

10/2/20 Wires

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Trump COVID-19 Diagnosis May Turn Off Independents in Key Swing States

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis could alienate independent voters in critical battleground states although his base will remain steadfast until the very end, analysts told Sputnik.

VIRUS COMES HOME TO ROOST

On Friday, White House physician Sean Conley said Trump is fatigued but in good spirits a day after he announced that he and his wife had tested positive for COVID-19. Meanwhile, the Trump campaign said all of the president's events will be moved to a virtual format or postponed.

Trump has come under fire for admitting that he downplayed the pandemic near the beginning of the outbreak. Trump told journalist Bob Woodward in an interview that he knew the virus was much worse than the flu. The president, after clips of the interview were released in early September, said he downplayed COVID-19 in order to not show panic.

California State University Emeritus Professor of Politics Beau Grosscup told Sputnik that Trump's diagnosis and condition are likely to tilt at least a few more independent and other swing voters towards Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

"It could push a few more independents toward Biden, as it makes clear the president's irresponsible approach to public health has caught up with him and others who are among the most 'protected,' [with] constant testing, citizens in the nation," Grosscup said. "There is little compassion for the President especially given not only his irresponsible - if not criminal - approach to the virus, but the latest reports as to how much his irresponsible approach has had on global attitudes and behavior towards effective public health measures."

Grosscup said he believes Trump will go back on the campaign trail wearing a mask after he has quarantined for fourteen days, assuming he is virus free. In any event, the ramifications for his campaign could be severe, he added.

"For those who will actually vote on election day, it could be devastating if his bad health makes his ability to serve questionable. It makes poignant national security issues as well as Continuity of Government (COG) issues that should swing voters to Biden," Grosscup said.

Political analyst Bill Boerum posited that the president would likely lose one of his greatest assets because of the virus.

"It definitely will impact the campaign and against Trump. The rallies were a source of enthusiasm for Trump. Even when he recovers, mass rallies will not be coming back. I believe people will be reluctant to attend mass rallies with even the president... able to contract the virus," Boerum told Sputnik.

Immediately significant was the removal of Trump's ability to participate in fund-raising events as well, Boerum advised.

"This will be further eroded by whatever his symptoms become, if he is bed-ridden or hospitalized. I believe his campaign already has had difficulty raising money. This has not been recognized by political observers or political 'pundits' – an untold story. Biden is ahead in raising campaign money," Boerum said.

Eurasian Center Executive Vice President Earl Rasmussen suggested that Trump's diagnosis would also likely disrupt Republican campaign strategy. Trump is a fighter and he will likely overcome this, Rasmussen added, but if he feels worse before the election this could lead to an atmosphere of uncertainty.

"I think that is unlikely but a possible scenario. Vice President [Mike] Pence is experienced and could quickly take over responsibilities. His policies may be different but will likely be more in-line with traditional Republican positions," Rasmussen told Sputnik. "Even if Pence is the onsite person, I can picture President Trump providing comments remotely directly to those attending events and other forums."

The greater threat could occur if Biden, the Democratic candidate, became ill, Rasmussen remarked.

"This will raise even more doubts on his [Biden's] ability to govern. As a result, one would and should be looking closer at [Democratic vice presidential candidate Senator Kamala] Harris and her positions as well as those that influence her," he said.

IMPACT ON SWING STATES

Biden's lead nationally has ranged from 6 to 8 percent over the past few months, however, because of the Electoral College format, statewide polling is more significant.

That said, Biden leads in eight of the top 10 ten largest swing states, according to poll aggregator Realclearpolitics.com. However, his lead is well within the margin of error in most of them.

Grosscup said Trump testing positive will have "little impact" on his core voters in many of these swing states, especially in the Midwest.

"Trump's base will go down with him regardless," Grosscup said. "His rabid followers will stay with him, it is those working-class Democrats and white [Republican-supporting] women who voted for him in 2016 in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan that matter."

However, in the end, people's sympathy will be on Trump's side and his enemies will look bad if they continue their attacks as they did before, the analysts acknowledged.

"This [contracting COVID-19] will most likely strengthen his base," Rasmussen said.

Boerum said Trump's supporters will remain committed, but the real issue is how close the election is in the "battleground" states.

Another crucial factor, he added, will be the record use of mail-in ballots because of the continuing COVID-19 national emergency.

"I believe the use of mail-in ballots will have a greater impact, the verification of the ballots, the slow count, and the legal challenges to late-arriving ballots," Boerum said. "The Electoral College meets separately in the capitals of the states on December 14. Each state needs to count and certify, what I call 'the election of the electors' before that date."

DEBATE IMPACT

Trump and Biden traded insults in their first presidential debate on Tuesday, which many experts and viewers saw as chaotic and negative. Most notable was the frequency with which Trump interrupted Biden when the former vice president tried to answer questions.

As a result, the debate commission announced it would make changes to the format of the final two debates. However, now questions loom over whether the debates will even take place.

"Assuming the best scenario, Trump will miss the next debate for sure [scheduled for October 15] but could participate in the last one. However, his rejection of any changes in the debate format may give more momentum to cancelling the last two debates. Of course, it also depends on the health status of Joe Biden," Grosscup said.

The prospect that Biden might also contract COVID-19 made the upcoming vice-presidential debate on October 7 between the candidates' running mates Pence and Harris much more important, Grosscup pointed out.

Rasmussen said the news of Trump's infection would fuel growing sentiment in the Democratic Party to scrap the remaining two debates completely.

"Yes, there are strong feelings within the Democratic Party/Biden camp to cancel the remaining debates even before this news. I anticipate this will only strengthen those calls and will also diminish any adverse public reaction. At least one presidential debate will be canceled but more likely both," Rasmussen said.

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Trump's illness would also raise the issue of presidential succession, Boerum added.

"It certainly is possible that Trump, if very sick, could delegate powers to Pence before the election," Boerum said.

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Canada to Loosen Travel Restrictions for Family Members, Int'l Students - Ministers

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) - Canada is loosening the travel restrictions for some extended family members of Canadian citizens, international students and other groups of foreign nationals, Canadian cabinet ministers told reporters.

"Today, I am announcing a process that will make it possible for additional families and loved ones to be reunited," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Minister Marco Mendicino said on Friday.

As of October 8, some extended family members of Canadian nations and permanent residents, including adult children, grandchildren, siblings and grandparents as well as those in an exclusive dating relationship of at least one year and their dependent children will be allowed to enter the country, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada said in a statement.

As part of the expanded travel allowance, international students can resume or begin their studies in Canada should their learning institution have an accredited "COVID-19 readiness plan," the statement said.

Canadian officials are also opening the doors to foreign nationals for compassionate reasons involving situations including funerals and life-threatening illnesses and injuries, with potential limited release from quarantine, Health Minister Patty Hajdu said.

The strict quarantine protocols upon entry in Canada will remain in place, unless indicated otherwise by Canadian officials for entrants in special circumstances. As of March 25, Quarantine Act violators may be subject to a fine of up to \$537,000 and/or a prison sentence of six months.

In addition, if a violator is found to have contributed to a risk of death of another individual, they can be subject to a fine of up to \$720,000 and/or a prison term of three years.

In mid-March, Prime Minister of Justin Trudeau announced that the government is halting the entry of most foreign citizens into Canada.

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Trump Arrives at Walter Reed Medical Center to Work From There Over Next Several Days

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has arrived at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center where he will work from the hospital's presidential offices over the next several days after he tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Television news footage on Friday showed Trump walking on his own and waving to reporters before he boarded Marine One.

The White House said earlier on Friday that the US president is experiencing mild symptoms, but is in good spirits and will continue working through the presidential election in November as well as will remain on the presidential ballot.

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Ottawa Taps Ex-Intelligence Official to Lead Forensic Team Investigating Downing of PS752

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) - Ottawa is tapping former top intelligence official to lead the forensic team looking into the circumstances surrounding the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752 in Tehran earlier this year, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement. "Francois-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced the formation of a Canadian forensic examination and assessment team, as recommended by the Honorable Ralph Goodale, Special Advisor for the Government of Canada's ongoing response to the downing of Flight PS752," the statement said on Friday.

The cross-agency team will be led by Jeff Yaworski, formerly the Deputy Director of Operations at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the statement said.

The forensic team will gather evidence and intelligence related to the disaster and report directly to the national security and intelligence advisor to the prime minister, the statement said.

Yaworski is a 33-year veteran of the Canadian intelligence service with strong ties to the so-called Five Eyes intelligence sharing allies - Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States - and served as CSIS acting director on multiple occasions, according to a press release.

Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran claiming the lives of 167 passengers - mostly Canadian and Iranian nationals and nine Ukrainian crew members - after being shot down mistakenly by Iranian authorities.

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Pompeo Says Confident Croatia, European Countries Will Keep China Away From 5G Networks

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed confidence after meeting Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic that Croatia and other European countries will act to prevent China from accessing their citizens' private data via 5G networks.

"I'm confident that many more European countries now, frankly because of just sharing information with them, they're going to make their own sovereign decision that says no," Pompeo said on Friday. "We don't want our citizens' data in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party," Pompeo said. "I think every European country now understands this, is increasingly aware of it. And you'll see them start to take actions consistent with that, including in Croatia."

Pompeo was speaking to reporters en route to Shannon, Ireland, after visiting to Dubrovnik, Croatia, where he also met with Foreign Minister Grlic Radman, and Defense Minister Banovic.

Pompeo's week-long tour of Europe's Eastern Mediterranean region also includes stops in Greece, Italy and the Vatican.

The United States has signed declarations on 5G security with several European countries, including the Czech Republic, Poland and Estonia. Huawei, one of the world leaders in 5G communication networks has already been affected by US sanctions imposed due to allegations of corporate espionage and national security threats.

As an advanced wireless technology, 5G enables the real-time exchange of information at speeds of more than 10 gigabits a second, which is 30 times faster than the current 4G networks. The new technology is the next step in internet connectivity speed and, as experts believe, has the potential to transform various aspects of modern life.

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Trump to Work From Hospital for 'Next Few Days' After COVID-19 Diagnosis - White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump will be working from Walter Reed Military Medical Center for a few days following his coronavirus disease (COVID-19) diagnosis, the White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a statement.

"President Trump remains in good spirits, has mild symptoms, and has been working throughout the day. Out of an abundance of caution, and at the recommendation of his physician and medical experts, the President will be working from the presidential offices at Walter Reed for the next few days," McEnany said in the statement on Friday.

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Kenosha Gunman Demands Biden Remove Video Depicting Him as Anti-White Supremacist - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - A legal team representing teenager Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot and killed two people during riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in August, is demanding that Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden take down a video depicting their client as a white supremacist, according to a letter from the Lin Wood legal firm.

"There is no evidence whatsoever that Kyle Rittenhouse is a white supremacist either, and he is not... I hereby demand on behalf of Kyle that Mr. Biden and his campaign (1) immediately take down the video from all places that he has published it such that it can no longer be viewed from its source," the letter said on Friday.

The lawyer said in the letter Rittenhouse demands Biden and his campaign to immediately issue a full retraction and a public apology.

Biden and his campaign put out a video on Wednesday that shows an image of Rittenhouse along with images of violence and disorder presumably committed by white supremacists.

Rittenhouse, 17, shot three people, killing two, during riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin in late August when they attempted to attack him while he was fleeing. Rittenhouse was arrested and charged for killing the two individuals.

Violent protests that turned into riots erupted in Kenosha after a police officer shot 29-year-old Jacob Blake Jr., an African American man, in the back seven times and left him paralyzed.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik)

TRUMP'S STATUS AFTER TESTING POSITIVE FOR CORONAVIRUS

- * US President Donald Trump is fatigued but in good spirits as of Friday afternoon after contracting the novel coronavirus, White House physician Sean Conley said in a memorandum.
- * First Lady Melania Trump said in a statement that she is experiencing mild symptoms after contracting the novel coronavirus.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin has sent a letter to his US counterpart Donald Trump wishing him and his wife Melania a swift recovery from the coronavirus, the Kremlin said on Friday.
- * All of the core White House staff have been tested for the novel coronavirus after Trump announced he has contracted the virus, and the results are negative, Chief of Staff Mark Meadows told reporters.
- * Trump will postpone or move to virtual format all previously scheduled campaign events after his COVID-19 diagnosis, his campaign manager Bill Stepien said in a statement.

CONFLICT IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan discussed the situation in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Kremlin said on Friday.
- * Pashinyan and French President Emmanuel Macron held a phone conversation during which they stated that it was unacceptable to involve foreign militants in hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian government said.
- * Baku believes that Yerevan is not interested in negotiations on the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry said.

US-RUSSIA SECURITY TALKS

- * Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and White House National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien confirmed at a Friday meeting in Geneva that Russia and the United States did not intend to interfere in each other's internal affairs, Russian Security Council spokesman Yevgeny Anoshin told reporters.
- * O'Brien said in a statement that his meeting with Patrushev was constructive and revealed that they discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria and Afghanistan.

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that it is imperative for the United States and Russia to extend without delay the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) which is set to expire in February, for the maximum duration of five years.

US, EU SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

* The United States has sanctioned eight high-ranking Belarus officials, including Internal Affairs Minister Yuri Karaev, Deputy Interior Minister Alexander Barsukov and Internal Troops Commander Yuriy Nazaranka, the US Treasury Department website revealed on Friday.

* The European Union is ready to impose more sanctions on Belarus if the situation there does not improve, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell said.

* Belarus is introducing "symmetric restrictions" on a number of officials from the United Kingdom and Canada, the republic's foreign ministry spokesman Anatoly Glaz said.

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Justice Dept., FBI Prepare for Possible Social Unrest Related to US Election - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US law enforcement agencies are preparing for possible social unrest related to the presidential election scheduled for November 3, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

The Justice Department currently plans to add officials in the FBI command center to coordinate the federal response to any possible protest, riot or other disturbance related to the election, the report said citing sources familiar with the matter.

Preparations are taking place during the last several weeks and cover a wide range of possible problems, the report said.

The FBI underscored its commitment to protect the Americans' right to vote in free and fair elections.

"Of course, our preparations for 2020 take into account the current climate in the country," the report quoted the FBI as saying. "As always, the FBI has a responsibility to plan for a host of potential scenarios."

Justice Department spokesperson Kerri Kupec noted the law enforcement agencies' commitment to the security and integrity of the election process.

"This year is no exception," Kupec said.

Officials at the command center, including civil rights and national security officials, will monitor news accounts of any high-profile incidents and reports from local representatives in the field as well as will assess possible cyber threats to election process, the report said.

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Trump Fatigued After COVID-19 Diagnosis, Given Antibody Cocktail - White House Physician

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"As of this afternoon the President remains fatigued but in good spirits," Conley said in the memorandum. "He's being evaluated by a team of experts, and together we'll be making recommendations to the President and First Lady in regards to next best steps."

Conley said that as a precautionary measure, Trump has been given an 8 gram dose of Regeneron's polyclonal antibody cocktail and he has been taking zinc, vitamin D, famotidine, melatonin and aspirin.

First Lady Melania Trump has a mild cough and headache, Conley said, adding that the rest of the Trump family is well and tested negative for the novel coronavirus today.

Earlier on Friday, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said that Trump will continue to work through November, when the US presidential election is scheduled, and remains on the ballot for re-election.

On Thursday night, the US president announced via Twitter that he and his wife had tested positive for the novel coronavirus just hours after he tweeted that Hope Hicks, one of his closest aides at the White House, had contracted the virus.

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Trump Exhibits Mild Symptoms After Contracting Novel Coronavirus - White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump is having mild symptoms after testing positive for the novel coronavirus and is otherwise in "good spirits", White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said on Friday.

"I spoke to him and he was in very good spirits and is having mild symptoms but he's feeling good," McEnany said during an appearance on Fox News.

On Thursday night, Trump announced via Twitter that he and First Lady Melania Trump had tested positive for the novel coronavirus just hours after he tweeted that Hope Hicks, one of his closest aides at the White House, had contracted the virus.

McEnany said earlier that the US president will continue to work through November, when the presidential election is scheduled, and remains on the ballot for re-election.

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Kentucky Attorney General Releases Audio Records of Breonna Taylor Proceedings - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron has released audio recordings of the grand jury proceedings in Breonna Taylor's case, CNN reported on Friday according to copies of the recordings it obtained.

The report said according to a recorded testimony of Louisville police officer Jonathan Mattingly, the officers knocked and made their presence known before entering Taylor's apartment in March.

US media are least 20 hours of audio recordings from the proceedings are available for review. On Wednesday, a US federal judge granted Cameron's request to delay the release of the recordings in order to redact private information.

Taylor, a 26-year old Black woman, was shot dead while with her boyfriend when police entered their home to execute a warrant. The grand jury decided against taking criminal proceedings against the two police officers in the case, setting off protests in Taylor's home city of Louisville, Kentucky, as well as in other cities in the United States.

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Pompeo Warns Turkey Sending Syrian Fighters to Azerbaijan Will Create More Instability

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters on Friday that Turkey deploying Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan would only cause more instability if the reports are true.

"We saw Syrian fighters taken from the battlefields in Syria to Libya. That created more instability, more turbulence, more conflict, more fighting, less peace," Pompeo said. "I think it would do the same thing in the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh as well."

Earlier in the week, the Armenian side stated that militants from Turkey and the Middle East were acting on the side of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. These accusations were denied by Baku and there has been no further confirmation.

A source told Sputnik earlier that a third batch of Syrian rebels is preparing for deployment to Azerbaijan from Turkey, while another two are already on the ground. According to the source, 322 Syrian mercenaries are currently present in Azerbaijan and they are well-equipped.

Commenting on Russia's concern about the involvement of militants in the conflict, Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Leyla Abdullayeva said that Armenia "makes extensive use of such resources" and is "especially actively attracting terrorists and mercenaries from the Middle East."

Omer Celik, a spokesman for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party has denied the reports about the alleged recruitment of mercenaries for fighting in Azerbaijan as "propaganda."

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US Imposes Belarus-Related Sanctions on 8 High-Ranking Officials - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned eight high-ranking Belarus officials, including Internal Affairs Minister Yuri Karaev, Deputy Interior Minister Alexander Barsukov and Internal Troops Commander Yuriy Nazaranka, the US Treasury Department website revealed on Friday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated eight individuals for their roles in the fraudulent August 9, 2020 Belarus presidential election or the subsequent violent crackdown on peaceful protesters," the Treasury said in the release. "These designations, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13405, target individuals who are responsible for, or have participated in, undermining democratic processes in Belarus." The sanctions also target Minsk Riot Police Chief Dmitry Balaba, Belarus' Central Election Commission (CEC) Deputy Chairperson Vadim Ipatov, Belarus Central Election Commission Secretary Alena Dmukhayla, Deputy Internal Troops Commander Khazalbek Atabekov, and Minsk Police Chief Ivan Kubrakov.

In response to the EU sanctions, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry said that Minsk would put into effect a reciprocal sanctions list from Friday, but it will not publish it "in accordance with the established civilized diplomatic practice." Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement that The Belarusian sanctions list, adopted in response to the sanctions of the European Union, automatically comes into effect in Russia as well.

Moscow regards EU sanctions against Belarus as open and unacceptable pressure on the republic's authorities, unilateral restrictions are illegitimate, this step by Brussels violates the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, Zakharova said.

Presidential elections were held in Belarus on August 9. According to the Central Election Commission, President Alexander Lukashenko won them with 80.1 percent of the vote. The Belarusian opposition claimed ex-presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, not Lukashenko, had won.

Mass opposition protests began across Belarus after the presidential elections. In the first days, the rallies were crushed by law enforcement officers: tear gas, water cannons, stun grenades and rubber bullets were used against the protesters, who did not agree with the election results. In line with official data, over 6,700 people were detained in the first days. Hundreds of people were injured during the riots, including over 130 law enforcement officers. Three protesters have died.

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Trump to Continue Working, Remain on Ballot for November Election - White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump will continue to work in his post and has no intention to let the coronavirus infection derail his campaign for re-election, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said on Friday, dismissing a New York Times report that suggested the future of the Trump presidency may be in question.

"That may be the hope and the wish of the New York Times, but President Trump is the president of the United States and he's on the ballot. He's hard at work. He's put his head down. He's worked. He's continuing to do that. And he will all the way through November," McEnany said.

On Thursday night, Trump announced that he and First Lady Melania Trump had tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Following the announcement, the report said there could be significant questions about Trump's alleged "cavalier attitude" toward the novel coronavirus pandemic and the future of his campaign just 32 days before the election.

The report pointed out that Trump did not appear on a scheduled call with governors from across the United States on Friday afternoon and Vice President Mike Pence took his place on the call.

Earlier on Friday, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said Trump is experiencing mild symptoms and the First lady issued a statement also saying she is experiencing mild symptoms.

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said he is optimistic the US president and the First Lady will have a quick recovery.

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Rights Groups Sue Texas Governor for Limiting Ballot Drop-Off Locations - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Two rights groups and two voters have filed a lawsuit against Texas Governor Greg Abbott and several county election officials for limiting the number of ballot drop-off offices for the upcoming November 3 presidential election, court documents revealed on Friday.

"In the midst of an election that is already underway, forcing such new burdens on voters who relied on a different set of election rules to make their voting plan, is unreasonable, unfair and unconstitutional," the court document said.

On Thursday, Abbott issued an order to close the majority of ballot drop-off offices in the state, allowing only one site for each of the 254 counties. Abbott said he undertook this action to ensure transparency and enable the authorities to stop any potential illegal voting.

The lawsuit was filed by the Texas League of United Latin American Citizens, the National League of United Latin American Citizens and two voters. They argue that the governor's order may discourage absentee voters from casting their ballots because of the increased travel time, longer wait times and increased risk to exposure to the novel coronavirus.

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Ottawa Probing Reports of Canadian Military Equipment Used in Nagorno-Karabakh - Trudeau

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) - Global Affairs Canada is looking into allegations that Canadian military equipment is being used in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters on Friday.

On Wednesday, the Armenian National Committee of Canada alleged that Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones used in the dispute by Azerbaijani armed forces uses L3Harris WESCAM target acquisition sensors and urged Canada to halt military sales to Azerbaijan and Turkey, which critics have accused of fueling the conflict.

"In regards to the Canadian military equipment that may have been used in this situation, the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Francois-Philippe Champagne] has launched an investigation into what exactly happened," Trudeau said.

Ottawa will probe whether Canadian-made equipment is being used to commit human rights violations, a breach of Canada's contractual terms when selling military equipment abroad, Trudeau said.

The prime minister called for an immediate halt to hostilities in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region and urged the warring sides to come to the negotiating table.

The Canadian government suspended the issuance of new military equipment export permits to Turkey citing violations committed during its military campaign in northeastern Syria, according to the 2019 Exports of Military Goods report. It is unclear whether those restrictions were subsequently lifted. The report also made no mention of sales to Azerbaijan.

Armenian officials have accused Turkey of injecting itself into the conflict. An Armenian Defense Ministry spokesman alleged that Azerbaijan had transferred the air control of the offensive operation against Karabakh to the Turkish Air Force. Yerevan has also claimed that Ankara deployed mercenaries from Syria to fight alongside Azerbaijani troops in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Ankara has denied all of Yerevan's claims, with the vice president of the security and intelligence committee in the Turkish parliament, Mehmet Altay, telling Sputnik that claims of Turkish-backed mercenaries operating in the disputed region are "unfounded."

Since 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in a conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority region that proclaimed independence from what was the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

On Sunday morning, clashes occurred in Nagorno Karabakh with both sides accusing the other of carrying out provocations. Armenia declared martial law and general mobilization, while Azerbaijan declared partial martial law and partial mobilization. Azerbaijan has closed its airports to all international air traffic except from Turkey, which has pledged support to Baku. Yesterday, the leaders of Russia, the United States and France — the co-chairing countries of the OSCE Minsk Group — called for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. The presidents expressed their condolences to the families of those killed and wounded. The leaders called on Yerevan and Baku to pledge to resume negotiations without preconditions.

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Movie Producer Weinstein Faces 6 New Sexual Assault Counts - District Attorney's Office

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Film producer Harvey Weinstein, who was sentenced to 23 years in prison on rape and sexual assault charges in March, now faces six new sexual assault counts, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office said in a news release on Friday.

"Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey announced today that film producer Harvey Weinstein was charged with six additional forcible sexual assault counts involving two victims stemming from incidents that allegedly occurred more than a decade ago," the release said.

This move by the authorities is the second time they amend Weinstein's criminal case. Initially, the authorities added three felony counts of forcible rape and forcible oral copulation.

Lacey said in the release that she is thankful to the women who initially reported Weinstein's crimes and whose courage have given strength to others to come forward.

"The willingness of these latest victims to testify against a powerful man gives us the additional evidence we need to build a compelling criminal case," Lacey said.

Los Angeles and Beverly Hills police and the District Attorney's Office will continue to investigate Weinstein's case, the statement also said.

Weinstein, 68, was previously one of the most influential movie producers in Hollywood. He was accused of sexual assault and harassment by dozens of women.

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Trump Campaign Events to Be Moved to Virtual Format or Temporarily Postponed - Manager

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump will postpone or move to virtual format all previously scheduled campaign events after his COVID-19 diagnosis, his campaign manager Bill Stepien said in a statement on Friday.

"All previously announced campaign events involving the President's participation are in the process of being moved to virtual events or are being temporarily postponed. In addition, previously announced events involving members of the First Family are also being temporarily postponed," Stepien said. "All other campaign events will be considered on a case-by-case basis and we will make any relevant announcements in the days ahead. Vice President Mike Pence, who has tested negative for COVID-19, plans on resuming his scheduled campaign events. Any further information about the President will come from the White House."

On Thursday night, President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump announced that they have tested positive for the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

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O'Brien Says Had 'Constructive' Dialogue With Patrushev on Karabakh, Syria - White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Friday that his meeting with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev was constructive and revealed that they discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria and Afghanistan.

"We had business-like and constructive dialogue and, while we have differences, I am optimistic that the United States and Russia can make progress in key areas that will ultimately benefit both the American and Russian people," O'Brien said via Twitter.

O'Brien explained that a number of mutually agreed upon topics were discussed during the meeting, including "arms control, cybersecurity, elections non-interference, counterterrorism, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Syria, Afghanistan and several other bilateral issues of mutual interest."

O'Brien also said that he made it very clear to Patrushev the United States will not tolerate foreign interference in its elections and "the Russian side committed not to do so."

Earlier on Friday, Russian Security Council spokesman Yevgeny Anoshin told reporters that Patrushev and O'Brien held a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland.

Anoshin said after the meetings that Patrushev and O'Brien confirmed Russia and the United States did not intend to interfere in each other's internal affairs.

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RPT - O'Brien Says Had 'Constructive' Dialogue With Patrushev on Karabakh, Syria - White House

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Fewer Than 40% of Canadians Would Immediately Take Coronavirus Vaccine - Poll

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) - Less than two out of five Canadians say they would immediately get immunized against the novel coronavirus when a vaccine becomes available, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed on Friday.

"New data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds fewer than half of Canadians (39 percent) say they'd seek to be vaccinated as soon as one was widely available. Just as many say they'd be willing to take a vaccine, but would want to wait first (38 percent), while the rest are split between taking a solid anti-vaccination stance (16 percent) and indecision (7 percent)," the Angus Reid Institute said.

The number of Canadians willing to take a vaccine has dropped by 7 percent since July, the Angus Reid Institute noted. The hesitancy grew across the political spectrum with most of those opting to wait or entirely foregoing vaccination citing potential negative side effects as a concern, it said.

The number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 161,000 with 9,300 virus-related deaths reported, government data revealed on Friday.

Last week, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that Canada is in the so-called "second wave" of the novel coronavirus pandemic, although the claim has been disputed by some in the medical community, including Alberta's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Deena Hinshaw.

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UN Chief Deeply Regrets Violence in Karabakh, Calls for End to All Hostilities - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres deeply regrets the ongoing violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region and calls for immediate end to hostilities, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary-General deeply regrets that parties continue military engagement, despite strong and repeated calls of the international community, including from himself and the OSCE Co-Chairs, to cease fire," Dujarric said. "He calls on the sides to immediately end all hostilities."

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US House Adopts Resolution to Condemn QAnon, Reject Group's Conspiracy Theories

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday overwhelmingly passed a resolution to condemn the right-wing QAnon group and to reject the conspiracy theories it promotes.

The House of Representatives passed the resolution in a 371-18 vote.

The resolution also encourages the FBI and other law enforcement agencies to focus on preventing violence, harassment and other criminal activity motivated by the group.

QAnon is often portrayed as a shadowy collection of individuals who claim President Donald Trump is secretly battling a network of pedophiles in the Democratic Party and establishment. Lawmakers have said that in recent years, QAnon has expanded into a movement embracing multiple conspiracy theories aimed at influencing elections by undermining public trust in US institutions.

The FBI has warned that the group's online presence encourages extremists to commit violent criminal acts, according to lawmakers.

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US Senator Mike Lee Says Tested Positive for Coronavirus After Visiting White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Republican Senator Mike Lee said in a statement on Friday that he has tested positive for the novel coronavirus after visiting the White House several days ago.

"Yesterday morning, I was experiencing symptoms consistent with longtime allergies," Lee said in the statement. "Out of an abundance of caution, I sought medical advice and was tested for COVID-19. Unlike the test I took just a few days ago while visiting the White House, yesterday's test came back positive."

On Thursday night, President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump announced that they have tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Lee, who is a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he will remain isolated for the next ten days and will return to work in time to consider the Supreme Court nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett.

Lee was last seen at the White House on Saturday for the announcement of Barrett's nomination.

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US Presidential Nominee Biden Tests Negative for Coronavirus - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has tested negative for the novel coronavirus, his physician Dr. Kevin O'Connor said in a statement on Friday.

"Vice President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden underwent PCR testing for COVID-19 today and COVID-19 was not detected," the statement said.

Biden was tested for the novel coronavirus after President Donald Trump announced on Thursday night that he and his wife Melania had tested positive. Biden and Trump met on Tuesday for the first presidential debate in Cleveland, Ohio.

Biden issued a separate statement confirming that he tested negative and reminded the public to wear masks, maintain social distancing and wash their hands.

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Canada to Begin Review of AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine Amid Immunization Skepticism

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will begin reviewing a COVID-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca to ensure it meets rigorous safety standards, the Public Health Agency said on Friday.

The announcement comes as polls show many Canadians are reluctant to get vaccinated due to concerns over potential side effects. Moreover, within the past few weeks, several countries halted trials of the the company's AZD1222 vaccine due to an unexplained illness.

"Yesterday, Health Canada received its first submission for authorization of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca in partnership with the University of Oxford," the agency said in a statement. "Health Canada will be doing a rolling review of AstraZeneca's vaccine data to make sure it meets the Department's rigorous safety and efficacy requirements."

The AstraZeneca vaccine against the deadly disease becomes the first candidate to be tested in the country. Canada struck a deal last week to buy 20 million doses of the vaccine from the UK-Swedish pharmaceutical giant.

The move comes as the country struggles to contain, what Trudeau says, is the second wave of the deadly pandemic. In the month of September, Canadian authorities have recorded more than 30,000 new infections, including more than 12,000 in the last week alone.

Should the vaccine candidate be approved, authorities face a tall order convincing Canadians to get vaccinated. According to an Angus Reid Institute poll unveiled on Friday, less than two out of five Canadians say they would immediately get immunized against COVID-19 when a vaccine becomes available.

"New data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds fewer than half of Canadians (39%) say they'd seek to be vaccinated as soon as one was widely available. Just as many say they'd be willing to take a vaccine, but would want to wait first (38%), while the rest are split between taking a solid anti-vaccination stance (16%) and indecision (7%)," the poll found.

The institute noted that the number of those willing to take the COVID-19 jab forthwith dropped by seven percent since July. The hesitancy grew across the political spectrum with most of those opting to wait or foregoing the immunization entirely citing potential side effects as a concern.

The US put a pause on AstraZeneca vaccine trials a few weeks ago due to side effects. US federal regulators, however, are currently in talks to resume trials, CNBC reported on Friday.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Canada has surpassed 161,000 with 9,300 deaths reported, government data revealed on Friday.

More than 700 new cases in Ontario 161,267, according to data released by the provincial health agency. There are 14,866 active cases throughout the country, Canada's public health agency says.

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US Presidential Candidate Biden Tests Negative for COVID-19 - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has tested negative for the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), his physician Dr. Kevin O'Connor said in a statement on Friday.

"Vice President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden underwent PCR testing for COVID-19 today and COVID-19 was not detected," the statement said.

Biden was tested for COVID-19 after President Donald Trump announced late Thursday that he and his wife Melania Trump had contracted the disease. Biden and Trump met on Tuesday for the first presidential debate in Cleveland, Ohio.

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On Thursday night, President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump announced that they have tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

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US House Adopts Resolution Condemning Unwanted Medical Procedures Amid ICE Hysterectomies

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed a resolution that condemns unwanted medical procedures on individuals without their full and informed consent.

The resolution passed with a 232-157 vote.

The House of Representatives adopted the measure in light of a whistleblower complaint filed last month by a nurse at a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Georgia alleging that hysterectomies were performed on detained migrant women without their informed consent.

On September 23, US Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf said the department's Office of the Inspector General is investigating the allegations.

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US Imposes Belarus-Related Sanctions on 8 High-Ranking Officials - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned eight high-ranking Belarus officials, including Internal Affairs Minister Yuri Karaev, Deputy Interior Minister Yuri Nazarenko and Internal Troops Commander Khazalbek Atabekov, the US Treasury Department website revealed on Friday.

The sanctions also target Minsk Riot Police Chief Dmitry Balaba and the Belarus Central Election Commission head Alena Dmukhayla.

Earlier on Friday, the European Union decided to approve a list of some 40 individuals in Belarus targeted for sanctions.

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First Lady Melania Trump Says Experiencing Mild Symptoms After Contracting Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - First Lady Melania Trump said in a statement on Friday that she is experiencing mild symptoms after contracting the novel coronavirus.

"I have mild symptoms, but overall [am] feeling good," she said via Twitter.

President Donald Trump announced on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive for the novel coronavirus after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

Earlier on Friday, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said that Trump is experiencing mild symptoms.

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said he is optimistic the US president and the First Lady will have a quick recovery.

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UPDATE 2 - US Vice President Pence, Senior US Officials Test Negative for COVID-19 - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence and other senior administration officials tested negative for COVID-19 after President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania contracted the disease, an official spokesman said on Friday.

"As has been routine for months, Vice President Pence is tested for COVID-19 every day. This morning, Vice President Pence and the Second Lady tested negative for COVID-19. Vice

President Pence remains in good health and wishes the Trumps well in their recovery," Pence's Press Secretary Devin O'Malley said via Twitter.

Several other senior administration officials have announced negative COVID-19 results after Trump on Thursday night said via Twitter that he and the first lady had tested positive for the disease and would immediately begin a quarantine at the White House.

Earlier on Friday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he also tested negative.

"I am feeling fantastic," Pompeo told reporters during his trip to Europe. He noted that he had not meet with Trump since September 15 and had taken four COVID-19 tests since that time. Pompeo said he intended to go ahead with his planned trips but would consult with a medical team to evaluate whether it is appropriate to travel. The top US diplomat is scheduled to depart on a tour of Asia on Sunday.

US Treasury Secretary Mnuchin has also tested negative for COVID-19, his spokesperson Monica Crowley tweeted on Friday.

"As part of regular protocols, Secretary @stevenmnuchin1 has been tested daily for COVID-19," Crowley said in her tweet. "He tested negative for COVID-19 this morning and will continue to be tested daily."

Mnuchin later said after speaking to the president this morning that Trump has "very light symptoms."

US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said he tested negative for COVID-19 on Friday ahead of his testimony on the coronavirus crisis in Congress.

"Out of an abundance of caution I was tested for COVID-19 this morning and the result was negative," Azar said via Twitter. "I will be testifying before Congress as scheduled."

Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband, White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner, have both test negative for the novel coronavirus, White House Special Assistant to the President Carolina Hurley said in a statement on Friday.

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows told reporters that all of the core White House staff had been tested for the coronavirus and the results came back negative. Meadows added that he is 'optimistic' that Trump will have a quick and speedy recovery.

US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley has tested negative for COVID-19 and Defense Secretary Mark Esper will be tested later today, Pentagon spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman said.

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Germany Hopes Participants at UN Libya Meeting Next Week Will Call for Ceasefire - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - Germany hopes that the participants in the upcoming ministerial meeting on Libya will urge the warring parties to advance toward a ceasefire, Germany's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gunter Sautter told reporters on Friday.

"On October 5, there will be a ministerial meeting on Libya, chaired by Secretary-General [Antonio] Guterres and German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas," Sautter said. "We hope that the participants... will call upon the parties to accelerate efforts to achieve a ceasefire." Among other priorities for the meeting Sautter named the renewal of commitments to the conclusions of the Berlin conference and their implementation, putting an end to arms embargo violations and strengthening the UN's key facilitator role in the Libyan political process. The high-level event will be held in a virtual format and will also engage the participants of the Berlin gathering and Libya's neighboring countries.

On January 19, the international conference on Libya took place in Berlin and included Russia, the United States, the European Union, Turkey and Egypt among other participants. The sides agreed to a ceasefire and the noninvolvement of third parties in the Libya conflict.

After the ouster and assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 by US- and EU-sponsored Islamic extremists, Libya was engulfed in a brutal conflict. Libya remains divided between two centers of power - an elected parliament in the country's east, supported by the Libyan National Army, and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord in the west.

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General Milley Tests Negative for COVID-19, Esper to Be Tested Later on Friday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley has tested negative for the novel coronavirus and Defense Secretary Mark Esper will be tested later on Friday, Defense Department spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman said in a press release.

"Secretary Esper tested negative for COVID-19 on Monday and Wednesday of this week," the release said on Friday. "Today, he will be tested again as planned for continuation of his travel. He will not be returning to the US early. The Chairman was tested this morning and was negative."

In addition, Hoffman said that US Strategic Command has confirmed reports about an E-6B aircraft being put on alert. Hoffman said the aircraft missions were pre-planned and the fact they were put on alert with President Donald Trump's announcement that he contracted the novel coronavirus was coincidental.

The E-6B aircraft is an airborne command post capable of providing command and control to US nuclear forces in case the ground-based control becomes inoperable.

On Thursday night, Trump announced that he and his wife Melania tested positive for the novel coronavirus after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the virus earlier.

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said earlier on Friday that Trump is experiencing mild symptoms.

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White House Chief of Staff Meadows Says 'Optimistic' Trump Will Have Quick Recovery

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows told reporters on Friday he was optimistic President Donald Trump would recover promptly from COVID-19, which he and First Lady Melania had contracted.

"He continued to be not only in good spirits but very energetic. We talked a number of times this morning," Meadows said. "I am optimistic that he will have a very quick and speedy recovery." Meadows also said that the doctors continued to monitor his health and would be providing updates.

Trump announced via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife Melania tested positive for the novel coronavirus after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease earlier. Trump's physician said the US president feels fine and is likely to continue carrying out his duties while recovering.

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First Lady Melania Trump Says Experiencing Mild Symptoms After Contracting Coronavirus

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"I have mild symptoms, but overall [am] feeling good," she said via Twitter.

President Donald Trump announced on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive for the novel coronavirus after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease earlier.

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Coronavirus Tests for All Core White House Staff Show Negative Results - Meadows

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - All of the core White House staff have been tested for the novel coronavirus after US President Donald Trump announced he has contacted the virus, and the results are negative, Chief of Staff Mark Meadows told reporters on Friday.

"We've tested all of core staff, and I can tell you that Mr. [Jared] Kushner, Mr. [Dan] Scavino, myself and number of us have been tested and came back with negative results," Meadows said.

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Pompeo Trip to Asia Underscores US Commitment to Region - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will underscore the United States' long-term commitment to Asia during his trip to the region next week, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell said during a press briefing on Friday.

"This trip reaffirms a long-term commitment [to the region]," Stilwell said when asked about possible messages for China during Pompeo's trip.

Pompeo is scheduled to visit Japan, South Korea and Mongolia from October 4-8.

Stilwell said Pompeo's trip provides a good opportunity to see like-minded partners and friends, and praised the three countries for their cooperation on different issues, including maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region, North Korea and others.

"We have outstanding partnership with Mongolia," Stilwell said. "Mongolia has been a strong contributor to peacekeeping operations."

Earlier on Friday, Pompeo said he would proceed with his trip to Asia despite the news that US President Donald Trump tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

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Trump Has 'Very Light' Symptoms, Will Be Briefed on COVID-19 Relief Later - Mnuchin

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has very mild symptoms after testing positive for the novel coronavirus and will be briefed on relief later on Friday, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said during Tom Reed's Manufacturing Summit.

"I was glad to hear this morning that he has very light symptoms," Mnuchin said. "I'm wishing them both a very speedy recovery and I'll be speaking to the president later today to update him on our COVID negotiations."

Trump announced via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife Melania tested positive for the novel coronavirus after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease earlier.

Several other senior administration officials have since announced negative test results for the presence of the novel coronavirus.

The Treasury Secretary spokesperson Monica Crowley said in a statement on Friday that Mnuchin has also tested negative.

Trump's physician said the US president feels fine and is likely to continue carrying out his duties while recovering.

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Guterres Says Imperative for US, Russia to Extend New START Treaty Without Delay

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that it is imperative for the United States and Russia to extend without delay the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) which is set to expire in February, for the maximum duration of five years.

"The only treaty constraining the size of the world's largest nuclear arsenals is set to expire early next year, raising the alarming possibility of a return to unconstrained strategic competition," Guterres said. "For this reason, it is imperative that the Russian Federation and the United States extend, without delay, the "New START" Treaty for the maximum duration of five years." Guterres made the comment at a high-level meeting to commemorate the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

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Croatia Evaluating US Offers on Purchase of F-16 Military Aircraft - Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Croatia is assessing the offers made by the United States on the possible acquisition of F-16 fighter jets, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said in a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo after their meeting on Friday. "We also mentioned the purchase of the aircraft, military aircraft. Once everything is evaluated, Croatia will take its decision," Plenkovic said. "We have the offers, we are now evaluating them and once we reach we stage of being able to tackle the issue in more detail, we shall do so." Pompeo said during the press conference that the decision to purchase the F-16 aircraft is a sovereign one made by the Croatian government.

"We'll try to provide the financial support to the American tender that we'll deliver a viable option and we will leave to the people of Croatia and its government to make a good choice for its own people," Pompeo said.

In January, Croatian Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic said that Israel officially notified Croatia that it had to cancel the delivery of 12 upgraded US-made F-16 fighter jets to Croatia because the United States had not approved the transfer.

Croatia announced a tender for fighter jets in 2017. The United States, along with Greece, Sweden and Israel, competed for the tender and the later won the bid.

Israel upgraded its used F-16 fighter jets with new avionics in order to win the contract at a cost of some \$500 million. The United States categorically opposed the sale, demanding a transfer of the fighter jets without upgrades.

The used F-16 jets were to replace the Soviet MiG-21 aircraft that are still in service in the Croatian Air Force.

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US Health Secretary Alex Azar Says He Tested Negative For COVID-19

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said he tested negative for COVID-19 on Friday after President Donald Trump announced that he and First Lady Melania Trump had contracted the disease.

“Out of an abundance of caution I was tested for COVID-19 this morning and the result was negative,” Azar said via Twitter. “I will be testifying before Congress as scheduled.”

Azar also wished the first couple a “swift and complete recovery.”

Trump said via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive for COVID-19 after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

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Trudeau Wishes Trump, Melania ‘Full Recovery’ After Positive COVID-19 Test

TORONTO, October 2 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau extended his best wishes to US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania in a statement on Friday after the couple revealed that they had both contracted COVID-19.

“Sophie and I are sending our best wishes to [President Donald] Trump and [First Lady Melania Trump]. We hope you both get well soon and have a full recovery from this virus,” Trudeau said via Twitter.

A number of world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have wished the Trumps a speedy recovery.

Trump has said via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

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Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner Test Negative for COVID-19 – White House

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) – US President Donald Trump’s daughter Ivanka Trump and her husband, White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner, have test negative for the novel coronavirus, White House Special Assistant to the President Carolina Hurley said in a statement on Friday.

Trump has said via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

“Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner were tested again today for COVID-19 and both are negative,” Hurley said via Twitter.

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US Stocks Down Sharply on Trump's COVID-19 Infection

NEW YORK, October 2 (Sputnik) - Wall Street fell sharply at Friday's open after President Donald Trump said he had tested positive for COVID-19, with the three leading US indexes opening as much as 2 percent lower.

The Dow, the broadest stock indicator on the New York Stock Exchange, opened down 1.5 percent. The S&P, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks on the NYSE, was off by more than 1 percent. The technology-laced Nasdaq Composite Index, which lists industry giants such as Facebook, Apple, Apple, Netflix and Google, was down 2 percent.

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UN Chief Wishes Trump, First Lady Speedy, Complete Recovery from COVID-19 - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wished US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump a quick and complete recovery after the couple tested positive for COVID-19, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary-General sends his best wishes to President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump for a quick and complete recovery," Dujarric said.

A number of world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have wished the Trumps a speedy recovery.

Trump said via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

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US Vice President Pence, Senior US Officials Test Negative for COVID-19 - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence and other senior administration officials tested negative for COVID-19 after President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania contracted the disease, an official spokesman said on Friday.

"As has been routine for months, Vice President Pence is tested for COVID-19 every day. This morning, Vice President Pence and the Second Lady tested negative for COVID-19. Vice

President Pence remains in good health and wishes the Trumps well in their recovery," Pence's Press Secretary Devin O'Malley said via Twitter.

Several other senior administration officials have announced negative COVID-19 results after Trump on Thursday night said via Twitter that he and the first lady had tested positive for the disease and would immediately begin a quarantine at the White House.

Earlier on Friday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he also tested negative.

"I am feeling fantastic," Pompeo told reporters during his trip to Europe. He noted that he had not meet with Trump since September 15 and had taken four COVID-19 tests since that time. Pompeo said he intended to go ahead with his planned trips but would consult with a medical team to evaluate whether it is appropriate to travel. The top US diplomat is scheduled to depart on a tour of Asia on Sunday.

US Treasury Secretary Mnuchin has also tested negative for COVID-19, his spokesperson Monica Crowley tweeted on Friday.

"As part of regular protocols, Secretary @stevenmnuchin1 has been tested daily for COVID-19," Crowley said in her tweet. "He tested negative for COVID-19 this morning and will continue to be tested daily."

Trump's physician has said the president feels fine and is likely to continue carrying out his duties while recovering. The New York Times reported that Trump's COVID-19 symptoms were "mild" and that there were signs that he had a "cold."

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Biden Wishes Trump Swift Recovery from COVID-19 - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden on Friday wished President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania a swift recovery after the couple revealed that they had both contracted COVID-19.

"Jill and I send our thoughts to President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump for a swift recovery. We will continue to pray for the health and safety of the president and his family," Biden said via Twitter.

A number of world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have wished the Trumps a speedy recovery.

Trump has said via Twitter on Thursday night that he and his wife tested positive after one of his aides, Hope Hicks, contracted the disease.

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US Gains 661,000 Jobs in Sept as Labor Recovery Slows From COVID-19 - Labor Department

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The United States gained only 661,000 jobs in September, less than half the number it added in August, as labor market recovery from the coronavirus pandemic slowed, the government's monthly jobs data showed on Friday. "Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 661,000 in September, and the unemployment rate fell to 7.9 percent," the Labor Department said in a statement. The economy lost more than 21 million jobs for all of March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. It posted a strong rebound of 2.5 million jobs in May and 4.8 million in June. Job gains have slowed since, with 1.8 million in July and nearly 1.5 million in August.

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US Vice President Pence, Wife Test Negative for COVID-19 - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence and his wife have tested negative for COVID-19 after President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania contracted the disease, an official spokesman said on Friday. "As has been routine for months, Vice President Pence is tested for COVID-19 every day. This morning, Vice President Pence and the Second Lady tested negative for COVID-19. Vice President Pence remains in good health and wishes the Trumps well in their recovery," Pence's Press Secretary Devin O'Malley said via Twitter.

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2020 US Election

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Today, Sputnik is launching a new daily digest focused solely on the US 2020 presidential election. Our subscribers will be informed about key campaign developments, candidates' rallies, statements, and poll numbers, among other news.

AFTERMATH OF BLOODY DEBATE

US President Donald Trump and Democratic rival Joe Biden continued to trade the same types of insults on Thursday as they did the previous evening during their first of three presidential debates, considered by many to be chaotic and extremely negative.

Over 73 million people watched Wednesday's debate, the Nielsen marketing research firm said. The viewership was 13 percent less than during the first showdown between Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016, which was watched by a record-breaking 84 million people.

Half of all US voters who watched the first presidential debates believe that Biden performed better than Trump, just 34 percent say the opposite, a POLITICO/Morning Consult poll revealed on Thursday. More than half, 52 percent, say they did not enjoy the show with 86 percent calling the debaters "interruptive". The vast majority said Trump "buted in" more than Biden - 71

percent to 18 percent. That did not deter Trump from tweeting: "I won the debate big, based on compilation of polls etc. Thank you!"

Trump suggested that he may not support changing debate rules for the remaining two rounds of his televised showdown with Biden.

"Why would I allow the Debate Commission to change the rules for the second and third Debates when I easily won last time?" he tweeted.

White House spokesperson Kayleigh McEnany told reporters Trump wants to participate in the next debate but does not want the rules changed to cover for his rival's "inability to perform."

The first debate, held on Tuesday in Cleveland, Ohio, was marred by insults between the participants and frequent mutual interruptions. The organizers said that they may amend the rules of the show to give a moderator more tools to enforce order.

Thousands of social media users have been sharing posts purporting to provide evidence that Biden was wearing a wire and an earpiece during the first presidential debate. Higher quality photos and videos of the event show that the mark on Biden's shirt was likely a shirt crease, not a wire, and the object on his wrist appears to be a rosary that he wears to honor his late son.

ELECTION INTEGRITY

Spending in the 2020 election is expected to reach \$10.8 billion, making it the most expensive campaign in history, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

US Federal Election Commissioner Ellen Weintraub said the watchdog cannot initiate any campaign funding probes unless President Donald Trump and Congress act to fill at least one vacancy.

"We are down to three commissioners out of six," Weintraub said Thursday, adding that four commissioners are required to initiate any new investigations or make major decisions.

The governor of Wisconsin Tony Evers urged Trump to cancel two of his campaign rallies scheduled for Saturday in a key battleground state which is experiencing a double-digit spike in coronavirus cases.

"Number one, he could not come. The second thing that could be done is for him to insist that if people are there, they wear a mask," local broadcaster WISN quoted Evers as saying.

Trump takes pride in massive attendance at his rallies, reaching tens of thousands of spectators, and mocks Biden who prefers more secluded events.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a proclamation which confines each of the state's counties, some with the population of over a million, to a single mail-in ballot drop-off location. State Democrats denounced Abbott's order as "a blatant voter suppression tactic" ahead of the presidential election.

Senior Senate Democrats wrote a letter to Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf requesting to release an intelligence paper which accuses a foreign actor of attempts "to undermine faith in the American system," echoing Trump's rhetoric on mail-in ballots.

Brad Parscale, former Trump senior aide, announced that he is stepping away from the reelection campaign days after an alleged attempt to harm himself. Politico quotes Parscale, who was once responsible for high-tech social media canvassing, as saying that he now seeks help to overcome "overwhelming stress."

The Democratic nominee Joe Biden leads the Republican incumbent Donald Trump by eight percentage points nationally, 51 percent to 43 percent, according to a Washington Post average of polls. Biden's margin is the same in Pennsylvania and smaller in other major battleground

states - seven points in Wisconsin and Michigan, five in Arizona and one in Florida. Four years ago, Trump trailed in polls behind then-rival Hillary Clinton, but eventually gained the upper hand by winning several key states on election day.

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Alaska's Sitka Relocating Baranov Statue Better Than Demolishing - Russian Diaspora Group

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - The statue of the first governor of Russian Alaska, Alexander Baranov, which was moved from the city of Sitka's downtown to the local museum, faced a much better destiny than many other monuments vandalized during recent protests in the US, the President of the Congress of Russian Americans (CRA) Natalie Sabelnik told Sputnik.

The Baranov statue was moved from its current location in Sitka's downtown to the museum on Tuesday.

In July, the city assembly adopted a resolution to relocate the Baranov statue to the Sitka Historical Society Museum, after a group of local activists urged legislators to remove it, citing mistreatment of indigenous people. In 1799, Baranov founded Sitka - called at that time Novo-Archangelsk - as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America.

"Relocation is much better than demolition, without question. In view of that situation, when a lot of statues in the US has been vandalized, I think it is good that the statue moved to a different location," Sabelnik said.

The Russian diaspora in the US submitted a petition with almost 6,000 signatures asking Sitka's authorities to leave the statue at its old place, while one of the city's assembly members introduced a resolution urging to put this issue to the local elections later this fall.

"Moving the statue to the museum is a good choice," Sabelnik said, suggesting that Sitka's residents would vote to remove it anyway.

The CRA president noted that it is a "win-win situation."

"The statue has not been destroyed and will get an appropriate place in a historic building, which was the Russian bishop house," she added.

Statues of several historical figures associated with racism have been removed, toppled or defaced across the United States amid nationwide protests fueled by multiple police-involved killings of African Americans.

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US Congress of Russian Americans Urges Removing Anti-Russian Banner in New York-
President

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - A Manhattan-based storage company should remove a provocative anti-Russian banner from the wall of its building because the content expresses ethnic discrimination, Congress of Russian Americans (CRA) President Natalie Sabelnik told Sputnik.

"It was brought to our attention that Manhattan Mini Storage building has a banner 'VOTE because Russian lessons are expensive.' We found that it was ethnic discrimination and profiling because everyone in America has the right to vote," Sabelnik said on Thursday. The United States is set to hold a presidential election on November 3. The US government has accused Russia of meddling in the United States' political process during the 2016 presidential election and to a lesser extent in the 2020 election. Russia has repeatedly denied the allegations, saying they were invented to excuse the election loss of Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and to deflect public attention from actual instances of election fraud and corruption.

Sabelnik said she can only suspect that the authors of the banner probably meant to depict the alleged Russian government intrusion in the US elections.

"According to reports that was not the case. However, it affects the Russian Americans living here," Sabelnik said.

Consequently, the CRA sent a letter to Manhattan Mini Storage calling on the company to remove the banner and not display such messages in the future.

"Honestly, I do not expect a letter in response, but if they do respond, it will not be right away. I am sure they would consult with their attorney before responding," Sabelnik said.

Many Russians living in the United States have helped the country develop and become prosperous, noting that "many very prominent Russians have contributed" to America, she said. Sabelnik acknowledged the right of Americans to put any banners, but called on people to be responsible and not insult other ethnic groups.

Another Russian diaspora group - the Russian Community Council of the USA - also sent a letter to Manhattan Mini Storage urging the company to remove the banner and threatening legal action if it ignores the call.

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Guterres Welcomes Announcement on UN-led Israeli-Lebanese Border Talks - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has welcomed the fact that Lebanon and Israel had agreed to launch direct negotiations to resolve their maritime border dispute under the UN auspices, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

Earlier on Thursday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that Washington will provide mediation efforts in the talks between the two nations that will take place "soon" in the Lebanese city of Naqura.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the announcements of an agreement to launch talks on the delineation of land and maritime boundaries between Lebanon and Israel, to be hosted by the

United Nations at the premises of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in Naqoura," Dujarric said on Thursday.

Guterres also acknowledged the "sustained" efforts led by the United States to facilitate the agreement, the spokesman added.

Earlier in the day, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said Israel and Lebanon can start direct negotiations after the end of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which lasts this year until October 9.

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Five European States Urge Russia to Disclose Details in Navalny Case - Letter to UN

UNITED NATIONS, October 2 (Sputnik) - Five European countries at the United Nations have sent a letter to the UN Security Council and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres saying the alleged use of the Novichok chemical agent to poison Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny represents a threat to international peace and security and Russia should urgently shed light on the case.

"We consider that the use of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group in the abhorrent poisoning of Mr. Alexey Navalny constitutes a threat to international peace and security," Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany and the United Kingdom said in the letter sent on September 30 and seen by Sputnik.

The five countries called on Russia in the letter "to disclose urgently, fully and in a transparent manner the circumstances of this attack and to inform the Security Council in this regard." Navalny fell very ill during a domestic flight in Russia and was treated in Omsk after the airplane made an emergency landing. After two days of treatment, the Russian doctors approved Navalny as being fit for air transport to a hospital in Berlin, Germany.

The German authorities soon claimed traces of a nerve agent from the Novichok family were found in Navalny's organism, but did not provide proof to back up their claim. The doctors in Russia have insisted they found no signs of toxins prior to Navalny's departure.

Russia has denied any involvement and has repeatedly asked for evidence, which has so far not been provided. The Kremlin has rejected Navalny's own accusations being poisoned as groundless, insulting and unacceptable.

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US Spoke to Armenia, Azerbaijan Leaders Urging De-Escalation in Karabakh - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) – US officials have spoken to Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders and urged them to cease hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview.

"We're urging a ceasefire. We want them both to back up. We've spoken to the leadership in each of the two countries, asking them to do just that," Pompeo told Fox News on Thursday. Pompeo urged third party states to remove themselves from the conflict amid Armenia's allegations that Turkey is involved in the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Syrian Rebels Recruited to Fight in Nagorno-Karabakh - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik) - Mercenaries from Syria are being recruited to fight in the ongoing armed confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, CNN reported citing a Syrian national who has signed up for the deployment.

The former rebel from the Syrian National Army (SNA), backed by Turkey, has registered to travel from northern Syria to Azerbaijan for \$1,500 per month, the report said on Wednesday. The man, who refused to provide his name, said the leader of the SNA had asked those willing to go to fight to register for three-months-long contracts.

The Syrian man said he did not know who was funding the operation and that around 1,000 fighters had signed up for it.

He said he was prepared to travel to Azerbaijan to lift his family from poverty, and security work was the only way he can do so.

Earlier in the day, sources from the Syrian opposition told Sputnik that a third batch of rebels was preparing to deploy to Azerbaijan from Turkey.

The second source added that Turkey is now preparing to send the third batch of Syrian fighters to Nagorno-Karabakh, and the names of combatants who want to go to the region "are now being registered and collected."

On Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Moscow was concerned over reports about the transfer of militants of illegal armed groups to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone. Presidents of Russia, France and the United States - Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Trump, respectively - on Thursday issued a joint statement on the Karabakh conflict, in which they condemned the recent escalation.

Macron subsequently said France had credible information about Syrian militants being deployed to the site of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Earlier in the week, the Armenian side stated that militants from Turkey and the Middle East were acting on the side of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. These accusations were denied by Baku and there has been no further confirmation. Bouthaina Shaaban, a political and media adviser to Syrian President Bashar Assad has also argued, in an interview with Sputnik, that Ankara is the driving force behind the current conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Commenting on Russia's concern about the involvement of militants in the conflict, Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Leyla Abdullayeva said that Armenia "makes extensive use of such resources" and is "especially actively attracting terrorists and mercenaries from the Middle East." Omer Celik, a spokesman for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party has denied

the reports about the alleged recruitment of mercenaries for fighting in Azerbaijan as "propaganda."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 2 (Sputnik)

NAGORNO KARABAKH CONFLICT

- * The presidents of Russia, France and the United States - Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron, and Donald Trump - on Thursday issued a joint statement on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in which they condemned the recent escalation.
- * Russia does not support one side against another in the ongoing conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, but advocates a ceasefire and a resolution of the conflict, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said in a press briefing on Thursday.
- * Yerevan is recalling its ambassador to Israel for consultations over the supply of arms by this country to Azerbaijan, Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Anna Naghdalyan said.
- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and stressed that foreign militants should not be involved in this conflict, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Preliminary data indicates that the Karabakh forces downed Su-25 planes and Mi-24 helicopters of Azeri Air Force, the information center of the Armenian government said.

NEW EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The European Union has included two Russian individuals and four organizations on the list of individual sanctions on Ukraine.

LEBANON-ISRAEL TALKS ON MARITIME BORDERS

- * Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri on Thursday announced indirect talks with Israel on maritime borders under the UN mediation, adding that the country's military would be tasked with leading the negotiations.
- * Israel and Lebanon can start direct negotiations under the US auspices on the demarcation of maritime borders between the two countries after the end of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which lasts this year until October 9, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said.

GLOBAL ECONOMY

- * US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she will bring to a vote in Congress later Thursday a revised \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief bill if Democrats and Republicans can find common ground on tax breaks.
- * Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a \$7.5 billion infrastructure plan during a press briefing.

* Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has proposed creating an economic relief fund outside of the European Union framework amid the debate about the bloc's plans to attach certain conditions to the disbursement of its COVID-19 funds, the government's international communications office said.

* Some 837,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, down 4 percent from the previous week, new US Labor Department data revealed.

* The Bank of Russia slightly increased the share of the US dollar in the structure of its international reserves, to 23.7 percent as of March 31 this year against 23.6 percent a year earlier, while the euro's share remained at last year's level of 30.3 percent, the central bank said in its report.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* The offer made by Russian President Vladimir Putin to provide free coronavirus vaccines to all UN staff was positively accepted by the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told reporters on Thursday.