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Leaked Memo Shows US Fears Re-Joining Open Skies Treaty Would 'Send Wrong Message to Russia'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Although US President Joe Biden quickly renewed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty after taking office, he has done little to undo the prior administration's withdrawal from a slew of international arms treaties, despite having spoken out against the moves when they occurred. While Democrats have been calling former US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Treaty on Open Skies "illegal," the Biden administration has privately been telling its allies that returning to the treaty would give Russia the "wrong message."

The March 31 message to "international partners," which was obtained [by Defense News](#), says the Biden administration is "frankly concerned that agreeing to rejoin a treaty that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda."

"While we recognize that Russia's Open Skies violations are not of the same magnitude as its material breach of the INF Treaty, they are part of a pattern of Russian disregard for international commitments - in arms control and beyond - that raises questions about Russia's readiness to participate cooperatively in a confidence-building regime," the memo continues. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Treaty on Open Skies (OST) are two agreements signed with Russia that aimed to reduce tensions between the two nations, particularly in Eastern Europe. This was after a tense standoff in the 1980s created conditions in which a strike against Moscow by NATO could [happen so quickly](#) that it left Warsaw Pact forces without sufficient time to evaluate the threat, making it likely a mistake or false reading could spiral into an all-out war. The Trump administration pulled the US out of both treaties - the INF in 2019 and OST in 2020 - after claiming Russia had been in violation of them, which Moscow has denied.

Democrat Double Talk

When Trump announced the US withdrawal from OST in May 2020, Democratic lawmakers denounced the [move as "illegal"](#) because the administration hadn't notified them 120 days prior to the move, as required by the National Defense Authorization Act. [In a letter to then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper and then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#), a group of senators called it "an obvious political maneuver in an attempt to bind a future administration."

US participation in the treaty nonetheless ended in November of that year, and this past January, [Moscow announced](#) it was ceasing its participation as well, saying the blame for the treaty's death "lies entirely with the US and its NATO allies." However, Russia has also signaled its [willingness to restart](#) the agreement if the US is also interested, now that Joe Biden, a Democrat, is in the White House.

Their hope was not without reason: the day after Trump announced the withdrawal, [Biden said the move](#) would “exacerbate growing tensions between the West and Russia, and increase the risks of miscalculation and conflict.”

He continued, saying that the US should respond to Russia’s alleged transgressions “not by withdrawing from the treaty, but by seeking to resolve them through the treaty’s implementation and dispute mechanism.”

The [US’ chief objection](#) has been Russia’s denial of certain specific flights over Kaliningrad Oblast and over territory adjacent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia; however, Russia has said the Kaliningrad decision was within the confines of the treaty because it concerned airspace safety. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are breakaway states from Georgia that are recognized by Russia but not by the US, creating a dispute about whether they’re international borders or not.

After the US announced its withdrawal, Sergei Ryzhkov, the head of the Russian Defense Ministry’s National Center for Reducing Nuclear Danger, [called the American reasons](#) a “pretext” for denying Russian access to US airspace and because of “the desire of the Americans to control all of space (communication systems, navigation, space debris control, remote sensing of the Earth, etc.), and make good money on this in the future by selling relevant materials.”

On Tuesday, the US [Air Force announced](#) its decision to retire the aging OC-135 Open Skies aircraft specially constructed to fit the confines of the treaty, [without replacing them](#). Russia’s own specialized aircraft, the Tu-214ON, which entered service in 2019, [has been repurposed](#) for other reconnaissance duties.

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Pentagon Building Autonomous Daytime Telescopes for Tracking Enemy Satellites
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the Pentagon has cried foul over Russian space-based devices it claims are weapons, the US has tested its own identical devices for years. Their claims have served as the alarmist foundations for justifying the creation of the US Space Force and the militarization of space. The US Air Force has invested in half a dozen advanced daytime ground-based telescopes it intends to use for tracking satellites in orbit.

Todd Brost, director of special projects at space-oriented defense firm Numerica, [told SpaceNews](#) on Monday the company had received a contract from the USAF to build six autonomous telescopes in Colorado, Australia, and Spain. The value of the contract is unknown, but the Pentagon gave Numerica \$3 million in 2019 to develop the technology necessary for the project.

In August, [Numerica announced](#) it had received a patent for the daytime tracking satellite design, which it says can track satellites up to 22,000 miles up, which is the distance at which geosynchronous satellites orbit the Earth.

“Our technology is enabled by high-speed shortwave infrared cameras, customized optics and advanced algorithms,” Jeff Shaddix, principle investigator for daytime tracking at Numerica, said in the August release. “A daytime sky background creates an extreme shot noise environment.

We collect 15 GB/minute from our cameras and apply image processing algorithms that fuse the data to reduce the noise to near theoretical limits. This enables detection of dim satellite signals beyond what is typically achievable for standard optical systems.”

Brost told SpaceNews Monday the US government was most interested in “maintaining custody of high interest objects for longer periods of time so you know whether they maneuver, or if they’re doing something unusual,” which explains the globe-spanning network.

The [US raised alarm](#) in early 2020, after claiming Russia tested out two maneuvering “inspector” satellites, which the Pentagon said could be used as a weapon after it apparently shadowed a US spy satellite for some time. A few months later, the Pentagon accused Moscow of testing an anti-satellite weapon when one of the satellites deployed a smaller object.

According to [Agence France-Presse](#), the Russian defense ministry said the satellite was meant to “monitor the condition of Russian satellites,” as well as other nations’ satellites.

However, the [US has also tested](#) out a similar “Prowler” satellite in 1990 for inspecting satellites in geosynchronous Earth orbit (GEO). Another project, carried out in 2014 by the Air Force Research Laboratory called Automated Navigation and Guidance Experiment for Local Space ([ANGELS](#)), [tested](#) a similar capability.

“This is not unique to Russia,” Brian Weeden, a space policy expert at the Secure World Foundation, told [MIT Technology Review](#) in February 2020. “It doesn’t happen every day, but it’s a capability that China, the US, and others have been testing out over time.”

Daytime telescopes aren’t the only methods the Department of the Air Force is using to track other nations’ satellites from the Earth’s surface: the US Space Force recently activated a set of powerful [space-surveillance radars](#) on Kwajalein Island in the Republic of the Marshall Islands to track low-Earth orbit objects, including satellites, but also space junk.

Last April, the [Space Force also unveiled](#) its Space Surveillance Telescope, a short focal length, wide field of view device pioneered by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency ([DARPA](#)) for [quickly](#)spotting dim objects in the sky. The Western Australia-based system began calibration in April 2020 and will be used for tracking satellites as well as space debris and asteroids.

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Neoliberal Dream: Honduras to Inaugurate First High-Tech Private Charter City
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Home to the US’ largest airbase in Central America, Honduras has long served as a hub for US foreign policy, including funneling arms to right-wing governments and insurgent forces to use against the left. In turn, pliant pro-US governments in Tegucigalpa have allowed US apparel firms to base their sweatshops in special export zones.

Honduras is preparing to inaugurate a new high-tech corporate fiefdom on a Caribbean resort island that will become the country’s latest experiment in neo-liberal privatization schemes.

Próspera, Honduras’ first privately governed charter city, is set to welcome its first residents later this year. The city is located on the Honduran island of Roatán, about 30 miles off the north

coast, although [according to Bloomberg](#), as much as two-thirds of its residents will be “e-residents,” or people using Próspera as a tax haven to incorporate businesses there or who will e-commute to work for such a business. However, it won’t all be colonists: some Hondurans will work there, but steep participation fees of several hundred dollars per year virtually ensure that the average Honduran citizen won’t be permitted.

The city will have its own constitution and legal code, and is only required to observe the bare minimum of the Honduran Constitution, with a democracy limited to property owners that’s heavily overseen by boards of neoliberal ideologues and billionaire investors.

Próspera is the first of Honduras’ ZEDEs (employment and economic development zones), a concept created in 2013 that is something of a mix between a tax haven and a beefed-up export-processing zone like those that house the country’s maquila sweatshops. Tegucigalpa is reportedly considering as many as 20 such projects scattered across the country that President Juan Orlando [Hernandez has boasted](#) will turn Honduras into “a modern logistics center for Central America.”

The idea was dreamed up by [Paul Romer](#), an NYU economics professor who later became chief economist at the World Bank who believed he could create a “Hong Kong” or “Dubai” anywhere on the globe.

Technocrat’s Paradise

Effective control over the ZEDEs has been placed in the hands of investors and a “technical secretary,” who must nominally be a Honduran citizen. They must answer to a “commission for best practices” (CAMP), However, [according to NACLA](#), special ZEDE courts will adjudicate civil and criminal cases.

At every level, this system has been funded, shaped, and governed by Western technocrats. The [original 21-member CAMP](#) in 2015 included Grover Norquist, a right-wing Republican libertarian who has dragooned decades of American lawmakers into signing no-tax-hike pledges and said his goal was to “drown the federal government in a bathtub”; Richard Rahn, who at the time was head of the arch-libertarian think tank the Cato Institute in Washington, DC; and [Mark Klugmann](#), a former speechwriter for US Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, who has spent much of the last 30 years helping neoliberal governments in Chile and El Salvador strip-mine their public services and pension funds.

Later, CAMP was pared down to 12 members, according to [The Economist](#), with seven coming from the National Party of President Juan Orlando Hernandez, and five foreigners including Rahn and [Barbara Kolm](#), the vice-president of the Austrian National Bank and head of the neoliberal Friedrich August von Hayek Institute and Austrian Economics Center (AEC).

Moreover, Próspera’s financial backers [include Pronomos](#), an investment fund for charter cities backed by former Facebook executive, and Donald Trump political bankroller Peter Thiel and run by Patri Friedman, who founded the Seasteading Institute. Friedman is the granddaughter of Milton Friedman, the founder of the Chicago school of “neoclassical” economics that has served as the bedrock of neoliberal economic theory.

Coup Creates Neoliberal Playground

ZEDEs were only made possible by the 2009 US-backed coup that overthrew left-wing Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. After Zelaya’s illegal removal by the army, Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo, who lost the 2009 elections to Zelaya, replaced him. Lobo’s government [quickly moved to pass](#) a law creating “Special Development Regions” (REDs), which the constitutional court

struck down in 2012 as violating Honduran sovereignty. However, in the aftermath of the ruling, the congress [dismissed the four judges](#) who voted against the law before amending the constitution to allow the ZEDE law in 2013.

In the aftermath of Zelaya's overthrow, Honduras fell into chaos as murders and corruption rose dramatically, sending up to 1% of its population fleeing as refugees per year. By 2014, the migration crisis was so severe that then-US Vice President Joe Biden proffered \$1 billion dollars "to help Central America's leaders make the difficult reforms and investments required to address the region's interlocking security, governance and economic challenges," as Biden wrote in a [New York Times](#) op-ed in January 2015. Biden is now US President.

Meanwhile, Honduras was facing extensive pressure by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which in 2014 [imposed "fiscal consolidation"](#) - a euphemism for slashing government social services budgets - in exchange for a \$189 million loan.

However, this "alliance for prosperity" Biden pitched became little more than gas in the fire neo-liberal selloffs of government capital already underway, as the project was overseen by the Inter-American Development Bank, which pushes similar free-market policies as the IMF. Since then, it's not just cities that are being given [private corporate charters](#), but schools, energy services, and security services, the latter of which have been trained on the Colombian and Israeli models, [the Grayzone reported](#).

The selloffs and compounding violence have driven extensive protests against Hernandez's regime, as have his effective stealing of the 2017 election and the prosecution of his brother, [Tony Hernandez](#), for drug trafficking by the US Department of Justice, for which he was sentenced to life in prison last week. At least 38 people were killed by government forces in [2019 mass demonstrations](#) and thousands were injured.

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US to Provide More Than \$150 Million in Aid to Palestinians, Blinken Says
by [Mary F.](#)

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing one that began in the mid-20th century. As a result of the conflict, at least 5.6 million Palestinians have been displaced, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday announced that the US will provide more than \$150 million in aid to a United Nations program for Palestinian refugees, formally called the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

"The US is committed to advancing prosperity, security, and freedom for both Israelis and Palestinians in tangible ways in the in the immediate term, which is important in its own right, but also as a means to advance towards a negotiated two-state solution," Blinken said, [Al-Jazeera reported](#).

The funding would include humanitarian assistance and economic development programs for Palestinians. Specifically, the plan calls for \$150 million through the UNRWA, \$75 million in US economic support and \$10 million in development funding, according to Reuters.

The UNRWA provides education, food, healthcare and business loan programs to the more than 5.6 million Palestinian refugees spread across the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Last month, the Biden administration also announced it would be giving \$15 million to vulnerable Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank and Gaza to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

The latest decision by the Joe Biden administration reverses a former Trump-era policy that cut off assistance to the agency. Former US President Donald Trump eliminated support for the humanitarian program in 2018, a decision that was applauded at the time by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Relations between Palestinians and the US took a turn for the worse during the previous administration, after Trump in 2018 decided to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy there.

On January 28, 2020, Trump's son-in-law and then senior White House adviser Jared Kushner also unveiled the "Peace to Prosperity" plan, an attempt by the Trump administration to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan, however, was repeatedly refused by Palestinian leaders.

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Ethics Watchdog Accuses Ted Cruz of Using Campaign Funds to Promote Book
by [Mary F.](#)

Texas Senator Ted Cruz in September 2020 published a book titled "One Vote Away: How a Single Supreme Court Seat Can Change History." Drawing on his own experiences, Cruz in his book chronicles how often Supreme Court decisions come down to one vote.

The Campaign Legal Center (CLC), a group that works to reduce the influence of money in politics, filed an ethics [complaint](#) against Texas Senator Ted Cruz this week, after accusing him of using donations to promote his 2020 book.

Specifically, the ethics group has accused Cruz of illegally using campaign funds to pay for Facebook ads to promote his book.

The Facebook ads allegedly ran between September 24, 2020 to October 2020 and cost between \$14,000 and \$17,697. In the complaint, the organization also highlights that Cruz obtains a 15 percent royalty for every book sold.

"Because Cruz receives royalties from book sales, his campaign crossed a legal line by spending donor funds on Facebook ads promoting sales of that book," CLC director of federal reform, Brendan Fischer, said in a statement obtained by [CNBC](#). "We don't know how extensive these violations might be because any similar ads that Cruz may have run on platforms other than Facebook or Google are not publicly available."

The watchdog also sent a [letter](#) to the Senate Ethics Committee, urging the organization to launch an investigation into whether Cruz broke federal law.

"In using campaign funds for a personal marketing endeavor designed to sell more copies of his book, Senator Cruz appears to have broken the law and violated Senate rules," the CLC wrote in the letter.

A lawyer for Cruz has denied the allegations made by the CLC.

"Senator Cruz's campaign has closely followed Federal Election Commission laws and guidelines when promoting his book, and he has not received any royalties whatsoever for these book sales," Chris Gober said in a statement provided to [The Hill](#).

According to the [Federal Election Commission](#), using campaign funds for personal use "is prohibited." Although the FEC does allow candidates to use campaign funds for some promotional items, the CLC has argued that the FEC guidelines prohibit candidates from using campaign donations to gain personal financial gain.

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Most Children With MIS-C Only Experienced Mild COVID-19 Symptoms, Study Finds
by [Mary F.](#)

Multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) is a condition where different body parts, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, eyes and gastrointestinal organs, become inflamed. The disease has been linked to COVID-19 since many children who had the novel coronavirus also end up developing MIS-C.

A recent study published in the journal [JAMA Pediatrics](#) this week found that most of the children who developed MIS-C following a COVID-19 infection either had no or only very mild symptoms of the coronavirus.

In fact, the study found that about 75% of the patients studied did not experience COVID-19 symptoms when they had a coronavirus infection.

However, when those same patients later developed the inflammatory condition weeks later, they did experience common symptoms associated with MIS-C, such as fever.

"In this cross-sectional study of a large cohort of patients with MIS-C, 2 peaks that followed COVID-19 peaks by 2 to 5 weeks were identified. The geographic and temporal association of MIS-C with the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that MIS-C resulted from delayed immunologic responses to SARS-CoV-2 infection. The clinical manifestations varied by age and by presence or absence of preceding COVID-19," the study outlines.

The study, led by researchers at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), came to that conclusion after studying nearly 1,800 cases of MIS-C reported to the CDC between March 2020 and mid-January 2020. The study included children up to age 20, although the majority of the study participants were under 15.

MIS-C has been likened to Kawasaki disease, which is common in children younger than 5 years old and causes inflammation of blood vessels throughout the body.

Kawasaki disease typically causes a fever, as well as a rash, sore throat and swollen lymph glands. Symptoms of MIS-C include fever, abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, skin color changes, rashes and labored breathing.

The [latest data](#) by the CDC shows that there are at least 3,185 cases of MIS-C in the US and 36 associated deaths.

The CDC [recommends](#) contacting your child's doctor, nurse or clinic immediately if your child shows any symptoms of MIS-C. Emergency services should also be sought immediately if your child shows any other warning signs like trouble breathing, pain or pressure in the chest, new confusion, the inability to stay awake, severe abdominal pain or pale colored skin, lips or nail beds.

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'Extremely Unacceptable': Latino Groups Blast Biden's Judicial Nominee List Over Lack of Diversity
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US President Joe Biden announced his list of 11 judicial candidates to nominate to the bench, highlighting that he intended to create an atmosphere that would "reflect the full diversity of the American people." However, many have begun to lash out after the list failed to provide sufficient representation of the Latino community.

Several prominent Latino legal and civil rights groups recently blasted the list of judicial nominations put forth by Biden, accusing the US president of failing to keep his promises for diversity on the federal bench after his first slate of nominees included only one Hispanic nominee.

Biden's list of nominations currently includes three African American women selected for appeals court vacancies, as well as a man who would become the nation's first Muslim American appointed as a federal district judge. Also included in the list is Regina Rodriguez, the sole Hispanic nominee who, if confirmed, would serve the US District Court in Colorado. While the nomination list was initially praised as "groundbreaking" by both [rights groups](#) and members of the [media](#), the sentiments were not mirrored by some Latino civil rights groups. Thomas Saenz, the president and general counsel of Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and Juan Cartagena, who serves as the president and general counsel of the LatinoJustice PRLDEF, condemned the failure in a [joint release](#).

The pair blasted the downfall as "utterly unacceptable when Latinos have been the largest minority group in this country since 2003, and when Latino voters are as responsible as any group of voters for Biden's close electoral victory."

[Data](#) released by the Pew Research Center indicates that Latinos are the second-largest racial or ethnic group within the US, and that Latinos account for about 52% of all US population growth between 2010 and 2019.

"As the nation's largest minority group, with substantial projected growth nationwide, Latinos have been playing and will play an increasing role in our nation's legal system, litigating many of the most important legal issues that will arise across the country in every area of law," a statement reads.

"There is no excuse for perpetuating the exclusion of Latino jurists from the federal bench."

“Despite his record-breaking number of judicial appointments, [former US President] Donald Trump appointed only one member of the Latino community to any court of appeals anywhere in the country. We expect the Biden administration to do substantially better than its predecessor, but today’s announcement is not encouraging as far as the Latino community is concerned,” the statement added.

The release further pointed out that five of the 13 federal circuit courts of appeals have no Latino or Latina judge, and that the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, which is seen as a pathway to the US Supreme Court, has never had a Hispanic judge throughout its entire history. While the Hispanic National Bar Association welcomed Rodriguez’s nomination, it too acknowledged in a [statement](#) that she was the only Hispanic nominee included in the list, and that the administration needs to nominate more Hispanic candidates if it “truly” wants the federal bench to “reflect the communities they serve.”

The Biden administration is expected to release names of additional nominees over the next several weeks.

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Twitch to Suspend Users Over Harmful Offline Actions Under New Platform Policy
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Following a spike in violent posts and campaigns of disinformation across platforms, social media companies, including tech giants Facebook and Twitter, have come under fire over their comment moderation efforts. Recently, lawmakers raised the possibility of stripping tech protections afforded under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Acts.

Popular streaming platform Twitch announced on Wednesday that it would be implementing a new policy to suspend users who are involved in “serious offenses” that occur offline, setting the stage for one of the more strictest initiatives put forth by a platform.

The streaming company, which came under Amazon’s ownership in 2014, explained in a [blog post](#) that it would be taking action against users who display certain behaviors against members of the Twitch community and those outside of it.

Under the new policy, users can be suspended from the platform for an indefinite period of time for taking part in deadly violence, terrorist activities such as recruiting, explicit or credible threats of mass violence, participation in a hate group, sexual exploitation of minors and acting as an accomplice to non-consensual sexual activities, among other offenses.

While investigations into allegations may take time, the company noted that a suspension will only be issued once a probe is completed, and if investigators are able to obtain solid evidence, such as links, screenshots, or a police report, of wrongdoing.

Twitch officials did also indicate in the policy update that they would be partnering with a “highly-regarded third party investigative partner to support our internal team with these investigations.”

“This partner is an experienced investigations law firm that is dedicated to conducting independent workplace and campus investigations including those related to sexual

discrimination or assault," the company explained without naming the new partner. "They have deep expertise in these types of cases, as well as training in conducting investigations with respect and sensitivity to all parties involved."

Additionally, an unidentified Twitch spokesperson [informed CNBC](#) that offline behaviors do not need to specifically be against another Twitch user in order to be considered a violation. The official explained that the premise is based on the belief that violence committed off the platform will likely create safety risks for the streaming community.

Individuals who are under investigation will only be informed "where appropriate," according to the release, which notes that it may side-step alerting the user involved "in order to preserve evidence" in cases linked to illegal behaviors.

In instances of false reports, the post notes that Twitch will "suspend accounts for submitting large amounts of frivolous reports, or encouraging others to submit fake reports."

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'That Wasn't Just a Hug': Cuomo Accuser Details Years of Grooming, Alleged Groping Incident by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several months, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has faced a slew of sexual harassment accusations from former and current administration aides who have alleged he took advantage of his political standing. Cuomo has repeatedly denied the allegations, stressing that his behavior was misconstrued.

The unidentified staffer who recently accused Cuomo of groping her has spoken out and detailed various incidents in which the state's most powerful politician spent years allegedly grooming her.

The unnamed woman spoke to the [Albany Times Union](#) on the condition of anonymity and shed light on multiple aggressive and sexually suggestive encounters that took place over the course of roughly two years and allegedly involved Cuomo.

Speaking to the outlet, the woman alleged that Cuomo had been grooming her over the course of several incidents that saw the governor give hugs that got increasingly tighter and interactions that also saw him giving her kisses on the cheek.

"It was never in front of anybody. He made sure that it was either at the [New York State Executive Mansion] or, if it was at the Capitol, that no one was around," she said, adding that Cuomo avoided giving her hugs whenever other administration officials were present. "It felt calculated - he would totally act different [when others were present]."

As the months passed, their physical embraces grew tighter, she told the outlet, explaining that she believed he was attempting to feel her breasts against his chest.

"Sometimes he would pull my whole body close to him. I remember purposely, like, taking my pelvis and pulling away. ... I knew what he was doing," she said.

Touching on similar allegations voiced by other accusers, the aide also stated that the governor made inappropriate remarks and inquiries into her personal life. At one point, Cuomo allegedly looked at her and remarked, "Oh, if you were single, the things that I would do to you."

However, the “first blatant move” that was committed by Cuomo occurred when the pair were alone inside his office and he had reportedly asked her to “take a selfie” with him.

“I remember standing up in his upstairs office. I was holding up the phone. I was nervous. As the phone is up I feel him, like, not just sliding his hands, he’s like rubbing my butt cheek, but not saying anything,” she recalled, detailing that Cuomo later told her to send the picture they snapped together to another colleague before urging her to not show it to anyone else.

Cuomo’s behavior, however, reached a new low as time went on. The unidentified aide told the Times Union that in November 2020 she found herself called to Cuomo’s office to help him with a phone issue. Once there, Cuomo came from behind his desk and began groping her.

“And that wasn’t just a hug,” she recalled. “He went for it and I kind of like was, ‘Oh, the door is right there.’ ... I was mortified that a woman who works here is going to come in and see. ... I was terrified of that happening, because that’s not who I am and that’s not what I’m here for.”

“I remember exactly what I was wearing,” she said. “I remember him slamming [the door] so hard that I remember thinking to myself that I’m sure the staff is, like, ‘Is everything OK up there?’ He came right back and he pulled me close and all I remember is seeing his hand, his big hand. I remember looking down like, ‘Holy s**t.’”

Cuomo had allegedly reached underneath her blouse and was cupping one of her breasts over her bra. The governor only pulled away from her after she called him “crazy.”

“That was definitely not something that he wants to hear. It definitely was a hit to his ego,” she told the outlet. “And then it was almost like instantly he was done. ... He turned around and walked back to his desk.”

“He didn’t say anything. I walked myself out to the front door and nothing was said. ... It was almost like I felt like a piece of garbage to him. I felt degraded,” she added.

The Times Union reported that individuals within Cuomo’s inner circle know who the accuser is, and that since the individual has remained working within the administration, she has been given fewer work assignments at the state Capitol since the accusations were made public.

The groping allegations involving Cuomo have been considered one of the more serious accusations among the several that have been voiced against him. They have prompted an [investigation](#) by the office of New York State Attorney General Letitia James, as well as an [impeachment inquiry](#) by the New York State Assembly.

Cuomo has [repeatedly denied](#) he committed any offenses, only admitting that his actions may have been “[misinterpreted as unwanted flirtation](#).” He has also rejected any and all calls for him to resign as governor, vowing instead to serve New Yorkers for the remainder of his term.

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Biden to Announce Long-Awaited Package of Executive Action Against Gun Violence, Report Says

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Since the start of his administration, US President Joe Biden has faced pressure from House Democrats to fulfill his campaign promises and place federal regulations on assault-style weapons.

Biden is expected to introduce at the White House on Thursday his long-awaited package of executive actions intended to curb skyrocketing gun violence within the US.

Citing sources familiar with the matter, [Politico reported](#) that some of the executive actions under consideration would require buyers of devices known as ghost guns - homemade or makeshift firearms without a serial number - to undergo background checks.

The actions will also most likely include promises from his 2020 campaign to support legislation in closing the so-called "Charleston loophole," which allows guns to be transferred between licensed gun dealers to interested buyers before a background check is completed.

There is also a consideration for placing a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, as well as repealing gun manufacturers' immunity from liability. Prohibition of firearm purchases for those convicted of domestic violence against their partners and federal guidance on home storage safety measures are also speculated as being part of the overall plan.

Other executive actions may include a plan by US Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) to reintroduce his universal background check bill. Murphy [has boasted](#) of bringing the bill to the US Senate floor, but not without hearing from the White House first. The senator believes that if the government is going to pursue legislation then "our best chance to pass a background checks proposal is this year. I don't want to have to wait for a mass shooting."

Due to pressure from officials, there is likely to be a push for gun control legislation in response to deadly [US mass shootings](#). However, it's worth noting that past shootings, such as those that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, failed to prompt comprehensive federal measures.

In fact, the late March shooting in Boulder, Colorado, that claimed the lives of 10 individuals reinvigorated calls for stricter gun control measures. Shortly after the shooting, Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold [told CBSN](#) that stricter gun laws were needed to make sure gun ownership is done in a "reasonable way," with regulation from the federal government being necessary to execute that effort.

Additionally, the Senate Judiciary Committee has held multiple hearings to address the US' gun violence epidemic in response to the shooting, which unfolded only a few days after a mass shooting in Atlanta, Georgia. Lawmakers have called on Senate leaders to take action and implement gun control measures.

In a [letter](#) to Biden last week, dozens of congressional lawmakers demanded the president place "concealable assault-style firearms that fire rifle rounds" under the [National Firearms Act](#), which would make the sale and transfer of the specified firearms much more difficult to complete.

"The concealability and ability to use ammunition capable of penetrating body armor make these firearms especially dangerous on our streets and for law enforcement personnel," the lawmakers wrote, urging Biden "to immediately promulgate regulations to cover these concealable assault firearms under the National Firearms Act."

The looming Thursday announcement may also include the participation of his nominee for the director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, who has not yet been named, but will play a key role in any executive branch actions on guns. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the Biden administration's lack of a Senate-confirmed US Attorney General and ATF director are considered some of the reasons it has taken time for the administration to follow up on its [gun safety campaign](#) promises.

In his \$2.25 trillion infrastructure plan, Biden proposed \$5 billion for community violence prevention programs, which has been praised by some community activists. “With this investment of our federal tax dollars, we have an unprecedented opportunity to build an infrastructure of peace to heal and disrupt cycles of violence,” said [Erica Ford](#), head of a coalition of community groups dubbed Fund Peace.

The latest developments came after White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [recently reaffirmed](#) that Biden would be expanding gun control measures at the federal level, but that the timing was uncertain as a result of the ongoing review process.

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Former Trump Aide Launches America First Legal Group to Combat Biden Administration Policies

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

During former US President Donald Trump’s four years in office, the nonprofit American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed 400 legal actions against his administration. Within its first 100 days, the Biden administration has gained just a taste of the legal onslaught as it has faced a series of lawsuits led by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

Stephen Miller, Trump’s former top aide, launched a new group on Wednesday with the goal of using the legal system to challenge US President Joe Biden’s policies, and fight back against the latter administration’s attempts to dismantle Trump’s previous initiatives and the overall conservative agenda.

The America First Legal (AFL) group launched [its website](#) with blessings from Trump and a board of directors which include former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and former acting Attorney General Matt Whitaker, as well as others from the conservative movement. “As we know, the Radical Left has been relentless in waging their battles in court. Conservatives and America First supporters badly need to catch up and turn the tables, which is why I applaud Stephen and Mark Meadows for rushing to fill this critical void,” Trump wrote in a statement. “The era of unilateral legal surrender must end—and I hope all America First patriots will get behind America First Legal.”

According to [CBS News](#), the legal organization plans to use attorneys who worked in the Trump administration, as well as partner with state attorneys general to help mount their legal battles. In its mission statement, AFL claims that “our security, our liberty, our sovereignty, and our most fundamental rights and values are being systematically dismantled by an unholy alliance of corrupt special interests, big tech titans, the fake news media, and liberal Washington politicians.” They also vow to wage a “forceful defense” of the rights of the American country and way of life.

Biden’s initiatives already face a large defense left behind by the Trump administration, which [appointed](#) more than 230 judges to the federal bench and three justices to the US Supreme Court.

“Whenever the Trump Administration tried to implement positive, lawful change that put America First, these extremist organizations filed one lawsuit after another, shopping for the most favorable legal forum,” Miller, who will serve as the group’s president, said in a [Wednesday release](#). “Now, we must turn the tables.”

Many other former Trump officials are using their executive branch experience to assemble teams centered on promoting the former president’s policies. These include Brooke Rollins, who held the role of acting domestic policy adviser under the Trump White House, and National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, who in December announced they were preparing to launch a [nonprofit group](#). Additionally, former US Vice President Mike Pence [launched](#) the Advancing American Freedom organization.

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MS-13 Gang Member, Five Others Arrested for Illegally Crossing US Border
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Mara Salvatrucha, more commonly known as MS-13, is an international gang alleged to be involved in both drug and human trafficking, prostitution, murder, extortion and many other illegal activities. US government officials have expressed concern about MS-13 because of its ties to ex-paramilitary members in El Salvador.

Early Wednesday morning, an agent patrolling near the US’ southern border wall arrested six men who admitted to illegally entering the US, one of whom was later found to be a documented MS-13 gang member.

In a [statement](#) released by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the agency revealed that San Diego Sector (SDC) Border Patrol agents arrested six men: a 28-year-old gang member from El Salvador, three additional El Salvadorian nationals, one Mexican national and one Honduran national.

The agency further indicated that the individuals were spotted by a SDC agent who was patrolling the mountainous area near Forest Gate Road at around 12:45 a.m. local time. The statement noted that the six men were “near the border wall.”

After capture, the men were transported to a nearby Border Patrol station to be processed for removal from the US. “I’m proud of the great work by our agents arresting this gang member,” Chief Patrol Agent Aaron Heitke said in the statement. “Their hard work keeps our neighborhoods safe.”

This arrest comes amid heightened concern over the southern border crisis, and as US Vice President Kamala Harris has come under increased criticism over her handling of the booming situation, including a recent trip to Chicago, Illinois, that she made to [visit bakeries](#).

Earlier, Harris was [tasked](#) by Biden to lead the administration’s response to curb illegal immigration into the US through the southern border. To date, Harris has gone weeks without holding a [news conference](#) to acknowledge any plans to address the growing crisis.

Last month, White House officials said Harris would work along a [two-track method](#) to approach the border crisis. This method will first address the increase of migrants at the border and then

expectantly build long-term relationships with the countries from which the migrants were fleeing, such as El Salvador, Mexico and Honduras.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich has written a [letter](#) to Harris inviting her to tour the southwest portion of the border in his state to get a "firsthand insight" into what those on the ground are experiencing.

Citing a "national security threat," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) wrote a letter on Tuesday to FBI Director Christopher Wray and CIA Director William Joseph Burns, requesting that a briefing be held on individuals included on the terror watchlist who were being detained at the southern border.

Also this week, Border Patrol agents in California found [two children](#) who had reportedly been abandoned at the border by smugglers. A recent video has also circulated on social media of a young boy who had apparently been abandoned in a desert in Texas.

As of last week, an [estimated](#) 5,000 unaccompanied children have been placed in Border Patrol custody, with another 13,000 minors in the custody of the US' Health and Human Services.

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RPT - 'No Decision Has Been Made' on US Participation in Open Skies Treaty - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet made a decision on the future of its participation in the Open Skies Treaty (OST), a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"No decision has been made on the future of US participation in the Open Skies Treaty," the spokesperson said Wednesday. "The United States is actively reviewing matters related to the treaty and consulting with our allies and partners."

The State Department spokesperson said Russia's "continuing noncompliance with the Treaty is one of several pertinent factors."

"As this process continues, we encourage Russia to take steps to come back into compliance with the agreement," the spokesperson added.

Earlier on Wednesday, a diplomatic memorandum published by Defense News said the United States has informed its allies that the Biden administration believes any move to rejoin the OST would send a wrong signal to Russia.

The United States is "frankly concerned that agreeing to rejoin a treaty that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda," the Biden administration said in the March 31 demarche to multiple allies.

"We believe, however, that there are circumstances in which we return to OST or include some of OST's confidence-building measures under other cooperative security efforts."

The Biden administration did not provide details about its specific concerns, but it accused Russia of engaging in a pattern of disregard for its commitments though not of the same magnitude as its material breach of the INF Treaty.

On Tuesday, the US air force announced that two OC-135B planes, which conducted monitoring missions over Russia for nearly three decades, would be retired.

The head of the Russian delegation at the security negotiations in Vienna, Konstantin Gavrilov, told Sputnik on Tuesday that the move to decommission the planes shows the United States is not yet ready to rejoin the treaty.

The US left the OST in November, citing alleged violations by Russia. On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that Moscow is completing domestic procedures to submit to the parliament a bill on the treaty denunciation, which means that Washington and its allies have 1.5 months left to decide on the fate of the surveillance flights deal.

During the 2020 campaign, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden criticized Donald Trump's move to abandon the OST. However, a flurry of Biden's executive orders reversing some of his predecessor's decisions has not included moves to rejoin the accord.

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White House Unveils Details on Initial Actions to Address Gun Violence

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The White House unveiled new actions to address recent mass shootings including a proposal to stop the spread of ghost guns, which are those bought in parts and assembled by the buyer.

"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing six initial actions to address the gun violence public health epidemic. The recent high-profile mass shootings in Boulder - taking the lives of 10 individuals - and Atlanta - taking the lives of eight individuals, including six Asian American women - underscored the relentlessness of this epidemic," the White House said in a fact sheet on Wednesday night.

Top among those actions, according to the fact sheet, calls for the Justice Department, within 30 days, to issue a proposed rule to help stop the proliferation of "ghost guns."

"We are experiencing a growing problem: criminals are buying kits containing nearly all of the components and directions for finishing a firearm within as little as 30 minutes and using these firearms to commit crimes," the release said.

These types of guns do not have a serial number and cannot be traced by law enforcement if used in a crime, the release said.

The Justice Department in 60 days will also propose a rule to further regulate the use of stabilizing braces that turn handguns into short-barreled rifles, the release said, adding that it would be done in accordance with the National Firearms Act.

President Joe Biden has nominated gun control advocate David Chipman to serve as the Director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, according to the fact sheet.

The US administration has also directed the Justice Department to publish model "red flag" legislation for states, the release said. The "red flag" laws can be used to bar people of concern from accessing firearms, the release said.

In addition, the Justice Department has been instructed to issue an annual report on firearms trafficking.

The Biden administration is taking action in light of the recent shooting at a grocery store in the Denver city of Boulder, which left 10 people dead.

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UPDATE 2 - Texas Governor Says Sexual Abuse, Malnutrition Reported at Federal Child Migrant Facility

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said during a press conference that there are reports of sexual abuse, malnutrition, and a novel coronavirus outbreak at a federal facility holding migrant children in the city of San Antonio.

"Complaints that were sent to these state agencies include the following four things: children at this facility are being sexually assaulted; second, there are not enough staff to safely supervise the children at this facility; third, some children at this facility are not eating throughout the day; and fourth, children with COVID are not being physically separated from children without COVID," Abbott said on Wednesday.

Abbott said he has ordered the Texas Rangers and state's Department of Public Safety to immediately investigate the allegations.

The Biden administration is using the Freeman Expo Center in San Antonio to house up to 2,100 migrant children. There are currently about 1,300 migrant children in the facility.

The governor called on the Biden administration to shut down the facility in order to ensure the safety of the migrant children.

An official from Health and Human Services told Sputnik: "As a matter of policy, in order to protect the privacy and security of the unaccompanied children (UC) referred to HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), ORR does not discuss individual UC cases."

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Sputnik reached out to US Health and Human Services (HHS) to comment on the matter but had yet to receive a response by the time of publication.

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US Justice Dept. to Propose Rule in 30 Days to Counter 'Ghost Guns' - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department within the next 30 days will propose a rule to help stop the spread of ghost guns, which are those that are bought in parts and assembled by the buyer, the White House said in a press release unveiling the Biden administration's initial actions in response to recent mass shootings.

"The Justice Department, within 30 days, will issue a proposed rule to help stop the proliferation of 'ghost guns,'" the release said on Wednesday. "We are experiencing a growing problem: criminals are buying kits containing nearly all of the components and directions for finishing a firearm within as little as 30 minutes and using these firearms to commit crimes."

These types of guns do not have a serial number and cannot be traced by law enforcement if used in a crime, the release said.

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All Puerto Ricans Over 16 Eligible for Vaccinations Starting April 12 - Governor

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Puerto Rico has made all residents over 16 years of age eligible to receive coronavirus vaccines as of April 12, the US territory's governor, Pedro Pierluisi, said in his first State of the Government Address.

"I am pleased to announce that, given the sustained increase in the allocation of vaccines to Puerto Rico and the capacity shown by the Department of Health, together with its providers and the National Guard, as of next Monday, April 12, all residents of Puerto Rico over 16 years of age who wants to be vaccinated can make their appointment and receive their vaccination," the governor said as quoted by the San Juan-based Weekly Journal on Wednesday.

Pierluisi also issued an executive order further tightening coronavirus-related mitigation measures due to a spike in COVID-19 cases.

More than one million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been distributed in Puerto Rico, the report said.

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US Neo-Nazi Leader Pleads Guilty over Threatening Journalists - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A leader of a US neo-Nazi group pleaded guilty to hate crime and conspiracy charges for threatening journalists who worked to expose anti-Semitism, the Department of Justice said in a statement.

"[Cameron] Shea pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to commit three offenses against the United States: interference with federally-protected activities because of religion; mailing threatening communications; and cyberstalking. He also pleaded guilty to one count of interfering with a federally protected activity because of religion," the statement said on Wednesday.

Shea, 25-year-old Washington State resident and leader of the Atomwaffen Division group, allegedly searched for journalists and advocates he wanted to threaten in retaliation for their efforts to expose anti-Semitism. The group then sent to their intended victims threatening messages and posters, which featured Nazi symbols, masked figures with guns and Molotov cocktails.

"The group focused primarily on those who are Jewish or journalists of color," the Justice Department said.

Shea will be sentenced on June 28. He faces a maximum penalty of ten years in prison for the hate crime charge and five years for the conspiracy charge.

Three his associates were also charged. Two of them pleaded guilty and were sentenced. The third pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial.

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Next 10 Years 'Decade of Decision' for Climate Action - Kerry

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The next ten years are the "decade of decision" for climate action, which if not utilized properly will fall short of achieving the world's limits of global warming, US Climate Envoy John Kerry said at a climate dialogue with IMF Managing Director Goergieva Kristalina held on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

"We think these next ten years, between 2021 now and 2030, is the decade of decision," Kerry said on Wednesday. "If we don't do this adequately in the next 10 years, we're not going to be able to hold onto the possibility of a warming limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius and we will not be able to achieve (the US) net zero (on emissions) by 2050. So all of this hangs in the balance."

Renewable energies are at the core of President Joe Biden's plan to steer the United States on the road to economic recovery while slashing the country's carbon footprint.

The Biden administration is also reducing its reliance on fossil fuels to halve the US rate of emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2050 under the Paris Climate Agreement.

The United States is rejoining the fight against climate change under the framework of the Paris Climate Agreement four years after former president Donald Trump withdrew the country from the accord.

Kerry said the Biden administration needs to get really focused on the creation of a "new economy," which will provide extraordinary jobs, better health to people with less cancer from less particulates in the air and with greater security for the nation and the world.

"It's a pretty obvious choice and it's extraordinary that only in the United States of America are there people in public life who still deny this evidence," he said.

Kerry was speaking ahead of Biden's Leaders Summit, a 40-nation meeting on climate scheduled for April 22-23.

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US Mulls Expelling Russian Diplomats Over Alleged Election Meddling, Hacking - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering expelling Russian diplomats over alleged meddling in the US presidential election and cyber attacks against the United States, Bloomberg reported citing three people familiar with the matter.

The report on Wednesday said the US administration has completed an intelligence review of Russia's alleged role in the SolarWinds cyber breach and interference in the 2020 presidential election. The administration is considering action against Russian diplomats, including sanctions against individuals close to Russian President Vladimir Putin and agencies linked to election interference allegations, the report said.

Russia has repeatedly denied all US allegations of election meddling and hacking.

US administration officials are meeting Wednesday to decide what action to take, the report said.

President Joe Biden had ordered his administration to review its policy on Russia, including allegations of Russian bounties on US troops in Afghanistan and the poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

Last month, the Biden administration imposed sanctions on seven senior Russian officials.

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US Charges, Sanctions Pakistani for Smuggling Immigrants - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged and sanctioned a Pakistani national for leading a scheme to smuggle illegal immigrants from Pakistan and Afghanistan, the departments of Justice and Treasury announced.

"According to court documents, between January 2015 and December 2020, Abid Ali Khan, 40, allegedly organized, led, and worked, with others in his Pakistan-based smuggling network to

facilitate the travel of undocumented individuals to the United States," the Justice Department said in a release.

Earlier on Wednesday, a federal grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia returned an indictment while the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced sanctions against Khan, his "Transnational Criminal Organization" and three of Khan's associates. The sanctions require the blocking and reporting of all their assets in the US and prohibit all dealings with them by US persons.

"In addition to the national security concerns, the practice of smuggling-for-profit and the facilitation of fraudulent documentation undermines the credibility of the US asylum system, damaging public confidence in the vetting process, and jeopardizing access to protection for vulnerable persons fleeing conflict, famine and persecution," the Treasury Department said in the release.

Khan's network coordinate the smuggling of foreigners to the United States for an average cost of approximately \$20,000, which included fees to procure fraudulent or counterfeit documents and make payoffs to corrupt officials, according to the Treasury Department.

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US Has Over 20,000 Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Custody - Border Agency Data

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US government has over 20,000 migrant children in federal custody, up from 18,000 reported last week, border agency data revealed.

The US as of Wednesday has a total of 20,273 migrant children in custody, according to data released on Wednesday by the departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS).

Over 16,045 children out of the total number remain in HHS care while 4,228 children are reported to be in CBP custody, according to the data.

The published report also noted that the total number of children in custody does not include children from Mexico, most of whom will be repatriated and will not remain in DHS custody.

Last week, HHS and DHS reported 18,046 migrant children were in federal custody.

The US has been experiencing the greatest influx of migrants as well as unaccompanied children on the southern border in two decades.

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US Charges 6 in \$21Mn Scheme to Peddle Fraudulent Stock - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Six residents in the state of Florida face charges of over fraudulent sales of stock in a company named Social Voucher, using boiler-room tactics to reach investors throughout the United States, the Justice Department said.

"They defrauded investors of approximately \$21 million by falsely claiming that the investors' money would go towards the development of a lucrative mobile gaming application that, in reality, never launched and generated no revenue," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

In 2013, Gerald Parker, the CEO of Social Voucher and Michael Assenza, the Director of Technology, created the company. They then hired four other defendants to set up a boiler-room style operation to sell stock in the company, the release said.

The six face charges of with conspiracy to commit mail fraud and wire fraud, according to the release.

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US State of Alabama Ends Coronavirus Facemask Mandate - Governor

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Alabama Governor Kay Ivey issued an executive order ending the facemask mandate in the state given the increased rate of coronavirus vaccination and the decreased number of hospitalizations and virus-related deaths.

"Although COVID-19 remains a serious public health threat, I find that a new approach to COVID-19 mitigation is warranted based on rising vaccination rates, decreased confirmed cases of COVID-19 and decreasing numbers of hospitalizations and deaths attributed to this virus," Ivey said in an executive order on Wednesday evening.

An accompanying press release said, "Masks will no longer be mandated statewide," but it added that people are strongly encouraged to keep covering their faces when in public or in close contact with others.

As of Monday, the seven-day average for new cases was 328 per day, a 92 percent drop since January 10, and the lowest average since last spring, local media reported.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The United States seeks stable and predictable relations with Russia despite profound disagreements between the two countries, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

* The United States has informed its allies that the Biden administration believes any move to rejoin the Open Skies Treaty would send a wrong signal to Russia, a diplomatic memo published by Defense News said.

* The administration of US President Joe Biden does not want to cooperate with Russia on cybersecurity and instead is groundlessly accusation Moscow of cyberattacks, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev has said.

* Persons interested in the growing tension between Moscow and Washington could provoke US President Joe Biden to unacceptable words about Russian President Vladimir Putin, Patrushev said.

* Russia was able to promptly agree on the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) - the country's only remaining nuclear arms pact with the United States - with the Biden administration on the terms originally put forward by Moscow, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said.

OLYMPIC GAMES

* The Biden administration's position on the 2022 Winter Olympics being hosted in China has not changed, but Washington is not discussing with allies plans for a joint boycott, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

* The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) opposes athlete boycotts of and believe that athletes should not be used as a tool for rising human rights issues in China, USOPC Chair Susanne Lyons told reporters.

* Lyons said she has not ruled out that North Korea's decision to skip the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games was due to political reasons.

JCPOA TALKS IN VIENNA

* White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that the Biden administration and Iran have taken a constructive early step toward holding talks regarding Tehran's nuclear program.

* The United States delegation met at the conference on reviving the Iran nuclear agreement in Vienna with their counterparts from Europe, Russia and China, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

* Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said that he discussed the resumption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley.

* Iranian Vice President Ali Akbar Salehi, who also heads the country's Atomic Energy Organization, pointed to some "good signs" inspiring optimism regarding the possibility to preserve the JCPOA.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The United Nations has called on all sides involved in Donbas conflict to do their utmost to lower the tensions, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

* Moscow records an increase in the activity of armed forces of NATO member states in Ukraine and in the Black Sea close to Russia's borders, the Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said.

* Moscow is seriously concerned about the situation in Donbas and calls on Kiev and NATO to end the Russophobic campaign, Zakharova said.

* Kiev is pulling new forces and weapons to the contact line in Donbas, continues to violate the ceasefire, Zakharova said.

* The statements about Kiev's offensive in Donbas are "winding up the situation", Ukraine is following a political and diplomatic path, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said.

NAVALNY CASE

* The United States is calling on the Russian authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

* Navalny has been diagnosed with two spinal hernias and disc protrusion after complaining about severe back and leg pain, his lawyer said.

PUTIN-PASHINYAN TALKS

* The issue of prisoners and detainees after the Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 is not yet resolved, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday.

* Putin promised Pashinyan to resolve issues with necessary deliveries of COVID-19 vaccines to Armenia but added that Moscow continues to prioritize supplies for Russian citizens.

* Putin assured Pashinyan that the two countries would soon bring their bilateral trade to the pre-pandemic level.

* The presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh is an important factor contributing to regional stability and security, Pashinyan said.

* Putin told Pashinyan that improvement of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh remains a top priority.

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US Ready to Lift Sanctions Imposed on Iran Inconsistent With JCPOA - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to lift sanctions imposed on Iran to resume mutual compliance with the 2015 nuclear agreement, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are prepared to lift sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action]," Price said during a daily briefing.

The spokesperson reiterated that there will be no unilateral gestures as the United States favors a "compliance for compliance" formula.

A US delegation is attending an in-person meeting by the JCPOA members in Vienna to discuss steps needed to fully restore the nuclear agreement. The US representatives had meetings with counterparts from China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom, but are not expected to engage in direct talks with Iran's team.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and began imposing sanctions on Iran in violation of the nuclear agreement.

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Pentagon Downplays Deal on Redeployment of US Troops in Iraq as 'Not New'

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby on Wednesday downplayed recent developments of a redeployment of American forces in Iraq as not new.

The US and Iraqi governments have reportedly agreed to a gradual withdrawal of foreign coalition forces from the Middle-eastern country.

"One of the things they agreed to in this was to continue to have technical talks going forward about the potential redeployment, so that is a new thing in the document, but the idea that there would eventually be a redeployment of US forces in Iraq is not new," Kirby said during a press

briefing. "We have always known that eventually there's going to be a redeployment of forces from Iraq."

A third round of US-Iraqi strategic talks began on Wednesday with the goal of clarifying the status of the troops of the international anti-terrorist coalition led by Washington in Iraq. The two previous meetings were held last June and August.

National Security Adviser to the Iraqi Prime Minister Qassem Al-Araji said in earlier remarks that both sides agreed to have no foreign military bases in the country.

In addition, the official said the two delegations decided that the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) would be conducted exclusively by the Iraqi troops.

In early 2020, the Iraqi parliament voted to end the presence of all foreign forces in the country in response to Washington's decision to launch a drone attack near Baghdad International Airport that killed senior Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani. According to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, the potential of the national security services has increased significantly and will soon enable the country to forgo the need for foreign forces.

The United States currently has 2,500 troops in Iraq.

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Russia Public, Private Sector Customers Can Procure Zoom Accounts - Company to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Customers in Russia's public and private sectors can still procure Zoom accounts, a company spokesperson told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Zoom continues to be committed to serving customers in the Russian market and the Commonwealth of Independent States," the spokesperson said. "We are in the process of evolving our approach in the region, and in the meantime, new and existing customers in both the public and private sectors can seek to procure Zoom accounts directly through our website."

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US Seeks Stable Relations With Russia Despite 'Profound' Disagreements - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks stable and predictable relations with Russia despite profound disagreements between the two countries, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"What we have said is that, yes, we have profound disagreements with the Russian Federation. I have listed many of them, enumerated them on any number of occasions. I won't do that now. But we have also said that what we want is the relationship with Moscow that is both stable and predictable," Price said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson was asked if the United States would consider any gestures to facilitate the return of Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov who was recalled to Moscow for consultations

after President Joe Biden said that he considers his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin "a killer" and threatened Putin will "pay a price."

"We believe that diplomacy is an important tool to help us achieve a relationship that is both stable and predictable even as we continue to hold Moscow to account for the offenses that I have mentioned before," Price said.

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US Team at JCPOA Talks in Vienna Has Had Consultations With Allies, Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States delegation met at the conference on reviving the Iran nuclear agreement in Vienna with their counterparts from Europe, Russia and China, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"The team on the ground in Vienna has had consultations with our European allies, with our Russian and Chinese partners. They, in turn, have met with the Iranian delegation," Price said during a press briefing.

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Former VP Pence Launches Advocacy Group to Defend Conservatives From 'Radical Left'

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Former US Vice President Mike Pence announced on Wednesday a new advocacy organization, Advancing American Freedom, that he said will promote conservative policies of the Trump administration.

"Conservatives will not stand idly by as the radical Left and the new administration attempt to threaten America's standing as the greatest Nation in the world with their destructive policies," Pence said in a press release.

The advocacy group plans to build on "the success of the last four years by promoting traditional Conservative values and promoting the successful policies of the Trump Administration," Pence added.

The release contained a list of more than two dozen prominent conservatives on the organization's advisory board, including many who served in government during the past four years and other longtime champions of the US political right.

They include former White House aides Kellyanne Conway and Larry Kudlow, as well as prominent figures dating back to the Reagan administration such as former Attorney General Ed Meese, according to the release.

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Canada's Ontario to Begin 4-Week COVID-19 State of Emergency on Thursday - Premier

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario is declaring a state of emergency and introducing a stay-at-home order effective Thursday amid an increase in coronavirus variant cases, Premier Doug Ford announced on Wednesday.

"I am declaring a state of emergency with a province-wide stay-at-home order effective 12:01 a.m. [4:01 a.m. GMT] Thursday. This will be in effect for four weeks," Ford told reporters.

The premier noted that non-essential businesses will be limited to curbside pick-up service, while big box stores will be limited to selling essential items, including groceries and medical supplies.

Ontario introduced a four-week lockdown starting on Saturday, but that has not stopped the surge in coronavirus variant cases. Ford noted that the daily case counts are rising faster than the worst-case scenario projected by an expert panel advising the provincial government.

Ontario's public health authorities are recording an average of more than 3,000 new cases daily since the introduction of a third province-wide lockdown since the onset of the pandemic.

Experts estimate that variants - particularly the B.1.1.7 one first identified in the United Kingdom - now make up two-thirds of all new cases.

To date, Ontario has reported 370,817 cases and 7,475 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago.

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US, Finnish Defense Chiefs Discuss Security Situation on Russia-Ukraine Border - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Finnish counterpart Antti Kaikkonen discussed over the telephone their concerns about the worsening situation on the Russia-Ukraine border, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

"Secretary Austin spoke by phone today with his Finnish counterpart, Minister of Defense Antti Kaikkonen," the readout said. "Both leaders expressed a shared concern about the deteriorating security situation resulting from increased Russian Federation activity along the Ukraine border."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said earlier that Moscow recorded an increase in NATO military activities in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders, including on Ukraine's territory and in the Black Sea. Zakharova added that the intelligence activities of foreign countries in Ukraine along the border with Russia and the line of contact in Donbas have significantly intensified.

Kirby continued to say that Austin conveyed to his counterpart that the United States looks forward to continued growth of the relationship between the two countries.

"The Secretary also reaffirmed that the United States seeks to be the partner of choice for Finland's defense modernization needs," Kirby said.

The two leaders also expressed mutual understanding of regional security aspects of climate change and agreed to meet in person at the earliest opportunity.

On Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the current situation on the contact line in Donbas is "frightening" amid numerous provocations by the Ukraine military.

Peskov also said Russia is taking measures to ensure the security of its borders amid the increased NATO activity, which obliges Moscow to be on alert. Russia does not threaten anyone but it moves troops on its territory as it wishes, he added.

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Space X Confirms Successful Launch of 60 Internet Satellites - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A Space X Falcon 9 rocket placed 60 additional satellites in orbit in the company's 10th launch of the year in a bid to provide global internet service through a constellation of thousands of links in low-Earth orbit, the company said on Wednesday.

"Deployment of 60 Starlink satellites confirmed, completing SpaceX's 10th mission this year," the company said via Twitter.

To date, SpaceX has placed more than 1,300 satellites in its Starlink system in orbit, with plans for a commercial rollout of its internet later this year, according to media reports.

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Strong Risk Mitigation Systems to Ensure US Aid to Palestinians Not Diverted- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The multi-million aid to the Palestinians will be fully consistent with US laws and have aggressive risk mitigation systems to prevent misappropriations, the State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"All of this aid is absolutely consistent with relevant US law... As we do around the world we provide assistance in the West Bank and Gaza through experienced and trusted independent partners on the ground. And it's these partners who distribute directly to people in need, not through government's or de-facto government's authorities," Price explained during a press briefing.

"Our development partners in the West Bank and Gaza have aggressive risk mitigation systems in place aimed at ensuring just that. Namely, that US tax payer- funded assistance is reaching those for whom it is intended - the women, the men, the children in need of life-saving assistance," he added.

The State Department announced earlier that the United States is planning to resume financial assistance to the Palestinian people with a \$235 million package that includes funding for development in the West Bank and Gaza along with assistance for the UN refugee agency and peace-building programs.

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Biden Warns US Losing World Leadership Due to Underinvestment

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden warned on Wednesday that the United States is losing its global leadership position and is being eclipsed by other countries due to underinvestment and defended his infrastructure plan as a way to restore supremacy.

"There is a new book out about how we have fallen behind. America is no longer leader of the world because we are not investing. It used to be we invested almost 2.7 percent of our GDP in infrastructure, now it is about 0.7 percent. We were investing and we were the leader in the world," Biden said in a televised address.

Biden unveiled earlier a \$2.3 trillion program to upgrade aging US infrastructures with a controversial corporate tax hike proposed to fund expenses.

"We are the only, (one of) few major economies in the world whose public investment in research and development has declined as a percentage of GDP in the last 25 years. The United States of America! That led the world," Biden said.

"Do you think the rest of the world is waiting around?.. Do you think China is waiting around for us to invest in digital infrastructure or in research and development? I promise you they are not waiting, but they are counting on American democracy to be too slow, too limited and too divided to keep pace," he added.

Biden invited the Republican opposition to consultations over details of his plan including its funding sources.

Republicans and others have criticized the plan as being wasteful given that roughly a tenth of the money would be used in infrastructure and the continuing printing of money would cause hyperinflation, even an inflationary collapse, as well as capital flight.

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High-Powered Microwave Weapon Could Defend US From Hypersonic Missiles - Raytheon CEO

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A future US defense against maneuverable hypersonic missiles developed by both China and Russia will most likely involve a high-energy microwave weapon that destroys the missile's electronics, Raytheon CEO Gregory Hayes said on Wednesday.

"Is it defensible? Absolutely," Hayes told the Economics Club of Washington. "Taking a high powered microwave energy burst and destroying the electronics in these [missiles] is probably the way we're going to have to solve that."

Hayes added that a directed energy microwave weapons is among "the things we're working on today."

China and Russia claim to have developed hypersonic missiles that can travel roughly 6,000 miles an hour, meaning they could hit almost any target in less than two hours, Hayes said.

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Harris, Mexico President Agree to Target 'Root Causes' of Migration to US

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador discussed aid to Central America as a key to reducing US-bound migration, according to a White House readout of their virtual meeting on Wednesday.

"They agreed to continue to work together to address the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras - including poverty, violence, and lack of economic opportunity," the readout said.

Harris updated Lopez Obrador on the US efforts to "surge humanitarian assistance" to the three nations of central America also called the "Northern Triangle," the readout added.

They also discussed ways to crack down on human trafficking, which media reports cite as a key reason for an unprecedented surge of unaccompanied children crossing the US-Mexico border.

US officials reported stopping over 170,000 illegal border crossers in March alone, the biggest one-month total in more than a decade.

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Canada's Ontario Province to Begin 4-Week COVID-19 Emergency on Thursday – Premier

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario is declaring a state of emergency and introducing a stay-at-home order effective Thursday amid a surge in coronavirus variant cases, Premier Doug Ford announced on Wednesday.

"I am declaring a state of emergency with a province-wide stay-at-home order effective 12:01 a.m. [4:01 a.m. GMT] Thursday. This will be in effect for four weeks," Ford told reporters.

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US, Finnish Defense Chiefs Discuss Security Situation on Russia-Ukraine Border - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Finnish counterpart Antti Kaikkonen discussed concerns about the worsening situation on the Russia-Ukraine border, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said after their call on Wednesday. "Secretary Austin spoke by phone today with his Finnish counterpart, Minister of Defense Antti Kaikkonen," Kirby said in a readout. "Both leaders expressed a shared concern about the deteriorating security situation resulting from increased Russian Federation activity along the Ukraine border."

Earlier, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Moscow recorded an increase in NATO military activities in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders including on Ukraine territory and in the Black Sea. The spokeswoman added that the intelligence activities of foreign countries in Ukraine along the borders with Russia and the line of contact in Donbas have significantly intensified.

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US Recovery 'Encouraging' But Remains Below Maximum Employment - Fed Minutes

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US recovery from COVID-19 has been encouraging with the drop in infections and deaths from the virus and associated pick up in the economy although jobs growth remain well below desired targets, minutes of the Federal Reserve's March meeting published on Wednesday said.

Members of the central bank's Federal Open Market committee at the March 16-17 meeting were encouraged enough by what they had witnessed to significantly revise upwards projections for 2021 GDP growth from estimates made in December, the minutes said.

"They noted encouraging developments regarding the pandemic, including significant declines in the number of new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths over the intermeeting period as well as a pickup in the pace of vaccinations," according to the minutes. But the policymakers also realized that "economic activity and employment were currently well below levels consistent with maximum employment," the minutes said, concluding that more fiscal support was needed.

Fed policymakers at the March meeting projected an overall GDP, or gross domestic product, growth of 6.5 percent against the 3.5 percent contraction in 2020.

But Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said maximum employment - one of the central bank's mandates - was unlikely to be achieved this year or anytime soon. Under the Fed's definition, maximum employment is reached when the monthly jobless rate declines to 4.0 percent or below. As of March, the rate stood at 6.0 percent, although the United States saw 1.4 million jobs created over the past two months, way above economists' expectations.

To provide continuous support to the economy, Fed policymakers decided at the March meeting to maintain bond purchases at \$120 billion a month and keep interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent.

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IMF Worried About Weak Middle-Income States, Yet Sees No Systemic Debt Crisis - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund does not expect a systemic worldwide debt crisis from the COVID-19, although middle income countries like Mexico and Argentina may need the debt relief support extended now to poorer nations, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Wednesday.

"At this point of time, we don't see a systemic debt crisis and we want to keep it that way," Georgieva told a news conference held on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings. "There have also been voices advocating for expanding the deployment, especially in new SDRs (to) vulnerable middle-income countries, and perhaps Mexico and Argentina can go in this direction."

SDRs, referring to Special Drawing Rights, are a form of reserve currency created by the IMF to supplement existing reserves of member countries. The IMF said this week it has approved a third tranche of debt service relief grants totaling \$238 million for 28 countries facing economic catastrophe from the coronavirus pandemic.

The governments of Argentina and Mexico on Wednesday urged the IMF to tap into that facility to provide more support to middle income nations, or MICs, faced with serious challenges from the pandemic.

"MICs tend to have – albeit sometimes intermittently – access to capital markets, but not at low rates. For this reason, it is critical to consider new mechanisms in which the new proportionally-allocated SDRs can benefit MICs in need," the two governments said in a joint statement.

Georgieva also said the IMF's prime focus now was in ensuring speedy and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines through the World Bank's COVAX facility.

"I want to be forcefully reminding everyone that time is not on our side and we need to bring a multilateral response to the health crisis before us and the importance of the COVAX facility," she added.

COVAX Managing Director Aurelia Nguyen said this week the facility has delivered enough first round coronavirus doses to 70 countries and is targeting to distribute 2.0 billion doses for all of this year.

But COVAX has also struggled to mobilize support needed from wealthy nations to subsidize its program and has only secured orders for 1.07 billion doses so far.

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White House Says US at 'Constructive' Early Steps of Iran Nuclear Talks

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that the Biden administration and Iran have taken a constructive early step toward holding talks regarding Tehran's nuclear program.

"This is just a constructive early step, we're at the early start of the process here," Psaki said during a press briefing. "We expect these conversations to be difficult, we expect this to be a long process, we're very much at just the beginning period."

Earlier on Wednesday, President Hassan Rouhani said Iran sees the United States' signals of its readiness to join nuclear negotiations, and is ready to resume compliance with the obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action if all US sanctions are lifted.

Psaki said the US administration does not currently have a timeline for bringing Iran to the negotiating table for direct talks.

Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said that he discussed the resumption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley on Wednesday.

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White House Reviewing 5,600 New Files for Trump-Era Migrant Separations - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A White House task force has identified and is reviewing 5,600 new files on asylum-seeking migrants who may have been separated during the Trump administration, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"They've also identified over 5,600 new files that were not reviewed and have begun the process for reviewing, cross checking those files," Psaki said in a press briefing.

The task force has had a difficult time reuniting migrant families because of inaccurate data, such as incorrect names and dates, Psaki said.

President Joe Biden has consistently criticized the Trump administration's hardline immigration policies, especially the controversial "zero tolerance" policy under which federal authorities separated children from their families after they illegally crossed the border.

Parents were sent to federal detention centers to await their court hearing while their children stayed in shelters operated by the Department of Health and Human Services. The policy was halted after receiving massive backlash and legal defeats, but hundreds of migrant children reportedly still remain separated from their families.

Biden created a task force to work on reuniting the separated families.

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Health Canada Aware of European Report Linking AstraZeneca Shot to Blood Clots - Official

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Health Canada is aware of a report by European health regulators that links the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to a string of blood clot events following inoculation, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said on Wednesday. Earlier in the day, experts at the European Medicines Agency (EMA) recommended listing blood clot events as a very rare side effect of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine. Despite the findings, the EMA still insists that the benefits of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine outweigh the risks posed.

"The regulator, Health Canada, is certainly aware of the situation in Europe and the announcement by the European Medicines Agency," Njoo told reporters.

Njoo added that regulators from Canada's health department have participated in the meetings dedicated to the discussion of the serious side effect that has prompted numerous regulators around the world to either restrict or halt immunization with the UK drugmaker's vaccine. Health Canada has pressed pause on inoculating Canadians under the age of 55 with the AstraZeneca vaccine following a recommendation from Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI).

Canadian health regulators have also issued a disclaimer regarding blood clots that may potentially form in individuals who receive an AstraZeneca shot but have not officially listed it as an official side effect.

Concern about the rare side effect of the vaccine began in mid-March, following dozens of reports of blood clotting after inoculations, prompting several EU countries to halt the rollout of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

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Commerce Secretary Says US Will Aggressively Counter China's Unfair Trade Practices

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Wednesday that Trump-era steel and aluminum tariffs have helped protect jobs in the United States and she will aggressively use all available tools to counter China's unfair trade practices going forward.

"The 232 tariffs on steel and aluminum have in fact helped save American jobs in steel and aluminum industries," Raimondo said during a press briefing at the White House.

Raimondo emphasized that she will use all available tools in her power to aggressively protect US jobs from unfair trade practices by China.

The Commerce Department had overseen the restrictions on China via an "Entity List" created by the Trump administration. It was responsible for broad national-security based tariffs the United States imposed on steel and aluminum from key trading partners, including the European Union.

Toward the end of his term last year, then-President Donald Trump also went after Chinese social media and payment applications TikTok and WeChat, trying to force their sale to US entities. Those moves were later struck down by US courts.

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Biden Expresses US Support for Jordan's King Abdullah, Two-State Solution - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden in a phone conversation with Jordan's King Abdullah II expressed strong US support for the monarch amid the recent feud within the royal family and affirmed that Washington backs a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with King Abdullah II of Jordan to express strong U.S. support for Jordan and underscore the importance of King Abdullah II's leadership to the United States and the region," the White House said in a readout.

The White House added that the two leaders also spoke about the bilateral relations between the two countries as well as enhancing bilateral cooperation on numerous political, economic, and security matters.

"The President also affirmed that the United States supports a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the readout said.

The king of Jordan, Abdullah II, said Wednesday, in his first public speech since the security allegations against former crown prince Hamzah bin Al-Hussein emerged, that the last few days had been "most painful."

The prince said Sunday he was under house arrest, a day after state media reported that he was told to stop actions that undermined national stability, as part of a broader security probe. On Monday, the royal court published a letter, allegedly penned by Prince Hamzah, in which the estranged royalty pledged to always be of help to the king and the new crown prince.

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US Restoring Aid to Palestinians With \$235Mln for UN Refugee Agency, Development - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US is planning to resume financial assistance to the Palestinian people with a \$235 million package that includes funding for development in the West Bank and Gaza along with assistance for the UN refugee agency and peacebuilding programs, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We [United States] plan to restart US economic, development, and humanitarian assistance for the Palestinian people. This includes \$75 million in economic and development assistance in the West Bank and Gaza, \$10 million for peacebuilding programs through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and \$150 million in humanitarian assistance for the UN Relief and Works Agency," Blinken said.

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US, Iraq Discuss Redeployment of American Combat Troops in Country - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iraq have addressed the matter of redeployment of any remaining US combat forces in the Middle-eastern country, according to a joint statement on Wednesday.

"Both countries reaffirmed that US forces are in Iraq at the invitation of Iraqi government to support the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in their fight against ISIS [Islamic State terror group, banned in Russia]," the statement, issued upon concluding the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, said. "Based on the increasing capacity of the ISF, the parties confirmed that the mission of US and Coalition forces has now transitioned to one focused on training and advisory tasks, thereby allowing for the redeployment of any remaining combat forces from Iraq, with the timing to be established in upcoming technical talks. The transition of US and other international forces away from combat operations to training, equipping, and assisting the ISF reflects the success of their strategic partnership and ensures support to the ISF's continued efforts to ensure ISIS can never again threaten Iraq's stability."

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US Not Discussing With Allies Joint Boycott of 2022 Winter Olympics in China

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's position on the 2022 Winter Olympics being hosted in China has not changed, but Washington is not discussing with allies plans for a joint boycott, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"Our position on the 2022 Olympics has not changed, we have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) Chair Susanne Lyons said the committee opposes athlete boycotts and believes that athletes should not be used as a tool for rising human rights issues in China.

Lyons added that past boycotts have showed a negative impact on athletes while not effectively addressing global issues.

On Tuesday, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the United States was planning to discuss with its allies and partners a joint boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics. In March, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union imposed sanctions on four Chinese officials and one entity for alleged human rights violations in the Xinjiang region of China.

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US Urges Russia to Take All Actions to Ensure Navalny's Safety, Health - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on the Russian authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Wednesday. "We are disturbed by reports that Mr. Navalny's health is worsening, that he is on a hunger strike to demand access to outside medical care," Psaki said. "We urge Russian authorities to take all necessary actions to ensure his safety and health. So long as he is in prison, the Russian government is responsible for his health and well-being."

Psaki stressed that Washington will continue to monitor the situation closely.

"I would also reiterate that we consider Mr. Navalny's imprisonment on trumped up charges to be politically motivated and a gross injustice, and we stand with likeminded allies and partners in calling for his immediate release as well as an end to the prosecution of his supporters."

Navalny continues his hunger strike, drinking only water despite being sick, his lawyer Olga Mikhailova said on Wednesday after meeting with Navalny in prison.

On March 31, Navalny, who is serving a prison term on charges of financial misconduct, went on a hunger strike, demanding that the prison administration give him access to proper medical treatment. The opposition figure has complained about pain in his back and legs.

According to the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service, Navalny's health has been assessed as stable and satisfactory by medical professionals and he has been receiving all necessary care.

In January, Navalny returned to Moscow from Berlin after receiving medical treatment for an alleged poisoning. The 44-year-old was arrested on arrival and referred to a court, which in early February rescinded his suspended sentence in the 2014 Yves Rocher fraud case over multiple probation breaches and replaced it with a 3.5-year term behind bars. A Moscow city court reinstated the ruling but reduced the sentence to 2.5 years.

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Russian Citizen Terada to Return Home April 9 After Serving Prison Time in US - Diplomat

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Russian national Mira Terada will return home on Friday, April 9, after serving prison time in the United States, a spokesperson for Russia's Consulate General in Houston told Sputnik.

"On April 6, Terada was brought to the temporary detention facility in Bergen County, New Jersey. On April 9, she takes an Aeroflot flight to Moscow," the diplomat said.

Last year, a court in the United States sentenced Terada to 2.5 years over money laundering. Before that, she served six months in pre-trial custody in Finland and another eight months in the US. Terada pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit money laundering.

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US May Consider Diplomacy with North Korea - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to consider some form of diplomacy with North Korea if it facilitates regional denuclearization, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"Broadly speaking, we have a clear objective as it relates to North Korea, which is denuclearizing the North Korean Peninsula, the Korean Peninsula, I should say. We are, of course, continuing to enforce sanctions, we are consulting with allies and partners. We are prepared to consider some form of diplomacy if it is going to lead us down the path toward the denuclearization," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

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US Urges Russia to Take All Actions to Ensure Navalny's Safety, Health - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on the Russian authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Wednesday. "We are disturbed by reports that Mr. Navalny's health is worsening, that he is on a hunger strike to demand access to outside medical care," Psaki said. "We urge Russian authorities to take all necessary actions to ensure his safety and health. So long as he is in prison, the Russian government is responsible for his health and well-being."

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White House Seeks to Appoint Special Envoy to Halt Construction of Nord Stream 2 - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – The White House is looking to appoint a special envoy tasked with halting construction of the Nord Stream 2 project that would carry Russian gas to Europe, Politico reported on Tuesday, citing current and former US officials. The lead candidate to fill the position is Amos Hochstein, the former US Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs during the Obama era, according to the report. Hochstein stepped down from the supervisory board of Ukraine's Naftogaz late last year.

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Commerce Secretary Says US Will Aggressively Counter China's Unfair Trade Practices

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Wednesday that Trump-era steel and aluminum tariffs have helped protect jobs in the United States and she will aggressively use all available tools to counter China's unfair trade practices going forward.

"The 232 tariffs on steel and aluminum have in fact helped save American jobs in steel and aluminum industries," Raimondo said during a press briefing at the White House. Raimondo emphasized that she will use all available tools in her power to aggressively protect US jobs from unfair trade practices by China.

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UN Says Shelling Damage to S. Donbas Pumping Station Left Over 1M In People Without Water

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday that the damage caused to the South Donbas waterway by shelling the day earlier has left more than one million people without water and called on all parties involved in the conflict there to avoid attacks on critical infrastructure.

"Yesterday, shelling damaged the power line near the main lift pumping station of South Donbas waterway in the eastern part of Ukraine," Dujarric said on Wednesday. "This interrupted safe water supply for over a million people in 15 nearby settlements on both sides of the contact line."

Dujarric said the United States reiterates the call for all involved to avoid targeting critical water infrastructure in eastern Ukraine.

The spokesperson noted that the damage to the pumping station has already been fixed.

The United Nations and humanitarian partners seek \$168 million to assist 1.9 million most vulnerable people in the region, Dujarric said, adding that only 5.5 percent of the funds had been received.

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US in Middle of China Policy Review, But Must Play on TikTok - Commerce Secretary

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is currently in the middle of the overall review of its policy toward China, but with respect to Beijing's tech policy Washington has to play offense and defense on TikTok, US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

When asked about the status of the China tech policy review and specifically about TikTok, Raimondo said, "We need to play offense and defense."

"The jobs package is offense: invest in America, competitiveness, so we can play offense" Raimondo said. "A lot of the tools that Commerce has are defense - the entities list, tariffs, etc. so, we are, you know, led by Jake Sullivan and our team interagency review, we are in a process of doing it now... We are kind of in the middle of the overall China policy.

In February, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the White House expects to keep in place tariffs imposed on China by the Trump administration though it will evaluate what is appropriate going forward.

Yellen said the White House was being deliberate in its review of existing policies on China because of the Biden administration's own concerns that went beyond trade.

The Commerce Department under Trump accused popular Chinese video streaming platform TikTok of illegally sharing with its government data on US users and tried unsuccessfully to force the US arm of that business to be sold to an American company. The Trump administration also effectively banned China's Huawei fifth generation technology.

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US Not Discussing With Allies Joint Boycott of 2022 Winter Olympics in China

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's position on the 2022 Winter Olympics being hosted in China has not changed, but Washington is not discussing with allies plans for a joint boycott, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"Our position on the 2022 Olympics has not changed, we have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners," Psaki said in a press briefing.

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White House Says US at 'Constructive' Early Steps of Iran Nuclear Talks

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that the Biden administration and Iran have taken a constructive early step toward holding talks regarding Tehran's nuclear program.

"This is just a constructive early step, we're at the early start of the process here," Psaki said during a press briefing. "We expect these conversations to be difficult, we expect this to be a long process, we're very much at just the beginning period."

Earlier on Wednesday, President Hassan Rouhani said Iran sees the United States' signals of its readiness to join nuclear negotiations, and is ready to resume compliance with the obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action if all US sanctions are lifted.

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UPDATE - Canada's Vaccine Advisory Board Upholds 4-Month Interval Between Shots Amid Dose Shortage

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) on Wednesday upheld the country's health regulator's controversial decision to allow up to four months between coronavirus vaccination shots amid an enduring shortage of available vaccine doses.

NACI Vice-chair Shelley Deeks admitted during a press briefing that Canada could "very well" be the world's lone country that has authorized a four-month interval between first and second vaccine doses.

"NACI recommends that in the context of limited COVID-19 vaccine supply and ongoing pandemic disease, jurisdictions should maximize the number of individuals benefiting from the first dose of vaccine by extending the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine up to four months after the first," the advisory panel said in a statement.

The advisory panel recommended that second dose shots be offered as soon as possible, after all eligible groups have received their first dose, with priority being given to the most vulnerable populations.

NACI Chair Dr. Caroline Quach-Thanh estimated that the interval could be reduced to two months or two and a half months, conditional on Canada receiving a larger supply of vaccine doses.

The advisory board added that it will continue to monitor developments and adjust recommendations as needed.

The recommendation sparked heated debate in the medical community, with one top expert saying that officials are conducting nothing less than a "population-level experiment."

Canada's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Theresa Tam has also defended the decision, citing data from the domestic immunization regime and from abroad.

However, other international medical officials, including the US government's top infectious diseases expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, have said that they will adhere to the manufacturers' recommended timelines between shots – 21 days for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 28 for Moderna.

Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties and many Canadians, according to polling numbers.

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US in Middle of China Policy Review, But Must Play on TikTok - Commerce Secretary

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"The jobs package is offense: invest in America, competitiveness, so we can play offense" Raimondo said. "A lot of the tools that Commerce has are defense - the entities list, tariffs, etc. so, we are, you know, led by Jake Sullivan and our team interagency review, we are in a process of doing it now... We are kind of in the middle of the overall China policy."

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UN Hopes Afghanistan Peace Meeting Will Be Held in Istanbul Later in April - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations hopes to hold a peace conference on Afghanistan later this month in Istanbul, Turkey, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"There are a series of consultations going on in Doha, Dushanbe with representatives of Qatar, the US, regional states, Afghan parties concerning the proposed conference that we hope will be held in Istanbul later this month," Dujarric said. "There will also be discussions in Kabul." Dujarric emphasized that the United Nations remains committed to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

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UN Urges All Sides Involved in Donbas to Lower Tensions - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has called on all sides involved in Donbas conflict to do their utmost to lower the tensions, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"Our appeal is obviously for all involved to do whatever they can to lower the tensions," Dujarric said when asked about the situation in the region.

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British Coronavirus Variant Now Most Common Strain in US - Centers for Disease Control

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has determined that the so-called British variant of novel coronavirus is the prevailing strain across the United States as number of virus-related deaths decreases, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said during a briefing on Wednesday.

"We are seeing increasing prevalence SARS-CoV-2 variants with 52 jurisdictions now reporting cases of variants of concern," Walensky said. "The B.1.1.7 variant is now the most common lineage circulating in the United States."

Walensky noted that increasingly more cases are associated with daycare centers and youth sports while hospitals report growing number of younger adults in their 30s and 40s being hospitalized.

Importantly, however, the number of virus-related deaths is decreasing, Walensky said.

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UN Welcomes Reports US May Resume Funding to Palestine Relief Agency - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) -The expected announcement by the US government that it resume a part of its aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is be very much welcomed by the United Nations, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, media reported that the Biden administration will resume about \$150 million in aid to UNRWA that was stopped by the former President Donald Trump.

"We've seen those reports. It is also our understanding that major announcement is imminent," Dujarric said. "We're waiting for the official announcement, but we very much welcome it."

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US Olympic Committee Does Not Rule Out Politics as Reason for N. Korea Skipping Olympics
WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) Chair Susanne Lyons said she has not ruled out that North Korea's decision to skip the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games was due to political reasons.

"The COVID-19 was the reason that was expressed. There are maybe some other reasons, more political, behind the announcement," Lyons told reports during a virtual press briefing on Wednesday.

Lyons expressed USOPC's understanding that neither the International Olympic Committee (IOC) nor the Japanese Organizing Committee has received an official confirmation of North Korea's decision.

On Tuesday, South Korean media reported that Pyongyang has decided to opt out of the Tokyo Olympic Games. The decision was reportedly motivated by the wish to protect its athletes amid the coronavirus pandemic.

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US Navy Sets Goal of 100% COVID-19 Vaccinations of Crews on All Ships - Chief

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Navy, with over a third of sailors now vaccinated against COVID-19, wants to deploy ships with entire crews inoculated against the potentially deadly disease, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said on Wednesday.

"Right now about 35 percent of the force is vaccinated. As soon as we get those doses, we are putting it into arms as quickly as we can," Gilday told reporters in a virtual interview conducted by the Center for New American Security. "I'd like to get every ship underway with 100 percent immunized crews."

Gilday added that some deployed ships now underway can boast vaccination rates of up to 98 percent.

For now, the Navy has achieved a COVID-19 positivity rate of less than a quarter of 1 percent, primarily by using mitigation measures such as facemasks and social distancing, Gilday said.

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Resumption of US Aid to Palestinians Would Be 'Breakthrough' - UNRWA
Commissioner-General

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The anticipated on Wednesday resumption of some \$150 million of US assistance to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), if confirmed, would be a breakthrough, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said during an event on the issue of Palestine refugees.

"A decision is about to be communicated. The communication has to come from Washington DC. So, we heard that it might be today," Lazzarini said when asked to confirm reports regarding the resumption of US funding. "If confirmed, this engagement is a very good news. This would be an important breakthrough, which would have been expected for some time." In 2018, former US President Donald Trump cut off \$300 of annual assistance to UNRWA.

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Canada's Vaccine Advisory Board Upholds 4-Month Interval Between Shots Amid Dose Shortage

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) on Wednesday upheld the health regulator's decision to allow up to four months between two coronavirus vaccination shots amid an enduring shortage of available doses.

"NACI recommends that in the context of limited COVID-19 vaccine supply and ongoing pandemic disease, jurisdictions should maximize the number of individuals benefiting from the first dose of vaccine by extending the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine up to four months after the first," the advisory panel said in a statement.

NACI recommended that second dose shots be offered as soon as possible after all eligible groups have received their first dose, with priority being given to the most vulnerable populations.

The advisory panel also said it will continue to monitor developments and adjust recommendations as needed.

The recommendation sparked heated debate in the medical community, with one top expert saying that officials are conducting nothing less than a "population-level experiment." Numerous international medical officials have suggested the authorities should adhere to the manufacturers' recommended timelines between shots - 21 days for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 28 for the Moderna vaccine.

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US Olympic Committee Opposes Athlete Boycotts to Address Human Rights Issues in China

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) opposes athlete boycotts of and believe that athletes should not be used as a tool for rising human rights issues in China, USOPC Chair Susanne Lyons told reporters on Wednesday.

"We at USOPC oppose athlete boycotts," Lyons said during virtual press briefing.

On Tuesday, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the United States was planning to discuss with its allies and partners a joint boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics. In March, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union imposed

sanctions on four Chinese officials and one entity for alleged human rights violations in the Xinjiang region of China.

Lyons said past boycotts have showed a negative impact on athletes while not effectively addressing global issues.

"We certainly do not want in any way to minimize the serious human rights issues that are happening in China, but the United States has many tools to constructively respond to these concerns, which we believe should be handled by government officials, including the Department of State," Lyons said.

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US Initiates Study of Allergic Reactions to Pfizer, Moderna Vaccines - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Wednesday that it is conducting a study of the possible allergic reactions to the Pfizer and Moderna coronavirus vaccines.

"A clinical trial is underway to determine whether people who are highly allergic or have a mast cell disorder are at increased risk for an immediate, systemic allergic reaction to the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines," the NIH said in a press release.

The researchers will also examine the biological mechanism behind the reactions and whether a genetic pattern or other factors can predict who are at most risk, the release said.

The NIH explained that researchers will look for a systemic allergic reaction in one or more parts of the body beyond the injection site within 90 minutes after administering either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

About two-thirds out of 3,400 participants will be female because severe allergic reactions to vaccines in general have occurred mainly in women, the release noted.

A mast cell disorder is a disease caused by a type of white blood cell called a mast cell that is abnormal, overly active, or both, predisposing a person to life-threatening reactions that look like allergic reactions.

The study results are expected to be published in late summer, according to the release.

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'No Decision Has Been Made' on US Participation In Open Skies Treaty - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet made a decision on the future of its participation in the Open Skies Treaty (OST), a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"No decision has been made on the future of US participation in the Open Skies Treaty," the spokesperson said. "The United States is actively reviewing matters related to the treaty and consulting with our allies and partners."

The State Department spokesperson said Russia's "continuing noncompliance with the Treaty is one of several pertinent factors."

"As this process continues, we encourage Russia to take steps to come back into compliance with the agreement," the spokesperson added.

Earlier on Wednesday, a diplomatic memorandum published by Defense News said the United States has informed its allies that the Biden administration believes any move to rejoin the OST would send a wrong signal to Russia.

The United States is "frankly concerned that agreeing to rejoin a treaty that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda," the Biden administration said in the March 31 demarche to multiple allies. "We believe, however, that there are circumstances in which we return to OST or include some of OST's confidence-building measures under other cooperative security efforts."

The Biden administration did not provide details about its specific concerns, but it accused Russia of engaging in a pattern of disregard for its commitments though not of the same magnitude as its material breach of the INF Treaty.

On Tuesday, the US air force announced that two OC-135B planes, which conducted monitoring missions over Russia for nearly three decades, would be retired.

The head of the Russian delegation at the security negotiations in Vienna, Konstantin Gavrilov, told Sputnik on Tuesday that the move to decommission the planes shows the United States is not yet ready to rejoin the treaty.

The US left the OST in November, citing alleged violations by Russia. On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that Moscow is completing domestic procedures to submit to the parliament a bill on the treaty denunciation, which means that Washington and its allies have 1.5 months left to decide on the fate of the surveillance flights deal.

During the 2020 campaign, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden criticized Donald Trump's move to abandon the OST. However, a flurry of Biden's executive orders reversing some of his predecessor's decisions has not included moves to rejoin the accord.

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US Trade Deficit Hits Record High of \$71.1Bln in February - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit in goods and services increased by \$3.3 billion, or almost 5 percent, in February to reach a record high of \$71.1 billion, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said on Wednesday.

"The goods and services deficit was \$71.1 billion in February, up \$3.3 billion from \$67.8 billion in January, revised," the Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a news release.

The released historical data shows the US trade deficit in the month of February being the highest ever.

The biggest component of the US trade deficit was with China, growing by \$3.1 billion to \$30.3 billion in February.

On the whole, US exports of goods stood at \$187.3 billion versus imports of \$258.3 billion, resulting in the deficit of \$71.1 billion, the data shows.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a trade deficit of \$70.5 billion for February.

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Five US States Account for 45% of New COVID-19 Cases Last Week - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, New Jersey, and Michigan accounted for about 45 percent of all reported coronavirus cases in the United States in the past seven-day period, according to the data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The data shows that the five states have reported nearly 197,000 tested positive for the coronavirus over the last seven days with New York at the top of the list with 53,088 cases.

A total of about 440,000 cases have been reported in the last seven-day period, the data shows.

There are 31 million cases in the United States and about 557,000 virus-related deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

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'No Decision Has Been Made' on US Participation In Open Skies Treaty - State Department

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UN Refugee Agency Calls for Equal Access to COVID-19 Vaccines for Refugees - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The international community should act collectively to ensure that refugees across the globe have equal access to COVID-19 vaccines, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement on Wednesday.

"On World Health Day, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is calling for concerted international action and solidarity to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccinations, including for refugees and other forcibly displaced and stateless people," the statement said.

Some 153 states have adopted strategies that include vaccination of refugees, and 20 countries have already begun inoculating displaced populations, the UNHCR said. However, in many parts of the world, immunization remains a challenging task mostly due to the unequal availability of vaccines.

"The blatant imbalances observed in vaccine-sharing among states are counter-productive and shortsighted," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi noted in the statement.

Besides, 85 percent of all refugees are hosted by countries that face financial challenges and need more support to address the urgent health needs, including COVID-19 vaccines.

To support these nations and respond to the impacts of the pandemic, the UN Refugee Agency said it urgently requires an additional \$455 million. UNHCR added that to date, it has received only 13 percent of that appeal.

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International Air Passenger Traffic Drops to 74% of Pre-Pandemic Levels – Trade Group

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – COVID-19 travel limits continued to throttle international travel, with global air carriers reporting a 74.7 percent drop in passengers compared with pre-pandemic levels, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Wednesday.

"Total demand for air travel in February 2021 (measured in revenue passenger kilometers or RPKs) was down 74.7% compared to February 2019," IATA said in a press release. "That was worse than the 72.2% decline recorded in January 2021 versus two years ago."

IATA attributed the decline to tightening travel restrictions by many nations, especially "demand-killing" quarantine requirements for arriving passengers.

For international travel to recover, the IATA called for the development of global standards for a rapid, digital COVID-19 test along with a global vaccination certificate.

The IATA said it created a Travel Pass app for smartphones that includes a person's vaccination history. The app is now accepted on a trial basis in Singapore.

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Mexico, Argentina Urge More Help for Middle Income Countries – Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – The governments of Argentina and Mexico on Wednesday urged the international community to provide more support to the middle income nations facing serious challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“In the context of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central banks meeting, it is imperative to assess the impact of the pandemic, as well as the scope and reach of the new support mechanisms, currently being discussed, to promote the economic recover of Low as well as Middle-Income Countries (MICs),” both governments said in a joint statement released during the International Monetary Fund and World Bank spring meetings in Washington.

Most people who may face extreme poverty due to the current crisis reside in countries with middle levels of income, the statement read.

“MICs tend to have – albeit sometimes intermittently – access to capital markets, but not at low rates. For this reason, it is critical to consider new mechanisms in which the new proportionally-allocated SDRs can benefit MICs in need,” the two governments said.

Mexico and Argentina also called on the global community to consider the possibility of creating a special fund within international financial organizations in order to provide more orderly debt restructuring to struggling middle income nations.

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US Tells Allies Rejoining Open Skies Treaty Would Send 'Wrong Message' to Russia - Memo

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has informed its allies that the Biden administration believes any move to rejoin the Open Skies Treaty (OST) would send a wrong signal to Russia, a diplomatic memo published by Defense News said on Wednesday.

The US is “frankly concerned that agreeing to rejoin a treaty that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda,” the Biden administration said in the March 31 demarche to multiple allies. “We believe, however, that there are circumstances in which we return to OST or include some of OST’s confidence-building measures under other cooperative security efforts.”

The Biden administration did not provide details about its specific concerns in the memo, but it accused Russia of engaging in a “pattern” of disregard for its commitments, according to the memo.

“While we recognize that Russia’s Open Skies violations are not of the same magnitude as its material breach of the INF Treaty, they are part of a pattern of Russian disregard for international commitments — in arms control and beyond — that raises questions about Russia’s readiness to participate cooperatively in a confidence-building regime,” it said.

On Tuesday, the US air force announced that two OC-135B planes, which conducted monitoring missions over Russia for nearly three decades, would be retired.

The head of the Russian delegation at the security negotiations in Vienna, Konstantin Gavrilov, told Sputnik on Tuesday that the move to decommission the planes shows that Washington is not yet ready to rejoin the treaty.

The US left the 1992 treaty in November, citing alleged violations by Russia. On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that Moscow is completing domestic procedures to submit to the parliament a bill on the treaty denunciation, which means that Washington and its allies have 1.5 months left to decide on the fate of the surveillance flights deal.

During the 2020 campaign, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden criticized Donald Trump's move to abandon the Open Skies Treaty. However, a flurry of Biden's executive orders reversing some of his predecessor's decisions has not included moves to rejoin the accord.

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US Tells Allies Rejoining Open Skies Treaty Would Send 'Wrong Message' to Russia - Memo

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has informed its allies that the Biden administration believes any move to rejoin the Open Skies Treaty (OST) would send a wrong signal to Russia, a diplomatic memo published by Defense News said on Wednesday. The US is "frankly concerned that agreeing to rejoin a treaty that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda," the Biden administration said in the March 31 demarche to multiple allies. "We believe, however, that there are circumstances in which we return to OST or include some of OST's confidence-building measures under other cooperative security efforts."

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US Disburses \$36Bln in 4th Tranche of COVID-19 Relief Payments - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – Twenty-five million payments worth \$36 billion headed to American households in the fourth round of COVID-19 relief under the American Rescue Plan, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Today's announcement brings the total disbursed so far to more than 156 million payments, with a total value of approximately \$372 billion, since these payments began rolling out to Americans in batches, as announced on March 12," the Treasury said in a press release. The fourth batch of payments began processing on Friday, April 2, with an official payment date of April 7, the release said.

The American Rescue plan provides direct payments to households of \$1,400 per adult and \$1,400 for each child.

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Two US Supersonic Heavy Bombers Conduct Overflight Missions in Aegean Sea - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Two US supersonic heavy bombers have carried out overflight missions in the Aegean Sea, the US European Command (EUCOM) said on Wednesday.

"As part of US European Command's continuing efforts to demonstrate the far-reaching capabilities of America's strategic bomber aircraft, two US B-1 Lancer bombers stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota conducted overflight missions in the Aegean Sea today," EUCOM said in a press release.

The military operation was a part of EUCOM's regular Bomber Task Force missions, the release said.

"The single-day mission of the supersonic heavy bombers took the aircraft and crews nearly 12,000 nautical miles during the roundtrip operation," EUCOM added.

The command said the mission demonstrated the steadfast US "commitment to European security."

The EUCOM also noted in the release that the bombers were escorted by two Aviano, Italy-based US F-16 fighter jets when they arrived to Europe before flying over the Aegean Sea.

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US Guided Missile Destroyer Transits Taiwan Strait - Navy

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain has carried out a "routine transit" through the Taiwan Strait, the Navy said on Wednesday.

"The Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain (DDG 56) conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit April 7 (local time) through international waters in accordance with international law," the Navy said in a press release. "The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The Navy said the US military would continue to fly, sail, and operate anywhere where international law permits.

Beijing considers the self-ruled island of Taiwan part of China, but Washington does not recognize the territorial claim.

China has previously accused the US of undermining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait by sending US warships through the waterway.