

04/28/21 Wednesday

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South Korean Paper Funded by CIA-Backed NGO Says Kim Jong Un Executed Official for Hospital Misstep
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Fantastical news stories about exotic methods of execution in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have become vogue topics for the media, with each absence from an official function stirring rumors of a falling out with upper leadership. However, the presumed disappeared figures often soon turn up unharmed.

A report in a South Korean daily about an alleged execution in the DPRK has begun to gain traction in other media outlets. However, the source for the outlandish tale gets funding from a front group for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

On April 23, Daily NK, a Seoul-based news outlet that claims to source its reports on North Korea from a network of informants across the demilitarized zone, [published a story](#) claiming that DPRK leader Kim Jong Un had ordered a senior Foreign Affairs Ministry official executed for buying the wrong kind of medical equipment for a new general hospital in Pyongyang. According to the article, Kim wanted the hospital put up in a hurry amid the COVID-19 pandemic and expected it to be filled with German equipment, apparently owing to his fascination with Europe after having studied there in his youth. However, due to pandemic-induced export restrictions and a small budget, the official bought the equipment at a better price from neighboring China instead. The overall hospital project is reportedly months behind schedule, although it is now believed to only lack medical tools.

According to the outlet, the ministry official responsible for managing imports and exports was executed, and a senior Ministry of Health official was also fired for the failure.

Reports about North Korean [officials being executed](#) for seemingly trivial errors are nothing new, but neither are stories about [their surprising return](#) without harm weeks or months after the report, either, meaning a healthy amount of skepticism is often due if the reports are not official.

In the case of this story, however, an even larger dose than normal is due, because [Daily NK received funding](#) from the National Endowment for Democracy, a CIA cutout.

Begun by Congressional directive in 1984 with an \$18 million annual budget, the NED has, [by admission of](#) its first and longest-serving president, Carl Gershman, served as a convenient soft power front for the CIA because "it would be terrible for democratic groups around the world to be seen as subsidized by the CIA. We saw that in the 1960's and that's why it has been discontinued. We have not had the capability of doing this, and that's why the endowment was created."

Another former acting president, Allen Weinstein, [similarly told ProPublica](#) in 1991 that "a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA. The biggest difference is that when such activities are done overtly, the flap potential is close to zero. Openness is its own protection."

The NED has helped provide funding for a slew of groups and movements found amenable to US foreign policy interests over the years, including the AFL-CIO's [Solidarity Center overseas](#) liaison group to labor unions; the April 6 [Youth Movement](#) in Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring protests; the [World Uyghur Congress](#) and Uighur Human Rights Project since as early as 2004; and the Hong Kong [Human Rights Monitor](#), among other groups central to the city's large protests in recent years.

However, it's true that importing medical equipment to the DPRK is challenging. As [Sputnik has reported](#), US economic sanctions intended to bar importation of certain materials that could be used for military or nuclear weapons purposes have the side-effect of blocking medical tools as well.

The hospital also remains unopened well past the projected completion date of October 10, although in January some satellite photos suggested it could soon be opened. At least one cause of construction delay was the discovery of [unexploded US bombs](#) during the excavation process. During the 1950-53 Korean War, the US Air Force [bombed Pyongyang intensively](#), with Dean Rusk, a part of the US government during the war who later became US Secretary of State in the 1960s, remarking that the US bombed "everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another." The USAF estimated that 20% of the North's population was killed by US bombing during the war.

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Somalia's Farmaajo Walks Back Term Extension, But Opposition Calls Move 'Meaningless, Insulting'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In 2019, Mogadishu began the process of extending new offshore licenses to US-based oil giant ExxonMobil and others, which put their operations on hold after a civil war gripped Somalia decades ago. The hotly contested law permitting oil licenses split Somalia's five states along similar lines to the recent election debate.

Somalian President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmaajo, has backed away from plans to extend his term for two years amid an intense debate about election structure. The move comes amid intense pressure for all sides to avoid a return to civil war. After a tense Tuesday in which Farmaajo's support among Somalia's five states crumbled and rebellious army troops maintained their positions along some of Mogadishu's main thoroughfares, the president finally addressed the country around 1 am local time. He announced he would no longer seek the two-year term extension.

Farmaajo told the nation he would appear before the Somali parliament on Saturday to "gain their endorsement for the electoral process" and he urged oppositional forces to join him for "urgent discussions" on how to proceed with the election, which was originally scheduled for December 2020.

"As we have repeatedly stated, we have always been ready to implement timely and peaceful elections in the country," Farmaajo said, according to [Agence France-Presse](#). "I hereby call

upon all of the signatories of the 17 September agreement to come together immediately for urgent discussions on the unconditional implementation of the above-mentioned agreement.” That deal was intended to lay the groundwork for a new indirect election process, but amid a number of intense disagreements about implementation, and in particular how the issue of the self-styled Republic of Somaliland, a breakaway region without international recognition, would be accounted for. As a result, the December election was cancelled and Farmaajo remained in office past his expected February departure.

Earlier this month, the Somali lower House voted to give him a de facto two-year extension so that new elections could be scheduled and the debates resolved, but after Farmaajo signed it into law, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble came out against the move. The leaders of Galmudug and Hirshabelle, two of Somalia’s five states, also issued [a statement Tuesday](#) demanding “an urgent election. Any form of extension should be cancelled.”

The two states, which previously supported Farmaajo’s position on holding this election in the older one-person-one-vote format, joined two other states, Puntland and Jubaland, which have staunchly opposed that method, leaving the president with South-West as the only state supporting him.

[According to Reuters](#), as many as 100,000 people have fled their homes ahead of anticipated violence in Mogadishu, where three people have already been killed in sporadic shooting over the last few days. Troop loyalties have largely fractured along clan lines, mirroring the September election reform that laid out a community-based system of indirect election in which traditional elders and civil society groups would nominate candidates for parliament.

Farmaajo also blamed the crisis on “individuals and foreign entities who have no aim other than to destabilize the country.”

Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame, who heads the center-left Wadajir party, denounced Farmaajo’s speech as “meaningless, insulting and disrespectful.”

In comments posted on [social media on Wednesday](#), Warsame accused Farmaajo of [continuing to “plot”](#) with Parliament Speaker Mohamed Mursal Sheikh, noting that the president had not actually rescinded his two-year extension. Warsame urged Roble to seize control of the situation, and said that “in order to reach an inclusive agreement, all the stakeholders have to take part in the talks so [as] to resolve the outstanding issues once & for all.”

While the US has not yet publicly commented on Farmaajo’s speech, Washington was “prepared to consider all available tools, including sanctions and visa restrictions, to respond to efforts to undermine peace and stability in Somalia,” the [US State Department said](#) on Monday. Farmaajo has heavily courted the US, [inviting US Africa Command](#) to expand its operations against al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-aligned militia group that primarily operates in the southwestern Lower Shabelle region.

Although former US President Donald Trump pulled the roughly 700 US troops out of Somalia in December, [clandestine ops](#) and airstrikes have persisted. [Military Times reported](#) on Wednesday that those troops, now based in nearby Kenya and Djibouti, are “commuting” into Somalia to perform the same missions they were before.

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Hound of the Hashtag: Enthusiastic Twitterers Share Fondness for Surreal 'Far Side' Comic Series

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Gary Larson's "The Far Side" comics, which ran from 1979 to 1995, helped to popularize "nerd humor," and the endearing response given him by scientists resulted in a species of insect being named after Larson, as well as framed prints of his comics being hung in many a science lab. It's unclear how exactly Twitter began talking about the Far Side comics, but that's probably how creator Gary Larson would have liked it. One way or another, thousands of people around the globe began sharing their favorite entries of the single-frame comic that ran in US newspapers and magazines for 16 years, causing the comic's name to begin trending on Wednesday. The Far Side often dealt with ironic and absurd situations that would have otherwise been mundane, but for a minor misunderstanding or slight change of a word. Many involved puns based on popular English-language idioms and proverbs, while others peddled in "shock value" that was often just as surreal.

Talk about the comic quickly got folks sharing their favorites, which despite having not been in print for 26 years, still continue to evoke endearment.

The Far Side was so popular during its run from 1976 to 1995 that it even influenced science! Until a 1982 Far Side comic about cavemen studying parts of a stegosaurus referred to the dinosaur's spiked tail as a "thagomizer," paleontologists had no such name for it. However, the novel name tickled many scientists' funny bones and they [subsequently adopted "thagomizer"](#) as a casual, non-scientific name for the tail spikes.

The "Cow Tools" comic, another 1982 conversation-maker, was found by many readers to be utterly baffling. After becoming overwhelmed with inquiries, Larson issued a [rare press release](#) to set folks' minds at ease - although it's unlikely he succeeded, since his explanation was effectively that he had failed to make a funny comic.

Larson briefly revived The Far Side in December 2019, posting a handful of new comics on a website that also posts selections from the complete archive of Far Side comics that is also hosted on the site. He told the [New York Times](#) that while he intends to post new comics periodically, he mostly hoped the presence of an official site would compel other websites to stop hosting them and redirect readers to the site.

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Watch: France Tests New Version of M51 Ballistic Missile, But Atypical Trajectory Questions Remain

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

France's four Triumphant-class submarines field the country's small nuclear deterrent, and although some have suggested Paris scrap its nuclear weapons and nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the defense sector is reluctant to let such knowledge slip out of regular use.

The French Ministry of Defense [announced on Wednesday](#) the successful firing of an M51.2 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the latest version of the weapon that underpins Paris' nuclear deterrent. However, some questions about the test remain unanswered.

Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly expressed her "great satisfaction" at the success of the test, noting the missile did not have any of the 10 multiple independent reentry vehicle (MIRV) nuclear warheads typically mounted on top.

However, [as Sputnik reported](#), the missile might still have tested a new maneuverable reentry vehicle. Maritime safety warnings put out earlier this week marking off areas of the Atlantic Ocean in which parts of the rocket would fall failed to adhere to a standard ballistic flight path, with the final splashdown site for the reentry vehicle being significantly far enough away from a standard trajectory to warrant comment from observers.

[The War Zone](#) highlighted the potential for Wednesday's test to be the debut flight of the anticipated V-Max hypersonic glide vehicle, which ArianeGroup began work on in 2019. Glide vehicles like [Russia's Avangard](#) and the [United States' AGM-183](#) Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) are highly maneuverable, which makes them hard to intercept, and are boosted to their Mach 5+ speed by rockets similar or identical to those used in the first stage of a ballistic missile.

Avangard is launched atop Russia's UR-100N, R36M2 and RS-28 intercontinental ballistic missiles, which existed before the hypersonic weapon was developed, so it's conceivable the M51.2, a new version of the M51 SLBM adopted in 2015 and also built by ArianeGroup, might similarly be adopted to field the V-Max as well.

If it was a hypersonic test, it would likely be the first such weapon deployable from a ballistic missile submarine.

That could also explain why Wednesday's missile was launched from land rather than a Triumphant-class submarine, as the [M51 test last June was](#). Observers earlier this month noted that France's missile range instrumentation ship Monge, which carries a host of powerful radars for tracking missiles in flight, had arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, not far from the target area. The US Navy's USAV Worthy missile range instrumentation ship was also spotted in San Diego days before the [anticipated first flight](#) of the ARRW, which ultimately failed to launch.

A US Air Force [RC-135S Cobra Ball](#) spy plane, also specialized for watching missile launches, monitored the test as well. However, both the Cobra Ball and the missile range instrumentation ships can also be used for regular ballistic missile tests, and it may simply be that Paris wants extra information about this new version of the M51, considering one of the rockets blew up in a [2013 test launched](#) from a submarine off the coast of Brittany.

The French Ministry of the Armed Forces is notoriously tight-lipped about its tests, but as of yet, no announcement about a hypersonic test has been made. It's also possible that Wednesday's launch tested another kind of MIRV with increased maneuverability, or another method of deploying existing MIRVs, which are themselves somewhat maneuverable, although nothing like what a hypersonic glide vehicle is capable of.

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Trump Longing for Prime-Time Spotlight, May Resume Rallies Next Month - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Former US President Donald Trump last held one of his campaign-style rallies on January 6, when thousands of his supporters broke away from the event and took the opportunity to storm the US Capitol. The day proved deadly as several eventgoers and law enforcement officials died as a result of the insurrection.

Newly surfaced details have indicated that Trump is considering the possibility of returning to the public and resuming his signature "Make America Great Again" rallies in an attempt to grasp the prime-time spotlight he once attained through the Oval Office.

Various aides and confidants associated with the former commander-in-chief [recently revealed](#) to CNN that Trump is longing for his days under the cable news spotlight, and that he may wind up tossing his names into the 2024 presidential election to regain that attention.

"He hates being off the A block," an unidentified individual close to Trump told the outlet, using a term that refers to the lead segment in a news program. "He's really thinking of running again in 2024 just to get back to that."

However, that's not all, folks.

Although plans are still very much in the early stages, aides also revealed that Trump could begin hosting his campaign rallies as early as May. Officials noted that logistics are still being worked out, but that Trump is interested in hosting an event against Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), who called on the former president to resign in the wake of the deadly Capitol riot.

"It will definitely be different in terms of the setup," an unidentified official close to the post-White House operations told CNN. "We got really good at planning these events in 2020, so we will probably use a lot of those same vendors again."

Interviews with some of Trump's closest confidants also revealed that the former president endured some struggles after departing the White House, namely that he was unable to shake presidential concerns.

"Most people would leave the White House relieved to have the weight of the world lifted off their shoulders, but for him it was a reality that took some time to get used to," an aide detailed. "Those first few weeks, it was not an easy transition."

Since the beginning of his post-presidential days, Trump has kept somewhat mum, albeit for the occasional press release from his office or TV interview. Most recently, Trump [took aim](#) at the 93rd Academy Awards over its continually low ratings.

Talk of Trump jumping back into the presidential ringer, however, is not new. The former president has repeatedly hinted at the possibility, with aides falling in line on the matter. Reports [previously surfaced](#) in March that Trump was seriously considering running for another term, and that aides wanted him to pick someone other than former Vice President Mike Pence as his running mate.

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Israel 'Directed' Assassination of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani, Rouhani Alleges
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who served as the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, was killed by a US drone strike outside Iraq's Baghdad International Airport in early January 2020. The strike also claimed the lives of several top officials from Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani alleged during a cabinet meeting on Wednesday that Israel was behind the January assassination of Soleimani, explaining that the US drone strike was "provoked by the Zionists."

"The martyrdom of General Soleimani was directed by the Zionists, even though [former US President Donald] Trump was the commander and killer," Rouhani [said](#), before referring to the former commander-in-chief "a mercenary of the Zionist regime."

The Iranian president went on to note that "all [of Trump's] actions were provoked by the Zionists," acknowledging that "of course, the previous US presidents were friends with the Zionists, but were not mercenaries."

Rouhani did not provide any evidence to support the allegations made during the midweek meeting with fellow cabinet officials.

However, the meeting did also see Rouhani discuss the bombshell remarks that were made by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in a [recently leaked tape](#), which allegedly saw the official state that his diplomatic efforts within the government were overshadowed by the demands of the IRGC.

In the tapes, which were not meant to be released to the public, Zarif is alleged to have stated that Soleimani often did more damage than good in terms of maintaining diplomacy with global leaders, specifically stating that the deceased official had allegedly attempted to thwart the signing of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

At the time, Zarif played a key role in the signing of the nuclear deal, which saw the US lift strict sanctions against Iran in exchange for caps on the Middle Eastern nation's nuclear capabilities. Zarif is also said to have praised Soleimani's military efforts in the recording, highlighting the slain commander's productive cooperation ahead of the US invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. He also lamented that Soleimani's death was a heavy loss for Iran.

Rouhani remarked during the meeting that the tapes were seemingly purposefully leaked since ongoing [Vienna talks](#) meant to ease tensions between the US and Iran are "at the height of their success." He noted that the interview was released "so that it creates discord" within Iran.

"We can only lift sanctions through unity," the president added.

Zarif has been under fire since the audiotapes first emerged on Sunday, prompting the onset of heated debate within the Islamic Republic ahead of looming presidential elections. The foreign minister has addressed the matter and indicated that he [deeply regrets](#) the political fallout that resulted from his recorded commentary.

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Mars Chopper Ingenuity Snaps Aerial Image of Perseverance Rover Roaming Red Planet
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ingenuity, NASA's Mars-based helicopter, recently conducted its third aerial test on the red planet and successfully managed to travel a total of 330 feet after staying afloat for some 80 seconds. The recent test smashed previous records documented on its prior two test flights. Stretching out its wings and trying to expand its horizons on the Martian surface, Ingenuity recently managed to obtain a never-before-seen aerial image of the Perseverance rover exploring its new home.

The photo was captured on Sunday during Ingenuity's third test flight while the 4-pound chopper was flying laterally at an altitude of 16 feet and situated roughly 279 feet from the curious roaming rover, according to a [release](#) issued by the US space agency.

Although difficult to spot at first, the image released by NASA shows Perseverance in the top left-hand corner of the frame. At the time, Perseverance was also pointing its own cameras directly back at Ingenuity in a bid to [document](#) its latest flight.

Incidentally, NASA released a similar image in 1997 that saw the agency's Pathfinder lander snap a picture of the Sojourner rover as it traversed the rocky Martian landscape. However, unlike the weekend photo release, the 1997 image saw both robots situated firmly on the ground.

Both Ingenuity and Perseverance [landed on Mars](#) in mid-February inside the Jezero Crater, a 28-mile-wide area once the location of a since-dried lakebed currently strewn with sharp rocks, hazardous cliffs and boulders.

NASA's latest efforts with the Perseverance program will seek out proof of microbial life on Mars and identify Martian environments that could someday support human life, among other objectives. Perseverance will spend at least two years exploring the crater.

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Netizens Grab Popcorn as Ted Cruz, Trevor Noah Squabble Over 2020 US Census
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The United States Census Bureau reported on Monday that, over the past decade, the country's population has grown at a mere 7.4% - the slowest rate since the 1930s. As a result of the new Census data, seven US states, including California and New York, will lose one seat in the US House of Representatives.

Trevor Noah, host of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," managed to catch the attention of Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) with his commentary on New York [narrowly losing](#) a congressional seat.

Per the 2020 Census, the state was just 89 people short of reaching the threshold to maintain its 27

"You're telling me that if just 89 more New Yorkers had filled out their census, the state wouldn't have lost a House seat?" the South Africa-born comedian said during a segment.

Cruz, whose state was granted two additional seats in the US House, argued on Twitter that folks are flocking to Texas because that is "where the jobs are."

The Republican senator also claimed Noah "doesn't understand why people like freedom," which riled up a number of folks online and played a role in both men going viral on Wednesday. The official Twitter account of "The Daily Show" issued a swift response to Cruz, recounting the moment when the Republican senator [was spotted](#) traveling to a resort in Cancún, Mexico, while Texas was enduring extreme low temperatures and widespread power outages.

At the time, Cruz claimed he was being a "good dad" by taking his daughters on vacation. The senator ultimately booked a flight back to the states amid the controversy.

"Not sure I'd be using the words 'fleeing' and 'Texas' in the same sentence, Senator Cancun," tweeted "The Daily Show."

"I wear your scorn with pride," Cruz clapped back. "I remember when the Daily Show was funny."

The back-and-forth came to an end after "The Daily Show" issued a final jab, claiming the senator was more engaged with the program "than he ever did when Trump called his wife ugly."

Indeed, former US President Donald Trump did bash Cruz's wife, Heidi, on [multiple occasions](#) and even retweeted a side-by-side photo comparison of her and former First Lady Melania Trump.

It's worth noting that Cruz did defend his wife - but the Republican senator also received backlash after he eventually endorsed Trump's campaign.

"Donald, real men don't attack women. Your wife is lovely, and Heidi is the love of my life," Cruz [tweeted](#) in 2016, responding to Trump's side-by-side picture.

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Three US Men Charged With Federal Hate Crimes, Attempted Kidnapping Over Ahmaud Arbery Murder

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed, 25-year-old man who was jogging, was shot dead on February 23, 2020, after being pursued by three Georgia men: Travis McMichael, 35; Gregory McMichael, 54; and William "Roddie" Bryan, 51. Footage of the murder went viral months after the incident, resulting in local and federal attention.

The US Department of Justice announced on Wednesday that Bryan and the McMichaels - a father-son duo - were indicted by a federal grand jury and charged with one count of interference with rights and one count of attempted kidnapping in connection to the killing of Arbery.

"Travis and Gregory McMichael were also charged with one count each of using, carrying, and brandishing—and in Travis's case, discharging—a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence," read the DoJ release.

Per the indictment, McMichaels were armed when they allegedly began pursuing Arbery via truck as the 25-year-old was running on a public street in the Satilla Shores neighborhood of Brunswick, Georgia. The father-son duo was reportedly overheard yelling at Arbery and threatening him with weapons.

Bryan allegedly joined in on the McMichaels pursuit and used his truck to cut off the 25-year-old's route. He was not armed.

The release noted the trio's acts were viewed as hate crimes because the defendants reportedly "used force and threats of force to intimidate and interfere with Arbery's right to use a public street because of his race."

The attempted kidnapping charges leveled against the three Georgia men relate to their alleged unlawful confinement of Arbery, who was running on a public street when he was killed.

Travis McMichael and his father brandished a Remington shotgun and .357 Magnum revolver, respectively. It was only Travis who discharged his weapon, according to the indictment.

"All three defendants have also been charged in a separate state proceeding with malice murder, felony murder, aggravated assault, false imprisonment, and criminal attempt to commit a felony," the DoJ release concluded.

A trial date has yet to be set for the three Georgia men.

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Biden Admin Pursuing Menthol Cigarette Ban, Despite Concerns of 'Serious Racial Implications' by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a memo to US President Joe Biden's administration, warning that a ban on menthol cigarettes alone would "trigger criminal penalties, which will disproportionately impact people of color, as well as prioritize criminalization over public health and harm reduction."

The Biden administration is preparing this week to announce a proposal to ban menthol cigarettes, several outlets - including the Washington Post and CBS News - reported on Wednesday.

Citing sources familiar with the tentative legislative proposal, the reports claim the US president will set forth a plan on Thursday, when the US Food and Drug Administration is required to submit a decision on the continued sale of menthol-flavored cigarettes.

The April 29, 2021, deadline was set as a result of a 2013 citizen petition filed by the Public Health Law Center.

It's worth noting the ban does not require congressional approval, but the matter will require public comment before it can pass.

Prior to the reports, Sen. Dick Durbin and Reps. Bobby Rush (D-IL) and Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL), chairman of the Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy, sent a letter to the

FDA on April 21, calling for the federal agency to prohibit the sale of menthol-flavored cigarettes.

Citing the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Democratic lawmakers asserted that menthol cigarettes are both believed to be a "popular on-ramp into smoking for children" and an easier way to absorb harmful chemicals - "likely because menthol makes it easier to inhale cigarette smoke."

The FDA - which has previously banned cigarette flavors such as cherry and chocolate - notes on its website that nearly 20 million Americans smoke menthol cigarettes, according to a 2016 study by the US Department of Health and Human Services.

The study also detailed 85.8% of Black, or African American, smokers smoke menthol cigarettes. In comparison, "46 percent of Hispanic smokers, 39 percent of Asian smokers, and 28.7 percent of White smokers smoke menthol cigarettes."

On Monday, the ACLU - on behalf of two dozen related organizations - issued a letter of concern to DHHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, claiming the reported proposal, although "well-intentioned," could result in "unconstitutional policing and other negative interactions with local law enforcement."

The memo detailed that the ACLU and other organizations do indeed agree with the need to address the public health issues surrounding cigarettes. However, they recommend the FDA and policy architects continue advancements with "harm reduction policies emphasizing education for adults and minors, cessation, well-funded health care for communities of color, and other members that push tobacco use down without putting criminal justice at risk."

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New Ransomware Group Exposes Vulnerability of DC Police's Tech Infrastructure
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The expanding digital age has opened up a new lane of expenses, as some institutions are learning the hard way that having a dedicated cyber security staff and knowledge is a necessity. Hospitals and city and county governments have become easy targets for some global hackers. A new ransomware developed by the Babuk hacker group has accessed the computer system of Washington, DC's Metropolitan Police Department, a development which has since seen the group threaten to leak confidential files if they are not contacted within three days.

The DC police department confirmed in a Tuesday YouTube post that unauthorized access occurred, and that the FBI were now looking into the matter.

The files encrypted by the hack group included arrest history, housing and financial records, polygraph results and details about training and work history for some officers. Screenshots posted online included police reports, internal memos, mugshots and gang conflict reports. Babuk claimed to have accessed over 250 GB of data from the police department in a signature ransom note that slammed the department on its slow computer software updates. The forum that the hacker group works under communicates in both English and Russian. In a message to

the police department, the group indicated they were able to find vulnerabilities in the computer system that were not fixed by patch updates in time.

The DC police department is only one of the major targets to be hit by the Babuk cyberattack this year. Other victims include the UK-based [Serco](#) company that deals with COVID-19 testings and the [NBA Houston Rockets](#).

Patches are updates, usually related to security that gets added onto a computer system to help fix-up any vulnerability. As the technological world is ever changing, there is always a newer, faster and more efficient way to handle data. Ransomware groups like Babuk often find ways to exploit these vulnerabilities by using different algorithms to communicate with computer systems through coding.

The algorithms used by hacking groups are known as ransomware since it requires a key to access the hijacked data, and the key is usually only known by the creators of the virus, which is how hackers are able to hold the data for ransom.

According to some critics, Babuk is only an “[amateur](#)” hacking group that uses the Elliptic-Curve Diffie-Hellman (ECDH) algorithm to ensure that their own operating systems are secure and not easy to access or change.

ECDH algorithms require subtle changes to a file that make it difficult to access items unless the file holder can decode the information needed to decrypt the data and translate it in a way that the computer can successfully read.

Ultimately, this means the Metropolitan Police Department may or may not still have the ability to combat the ransomware if they are able to decode the common algorithm shared with the hacking group, which can possibly be found through suspected phishware.

Babuk operates on a ransomware-as-a-service ([RaaS](#)) model, meaning they are but a front for a much larger hacking affiliation since Babuk is known to use implementations of SHA256 hashing algorithm, which has [links](#) back to the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the ChaCha8 encryption that also has ties to US-based computer technology development.

According to [AP](#), the Babuk group has only been discovered this year, but has so far hit 26 government agencies in the US, releasing data from 16 of them, thereby exposing the poor cyber security of most agencies. The group is known to target the agricultural, electronic, plastic surgery and dental health care and transportation sectors.

The groups most vulnerable to cybersecurity threats include [schools](#), hospitals and state and municipal systems. In [2019](#), 113 state and municipal groups were hit by ransomware attacks, the most famous of which being the attack on voting infrastructure during the 2020 elections in [Georgia](#). The largest cybersecurity attack so far has been the [2017 WannaCry cyberattack](#) launched by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The Babuk group exposes the vulnerability of its targets, but usually asks for bitcoin payments below \$100,000. The group has boasted that it does not attack hospitals or organizations that earn below \$4 million, and that it mostly stays away from nonprofit organizations, except those associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and the LGBTQ communities.

Babuk has indicated that it will launch a dedicated leak site in the near future. The administration of US President Joe Biden has [claimed](#) that they are boosting efforts to shield the US cyberspace from hackers by analyzing the system's vulnerabilities and pinpointing [threats](#).

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Three Colombians Charged Over Cocaine-Packed Submarine Operating Within Caribbean Waters

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Puerto Rico is a popular transit way to nearby Caribbean nations, making it a target destination for international business and pleasure. On April 4, the US Coast Guard intercepted a semi-submersible vessel off the coast of Yabucoa.

Colombian nationals Arturo González-Quiñones, Freiman Yepes-Ospina and José Álvaro Córdoba-Rentería were recently charged by a federal grand jury for conspiracy to smuggle some 2,500 kilos of cocaine in a submarine.

A four-count indictment against the trio indicates the charges include conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute some \$75 million worth of cocaine, conspiracy to operate and embark in a semi-submersible vessel without nationality, and to navigate into and through waters beyond the outer limit of any country's territorial sea, with the intent to evade detection in violation of the Drug Trafficking Vessel Interdiction Act (DTVIA) of 2008.

In a Monday press conference, US Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico Stephen Muldrow announced that this semi-submersible vessel is the first to ever be intercepted off Puerto Rico's Caribbean coast. It was also noted that its occupants would be the first to be charged with conspiracy to operate a submarine.

"The geographical location [of Puerto Rico] and its status as US territory makes it an ideal target for transnational criminal organizations seeking to import narcotics into the continental United States and facilitate the repatriation of their drug profits," Muldrow said in a [release](#) issued by the US Department of Justice.

Under the DTVI violation (18 U.S. Code § 2285), the accused could face a maximum prison fine of up to 15 years for the submarine ride, and a minimum sentence of ten years to life on drug trafficking charges.

During the conference, Muldrow pinpointed González-Quiñones as the same person he accused of drug trafficking during his time as a federal prosecutor in Tampa, Florida, in 2008.

According to [Telemundo Puerto Rico](#), González-Quiñones was released on bail in 2019.

The vessel was found off the coast of Yabucoa, located near the southeastern corner of southern Puerto Rico as an international tanker docked for crude oil, fuel oil and refined products. The Yabucoa dock is located in close proximity to powerhouses for oil and power production in the Caribbean, nations like the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

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ANALYSIS - Biden Edges Trump in First 100 Days Despite Flawed Security Policies, Mental Gaffes

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden potentially outperformed his predecessor overall during his first one hundred days in office yet the administration's aggressive security policies - along with concerns over the commander-in-chief's mental stability - bode ill for America's future, analysts told Sputnik.

Thursday marks Biden's "first 100 days" in office - a much-hyped performance benchmark for new US administrations. The tradition began in 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who enacted 76 laws during this symbolic period.

EARLY SUCCESSES

As he hits the 100-day mark, Biden's Gallup job approval rating sits at 57 percent - 16 points higher than Trump's was at this point in 2017, a margin many attribute to progress in the fight against COVID-19 and the economic recovery.

Biden's approach to the pandemic has contrasted sharply with the one embraced by his predecessor, who admitted to downplaying the virus. Trump supporters, however, have argued that Biden is taking credit for the success of the previous administration's vaccine development and COVID-19 relief programs.

"After the disaster of four years of Trump's fascist, racist and incompetent misrule, for the majority of Americans Biden's presidency comes as a relief," historian and anti-nuclear campaigner Joseph Gerson told Sputnik.

Many in the US, Gerson added, are celebrating Biden's commitments and policies to stanch the pandemic, revitalize the economy and implement systemic changes to address painful inequalities.

Historian and political commentator Dan Lazare believes Biden has won praise for reversing many of his predecessor's environmental, nuclear and immigration policies, while following Trump's strategy on Afghanistan and COVID-19 relief.

"Biden's \$1.9-trillion economic stimulus package was immensely popular, as were his decisions to end US support for the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen, re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement, end Trump's Muslim immigration ban, and announce an Afghan pullout by September 11," Lazare told Sputnik.

SECURITY ISSUES

Since taking over in January, the Biden administration has taken Washington's relationship with Moscow to new lows, just after many thought it bottomed out during the Trump years. The White House has levied new rounds of sanctions against Russia over allegations ranging from election meddling to cyber warfare - accusations Moscow has repeatedly denied.

On the other hand, Biden also agreed to extend the New START treaty which was on the verge of expiring, quite a turnabout from the previous administration that appeared bent on destroying every US-Russian arms control pact.

Meanwhile, Biden has also escalated tensions with Beijing well beyond where they sat under Trump. On Wednesday, during his first joint address to Congress, the president vowed to keep a strong US military presence in the so-called "Indo-Pacific" region to counter China.

Lazare is concerned with Biden's inner circle - including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan - both of whom during the Obama administration supported US involvement in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Relations with China and Russia are also big unknowns, and the Biden foreign policy team, i.e. Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, does not exactly inspire confidence," Lazare said.

Lazare is also worried Biden's few foreign policy achievements could unravel. In Yemen, for example, the Houthis are closing in on the strategic city of Marib. If it falls, he added, US policy will be thrown into crisis since the balance of power could shift toward Iran.

Lazare also suggested the delayed extraction from Afghanistan could resemble the ugly scenes at the end of the Vietnam War.

Other critics have argued that if the Biden administration simply followed Trump's timeline American troops would already be home.

"Similarly, I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that the exit from Afghanistan will not go smoothly and may well end in a Saigon-style rooftop escape," Lazare said.

Gerson also raised red flags about the Biden administration's foreign and military policies which risk sparking a war with other great powers.

MENTAL CONCERNS

No less important for Lazare is the frightening glimpses into Biden's state of mind during these first 100 days.

Lazare speculated that Biden's gaffes may signal he is suffering from a severe mental disorder.

"Biden is the reincarnation, more or less, of Konstantin Chernenko, the Soviet leader who expired after just 13 months in office in the early 80s. It was plain that poor Konstantin had one foot in the grave from the moment he took office," Lazare explained.

The fact the Politburo chose Chernenko regardless of the situation shows how decrepit the Soviet system had become, Lazare claimed.

"But is Biden any different? Plainly he's suffering from early-onset senile dementia and is not all there either. So there's a hole where a president ought to be, which means that the executive branch at this point is a bit of a leaderless mob. It may not matter for now, but it will soon. So I think mucho trouble is brewing," Lazare concluded.

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RPT - Americans Left With Government of 'Totally Disunited Country' - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Americans now have a government that rules over a completely disunited nation, while presuming itself to be a superpower set to impose its will on the entire international community, former Assistant US Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"The American population is splintered. There is no unity. The United States has become a diverse, multicultural Tower of Babel, which has drained all strength from the country," Roberts said. "We are left with a government with a totally disunited country that imagines itself to be a superpower determined to force its will on the world."

Roberts went on to say, however, that the international community is accustomed to 70 years of US dominance and is unaware that the United States has entered a process of collapse.

"US power rests substantially on the US dollar as world reserve currency, the currency used for international transactions," he said. "This privileged role has been harmed by the Federal Reserves creation of trillions of new dollars in order to support the disastrous decisions of the unregulated mega-banks."

Roberts also said the US government's "freely issued" sanctions undermine the dollar by teaching sanctioned nations to find alternatives to the dollar payments and clearing system. In addition, US corporations have de-industrialized the United States by offshoring its manufacturing jobs, he said.

"The real family median income has eased to increase," he said. "Wealth and income gains have gone to the top one-half of one percent of the population. Indebtedness is the rule for the vast majority of the population, any and every one of whom can lose his or her job because of using a wrong pronoun or for not being sufficiently deferential to a transgendered person or a person of color."

Roberts also pointed out that the country is further being divided as white Americans are under constant attack with charges of systemic racism.

"Their monuments are torn down, their museums closed. The ideology of the Democrat party is identity politics," he said. "In Marxist class warfare, it is the capitalists who oppress the workers. In American identity politics, it is white Americans who oppress blacks and people of color and men who oppress women."

Roberts spoke on the occasion of US President Joe Biden's 100th day in office on Thursday. The former official underscored that the Biden presidency in its first 100 days has dramatically worsened the already bad US-Russian relations.

"Biden said on national TV that President Putin is 'a killer.' A US-backed coup was foiled in Belarus. Biden also gave a military guarantee to Ukraine against Russian intervention if Ukraine renewed its invasion of the Donbass republics. US military equipment arrived in Ukraine. Biden issued new sanctions against Russia. NATO and the EU supported the sanctions," he said. Roberts pointed out that he believes former President Donald Trump was removed from office because he wanted to normalize ties with Russia.

"This intention was unacceptable to the US military-security complex, which needs the 'Russian threat' to justify its budget and power," he said. "The US foreign policy establishment regards Russia as a barrier to American hegemony. This means that there is no chance for normal relations."

Commenting on the United States' relations with the European countries during the first three months of the Biden presidency and their prospects in the future, Roberts noted that Trump regarded NATO as a Cold War relic that had outlived its purpose and to European politicians this implied a loss of US funds and sinecures.

"They are pleased that Biden will continue paying them. But others in Europe see no value in being part of Washington's conflict with Russia," he said. "It is all risk and no reward. Europe needs Russian energy and European businesses desire to participate in Russia's economic development. The consequence is strain within the American empire. But as long as there is no real cost to Europeans for aligning with Washington against Russia, Washington's money will keep Europe in line."

When asked about what was achieved and is expected to happen with regards to US military presence overseas, Roberts noted that the United States' two decades of war against Muslims have served Israel's agenda.

"Iraq and Libya have been destroyed. Syria, despite the Russian intervention, is still subject to unpunished Israeli attacks. US policy toward Iran remains under Israel's control," Roberts said. "Afghanistan was a defeat for Washington like Vietnam, but unlike President Nixon American presidents have not succeeded in withdrawing US military presence."

Biden's job approval rating after the first 100 days in office is the third lowest for a US president since 1945, an ABC and Washington Post poll revealed on Sunday.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden in First Address to Congress Talks Countering China, Developing US Infrastructure

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his first speech to Congress vowed to challenge China, Russia, and other rivals on security matters, outlined his jobs plan to revive the American economy, and called on lawmakers to pass gun control, police and immigration reform legislation.

Biden also talked about working with the world community to take on shared challenges such as climate change and the novel coronavirus pandemic.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Biden during Wednesday night's speech said the United States seeks no escalation with Russia and believes both countries can cooperate where their interests converge.

"With regard to Russia, I made very clear to President [Vladimir] Putin that while we don't seek escalation, their actions have consequences," Biden said according to the transcript provided in advance by the White House.

The US president took credit for responding "in a direct and proportionate way" to Russia's alleged interference in US elections and cyberattacks - accusations Moscow has repeatedly denied.

Biden pointed out the United States and Russia can cooperate in areas of mutual interest, such as already done by extending the New START Treaty on nuclear arms and on climate change. In addition, Biden said he notified Chinese President Xi Jinping that the United States will keep a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific region as a means to prevent a conflict from sparking in the region.

"I also told President Xi that we will maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific just as we do with NATO in Europe - not to start conflict - but to prevent conflict," Biden said.

Biden added that the United States is consulting closely with its allies to address threats posed by Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs through diplomacy and deterrence.

The president also said White Supremacy is terrorism and represents the most lethal threat to the US homeland.

ECONOMY

Biden said the US economy had created more than 1.3 million new jobs during his first 100 days in office.

"More new jobs in the first 100 days than any president on record," Biden said.

Biden told Congress his \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan to renovate US infrastructure will add millions of job and trillions of dollars in economic growth in the United States. The plan would expand education and child care, financed partly through higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans

Biden also outlined his American Families Plan, which consists of about \$1 trillion in investments over a 10-year period and \$800 billion in tax cuts for American families and workers. This is the second phase of the \$2.3 trillion package.

IMMIGRATION

The US president called on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

"Let's end our exhausting war over immigration," Biden's speech read on Wednesday night. "On day one of my Presidency, I kept my commitment and I sent a comprehensive immigration bill to Congress. If you believe we need a secure border - pass it. If you believe in a pathway to citizenship - pass it. If you actually want to solve the problem - I have sent you a bill, now pass it."

The Biden administration is attempting to improve economic and security issues in the Northern Triangle countries that are driving hundreds of thousands of migrants to seek asylum in the United States.

US government data revealed that US southern border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

POLICE/GUNS

Biden urged Congress to approve in May a police reform bill that would address the issue of racially motivated brutality.

"Let's get it done next month, by the first anniversary of George Floyd's death. The country supports this reform. Congress should act," Biden said in a speech before a joint session of Congress on Wednesday evening.

Floyd, an African American resident of Minneapolis, died in police custody last May. Earlier this month former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of murder in the Floyd case.

The police reform bears Chauvin's name and has already passed the House of Representatives, but faces an uphill battle in the Senate.

Biden called on Democrats and Republicans to find common ground.

Biden also called on Congress to work together to pass stricter background checks, and to ban the sale of assault rifles and high-capacity magazines.

The United States has constantly been plagued by mass shootings. Several deadly mass shootings have taken place under the Biden administration's first 100 days in the states of Texas, Colorado, Georgia, and Indiana.

OTHER DOMESTIC ISSUES

Biden in his address to Congress called for the creation of a new health research agency that would be able to develop breakthroughs to treat disease like diabetes and cancer.

"The National Institutes of Health, the NIH - should create a similar Advanced Research Projects Agency for health to develop breakthroughs - to prevent, detect, and treat diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes, and cancer," Biden said.

Biden touted his administration's efforts to provide more than 200 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine doses in the United States in his first 100 days. He said the United States will soon provide the world with vaccines once needs are met for Americans.

The president also proposed adding two free years of pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds in the United States, then providing two free years of community college.

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RPT - NATO Will Never Match Russia's Military Strength - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - NATO will never equal the power of the Russian military because the alliance only serves a propagandistic function, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"NATO will never match Russian military strength. NATO mainly serves as European approval of US foreign policy," Roberts said. "It has a propagandistic function."

Roberts pointed out that it is important to understand that the United States' hegemonic policy "leaves no basis for agreement."

"What Washington demands is the surrender of Russian sovereignty. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's responsible, low-key, non-confrontational responses to Washington's threats and insults will not benefit him or Russia," Roberts said. "The vicious facts are these: Putin and Russia are seen by Washington as obstacles to US hegemony, and the powerful and pervasive US military/security complex requires Russia as an enemy to justify its budget and power. This leaves no possibility for better relations."

Roberts noted that former President Donald Trump regarded NATO as "a Cold War relic that had outlived its purpose."

"To European politicians, this implied a loss of American money and sinecures," he said. "They are pleased that Biden will continue paying them."

However, Roberts pointed out that there are others in Europe who see no value in being part of the United States' conflict with Russia.

"It is all risk and no reward. Europe needs Russian energy, and European businesses desire to participate in Russia's economic development," he said. "The consequence is strain within the American empire. But as long as there is no real cost to Europeans for aligning with Washington against Russia, Washington's money will keep Europe in line."

Relations between NATO and Russia have significantly deteriorated in light of the 2014 Ukrainian conflict, with the alliance having accused Moscow of meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs and boosting its military presence in Eastern Europe. Russia has repeatedly expressed concern over NATO's increased activities in the region and has emphasized they pose a real threats to its security.

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REVIEW - Biden in First Address to Congress Talks Countering China, Developing US Infrastructure

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"With regard to Russia, I made very clear to President [Vladimir] Putin that while we don't seek escalation, their actions have consequences," Biden said according to the transcript provided in advance by the White House.

The US president took credit for responding "in a direct and proportionate way" to Russia's alleged interference in US elections and cyberattacks - accusations Moscow has repeatedly denied.

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The president also proposed adding two free years of pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds in the United States, then providing two free years of community college.

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Biden Says Congress Must Ban Assault Arms, High-Capacity Magazines

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden called on Congress to reintroduce legal bans on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines to curb gun violence.

"We need a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines again. Don't tell me it can't be done. We've done it before... and it worked," Biden said in a speech before a joint session of Congress.

He also urged lawmakers to approve mandatory background checks for purchasing a gun and close existing loopholes. Biden reminded that in the 1990s Congress already passed these measures, but the law expired in the early 2000's and "we've seen the daily bloodshed since."

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Biden Urges US Congress to Approve Police Reform in May

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urged Congress to approve in May a police reform that would address the issue of racially motivated brutality.

"Let's get it done next month, by the first anniversary of George Floyd's death. The country supports this reform. Congress should act," Biden said in a speech before a joint session of Congress on Wednesday evening.

Floyd, an African American resident of Minneapolis, died in police custody last May. Earlier this month former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of murder in the Floyd case.

The police reform bears Chauvin's name and has already passed the House of Representatives, but faces an uphill battle in the Senate.

Biden called on Democrats and Republicans to find common ground.

"I know the Republicans have their own ideas and are engaged in productive discussions with Democrats. We need to work together to find a consensus," he said.

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Biden Says White Supremacist Terrorism Most Lethal Threat to US Homeland

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that white supremacist terrorism represents the most lethal threat to the US homeland, according to the text of his speech before the joint session of Congress provided in advance by the White House.

"We won't ignore what our own intelligence agencies have determined – the most lethal terrorist threat to the homeland today is from white supremacist terrorism," Biden said in the speech on Wednesday evening.

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Biden Calls on US Congress to Pass Comprehensive Immigration Bill - Address

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is calling on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation, according to excerpts of his address to the joint session of Congress released in advance by the White House.

"Let's end our exhausting war over immigration," Biden's speech read on Wednesday night. "On day one of my Presidency, I kept my commitment and I sent a comprehensive immigration bill to Congress. If you believe we need a secure border - pass it. If you believe in a pathway to citizenship - pass it. If you actually want to solve the problem - I have sent you a bill, now pass it."

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Biden Says US Working Closely With Allies to Address Iran, North Korea Nuclear Programs

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is consulting closely with its allies to address threats posed by Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs through diplomacy and deterrence, according to excerpts of President Joe Biden's speech to Congress released in advance by the White House.

"On Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs that present a serious threat to America's security and world security - we will be working closely with our allies to address the threats posed by both of these countries through diplomacy and stern deterrence," Biden's speech read on Wednesday night.

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Biden Says US Economy Created Over 1.3Mln New Jobs During His First 100 Days in Office

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said the US economy had created more than 1.3 million new jobs during his first 100 days in office.

"In the process, the economy created more than 1.3 million new jobs in 100 days," Biden said on Wednesday in his first address to a joint session of Congress. "More new jobs in the first 100 days than any president on record."

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Biden Calls on US Congress to Establish Health Research Agency

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his first speech to a joint session of Congress called for the creation of a new health research agency that would be able to develop breakthroughs to treat disease like diabetes and cancer.

"The National Institutes of Health, the NIH - should create a similar Advanced Research Projects Agency for health to develop breakthroughs - to prevent, detect, and treat diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes, and cancer," Biden said on Wednesday night.

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Biden Says Told China's Xi US Will Maintain Strong Military Presence in Indo-Pacific

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his first address to US Congress said he told his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping the United States will maintain a robust military presence in the Indo-Pacific region just as with NATO in Europe.

"I also told President Xi that we will maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific just as we do with NATO in Europe - not to start conflict - but to prevent conflict," Biden said on Wednesday.

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US Seeks No Escalation With Russia, Ready to Cooperate - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks no escalation with Russia and believes both countries can cooperate where their interests converge, US President Joe Biden said in an address to Congress.

"With regard to Russia, I made very clear to President Putin that while we don't seek escalation, their actions have consequences," according to the transcript provided in advance by the White House.

He took credit for responding "in a direct and proportionate way" to Russia's alleged interference in US elections and cyberattacks. Russia denies all allegations.

"But we can also cooperate when it's in our mutual interests. As we did when we extended the New START Treaty on nuclear arms - and as we're working to do on the climate crisis," Biden is poised to say.

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US Envoy for Yemen to Travel to Saudi Arabia, Oman on Thursday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Yemen Tim Lenderking will travel to Saudi Arabia and Oman on Thursday to meet with senior government officials to discuss concerns over the humanitarian crisis and violence in the region, the State Department said in a press release.

"US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking will travel to Saudi Arabia and Oman on April 29, where he will hold meetings with senior government officials and work jointly with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths," the release said on Wednesday.

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NATO Will Never Match Russia's Military Strength - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - NATO will never equal the power of the Russian military because the alliance only serves a propagandistic function, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"NATO will never match Russian military strength. NATO mainly serves as European approval of US foreign policy," Roberts said. "It has a propagandistic function."

Roberts pointed out that it is important to understand that the United States' hegemonic policy "leaves no basis for agreement."

"What Washington demands is the surrender of Russian sovereignty. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's responsible, low-key, non-confrontational responses to Washington's threats and insults will not benefit him or Russia," Roberts said. "The vicious facts are these: Putin and Russia are seen by Washington as obstacles to US hegemony, and the powerful and pervasive US military/security complex requires Russia as an enemy to justify its budget and power. This leaves no possibility for better relations."

Roberts noted that former President Donald Trump regarded NATO as "a Cold War relic that had outlived its purpose."

"To European politicians, this implied a loss of American money and sinecures," he said. "They are pleased that Biden will continue paying them."

However, Roberts pointed out that there are others in Europe who see no value in being part of the United States' conflict with Russia.

"It is all risk and no reward. Europe needs Russian energy, and European businesses desire to participate in Russia's economic development," he said. "The consequence is strain within the American empire. But as long as there is no real cost to Europeans for aligning with Washington against Russia, Washington's money will keep Europe in line."

Relations between NATO and Russia have significantly deteriorated in light of the 2014 Ukrainian conflict, with the alliance having accused Moscow of meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs and boosting its military presence in Eastern Europe. Russia has repeatedly expressed concern over NATO's increased activities in the region and has emphasized they pose a real threats to its security.

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Americans Left With Government of 'Totally Disunited Country' - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Americans now have a government that rules over a completely disunited nation, while presuming itself to be a superpower set to impose its will on the entire international community, former Assistant US Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"The American population is splintered. There is no unity. The United States has become a diverse, multicultural Tower of Babel, which has drained all strength from the country," Roberts said. "We are left with a government with a totally disunited country that imagines itself to be a superpower determined to force its will on the world."

Roberts went on to say, however, that the international community is accustomed to 70 years of US dominance and is unaware that the United States has entered a process of collapse.

"US power rests substantially on the US dollar as world reserve currency, the currency used for international transactions," he said. "This privileged role has been harmed by the Federal Reserves creation of trillions of new dollars in order to support the disastrous decisions of the unregulated mega-banks."

Roberts also said the US government's "freely issued" sanctions undermine the dollar by teaching sanctioned nations to find alternatives to the dollar payments and clearing system. In addition, US corporations have de-industrialized the United States by offshoring its manufacturing jobs, he said.

"The real family median income has eased to increase," he said. "Wealth and income gains have gone to the top one-half of one percent of the population. Indebtedness is the rule for the vast majority of the population, any and every one of whom can lose his or her job because of using a wrong pronoun or for not being sufficiently deferential to a transgendered person or a person of color."

Roberts also pointed out that the country is further being divided as white Americans are under constant attack with charges of systemic racism.

"Their monuments are torn down, their museums closed. The ideology of the Democrat party is identity politics," he said. "In Marxist class warfare, it is the capitalists who oppress the workers.

In American identity politics, it is white Americans who oppress blacks and people of color and men who oppress women.”

Roberts spoke on the occasion of US President Joe Biden’s 100th day in office on Thursday. The former official underscored that the Biden presidency in its first 100 days has dramatically worsened the already bad US-Russian relations.

“Biden said on national TV that President Putin is ‘a killer.’ A US-backed coup was foiled in Belarus. Biden also gave a military guarantee to Ukraine against Russian intervention if Ukraine renewed its invasion of the Donbass republics. US military equipment arrived in Ukraine. Biden issued new sanctions against Russia. NATO and the EU supported the sanctions,” he said. Roberts pointed out that he believes former President Donald Trump was removed from office because he wanted to normalize ties with Russia.

“This intention was unacceptable to the US military-security complex, which needs the ‘Russian threat’ to justify its budget and power,” he said. “The US foreign policy establishment regards Russia as a barrier to American hegemony. This means that there is no chance for normal relations.”

Commenting on the United States’ relations with the European countries during the first three months of the Biden presidency and their prospects in the future, Roberts noted that Trump regarded NATO as a Cold War relic that had outlived its purpose and to European politicians this implied a loss of US funds and sinecures.

“They are pleased that Biden will continue paying them. But others in Europe see no value in being part of Washington’s conflict with Russia,” he said. “It is all risk and no reward. Europe needs Russian energy and European businesses desire to participate in Russia’s economic development. The consequence is strain within the American empire. But as long as there is no real cost to Europeans for aligning with Washington against Russia, Washington’s money will keep Europe in line.”

When asked about what was achieved and is expected to happen with regards to US military presence overseas, Roberts noted that the United States’ two decades of war against Muslims have served Israel’s agenda.

“Iraq and Libya have been destroyed. Syria, despite the Russian intervention, is still subject to unpunished Israeli attacks. US policy toward Iran remains under Israel’s control,” Roberts said. “Afghanistan was a defeat for Washington like Vietnam, but unlike President Nixon American presidents have not succeeded in withdrawing US military presence.”

Biden’s job approval rating after the first 100 days in office is the third lowest for a US president since 1945, an ABC and Washington Post poll revealed on Sunday.

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US to Deliver \$100Mln in Supplies to India in Coming Days to Battle COVID-19 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will send \$100 million in supplies to India in the coming days to help the country deal with an overwhelming wave of novel coronavirus cases, the White House said in a press release.

"Reflecting the United States' solidarity with India as it battles a new wave of COVID-19 cases, the United States is delivering supplies worth more than \$100 million in the coming days to provide urgent relief to our partners in India," the release said on Wednesday.

Moreover, the United States will re-direct 20 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses to India, the release said.

The United States will also send more "planeloads" of oxygen tanks to India for local hospitals in need of them, the release said. In addition, the US administration will send multiple field units that can house up to 20 hospital patients, and a team of US experts will work with Indian medical personnel to operate these mobile facilities.

India has already received from the United States 20,000 doses of the antiviral drug remdesivir to help infected patients, the release added.

The US administration is also providing 15 million N95 face masks for patients and Indian medical personnel, the release said.

India comes second in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases following the United States and registers more than 300,000 new ones per day over the past week.

Earlier on Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin notified Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that Russia will provide India with more than 22 tonnes of humanitarian aid, including medicines, lung ventilators and oxygen generation equipment.

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US Officials to Meet Mideast Partners in Coming Days for Iran Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - A United States delegation will travel to the Middle East in the coming days to meet with partner nations to discuss matters concerning Iran and other regional issues, UAE's The National newspaper reported citing multiple US officials.

The report said on Wednesday a senior United States delegation will travel over the coming week to the Middle East to discuss a range of important matters related to US national security and efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region.

The report, citing a US-based diplomatic source, said the delegation will visit Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to discuss the ongoing Vienna talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement.

Other media reports said the US delegation will also visit Egypt and Jordan during the trip to the Middle East.

US media reported that the delegation will include US coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, Brett McGurk; State Department counselor Derek Chollett; acting US Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs, Joey Hood; and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul.

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RPT - us re-directing supplies for 20 Million AstraZeneca vaccine doses to India - white house Sputnik

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UPDATE - Biden to Unveil Jobs Plans, Education Investments in First Address to Congress

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will tell a joint session of Congress on Wednesday night that the United States is on the move again, and will tout his administration's jobs plan to revive the American economy in the wake of the worst days of the pandemic, according to excerpts of the US president's speech released by the White House.

"Now - after just 100 days - I can report to the nation: America is on the move again. Turning peril into possibility. Crisis into opportunity. Setback into strength," Biden's speech read on Wednesday.

Biden will tell Congress his \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan to renovate US infrastructure will add millions of job and trillions of dollars in economic growth in the United States.

Biden will characterize his plan as a "blue-collar blueprint to build America" through good-paying infrastructure jobs that will mostly not require college education.

He will also commend his administration's efforts to "restore" the US public's faith in democracy in his first 100 days.

The US president will also touch on his efforts to get Americans vaccinated.

On Tuesday, an administration official told reporters that Biden will outline his American Families Plan, which consists of about \$1 trillion in investments over a 10-year period and \$800 billion in tax cuts for American families and workers. This is the second phase of the \$2.3 trillion package. The plan would expand education and child care, financed partly through higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans, media reported.

Some Republicans are hammering Biden on his 100-day record ahead of tonight's speech.

"The last example of unity we've seen from @JoeBiden was in his inaugural address. In just 99 days, President Biden has already shown himself to be one of the most radical presidents in

American history. It's time for President Biden to actually practice what he preaches," Senate Republican Chairman John Barrasso said via Twitter.

Other Republican lawmakers slammed Biden's 100-day record, accusing him of boosting the national debt, threatening US energy independence, and causing a border crisis.

Due to coronavirus restrictions, the event will be drastically scaled down with a total number of attendees expected at around 200 compared to as many as 1,600 people in previous years. Biden will deliver the speech beginning at 9:00 p.m. EST on Wednesday (1:00 a.m. GMT Thursday).

Republican Senator Tim Scott will get the rebuttal address tonight. Scott is the only Black Republican in the Senate.

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Chinese National Pleads Guilty to Illegal Exports to Military University- US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Chinese national and Massachusetts resident Shuren Qin pleaded guilty to violating US export laws after he was caught sending technology from the United States, Canada and Europe to a Chinese military university, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A Chinese national pleaded guilty today in federal court in Boston in connection with illegally procuring and causing the illegal export of \$100,000 worth of US origin goods to Northwestern Polytechnical University (NWPU), a Chinese military university that is heavily involved in military research and works closely with the People's Liberation Army on the advancement of its military capabilities," the release said on Wednesday.

The Justice Department noted that Qin entered the United States on an immigrant investor visa program and subsequently establish a company - LinkOcean Technologies LTD.

Qin used the company to illegally export technologies and goods with underwater and marine applications back to China for use in military systems, the release said.

Qin pleaded guilty to numerous charges, including one count of conspiracy to unlawfully export items from the United States without the required export licenses, one count of visa fraud, four counts of money laundering and two counts of smuggling hydrophones to China, the release added.

He faces a prison sentence of up to 65 years and a fine in excess of \$2 million, according to the release.

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Federal Reserve Chairman Says China's Digital Yuan Will Not Work in US

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is still figuring out what it would want from a central bank cryptocurrency though it is certain that China's digital yuan will not fit the bill, Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters.

"The currency that's being used in China is not one that would work here," Powell said on Wednesday. "It's one that really allows the government to see every payment that's used, for which it is used in real-time. It's more to do with things happening within their own financial system than it is to do with the global competition."

The United States would want a digital currency that it can use "for doing international business right away," said Powell.

"We are engaged in a serious program to understand both the technology and the policy issues," he added. "The dollar is used in transactions all around the world far more than any other currency. We also have open capital accounts. Those are the factors that make us a reserve currency and we have to reflect those."

The Fed and a host of central banks around the world have been at work in researching or launching their own digital coins as cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin gain mass attention from investors. China has so far led other governments in experimenting with a digital yuan, which would be the world's first sovereign cryptocurrency if launched.

Powell said the Federal Reserve was less worried someone or some country may first have a digital currency and more concerned about what such a mode of payment would mean to the United States.

"It is a tricky set of questions that we have to navigate in a world where we already have a highly evolved payment system," he said. "Pretty soon everybody will be able to do what people do in other parts of the world, which is just use their phone to make immediately available payments all the time. It will be normal. But what would be the role of a central bank digital currency in that kind of an environment? It's far more important to get it right than it is to do it fast or feel we need to rush to reach conclusions because other countries are moving ahead." China has said it will use the digital yuan for domestic transactions and the cryptocurrency Bitcoin for international transactions, having stated earlier that it now considers Bitcoin to be an alternative asset and form of investment, according to media reports.

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Biden Hails Jobs Plan, Says America 'On the Move Again' in First Address to Congress

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will tell a joint session of Congress on Wednesday night that the United States is on the move again, and will tout his administration's jobs plan to revive the American economy in the wake of the worst days of the pandemic, according to excerpts of the US president's speech released by the White House.

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Biden will tell Congress his \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan to renovate US infrastructure will add millions of job and trillions of dollars in economic growth in the United States. Biden will characterize his plan as a "blue-collar blueprint to build America" through good-paying infrastructure jobs that will mostly not require college education. Biden will commend his administration's efforts to "restore" the US public's faith in democracy in his first 100 days. The US president will also touch on his efforts to get Americans vaccinated.

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US Charges 3 With Hate Crimes in Death of Georgia Black Man Arbery - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Three men have been charged with hate crimes and a kidnapping attempt of Ahmaud Arbery resulting in his death, the US Justice Department said in a release.

"Travis McMichael, 35; Travis's father, Gregory McMichael, 65; and William 'Roddie' Bryan, 51, were each charged with one count of interference with rights and with one count of attempted kidnapping," the release said on Wednesday. "Counts One and Two of the indictment allege that the defendants used force and threats of force to intimidate and interfere with Arbery's right to use a public street because of his race... Count One also alleges that the offense resulted in Arbery's death."

It is alleged that the armed defendants chased Arbery, a Black man, while he was running on a public street in Brunswick, Georgia, yelled at him, using their truck to cut off his route and threatening him with firearms, the release added.

According to the release, count three of the indictment alleges the defendants attempted to restrict the victim's freedom of movement, and detained him against his will. Count four and five allege that Travis used, carried, brandished, and discharged a shotgun, and Gregory used, carried, and brandished a Magnum revolver.

The defendants have also been charged with malice murder, felony murder, aggravated assault, false imprisonment, and criminal attempt to commit a felony.

Arbery's death sparked outrage after being caught on video and going viral in May 2020 - more than two months after he was killed. Later, all three men were indicted in state court.

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US Arrests Man for Stealing \$5.8Mln in COVID-19 Relief for Small Business - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The authorities arrested a New York City businessman on charges of defrauding the US government of more than \$5 million for claiming fake employees to apply for COVID-19 relief loans, the US Justice Department said.

"Marcus Frazier sought millions of dollars in unsecured SBA [Small Business Administration]-guaranteed loans for which his businesses did not qualify. Frazier allegedly did this by lying about the number of people employed by his businesses, the salaries they were paid, even that these employees existed," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Frazier sought about \$5.8 million in Paycheck Protection Plan loans by submitting at least seven applications for various businesses he controlled, the release said. He eventually received \$2.17 million, the release added.

The applications relied on fraudulent statements regarding the number of employees of each business and the amount of payroll involved, according to the release.

Frazier was arrested Thursday morning and appeared before US Magistrate Judge Gabriel Gorenstein of the Southern District of New York in the afternoon.

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Senate Approves Measure to Reinstate Limits on Methane Emissions in US Oil, Gas Sector

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday approved a measure to rescind a Trump administration rule that removed an Obama-era regulation limiting methane emissions in the US oil and gas sector.

The Senate passed the measure with a 52-42 vote, sending it to the House of Representatives for consideration.

On Tuesday, the White House said the Biden administration supports the resolution to reinstate limits on methane emissions on the US oil and gas sector.

The resolution overturns the Trump administration's Oil and Natural Gas Sector: Emission Standards for New, Reconstructed and Modified Sources Review rule published by the Environmental Protection Agency in September 2020.

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US Charges 3 Men Charged With Hate Crimes Resulting in Victim's Death - Justice Dept.

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US Housing Fully Recovered From COVID-19, Seeing Biggest Boom Since 2009 - Fed Chair

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The US housing market has fully recovered from the coronavirus pandemic and is experiencing a boom not seen since the Great Recession of 2008-2009, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said Wednesday.

"This is clearly the strongest housing market we've seen since the global financial crisis," Powell told reporters after chairing the central bank's monthly policy meeting. "My hope would be that, over time, housing builders can react to this demand and come up with more supply, and workers will come back to work in that industry."

Sales of new homes in the United States jumped 21 percent in March to more than 1.02 million units, the highest in 15 years, the Commerce Department said last week.

Existing homes were, meanwhile, offered at record high prices of \$330,000 and above, the National Association of Realtors said.

Powell said he was not unduly concerned about a bubble forming in the housing market due to runaway demand or record high prices.

Economists said the situation was partly due to the Fed keeping interest rates near zero over the past year, enabling people to borrow cheaply and easily to buy homes.

"We're watching it very carefully," Powell said, acknowledging the problem. "I don't see the kind of financial stability concerns, though, that really do reside around the housing sector. So many

of the financial crackups in all western countries that have happened around the last 30 years [were] around housing. We don't see bad loans and unsustainable prices and that kind of thing." He said the one thing that differentiated the current housing market from the one before the financial crisis was the presence of more financially sound buyers.

"We don't have people who are over-leveraged and owning a lot of houses," Powell said.

"There's no question housing prices are going up but it's partly because there's clearly strong demand and not a lot of supply right now."

While a rash of US economic data, from consumer spending to inflation, have exceeded forecasts lately, the housing sector itself "has more than fully recovered from the downturn", he added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik)

US SENATE LIMITS METHANE EMISSIONS

* The US Senate on Wednesday approved a measure to rescind a Trump administration rule that removed an Obama-era regulation limiting methane emissions in the US oil and gas sector.

EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The European Union does not have means to decide on the fate of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, but it must ensure the pipeline's compliance with the bloc's energy legislation, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Wednesday.

* Borrell warned EU parliamentarians against urging him to back US sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, since he opposed extraterritorial US sanctions in principle.

* The European Union is ready to improve relations with Russia if Moscow shows willingness for it, Borrell said.

* The European Parliament is proposing to disconnect Russian from the SWIFT payment system, cease imports of oil and gas in case of an "invasion" of Ukraine, according to a draft resolution, which is expected to be adopted on Thursday following the plenary session.

PUTIN-MODI TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin told Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during a phone conversation on Wednesday, about Russia's decision to provide emergency humanitarian aid to India in light of the surge in COVID-19 cases in the South Asian country, the Kremlin said.

* Modi thanked Putin for Moscow's prompt assistance in India's fight against escalating coronavirus epidemic, the Indian Foreign Ministry said.

UKRAINE'S NAFTOGAZ CEO RESIGNS

* Ukraine's state energy company Naftogaz CEO Andriy Kobolyev said on Wednesday that he learned about his alleged dismissal from the news and did not in fact tender resignation.

* Ukraine's government appointed Yuriy Vitrenko as the new chairman of the board of state energy company Naftogaz after terminating the contract with the former CEO.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

* Russia, Pakistan, China, and the United States - the so-called extended Troika - will meet in Doha on April 30 to discuss the Afghan peace settlement a day before the US troops are expected to begin official withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russian presidential envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov told Sputnik.

* Russia prioritizes the launch of the inter-Afghan peace process and it believes that the date of the US troops withdrawal does not matter much, Kabulov told Sputnik.

* Russia plans to use the upcoming Doha talks on Afghanistan to urge the Taliban movement for restraint and compromise with the United States, Kabulov told Sputnik.

PUTIN-ZELENSKY MEETING

* The Kremlin has not received any exact official proposal from Kiev following on from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's idea to hold a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Vatican, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* Peskov said that he is not aware whether Putin is ready to travel anywhere for a meeting with Zelenskyy.

MOLDOVA POLITICAL CRISIS

* Moldovan President Maia Sandu said on Wednesday that she signed a decree on the dissolution of the parliament and announced that the snap elections will take place on July 11. **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

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US Senate Confirms Ex-UN Envoy Samantha Power to Be Next Chief of USAID

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday confirmed former Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power to be the next administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Senate approved Power's nomination with a 68-26 vote.

President Joe Biden picked Power to head USAID before his inauguration on January 20. Biden also elevated the USAID administrator position by making it part of the National Security Council. Power previously served as the US ambassador to the United Nations from 2013 to 2017.

In a confirmation hearing earlier this month, Power pledged to promote multilateralization of the Magnitsky sanctions against corruption and human rights abuses and ensure as many countries as possible adopt similar legal mechanisms.

Power also promised to make anti-corruption work "a huge priority" and said that broader efforts to counter the decline of democracies will top the immediate USAID agenda along with addressing the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and conflicts around the world.

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US Defendant Admits Guilt in Nationwide Theft of Cryptocurrency - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - A man in the US state of Massachusetts pleaded guilty of running a scheme to take over victims' social media accounts and stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in cryptocurrency, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Eric Meiggs, 23, of Brockton, admitted that he and one or more co-conspirators targeted victims who appeared to have significant amounts of cryptocurrency and those who had high value or 'OG' [original gangster] social media account names," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Using an illegal practice known as "SIM-swapping," Meiggs and others also hacked into online accounts to steal or attempt to steal more than \$530,000 in cryptocurrency from at least ten victims throughout the United States, the release said.

Meiggs pleaded guilty to each of seven counts in an indictment, charging him with conspiracy, wire fraud, computer fraud and abuse, and aggravated identity theft. He is scheduled to be sentenced on September 15, and faces a mandatory minimum penalty of two years in prison to be served consecutively with any other sentence, according to the release.

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NASA Honors Passing of Astronaut Michael Collins for His Role in First Lunar Landing

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday issued a statement honoring the astronaut Michael Collins, who died Wednesday aged 90.

"Many remember him as the astronaut who was by himself, orbiting the Moon as Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong walked on the lunar surface. He may not have received equal glory, but he was an equal partner, reminding our nation about the importance of collaboration in service of great goals. From his vantage point high above the Earth, he reminded us of the fragility of our own planet, and called on us to care for it like the treasure it is," Biden said in his statement. Collins, who held the rank of Major General in the US Air Force, went on to work for the State Department, and later, managed the planning and construction of the Smithsonian Institute's National Air and Space Museum as its director, during which time he opened the museum under-budget and ahead of schedule.

Biden touched on Collins's humility, noting that despite his many accomplishments and titles, he demanded that everyone simply call him 'Mike'.

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US Arrests Russian National Over Cryptocurrency Laundering - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US law enforcement arrested Russian national Roman Sterlingov and accused him of being the principal operator of the cryptocurrency money laundering website Bitcoin Fog, a court filing revealed on Wednesday.

Sterlingov, who also has Sweden's citizenship, faces charges related to unlicensed money transmissions and money laundering. The arrest warrant was executed on Tuesday in California.

"Analysis of bitcoin transactions, financial records, Internet service provider records, email records and additional investigative information, identifies Roman Sterlingov as the principal operator of Bitcoin Fog," Devon Beckett, a Special Agent assigned to the Internal Revenue Service, wrote in an affidavit.

Beckett described Bitcoin Fog - launched in 2011 and still operational in the darknet - as one of the original "tumbling sites" that has processed transactions worth almost \$336 million.

"Historically, the largest senders of BTC through Bitcoin Fog have been darknet markets, such as Agora, Silk Road 2.0, Silk Road, Evolution, and AlphaBay, that primarily trafficked in illegal narcotics and other illegal goods," Beckett said.

The authorities estimate that Sterlingov would have made approximately \$8 million in commissions if he had cashed out the administrative fees near the time that the transactions occurred.

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RPT - NASA Honors Passing of Astronaut Michael Collins for His Role in First Lunar Landing

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Astronaut Michael Collins, who remained in lunar orbit while colleagues Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to set foot on the Moon, was remembered for inspiring a generation of scientists, engineers and astronauts, Acting NASA Administrator Steve Jurczyk said on Wednesday.

"His own signature accomplishments, his writings about his experiences, and his leadership of the National Air and Space Museum helped gain wide exposure for the work of all the men and women who have helped our nation push itself to greatness in aviation and space. There is no doubt he inspired a new generation of scientists, engineers, test pilots, and astronauts," Jurczyk said in a statement.

Collins died at the age of 90, his family announced on Wednesday.

As pilot of the Apollo 11 command module that circled the moon in July 1969 while his colleagues walked on the lunar surface, Collins later wrote in a best-selling memoir, "I am alone now, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life."

As a result, Collins became known to many as "the loneliest man in history," as Jurczyk noted on Wednesday.

Collins also flew on a three-day Gemini mission in 1966 and served as director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum after retiring from NASA in 1970.

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Federal Reserve Chairman Says US Economic Recovery Dependent on Controlling Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will continue supporting the US economy but what matters most in the economic recovery is controlling the coronavirus, Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

"We'll continue asset purchases at this pace until we see substantial further progress," Powell told reporters after chairing the central bank's monthly policy meeting for April. "I would certainly say that what matters the most in the economic recovery is controlling the virus."

The central bank's Federal Open Market Committee pledged at the meeting to continue buying at least \$80 billion of US bonds and \$40 billion of mortgage-backed securities per month until substantial further progress has been made toward the Committee's maximum employment and price stability goals.

The Federal Reserve said believes the US economy will rebound 6.5 percent this year although it does not expect the return of "full employment" - defined by an unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - before 2023.

Powell acknowledged that a rash of US economic data, from consumer spending to inflation, homebuilding and house prices, have exceeded forecasts lately, boosting hopes for faster-than-expected recovery.

Yet the economy still was not strong enough to stand on its own without the support of the Federal Reserve, he said.

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COVID-19 Surge Overwhelms Hospitals in Americas - Health Organization

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Coronavirus cases and hospitalizations are rising sharply throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as supplies of vaccines languish, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa Etienne said on Wednesday.

"In total 1.4 million new COVID-19 cases were reported in the Americas in the past week, while 36,000 people died of the disease, Etienne said in a press release. "In fact, one in four COVID-19 deaths reported worldwide last week took place right here in the Americas."

Etienne said hospitalizations hit an all-time high in Costa Rica, and hospitals reached maximum capacity in Guatemala and in the Colombian cities of Bogota and Medellin.

Cases are also increasing in Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay and nearly every Central American country, Etienne said.

Etienne urged nations to send surplus vaccines to the region, where she said "supplies continue to languish."

Etienne also urged nations throughout the region to tighten public health measures by extending curfews, limiting re-openings, and imposing new stay-at-home orders to combat the latest surge.

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US Should Sanction Navalny's Jailers, Engage With EU on New Russia Sanctions - Senator

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has to impose sanctions against Russian officials responsible for opposition figure Alexey Navalny imprisoning and engage with its European allies on new restrictions, US Senator Robert Menendez said on Wednesday.

"[The US] Treasury should be reviewing the list of 35 Putin oligarchs that Mr. Navalny and his team has flagged as sanctions targets. But given Mr. Navalny's current situation, the immediate targets of new sanctions need to be his jailers," Menendez said during an online discussion at the Sedona Forum.

Menendez welcomed the Biden administration's decisiveness to hold Russian officials accountable for alleged human rights abuses.

"But that signal just has to be the first step," Menendez said.

Menendez urged the Biden administration to engage with the European Union on imposing additional sanctions against Russia.

"We need robust diplomacy because multilateral sanctions have far more effect than unilateral sanctions," he said.

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About 60% US Special Forces Focus On Great Power Competition – Commanding General

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – About 60 percent of US Special Forces formations are focused on the ongoing great power competition while 40 percent are engaged in combating violent extremism around the world, the Commanding General of the United States Army Special Operations Command Francis Beaudette said in a Senate hearing on Wednesday. “Approximately 60% of our men and women are focused on great power, competition, while the remaining 40% remain focused on countering violent extremism,” Beaudette said. “We have an excess of 3000 men and women deployed in 71 countries.”

At this time, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) has access and placement in 80-100 countries around the world with an additional several dozen countries which allow overflight landing, the Commander of the Air Force Special Operations James Slife added during the hearing.

SOF is a division of the US Defense Department's Special Operations Command that is used for special operations.

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California Man Admits to Defrauding Afghan Government of Over \$100Mln - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - California resident Saed Ismail Amiri pleaded guilty to wire fraud charges after lying about the work history of his company to obtain a \$112.2 million contract from the Afghan government, the US Department of Justice said in press release on Wednesday.

“A California man pleaded guilty Tuesday for his role in a scheme to defraud the government of Afghanistan of over \$100 million. These funds were provided to Afghanistan by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for the purpose of constructing an electric grid in Afghanistan, in connection with the long-standing US effort to strengthen that country's basic infrastructure,” the press release said.

Amiri claimed that his company Assist Consultants Incorporated (ACI), had previously constructed power stations in Uganda and Nigeria in order to meet the prerequisites to bid on the contract. The money for the project was given to the Afghan government by the USAID, the release said.

In an attempt to secure the contract for the AGI, Amiri sent false documents and made false statements to officials, the release added.

Amiri could face up to 20 years in prison for the scheme depending on the federal judge's consideration of sentencing guidelines, according to the release.

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US Must Embrace Human Augmentation or Fall Behind Competitors - Top Space Force Scientist

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Mixing human ingenuity with machine efficiency, power, and speed can create superhuman capabilities in the coming decade, and the US must embrace this change in technological era or fall behind global adversaries, Dr. Joel B. Mozer, the Chief Scientist of the US Space Force, said during the Air Force Research Laboratory's (AFRL) Inspire event on Wednesday.

"In the last century, Western civilization transformed from an industrial-based society to an information-based society, but today we're on the brink of a new age: the age of human augmentation. In our business of national defense, it's imperative we embrace this new age, lest we fall behind our strategic competitors," Dr. Mozer said.

The AFRL, which leads technological research for both the Air Force and newly-created Space Force, puts on the annual Inspire event to showcase the innovative ideas being produced by the lab and its partners. Dr. Mozer, this year's special guest speaker, focused his speech on the integration of humanity with technology, and the important role that such an integration will play in the future military.

Mozer also emphasized that humans must be integrated and allowed to do what they do best, such as exerting ethical judgments during the decision-making process and dealing with ambiguity that AI may be unable to. He noted that US adversaries certainly will if they do not, and encouraged attendees to lead the way into the age of human augmentation.

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NASA Honors Passing of Astronaut Michael Collins for His Role in First Lunar Landing

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As pilot of the Apollo 11 command module that circled the moon in July 1969 while his colleagues walked on the lunar surface, Collins later wrote in a best-selling memoir, "I am alone now, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life."

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Collins also flew on a three-day Gemini mission in 1966 and served as director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum after retiring from NASA in 1970.

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US Democrats Top Republicans in Embracing Coronavirus Vaccines By 82-53% Margin - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - More than two thirds of US adults consider available coronavirus vaccines to be safe and effective, although opinions vary widely between Democrat and Republican voters, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Eighty-two percent (82 percent) of Democrats have confidence in the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine, including 53 percent who are Very Confident. But only 56 percent of Republicans are confident in the vaccine, including 31 percent who are Very Confident," a press release explaining the poll said.

Overall acceptance of vaccines was reported by 69 percent of those surveyed, the release said. Democrats were also more likely than Republicans to say they had been vaccinated by a 69-52 percent margin, the release added.

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US Must Show Russia That Military Option on Table - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – The United States and its Western allies should show Russia that military option is "on the table" in case of its engagements in Ukraine and other countries, House Representative Adam Kinzinger said on Wednesday.

"I think we need to make it clear that there is a military option on the table," Kinzinger said during online conversation at the Sedona Forum

The Illinois Republican lawmaker said he does not suggest immediately stationing the US troops in Ukraine but Washington and allies should be ready to provide a "military response". "Eventually people look up to a threat that the Baltics in this case might be next," he said, comparing Russia with Germany before the World War II.

Kinzinger called on to fight for Western democracy in countries where Russia might have an influence. He also noted that Washington will return to "a massive operation" of informing the Russian people about corruption in the government.

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Biden's Track Record Shouldn't Have Made Armenian Genocide Recognition a Surprise- Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century should not have come as a surprise considering the former senator's public record on the issue, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"There was not and should not have been any surprise. President Biden expressed views that he has held for many, many years and he's been very clear about that," Blinken told reporters during a virtual roundtable ahead of World Press Freedom Day.

The objective of the commemoration was to honor victims not to assign blame, Blinken added. Blinken emphasized that Biden looks forward to his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and that the US continues to seek strong bilateral relationship with Turkey, including areas of expanded cooperation with its NATO ally.

Biden's statement made on Saturday in observance of Armenia's Remembrance Day has elicited outrage from officials in Ankara, with Erdogan calling Biden's decision regretful and a source telling Sputnik that Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had summoned US Ambassador David Satterfield to voice its opposition to the statement.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Armenians found themselves an increasingly persecuted minority within the ailing Ottoman Empire. In 1915, according to a number of historians, more than 1.5 million Armenians were killed. The events have been recognized as a genocide by the governments and parliaments of over 30 countries. Turkey, which traditionally rejects the genocide accusations, warned the Biden administration that such a move by the US would hurt bilateral relations.

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Biden 'Directly, Privately' Conveyed to Putin Concerns about Russia's Buildup - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden conveyed to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin concerns about Russia's military buildup along Ukrainian borders and wants to discuss Ukraine's sovereignty during a proposed bilateral summit, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"I am not going to get into hypotheticals about what might happen if Russia goes into Ukraine except just to say ... that the President has communicated directly, privately to President Putin his concern about Russia's military buildup and his view that the United States alongside other partners will stand firmly in defense of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Sullivan said in an interview with MSNBC.

Last week, the Russian Defense Ministry said that troops that were engaged in the surprise combat readiness check in the country's south and west, in the vicinity of Ukraine, are coming back to their permanent bases. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the military to return by May 1.

Sullivan said that the United States would continue addressing the issue "through high level diplomatic communication, not through issuing public ultimatums." The official added that Biden suggested that he and Putin discuss Ukraine during their first meeting that may take place this summer.

"Joe Biden is a man of his word. He said he would respond to Russia's harmful actions and he did. He also said he wasn't seeking to escalate, that he wanted the stable relationship. And so he offered the opportunity to sit down with Vladimir Putin in a third country this summer to talk about the full range of issues in our relationship, including the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Sullivan said.

He added that Biden intends "to follow through on that" if the US and Russia can work out a date and location for the summit.

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Blinken Says Discussed Situation Over Radio Free Europe With Lavrov - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a press briefing on Wednesday that he has addressed the situation with of US-funded media outlet Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which targets media consumers in Russia and the post-Soviet space, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Earlier in April, The Moscow bureau of RFE/RL, designated as a foreign agent in Russia, filed a lawsuit against the country with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In March, the head of RFE/RL's Russian office, Andrey Shary, told Sputnik that the bureau was planning to appeal to international bodies, including the ECHR, against Russian court rulings obligating it to pay fines for not identifying itself as a foreign agent as required by law.

"I've spoken to my Russian counterpart about this, I spoke to the head of RFE/RL just a couple of weeks ago in my office about this," Blinken revealed. "We are doing everything we can to be supportive and to find a good way forward ultimately."

The media argues that Russia's actions violate the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press protected by Article 10 of the ECHR.

Earlier in the month, Russian media watchdog Roskomnadzor said it drew up nearly 400 administrative violation protocols against the US government-funded organization over continuing to refuse to label its content as foreign agent's, leading to fines totaling \$919,000.

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US Trade Representative Discussed With Bill Gates COVID-19 Intellectual Property Waiver

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates the proposed waiver on intellectual property regarding COVID-19 vaccines which could potentially help India and other nations better fight against coronavirus, the office of the Representative said in a release on Wednesday.

The intellectual property rights waiver is seen as crucial to enhance India's vaccine production capacity amid a deteriorating COVID-19 situation in the country.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai met virtually yesterday with Bill Gates, co-founder and co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to discuss increasing vaccine production, global health issues and the proposed waiver to certain provisions of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for the COVID-19 pandemic," the release said.

Tai also underscored her commitment to a coordinated global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the release said.

In October 2020, India and South Africa asked the members of the WTO to waive protections in WTO rules for patents, copyrights, industrial designs, and undisclosed information related to COVID-19 treatment, including vaccines, until widespread vaccination is in place globally.

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Grand Jury Adds Firearms, Other Charges in Whitmer Kidnapping Case - US Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury has added new charges against three defendants who were initially charged with a conspiracy to kidnap the Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, including a conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, the Department of Justice said in a press release on Wednesday.

"A federal grand jury in Michigan returned a superseding indictment today that adds new charges of conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction against three defendants and adds federal firearms violations against two defendants in the case alleging a conspiracy to kidnap the governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer," the release said.

The three men charged with conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction plotted to destroy a nearby bridge in order to harm and hinder the governor's security detail and any police officers who may have responded, the release said.

The two defendants facing federal firearms charges are accused of possessing destructive devices not registered to them, the release added.

Whitmer was never harmed by the group and the plot was exposed by a paid FBI informant and undercover agents.

If convicted on the conspiracy to kidnap charges, the defendants face life in prison, with the conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction adding another potential life sentence, as well as up to ten additional years on the federal firearms charges.

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Federal Reserve Maintains Asset-Buying Pledge, Keeps Interest Rate at Near Zero

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve kept up on Wednesday with its pledge to buy more assets to support the coronavirus pandemic-hit US economy as it left interest rate unchanged at near zero percent.

"The Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 0 to 1/4 percent," the Federal Reserve said in a statement issued after the conclusion of its two-day Federal Open Market Committee meeting for April.

The Federal Reserve added that it will continue to increase its holdings of Treasury securities by at least \$80 billion per month and of agency mortgage-backed securities by at least \$40 billion per month "until substantial further progress has been made toward the Committee's maximum employment and price stability goals."

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Blinken Discusses With Azerbaijan President Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday discussed with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev bilateral relations and the possibility of a political settlement to the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The Secretary noted the importance of continuing efforts by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs to negotiate a lasting political settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict benefiting all people in the region," Price said.

The latest round of hostilities in the region started last September and ended in November, when Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement, which resulted in Yerevan handing over the Kalbajar, Lachin and Agdam districts to Baku.

The OSCE Minsk group was founded in 1992 to help resolve the long-standing conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

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UNICEF, WHO to Provide Oxygen to India Amid Surge in Coronavirus Cases - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - The World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) will deliver oxygen supply and other assistance to India amid a major

coronavirus outbreak, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The WHO and UNICEF are procuring equipment and supplies, including 7000 oxygen concentrators and 500 devices for oxygen supply, as well as oxygen generating plants, COVID-19 testing machines and personal protective kits. WHO is also helping to set up a mobile hospital," Haq said.

On Tuesday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said some 2,600 staff members were redeployed to India to help the country combat the coronavirus outbreak. Indian hospitals have decried a severe shortage of ventilator oxygen as coronavirus cases continue to increase. Last week, the Indian government had to ban the use of oxygen for non-medical purposes.

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Blinken Discusses With Iceland Counterpart Planned Visit to Reykjavik - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken with Icelandic Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thordarson about his scheduled visit to Reykjavik where he will take part in the Arctic Council ministerial meeting next month, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Thordarson discussed the Secretary's planned visit to Reykjavik, Iceland to participate in the Arctic Council Ministerial on May 19-20," Price said.

"They also discussed the importance of continued close coordination as NATO Allies."

The Arctic Council was established in 1996 in accordance with the Ottawa Declaration as a high-level intergovernmental forum that promotes cooperation in the region. The Arctic Council especially promotes cooperation in the field of environmental protection.

The Arctic Council is comprised of Denmark - including Greenland and the Faroe Islands - Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Finland and the United States.

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Biden Nominee For Top Arms Control Post Says Would Pursue Deeper Weapons Cuts With Russia

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Bonnie Jenkins, nominee for the position Under Secretary of State for Arms Control, said Wednesday at a confirmation hearing that would pursue deeper cuts to arsenals with Russia, including of novel weapons, if she were approved for the position.

"Certainly, I think the idea would be deeper cuts but I think a lot of that depends on what happens with the strategic stability talks that are being planned," Jenkins told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Jenkins stressed that Washington certainly wants to include discussions on some of the novel weapons that Russia has developed and to explore non-strategic weapons.

"We certainly want to have a discussion in which we will bring in all of these weapons systems... so we can determine exactly where we need to have a conversation on deeper cuts," she said. In February, Russia and the US agreed to extend the New START treaty for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026. It is currently the only arms control agreement between two countries that is still in force.

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UN Chief Closely Monitoring Turkish Raids in Northern Iraq, Urges Restraint - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been closely following the Turkish offensive in northern Iraq and called for maximum restraint to avoid any escalation in the region, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Wednesday. Last week, Turkey announced a twin air-and-ground offensive against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq, which Ankara considers a terrorist organization. The operations – Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunder – began on Friday and continued throughout the night. "The Secretary-General has been closely monitoring developments in northern Iraq," Haq said. "He urges maximum restraint and renews his call to avoid any escalation which would undermine regional stability and security."

Guterres also encouraged to undertake diplomatic efforts to find peaceful solutions to issues in the region, Haq said.

Turkey has been regularly conducting cross-border operations in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region despite protests from Baghdad, in a bid to root out PKK militancy, which seeks to create a Kurdish state in parts of Turkey and Iraq.

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US Judge Denies Release of Police Body Camera Footage to Media in Andrew Brown Case

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Judge Jeffery Foster denied on Wednesday the request to release the police body camera footage of officers shooting and killing Andrew Brown in Elizabeth City, North Carolina earlier in the month.

"Good cause does not exist for granting the petition of the media petitioners, and therefore that petition is respectfully denied by the court," Foster said during a court hearing in the Brown case.

The judge cited concerns including the privacy and safety of the individuals involved in the case, as well as the impartiality of the court and ongoing investigations into the shooting of Brown.

Under certain conditions, body camera footage can be released to the media and the public, however, the judge determined that those conditions do not apply in this case.

Brown was shot and killed while attempting to drive away from police officers who were executing a warrant. While Brown's legal team have described the killing as an execution, law enforcement have stated that due to Brown's criminal history, they considered the engagement to be high-risk and dangerous.

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Investigators Raid Home of Ex-Trump Lawyer Guilani, Seize Electronic Devices - Reports

NEW YORK, April 28 (Sputnik) - Federal investigators in New York's Manhattan district raided the home Rudolph Giuliani, the one-time mayor of the city and personal lawyer of former President Donald Trump, as they stepped up a criminal investigation into his alleged dealings in Ukraine, the New York Times reported on Wednesday.

The investigators had seized Mr. Giuliani's electronic devices, the report said, citing three people with knowledge of the matter.

While the United States Attorney's office in Manhattan and the FBI had for months sought to secure a search warrant for Giuliani's telephones, the raid still marked a watershed moment in the investigation, the report said.

"Executing a search warrant is an extraordinary move for prosecutors to take against a lawyer, let alone a lawyer for a former president, and it marks a major turning point in the long-running investigation into Mr. Giuliani," the report added.

Investigators were probing whether Giuliani illegally lobbied the Trump administration in 2019 on behalf of Ukrainian officials and oligarchs, according to the report.

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Missile Defense Agency Canceled Cybersecurity Tests After Failing it Since 2017 - GAO

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) canceled all 17 of the cybersecurity assessments planned for last year after failing all similar tests annually since 2017 and instead developed a new cyber test approach, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report published Tuesday.

"Despite failing to meet annual operational cybersecurity assessments since 2017, MDA canceled its planned fiscal year 2020 operational assessments, instead taking steps to implement a new approach designed to improve cyber system requirements while streamlining cyber test planning," the report said.

The MDA had planned 13 Cooperative Vulnerability and Penetration Assessments, which provide initial information about the resilience of a system in an operational context, as well as

four Adversarial Assessments, which characterize the defense capabilities and operational effects of an enemy cyberattack. None, however, were completed.

While the agency stated that the tests were unnecessary this year given the availability of previous information and the ongoing redesign of the testing system altogether, the report noted that "the lack of testing during fiscal year 2020 coupled with persistent testing shortcomings over the last 3 years are representative of a broader MDA cybersecurity development issue."

The MDA, founded in 2002, is the part of the Department of Defense responsible for developing and managing the US's ballistic missile defense systems both domestically and abroad.

However, the report noted that the nature of the agency has changed slightly with the advent of hypersonic weapons, which pose unique challenges compared to ballistic missiles, requiring the agency to transition their Ballistic Missile Defense System into simply the Missile Defense System.

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Pfizer, Moderna Vaccines Show 94% Effectiveness in Elderly Americans - Health Dept.

WWASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The latest data from Americans aged 65 and above show the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are at least 94 percent effective in preventing hospitalization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report on Wednesday.

"In this multistate analysis of adults aged ≥ 65 years, receipt of an authorized COVID-19 vaccine was associated with significant protection against COVID-19 hospitalization. Effectiveness was 94 percent among adults who were fully vaccinated and 64 percent among adults who were partially vaccinated," the report said.

The findings were consistent with the efficacy determined from clinical trials in adults aged 65 and above, the report said.

Because the study excluded elderly vaccine recipients who tested positive after receiving vaccinations but did not require hospitalization, the analysis "had limited power to assess protection against severe COVID-19 among older adults," the report added.

In assessing the impact of receiving only a single dose, no significant vaccine effectiveness was detected within 14 days of the initial jab, highlighting the continued risk for severe illness shortly after vaccination, before a protective immune response has been achieved, according to the report.

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US Trying to Bring China to Negotiating Table on Arms Control - Under Secretary Nominee

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is trying to bring China to the negotiating table regarding nuclear arms, but it also sees the importance of engaging Beijing

bilaterally, Bonnie Jenkins, nominee for the position Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, said during her confirmation hearing on Wednesday.

"China is an important country in terms of nuclear arms issues. They are a significant threat to us," Jenkins said. "Certainly we have to find a way to get them at the [negotiating] table. As you know, it has been a challenge to do that. We do think, and I think the administration thinks that a bilateral effort is a way to go because there are certain security issues that I think that we want to look at specifically with China. So, we want to engage them."

Jenkins also said the Biden administration is discussing the next steps on engaging China bilaterally.

"They try to start discussion so we can prevent miscalculation, we can have more transparency and get a much better understanding of what's happening for everybody's security," she said.

On February 3, Russia and the United States exchanged diplomatic notes notifying the other of the completion of internal procedures required for extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The treaty will be extended for a five-year term, ending on February 5, 2026, without any modifications.

While the previous Trump administration consistently pushed for China to join the arms control negotiations, Beijing has repeatedly said it is not interested in trilateral talks on the matter.

The United States' decision to revive the treaty, which was sealed by former President Barack Obama and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, was hailed by Russia. Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said Moscow expects further talks with the United States on the issues of strategic stability.

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China Still on Hook for Trade Commitments Made During Trump Era - US Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration in evaluating China's adherence to the trade commitments it made with the previous Trump administration and those commitments will be a priority for the Biden administration to ascertain how it will move forward in its relations with Beijing, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said on Wednesday.

"We are in the process of examining performance and are scrutinizing all the aspects of what they have done and what they have yet to do and what they have not done at the levels that they promised," Tai said. "These promises and China's ability to keep them ... will be a priority for us as we examine our options for engagement with China and all of our enforcement options."

China agreed in January of last year to buy at least \$200 billion more in US goods and services over two years - in 2020 and 2021 - on top of its purchases in 2017. The so-called "Phase One" deal was struck by former president Donald Trump after a tariffs fight that started between the two countries in 2018.

In the first year of the arrangement, China imported about \$100 billion of US goods - only 58 percent of the actual targeted volume of \$173.1 billion for 2020, according to data compiled by the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

President Joe Biden has had a rocky start in his relationship with China, with officials from the two countries openly bickering before the media at a meeting in Alaska hosted by US State Secretary Anthony Blinken last month.

While Biden has undone most of Trump's executive orders on immigration, climate and other matters, he has left intact the tariffs on China, indicating that his administration would likely use them in the future to pressure Beijing into making concessions on trade and other issues.

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Russia Calls for Resumption of In-Person UN Security Council Meetings - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Wednesday called on the UN Security Council to switch its meetings from virtual to in-person format.

"I would like to express my regret having to do with the fact that the Security Council, yet once again to conduct the discussion on important issues of maintaining international peace and security, is using the virtual format for that," Nebenzia said during a meeting on the political and humanitarian situation in Syria. "We do not think this is justifiable.

"I call upon the Vietnamese presidency [of the UN Security Council] and the upcoming [in May] Chinese presidency to take practical steps to switch our meetings into in-person meetings in the Security Council Chamber," Nebenzia said.

Nebenzia said convening meetings at the Security Council Chamber in the UN headquarters in New York is safe, given that last October, when the COVID-19 situation in New York was far worse, the Security Council managed to hold ten in-person meetings.

"Being overly cautious on the part of our colleagues can cast an unfavorable light on this Security Council, as compared to our colleagues in the General Assembly, who regularly have in person meetings in their chamber. Nothing is stopping us from doing the same," Nebenzia said.

The UN Security Council has ceased to meet in person in March last year, following the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York.

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RPT - UN Special Envoy Calls for More Constructive Diplomacy to Unlock Progress on Syria

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Wednesday called for the establishment of a new constructive international discussion that would help to promote the progress in achieving a political settlement in the Arab Republic.

"If this highly internationalized conflict is to move towards resolution, we need a more constructive and comprehensive international diplomacy on Syria to try to unlock progress step

for step," Pedersen told a UN Security Council meeting. "A new means of international discussion or a new international format could bring all of those stakeholders who can put something on the table to the table."

Pedersen said he spoke about the new format with the parties in Syria and critical interlocutors in Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, Arab states and others at the UN Security Council. According to the Special Envoy, key international actors expressed interest in the idea even though mistrust was the central element in the minds of many.

"Exploratory consultations could help test possibilities and bridge the gaps of mistrust that hinder such an effort," Pedersen pointed out.

The Special Envoy called on the member states to swiftly begin to lay the groundwork for such an effort bearing in mind the need to explore what is possible while a relative calm on the ground is sustained.

In a bid to reconcile the Syrian government and the opposition, the United Nations launched in 2019 the 150-member Syrian constitutional committee with equal representation of the government, opposition and civil society.

The latest fifth round of the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks was held in Geneva in late January. Pedersen called the talks a "disappointment," as nothing was achieved on specific agenda issues the diplomat had defined before the session.

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Poll Finds Fewer US Adults Cite COVID-19 as Nation's Biggest Problem

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – Just 20 percent of US citizens cite coronavirus as the most immediate threat facing the nation, the lowest since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, a Gallup poll said on Wednesday.

"Although fewer US adults cite COVID-19 than have done so for more than a year, it is still the top problem, and immigration (14%), the government (14%) and race relations (12%) are named as the next most pressing issues," a Gallup press release explaining the poll said. Gallup attributed declining pandemic-related fears with the prevalence of citizens who are largely satisfied with the vaccine rollout and less worried about contracting the potentially deadly disease, the release said.

The 20 percent who named the coronavirus as the biggest threat dropped from 25 percent in March. It was the lowest since 13 percent recorded in March 2020 and well below the high point of 45 percent in April 2020, the release added.

The poll also revealed Americans' satisfaction with the direction of the country is now at 34 percent, the highest since March 2020, when 42 percent were satisfied, according to the release.

On other issues, 14 percent named immigration as the top problem, 14 percent cited the government and 12 percent cited race relations, the release said.

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UN Special Envoy Calls for More Constrictive Diplomacy to Unlock Progress on Syria

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Wednesday called for the establishment of a new constructive international discussion that would help to promote the progress in achieving a political settlement in the Arab Republic. "If this highly internationalized conflict is to move towards resolution, we need a more constructive and comprehensive international diplomacy on Syria to try to unlock progress step for step," Pedersen told a UN Security Council meeting. "A new means of international discussion or a new international format could bring all of those stakeholders who can put something on the table to the table."

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US Defense Secretary Discusses Afghanistan Drawdown with Pakistani Army Chief - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, on Wednesday in a phone call to discuss the drawdown of US activity in neighboring Afghanistan, a Pentagon press release said.

"During the call, Secretary Austin reaffirmed the importance of the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship and expressed appreciation for Pakistan's support for Afghanistan Peace Negotiations. Secretary Austin and General Bajwa also discussed the drawdown in Afghanistan," the release read.

On Tuesday, US officials urged American civilians and embassy employees to leave the country as soon as possible, given that a non-aggression agreement between the US and the Taliban is set to expire by May 1.

US President Joe Biden announced earlier this month the decision to withdraw troops from the country starting on that May 1 deadline, with the aim of completely withdrawing from Afghanistan by September 11, which would mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that sparked the war in Afghanistan—the longest conflict in American history.

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New York Governor Cuomo to Lift Midnight Curfew For Bars, Restaurants in May

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Andrew Cuomo is planning on lifting the 12 a.m. curfews for both indoor and outdoor bars and restaurants next month, he announced with a tweet on Wednesday.

“Beginning May 17, the 12am outdoor dining area curfew for bars & restaurants will be lifted. The 12am indoor area curfew will be lifted on May 31,” Cuomo’s tweet read.

New York has been among the hardest-hit states throughout the pandemic. Earlier this month, Cuomo announced that anyone 16 and over would be eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccination in the state.

Governor Cuomo has also been at the center of several scandals involving his handling of the pandemic over the last several months, including reports that he misrepresented death tolls from COVID-19 in nursing homes, as well as reports that he and his family enjoyed special access to testing early on in the pandemic.

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Biden's Pick for Top Arms Control Post Says to Limit Russian, Chinese Nuclear Expansion

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Bonnie Jenkins, nominee for the position Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security said during the hearing on Wednesday that she is aiming to limit Russian and Chinese nuclear expansion.

“Reducing the risk of nuclear war through effective arms control, limiting Russian and Chinese nuclear expansion, strengthening our efforts in biosecurity, pursuing accountability for the use of chemical weapons, and promoting a diverse workforce will be among my top priorities, if confirmed,” Jenkins said.

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US Trade Deficit in Goods Hits Record High of \$90.6Bln in March - Department of Commerce

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit in goods hit a record high of \$90.6 billion in March, data from the Commerce Department showed on Wednesday as the United States continued to outpace its trading partners in recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. "The international trade deficit was \$90.6 billion in March, up \$3.5 billion from \$87.1 billion in February," the Census Bureau, a unit within the Commerce Department, said in a statement, referring to a figure focused on just the trade of goods.

The government will release next week overall trade numbers for March, which will include numbers for services.

An examination of historical data released by the Census Bureau showed the \$90.6 billion for March was the highest ever monthly deficit in the trade of goods.

A rash of US data, from consumer spending to inflation and homebuilding and house prices, have exceeded forecasts lately, accelerating the nation's recovery from the COVID-19 and leading to a surge in imports as the economy struggles to keep pace with resources needed for the growth.

The Commerce Department data showed US imports accounted for \$232.6 billion in March, up \$14.9 billion from February, while exports were valued at \$142 billion, or \$11.4 billion higher from a month ago.

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UPDATE: Pentagon Does Not Expect Anything Dramatic, Imminent On Russia-Ukraine Border

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – The US doesn't envision anything dramatic or imminent happening on the Russia-Ukraine border in the near future as Moscow has started withdrawal of its forces from the region, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said in the Sedona Forum on Wednesday.

"We know that some of that [Russian military] capability has been withdrawn recently and the tensions are being lowered, and that's good news. We'll continue to monitor very closely. Right now we do not expect anything dramatic or imminent in the very near future," Milley said.

He went on to say that the Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine could be chalked down to several reasons, including actual military drills, an attempt to influence Ukrainian politics and Russia's own internal politics.

Milley also noted that in terms of the actual defense of Ukraine and while Kiev is not a NATO member, the US will have to wait to see what Russia does next as only then Washington will be "in a different place at that point."

Last week, the Russian Defense Ministry said troops that were engaged in a combat readiness check in the country's south and west have started returning to their permanent bases. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the move to ensure the troops' return to their home stations by May 1.

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US Sends 8 F-35B Fighters Jets to UK Ahead of Joint Strike Group Deployment – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – The United States has sent its Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 211 of eight F-35B fighter jets, known as the Wake Island Avengers, to the United Kingdom ahead of a record-setting joint strike force deployment aboard the UK's newest aircraft carrier, the Pentagon said in a statement on Wednesday.

"U.S. Marine Corps 5th-generation aircraft flew more than 5,000 miles from their home station in Arizona to Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, ahead of their upcoming combined deployment with the United Kingdom's newest aircraft carrier," the statement said, adding that the squadron will "conduct final training for a carrier deployment aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth as part of Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 21," the statement said.

The deployment will form the largest 5th-generation carrier air wing in the world, it added.

"Now that we have arrived in the United Kingdom, we are reintegrating with our UK counterparts and focused on providing both the commodore of CSG-21 and US combatant commanders with ready, combat-capable, 5th-generation aircraft," Wake Island Avengers commanding officer, Lt. Col. Andrew D'Ambrogi, said in the statement.

This deployment precedes the Carrier Strike Group 21's worldwide disposition later this year, the Pentagon noted. UK media reported on Monday that CSG 21's 26-week-long record size mission will feature visits to India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Units from this group will undertake over 70 engagements in over 40 countries around the world.

The HMS Queen Elizabeth, the most powerful vessel in the British Navy history, will be carrying on deck eight F-35B Lightning II jets, four Wildcat maritime attack helicopters, seven Merlin Mk2 anti-submarine and airborne early warning helicopters, and three Merlin Mk4 commando helicopters.

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Pentagon Does Not Expect Anything Dramatic, Imminent On Russia-Ukraine Border

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US Trade Representative Says Biden Aims to Assemble 'United Front of US Allies'

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration, which has suspended EU trade tariffs and helped settle a dispute between rival South Korean battery-makers, aspires to set up a trade policy focused on a "united front of US allies," US Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai said Wednesday.

"As we continue to pursue the president's trade agenda, we will promote and defend our values of, democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity in service of producing a more inclusive prosperity," Tai said in an address to a Senate committee. "USTR will be directly involved in assembling what the President has termed 'a united front of US allies.'"

Tai said such a front will extend the administration's work in rebuilding international alliances and partnerships by re-engaging global institutions.

She cited as an example the joint decision by President Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in early March to suspend for a period of four months retaliatory tariffs between the two sides over the long-running trade row between US aircraft maker Boeing and its European rival Airbus.

Tai also cited the mediation by her office in the dispute between South Korean battery makers LG Energy Solution and SK Innovation, a conclusion that she said not only boosted their reliability and responsibility as suppliers to the US auto industry.

"The settlement is the type of trade policy I believe we need," Tai said. "It supports a larger strategy for creating jobs and investing in innovation and manufacturing leadership by bolstering sustainable renewable energy supply chains, leveling the playing field, discouraging regulatory arbitrage."

Biden's predecessor in the White House, Donald Trump, made trade disputes and tariff hikes, both towards adversaries and allies, a major part of his one-term presidency, leaving the new administration's work cut out for it in reversing and re-aligning US trade policy.

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US State Dept Says Appalled by North Korea's 'Increasingly Draconian Measures'

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is alarmed by the increasingly severe measures the North Korean government is taking towards its population, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We are appalled by the increasingly draconian measures the regime has taken, including shoot-to-kill orders at the North Korea-China border, to tighten control of its people under the guise of fighting COVID-19," Price said in a statement published on the occasion of North Korea Freedom Week.

He went on to say that "the civilized world has no place for such brutality, and the international community must continue to speak out."

The statement added that the US will continue to raise awareness of North Korea's human rights situation, investigate abuses and violations, support access to independent information for the North Korean people, and work with the United Nations and like-minded allies to promote accountability for the Kim regime.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a report in February that there were reasonable grounds to conclude that torture and forced labor continued to take place in North Korea's prisons and may amount to crimes against humanity. In 2014, the UN commission of inquiry on human rights in North Korea concluded that crimes against humanity of a "gravity, scale and nature that did not have any parallel in the contemporary world" were committed in North Korea. Seven years later, interviews with people who escaped North Korea provide "reasonable grounds" to believe that the systematic infliction of severe physical and mental pain in the country's prison system continues, the OHCHR said. North Korea remains under strict UN Security Council over its nuclear and ballistic missiles program.

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RPT - ANALYSIS - US Mental Illness Surge Could Revolutionize Therapy

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Pandemic containment measures that triggered a rise in the demand for mental health care also forced innovations in treatment that could have the United States better prepared for the next pandemic, therapists told Sputnik.

Nearly 50 percent of Americans said they considered getting mental health treatment as a direct result of the pandemic, according to a Vida Health survey published earlier this year, while a recent Kaiser Foundation study found the number of people seeking therapy rose by 20% during the course of 2020.

TRANSFORMING LIVES, REVOLUTIONIZING THERAPY

Meanwhile, although the number of people suffering from mental illness during the pandemic has increased, the number of suicides actually dropped, The New York Times reported earlier in April based on an analysis of health agency data.

Investigators with the International COVID-19 Suicide Prevention Research Collaboration (ICSPRC) came to similar conclusions in a recent global study of suicides. They speculated that government economic rescue packages that covered mental health services may have lessened the strain of the lockdowns.

"It has revolutionized the way we do therapy," Dr. Jeff Gardere, a psychologist with a private practice in Manhattan, told Sputnik. "We're still learning about how it's changed our culture." Gardere, who is also an associate professor at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine, said COVID-19 has fundamentally altered the way Americans live – from remote working to online schooling - and, in turn, has changed the way treatment is delivered. And some of these changes, Gardere added, will likely be a part of life for the foreseeable future.

"We're all dealing with and affected by the idea of shared space and we're also watching a real estate revolution," Gardere said. "This scared us to death, but it is what it is. It's not good or bad. The important thing is that we've adapted."

Dr. Ramel Kweku Akyirefi Smith, a clinical and sports psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told Sputnik that he had to move quickly to adapt, which has spurred a burst of creativity and innovation in helping patients find new ways to cope mentally and emotionally.

Florida-based Marriage and Family Therapist Shari Warner said out of this new reality a number of people saw an opportunity to exploit the situation and actually flourished by discovering new skills and interests such as art, music, and writing. Some have even created their own podcasts. Warner said Americans had to mentally deal with a "mosh pit" of issues in addition to the pandemic.

"They have had to deal with social media madness and how not to get caught up in a rabbit hole of medical, political and racial issues," Warner told Sputnik. "People had to develop mental and emotional muscles."

Gardere said the next challenge will be balancing climate change with what assuredly will be the emergence of more viruses.

"If this happened [COVID-19 outbreak] so easily, it will happen again," Gardere said. "We weren't prepared for this. Now we're prepared and know what it looks like."

DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, ANGER

Gardere said many of his patients, as a result of the lockdowns, are experiencing anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sleep and appetite disruptions - including overeating and excessive drinking.

He is concerned about the over-dependence on screens, devices, and the internet and the negative impact on interpersonal skills. Social distancing and quarantining, Gardere added, has also had a devastating impact on relationships.

"The inability to touch and hug people will make people more isolated and distrustful," Gardere explained.

Meanwhile, he said, anxiety and depression in children has almost quadrupled.

"We're seeing increases in admissions and visits among teens suffering from anxiety and panic attacks," Gardere said. "Those families that already had issues with family and relationship dysfunction are struggling."

Smith said many Americans who have been unemployed are feeling like captives in their own homes. The isolation is fueling rage and anger for being bumped which has caused a deterioration in character and social coping skills, Smith added.

"I call it the COVID Effect: people are frustrated and want to fight," Smith said.

Florida-based marriage and family therapist Shari Warner said people are not used to being isolated and unable to interact on their own, which has prompted a rise in depression.

WOMEN, BLACKS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED

The same Kaiser survey also found that women and minorities were being impacted the most by the pandemic. Nearly 70% of women under 30 believe the COVID-19 crisis negatively affected their mental health, according to the findings.

Women are also feeling the brunt of the pandemic-induced mental illness as victims of domestic violence. Gardere said the pandemic is triggering pre-existing mental health problems which are partly responsible for a recent spike in this phenomenon.

Smith said rage driven by unemployment has made things even worse with women becoming the targets of frustration.

"It's death by a thousand cuts," Smith said. "We're seeing murder rates and domestic violence increase in astounding numbers. Women and other victims may be trying to survive domestic violence at home and in virtual school spaces. We saw people having sex, murders and molestation."

Although suicides in the US overall dropped last year, the rate among nonwhites rose, according to The New York Times study.

Smith noted that Black people are being disproportionately killed by the pandemic, which also has a ripple negative mental impact on families and communities.

He said significant numbers of Blacks, Latinos and women are on the frontlines in hospitals, senior citizens homes, grocery stores and retail establishments, putting themselves at risk.