

10/16/20 Wires

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Esper, French Counterpart Discuss Escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has discussed over the telephone with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian the recent escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Defense Department said in a readout of the conversation on Friday.

"The Secretary and the Minister discussed a range of issues, including the surge of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, security and stability in Africa, and the situations in Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea," the readout said. "On the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Secretary and the Minister agreed on the need for leaders from both Armenia and Azerbaijan to implement their commitments to an immediate ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and to a peaceful settlement."

The Defense Department said Esper thanked le Drian for France's role in the fight against terrorism and expressed hope that more European countries will support the country's efforts in the Sahel region.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the ten-hour talks in Moscow initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, agreed to cease the hostilities starting on October 10, but the exchanges of fire have continued.

Russia has said the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict does not have military solution and has undertaken efforts to mediate in the dispute.

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

The fighting on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27. The sides have accused each other of starting the firing. The international community strongly condemned the escalation and called on parties to settle the differences via dialogue, while Turkey has pledged its full support for Azerbaijan.

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US Negotiator Accuses Russia of 'Backtracking' on Nuclear Agreement

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea on Friday called it a disappointment that Russia "backtracked" on the American proposal to conclude an agreement that would cover all nuclear warheads.

"The United States made every effort. It is disappointing that the Russian Federation backtracked on an agreement covering all nuclear warheads for the first time. This would have been an historic deal, good for the US, Russia, and the world," Billingslea tweeted. Earlier on Friday, the US rejected Russia's proposal to unconditionally extend New START for one year.

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Canada, Baltic States Agree to Hold Annual Summit – Foreign Minister

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) – Canada will begin holding annual summits with the Baltic states as part of a broader effort to deepen engagement with European allies, Canada's Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said during a visit to Vilnius on Friday.

"We met with our Baltic foreign ministers from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia ... we have agreed to hold an annual summit to discuss security issues but also trade opportunities and ways that we can work more together," Champagne told reporters on a conference call.

Canada's top diplomat said his country and the Baltic states have many shared values, adding that Ottawa seeks greater engagement with like-minded European allies on global issues.

"You will see Canada work more and more on key issues around the world," he said.

During his stop in Vilnius, Champagne also met with ex-Belarusian presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to discuss how Canada can further assist opposition efforts. Canada's foreign minister said that the discussion centered around technical assistance in Belarusian reform efforts.

The meeting with Tikhanovskaya comes a day after Ottawa imposed sanctions on 31 additional Belarusian officials just weeks announcing the first round of embargoes, which included the country's President Alexander Lukashenko.

The Russian Embassy in Ottawa denounced the sanctions as illegal and senseless, adding that Russia stands with Belarus to counter any hostile acts against the country.

On August 9, the Belarusian opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election. Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Russia has also voiced concerns over foreign interference in the neighboring country.

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UNSC Calls on Yemeni Parties to Urgently Endorse Joint Declaration Proposals - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council in a statement on Friday called on Yemen's warring parties to urgently endorse the UN-facilitated Joint Declaration proposals to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict in that country.

"The members of the Security Council ... urged the parties to urgently endorse the UN-facilitated Joint Declaration proposals without delay in order to achieve an inclusive and sustainable peace," the statement said. "They stressed the need for urgent agreement to the Joint Declaration to enable negotiation of a comprehensive transitional agreement to end the conflict."

The council members condemned the recent escalation in Hudaydah governorate, which they said constituted a violation of the 2018 ceasefire agreement and called for an immediate stop to the fighting.

For over five years, Yemen has been engulfed in an armed confrontation between the government forces, led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi movement. The situation became complicated when the Saudi-led coalition intervened in the conflict in 2015 and began carrying out hostilities against Houthis in its support of Yemen's legitimate authorities. In December 2018, the belligerents signed a UN-sponsored peace accord in Sweden to ease tensions in the war-torn nation, under which the sides agreed to a ceasefire in Yemen's port of Al Hudaydah, including the exchange of around 15,000 individuals and the establishment of humanitarian corridors in the area.

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UN Chief Welcomes Exchange of Over 1,000 Prisoners In Yemen - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed this week's exchange of more than 1,000 prisoners by Yemen's warring parties, his spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the further release of detainees by the Yemeni parties on 15 and 16 October, in line with the agreement reached on September 27 for the release of over 1,000 people who had been detained in connection with the conflict," Dujarric said.

Some 1,081 prisoners have been released this week in the largest exchange since the start of the conflict more than five years ago.

Guterres urged the parties to continue such efforts and finalize a comprehensive joint declaration consisting of a nationwide ceasefire and measures to end the war, Dujarric added. In December 2018, Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Houthi movement signed a UN-sponsored peace accord in Sweden, under which the sides agreed to a ceasefire in Yemen's port of Al Hudaydah and the exchange of around 15,000 prisoners.

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Pentagon Says Turkey Should Not Activate Russia's S-400 Systems Amid Test Reports

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) – Turkey should not activate Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, otherwise Ankara risks serious consequences, Pentagon spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman told Sputnik in a statement on Friday.

"We object to Turkey's purchase of the system, and are deeply concerned with reports that Turkey is bringing it into operation. It should not be activated," Hoffman said. "Doing so risks serious consequences for our security relationship."

Hoffman added S-400s represent "a barrier to progress" in bilateral relations between Washington and Ankara.

Turkey's military M5 magazine reported earlier on Friday that Ankara had conducted "the first firing" of S-400 systems as part of drills near the Black Sea town of Sinop.

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Canada Urges Russia to Insist on 'Respect of Ceasefire' in Karabakh - Champagne

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) – Canada's Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne told reporters on Friday that Russia should use its influence in the Transcaucasian region to enforce the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan amid hostilities over the disputed Nagorno Karabakh region.

"Russia should use its influence in the region to bring people back to the negotiating table, to insist on the respect of the ceasefire, protection of civilians," Champagne said.

Canada's top diplomat added that he welcomes any effort by any of the parties to the OSCE's Minsk Group format - Russia, the United States and France – to curtail tensions in the contested region.

Champagne also reiterated his insistence that third parties should remove themselves from the conflict.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the 10-hour talks in Moscow initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, agreed to cease hostilities starting October 10 noon (08:00 GMT), but the exchanges of fire have continued.

Moscow has insisted that the conflict does not have military solution and undertaken a number of efforts to mediate the dispute.

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

The fighting on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27. The sides have accused each other of starting the firing. The international community strongly condemned the escalation and called on parties to settle the differences via dialogue, while Turkey has pledged its full support for Azerbaijan.

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US Defense Chief, French Counterpart Discuss Escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has discussed the recent escalation of violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh region with his French counterpart, the Pentagon said on in a readout on Friday after phone talks between the two military chiefs. "The Secretary and the Minister discussed a range of issues, including the surge of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, security and stability in Africa, and the situations in Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea," the readout said. "On the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Secretary and the Minister agreed on the need for leaders from both Armenia and Azerbaijan to implement their commitments to an immediate ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and to a peaceful settlement."

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US Govt. Joins With CVS, Walgreens Pharmacy Chains to Provide Vaccines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The US government has concluded agreements with two of the largest drug store chains in the United States to provide COVID-19 vaccines to elderly and seriously ill Americans living in long-term care facilities, the Department of Defense said in a press release on Friday.

"To meet the Trump Administration's Operation Warp Speed (OWS) goals, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Defense today announced agreements with CVS and Walgreens to provide and administer COVID-19 vaccines to residents of long-term care facilities (LTCF) nationwide," the release said.

The Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care Program will provide complete management of the COVID-19 vaccination process so that LTCF residents and staff across the United States will be able to safely and efficiently get vaccinated once vaccines are available and recommended for them, the Defense Department explained.

"Our unprecedented public-private partnership with CVS and Walgreens will provide convenient and free vaccination to residents of nursing homes across America, another historic achievement in our efforts to get a safe and effective vaccine to Americans as fast as possible," HHS Secretary Alex Azar said in the release.

The program will also minimize the burden on LTCF sites and jurisdictional health departments of vaccine handling, administration, and fulfilling reporting requirements, the release added.

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Canada's Top Diplomat Offers to Mediate Dispute Between Greece, Turkey

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) – Canada stands ready to mediate the dispute between Greece and Turkey in Mediterranean Sea, the country's Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said during a call with reporters on Friday following a meeting with top Greek officials.

"I met with the Prime Minister of Greece, also the foreign minister, understanding in more detail the situation and have offered to mediate between the two parties to the extent they so wish," Champagne said of the escalating tensions between Athens and Ankara.

Champagne said that Turkey's decision to send its Oruc Reis research vessel to the hotly disputed Eastern Mediterranean waters was "not helpful."

On Monday, Oruc Reis departed from Turkey for a new seismic exploration mission near the island of Kastellorizo in contested waters that Greece considers to be part of its continental shelf. Ankara announced the move in a Navtex advisory issued late on Sunday.

The Greek Foreign Ministry has slammed what it called Turkey's "illegal" Navtex advisory. Athens, in particular, criticized Ankara's decision to conduct new surveys just days after Dendias met with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to discuss a potential pathway for easing regional tensions.

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Pompeo Condemns Northern Cyprus' Move to Reopen Varosha as 'Provocative' - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said during a phone call with his Cypriot counterpart that the latest reopening of Varosha by Northern Cyprus is "provocative" and not consistent with efforts to conduct settlement talks, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Friday.

"Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister [Nikos] Christodoulides discussed actions taken by the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' to reopen a part of the fenced-off area of Varosha," Ortagus said. "The Secretary expressed deep concern and noted such a move was provocative and inconsistent with UN Security Council Resolutions 550 and 789 and not conducive to a return to settlement talks."

Pompeo has urged the self-proclaimed republic to reverse the re-opening of Varosha, she added.

"The United States continues to support a comprehensive settlement to reunify the island as a bizonal, bicomunal federation, which would benefit all Cypriots and the entire region," the spokesperson said.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking on October 6 in Ankara at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Ersin Tatar, announced the opening of the Varosha embankment. This is a tourist quarter at the southeast coast of Cyprus, which has been closed

to the public since 1974 after occupation of part of Cyprus by Turkish troops and the partition of the island. Varosha is protected by a 1984 UN Security Council resolution.

The decision has been condemned by many members of the international community, including Russia, and the matter was discussed by the United Nations Security Council this past Friday. The UNSC called on Turkey to reverse the decision to reopen the coastline area in Varosha. Turkey also issued an international Navtex alert late Sunday, October 11, according to which the Oruc Reis vessel will conduct research with the Ataman and Cengizhan vessels south of the Greek island of Kastelorizo October 12-22. The Greek Foreign Ministry said that the area belongs to the Greek continental shelf and is located just 6.5 nautical miles from the coast of Kastelorizo. The territorial waters of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea are defined at six nautical miles. Ankara said the vessel operates exclusively on the Turkish continental shelf 15 kilometers off the coast of Turkey and 425 kilometers off the coast of Greece.

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Trudeau Says to Discuss With Erdogan Canada's Suspension of Arms Exports to Turkey

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) – Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday he would discuss Canada's decision to suspend arms exports to Turkey with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a phone call later in the day.

"I am scheduled to speak with President of Erdogan of Turkey a little later today, in which we will certainly be discussing the export permits that Canada has suspended because of concerns that they have been [used] to buy [arms for] Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict," Trudeau said at a press briefing.

Ottawa has suspended export permits to Turkey amid allegations that Canadian military equipment is being used in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Trudeau said he would impress upon the Turkish president that supplying arms to the ongoing conflict is a violation of Canada's contractual terms when selling military equipment abroad. Canada's prime minister added that he would urge Erdogan to use his influence to bring the warring sides to the negotiating table. In a separate teleconference, the country's top diplomat Francois-Philippe Champagne said that Canada is asking Turkey to stay out of the conflict in the disputed region.

Ottawa is currently probing whether Canadian-made L3Harris WESCAM target acquisition sensors are being used in the conflict.

Armenian officials have accused Turkey of injecting itself into the conflict. Ankara has denied all of Yerevan's claims.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the 10-hour talks in Moscow initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, agreed to cease hostilities starting October 10 noon (08:00 GMT), but the exchanges of fire have continued.

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

The fighting on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27. The sides have accused each other of starting the firing. The international community strongly condemned the escalation and called on parties to settle the differences via dialogue, while Turkey has pledged its full support for Azerbaijan.

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US Retail Sales Increase 1.9% in September - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US retail sales increased 1.9 percent in September or nearly four times above the forecast for the month, data by the Commerce Department's Census Bureau showed on Friday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for September 2020, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$549.3 billion, an increase of 1.9 percent from the previous month, and 5.4 percent above September 2019," the Census Bureau, an unit of the Commerce Department, said in a statement.

Economists surveyed by US media had expected a 0.5 percent growth in retail sales for the month of September.

Stronger expectations since last month that the US government will issue a new round of economic stimulus to address citizens and businesses affected by the novel coronavirus crisis spurred heavier spending in automobiles and apparels, the data showed.

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Topics of Next Trump-Biden Debate to Include COVID-19, National Security - Moderator

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) – The next debate between US President Donald Trump and his Democratic contender Joseph Biden will focus on several topics including COVID-19 and national security, the Commission on Presidential debates said in a statement on Friday. "Kristen Welker, moderator of the Oct. 22, 2020 presidential debate, has selected the topics for that debate," the Commission said.

The full list of topics includes fighting COVID-19, American families, Race in America, climate change, national security and leadership, it added.

The next debate will be held on October 22 at Belmont University in Nashville.

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World Food Program Needs \$170Mln to Assist Central Sahel States for 6 Months - Director

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - The World Food Program (WFP) requires \$170 million in funding to continue its emergency aid operations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger over the next six months, WFP Executive Director David Beasley said in a press briefing on Friday. "For the [three] Sahel countries, about 170 million for the next six months [is needed], and that's for emergency operations, primarily," Beasley said.

According to the United Nations, Africa's Central Sahel region has experienced one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises in the world caused by armed conflict, extreme poverty, food insecurity, climatic changes and the novel coronavirus pandemic.

More than 13 million people urgently require lifesaving assistance across the three countries that are at the epicenter of the crisis in the region.

WFP had asked for \$86 million for Burkina Faso, \$21 million for operations in Mali and \$63 million for Niger.

On October 20, the United Nations, together with Denmark, Germany and the European Union, will co-host a virtual ministerial pledging event in response to the challenges in the Central Sahel.

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US Budget Deficit Hits All-Time High of \$3.13 Trillion in 2020 - Treasury Data

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The US federal budget deficit reached an all-time high of \$3.13 trillion in the fiscal year that ended on September 30 amid massive spending to contain the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Friday. "The Trump Administration has provided assistance to American workers and families, small businesses, and state, local, and tribal governments, and preserved jobs for American industry. Primarily due to these efforts, the deficit in FY 2020 was \$3.1 trillion — \$2.0 trillion more than forecast in the FY 2021 President's Budget," the statement said.

Government receipts totaled \$3.42 trillion, which was lower than budget expectations and represented a 1 percent decrease from the previous year. Outlays, meanwhile, grew substantially to reach \$6.552 trillion, a 47 percent increase from fiscal year 2019, it added.

The US Congress has approved roughly \$3 trillion in assistance since March under four phases of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide grants and loans to US businesses and paycheck protection to qualifying citizens and permanent residents.

Democrats in Congress have been locked in a stalemate since with Senate Republicans on a successive package to the CARES, arguing over the size of the next relief, as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risk losing their jobs without further aid.

The US economy shrank 5 percent in the first three months of 2020 and nearly 33 percent in the second quarter to hand the United States its worst recession in history as most of the 50 states in the country went into lockdown to stem the outbreak of the virus. While most businesses have reopened from May, new COVID-19 infections since mid-June have limited recovery.

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Romney Warns US Politicians, Parties Refusing to Disavow Radical Groups

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mitt Romney on Friday issued a warning to politicians and political parties in the United States that are refusing to denounce domestic radical groups, emphasizing that such attitude may fuel a political movement that could eclipse the country.

"Politicians and parties refuse to forcefully and convincingly repudiate groups like Antifa, white supremacists and conspiracy peddlers... Rather than expel the rabid fringes and the extremes, they have coddled or adopted them, eagerly trading their principles for the hope of electoral victories," Romney said in a statement.

Romney further said that US political parties falling into this "rabbit hole" may be opening the door to a political movement that could eventually eclipse US values and elections.

Romney said President Donald Trump's unwillingness to denounce the so-called QAnon conspiracy group during Thursday night's town hall meeting is the latest in this alarming pattern seen in Washington.

Trump was asked by the NBC moderator on Thursday whether he was familiar with QAnon and their belief that Democrats are part of a satanic pedophile ring that he will defeat.

"I know nothing about QAnon," Trump said. "What I do hear about it is they are very strongly against pedophilia and I agree with that... I agree with it very strongly."

Trump complained that he has repeatedly been asked about white supremacy after having disavowed numerous times radical groups like the KKK and others while his political opponent Joe Biden has neither disavowed nor being asked to disavow far left militant groups like Antifa.

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Trudeau in Call with Pashinyan Vows to Work With Partners to De-Escalate Karabakh Conflict

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) – Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday said he told his Armenian counterpart Nikol Pashinyan during a phone conversation that Canada would work with its international partners to put an end to the violence in Nagorno Karabakh.

"This morning, I spoke with Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia to express our concern about the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. I told him that Canada will continue to work extremely hard with all of our allies to put an end to the violence," Trudeau said at a press briefing.

Trudeau reiterated his desire to see the warring parties come to the negotiating and table and find a diplomatic solution to the decades-long conflict.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the 10-hour talks in Moscow initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, agreed to cease hostilities starting October 10 noon (08:00 GMT), but the exchanges of fire have continued.

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

The fighting on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27. The sides have accused each other of starting the firing. The international community strongly condemned the escalation and called on parties to settle the differences via dialogue, while Turkey has pledged its full support for Azerbaijan.

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"Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister [Nikos] Christodoulides discussed actions taken by the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' to reopen a part of the fenced-off area of Varosha," Ortagus said. "The Secretary expressed deep concern and noted such a move was provocative and inconsistent with UN Security Council Resolutions 550 and 789 and not conducive to a return to settlement talks."

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UN Chief Will Speak to Azerbaijan Foreign Minister Regarding Karabakh Friday - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres remains personally engaged with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and is scheduled to speak to Azerbaijan Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov later on Friday, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said during a press briefing.

"The Secretary-General has continued his personal engagement on this issue. He spoke yesterday with the Foreign Minister of Armenia," Dujarric said. "Today, he is scheduled at some point, it could be very soon, about this afternoon [to speak] with the Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan."

Guterres is very concerned about the impact of the conflict on the civilian population and his message to both sides has conveyed the need for implementing and fully respecting the ceasefire for humanitarian purposes, Dujarric said.

While the conflict remains dynamic, it is crucial that Armenia and Azerbaijan quickly move toward de-escalation to mitigate the risk of further destabilizing the region, Dujarric added.

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UN Human Rights Office Closely Monitoring Protests in Thailand - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Thailand has been closely monitoring the ongoing protests in the country and stresses the need to allow people to exercise the right to peacefully demonstrate, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

"We've been monitoring the situation closely, in fact, on the ground, our colleagues from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have been observing the protests, routinely engaging with the authorities," Dujarric said. "People should be allowed to exercise the right to demonstrate freely and peacefully."

Protests in the otherwise peaceful Southeast Asian country are now in their third month, with thousands of pro-democracy citizens calling for large-scale constitutional reform.

The protesters demand the dissolution of what they call Chan-o-cha's military dictatorship, which took over in a bloodless coup in 2014 but has since remodeled itself into a civilian type. They also call for a limitation of the monarchy's power and to scrap the strict laws prohibiting criticism of the king.

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US Charges Ex-Mexican Defense Chief With Drug Trafficking-Related Crimes - Indictment

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Former Mexican Defense Minister Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda has been charged by a US federal grand jury with drug trafficking and conspiracy to launder narcotics proceeds, an indictment unsealed on Friday revealed.

Cienfuegos faces four counts for his alleged operation to smuggle heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and marijuana into the United States from December 2015 to February 2017.

Late on Thursday, Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said Cienfuegos was detained at the airport in Los Angeles, California.

Media reported that Cienfuegos was arrested by US officials at the request of the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

A defense minister has never been arrested in the history of Mexico, the report said citing former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castaneda.

Cienfuegos had served as the Mexican defense minister from 2012 to 2018 under former president Enrique Pena Nieto.

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US COVID-19 Cases Rise From 7Mln to 8Mln in Under 1 Month - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The number of US COVID-19 cases increased from 7 million to 8 million in less than one month, data from the Johns Hopkins University revealed mid-day on Friday.

More than 8 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in the United States since earlier this year, data showed.

The United States has begun to experience another surge in COVID-19 cases this fall, the data showed.

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World Bank Should Step Up Efforts to Deliver Coronavirus Aid - Development Committee

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group (WBG) should press ahead with efforts to deliver up to \$160 billion in aid by 2021 to help countries cope with the coronavirus pandemic and should consider extending such efforts beyond next year, the banks Development Committee said in a communique on Friday.

"The WBG should continue its efforts to deliver a bold and decisive response of up to US\$160 billion by June 2021. Considering the severity and likely long-term effects of the crisis, we encourage discussions on the WBG financial capacity beyond fiscal year 2021, to ensure that the WBG remains adequately capitalized to fulfill its mandate," the World Bank and IMF Development Committee communique said.

The committee also commended the International Monetary Fund for delivering \$100 billion in aid to more than 80 countries since the start of the pandemic, primarily through its emergency financing facilities.

"We call on the IMF to continue to deploy all available tools and resources to help members achieve a durable exit from the crisis while building more resilient and inclusive economies," it said.

The committee also urged that poor countries be allowed to suspend debt payment through April amid the coronavirus pandemic, and possibly another six months thereafter, depending on their economic situation.

"We support the extension of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) by six months and to examine, by the time of the 2021 WBG and IMF Spring Meetings, if the economic and financial situation requires to extend further the DSSI by another six months, with targeted complements to the April 2020 DSSI Term Sheet," the committee said.

The committee also called on multilateral development banks, or MDBs, to help the debt service suspension efforts by providing net positive flows to eligible countries. MDBs provide financial assistance to developing countries in order to promote economic and social development. They also provide concessional assistance, including grants and loans at below-market interest rates, to low-income countries.

More than 39 million people worldwide have been infected by the COVID-19 and over 1 million have been killed by the virus.

The global economy is projected to contract by 4.4 percent in 2020, the IMF said earlier this week, revising slightly upward its forecast for a 4.9 percent decline made in June.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said that a global economic recovery from the COVID-19 was underway but it will be partial, uneven and marked by significant uncertainty, requiring relentless fiscal support.

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US Launches Website to Promote Study of Russian, Other Languages - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has launched a federally funded website to promote study of Russian and 100 other foreign languages, the US State Department said in a statement on Friday.

"To make it easier to navigate the many opportunities available, the US Department of State has launched a new website: [Languages.State.Gov](https://languages.state.gov)," the statement said.

The State Department noted that the website offers studies in Mandarin, Russian, Arabic, Farsi and some 100 other languages.

The new website will help the US government address the existing and future security challenges and make diplomacy more effective, the statement said.

"The website provides a resource for Americans seeking to learn a foreign language by serving as a one-stop platform for US government language programs," the statement added.

Participants will be able to choose the language programs they need by utilizing several criteria, including the length of the course, location and others, according to the statement.

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US Sees Putin's Proposal to Extend New START Treaty as 'Non-Starter' - White House

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin's latest proposal to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for one year without conditions is a non-starter, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Friday. "President Putin's response today to extend the New START without freezing nuclear warheads is a non-starter," O'Brien said via Twitter.

O'Brien pointed out that the US proposal to extend the New START for one year in exchange for Russia and the United States freezing the number of all nuclear warheads during that period would have been a win for both nations.

O'Brien said United States believed the Russia was willing to accept the proposal when he met with his Russian counterparts in Geneva.

"The United States is serious about arms control that will keep the entire world safe. We hope that Russia will reevaluate its position before a costly arms race ensues," O'Brien said.

Earlier on Friday, Putin said a world without the New START - the last arms control agreement between the United States and Russia that is set to expire in February - would represent a full-blown threat. Putin also said that Russia has new kinds of weapons systems that the United States does not and Moscow is willing to discuss this issue with Washington.

Putin said he had asked Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to formulate Russia's position on the New START, present it to the United States and attempt to receive a clear response from Washington quickly. Lavrov had promised to do this as soon as possible.

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US Sees Putin's Proposal to Extend New STAR Treaty as 'Non-Starter' - White House

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin's latest proposal to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for one year without conditions is a non-starter, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Friday. "President Putin's response today to extend New START without freezing nuclear warheads is a non-starter," O'Brien said via Twitter.

The United States had proposed earlier extending the New START for one year in exchange for Moscow and Washington freezing the number of their nuclear warheads during that period.

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URGENT: UN Chief Believes New START Extension Should Remain Priority - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres believes that extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) should remain a priority and hopes Russia and the United States will agree on a path forward, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested extending the New START treaty for one year without any conditions and then discussing all arms control parameters during that period.

"For the Secretary-General, the extension of the New START treaty should remain a priority, and we very much hope that the parties - the Russian Federation and United States - will agree on a path forward," Dujarric said. "We cannot underscore enough the need for that treaty to be extended."

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Biden Town Hall Gains 2Mln More Viewers Than Trump's on Thursday Night - Nielsen Ratings

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's town hall meeting broadcast on ABC had two million more viewers than President Donald Trump's town hall broadcast on NBC, The Wrap media outlet reported on Friday citing early numbers from the Nielsen marketing research firm.

On Thursday night, Biden's town hall meeting with voters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was aired by ABC concurrently with a similar event held by Republican incumbent Donald Trump in Miami, Florida, and broadcast live by NBC.

The report said Biden's town hall attracted 12.7 million viewers on ABC while Trump drew 10.4 million viewers on his NBC town hall event.

However, the early numbers do not include viewers that may have tuned into Trump's town hall event on MSNBC.

The town hall meetings replaced the second of the three presidential debates that was canceled after Trump contracted the novel coronavirus but refused to debate Biden virtually. Trump said his medical team informed him after administering a treatment that he is now immune to the novel coronavirus.

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UN Chief Condemns Attacks on Peacekeepers in Mali, Calls for Justice - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the two attacks against the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and urged the Malian authorities to swiftly bring the perpetrators to justice, United Nations spokesperson Stephan Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

On Thursday, one Egyptian peacekeeper died and another sustained serious injuries after a MINUSMA vehicle hit an explosive device in the Kidal region. In another incident in Timbuktu, an indirect fire attack against a MINUSMA camp wounded one peacekeeper.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the two attacks that were perpetrated against the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) on October 15," Dujarric said. "He calls on the Malian authorities to take urgent steps to apprehend and swiftly bring the perpetrators to justice."

Guterres pointed out that such attacks against United Nations peacekeepers may constitute war crimes, Dujarric said.

The UN chief also expressed his condolences to the governments of Egypt and Mali and the families of the victims as well as wished a swift recovery to the injured.

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US Condemns Turkey's Reported Test of S-400 Systems, Warns of Consequences – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) – The United States will strongly condemn Turkey's testing of Russian-made S-400 air defense systems if media reports are confirmed, the State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Friday.

"If confirmed, we would condemn in the strongest terms the S-400 test missile launch as incompatible with Turkey's responsibilities as a NATO Ally and strategic partner of the United States," Ortagus said. "We have also been clear on the potential serious consequences for our security relationship if Turkey activates the system."

Turkey's military M5 magazine reported earlier on Friday that Ankara had conducted "the first firing" of S-400 systems as part of drills near the Black Sea town of Sinop.

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US Arms Control Experts Urge Trump to Agree to Putin's Proposal on Extending New START

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US arms control experts are urging President Donald Trump to accept Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for one year without conditions, the Arms Control Association said in a release on Friday.

Former Acting Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas Countryman underscored in the release that extending the New STAR is vital for US, Russian and international security.

"We strongly urge President Trump to take 'yes' for an answer to Russia's proposal to extend the New START without conditions, ideally for five years," Countryman said.

Arms Control Association Executive Director Daryl Kimball warned in the release that the not extending the New START would open the door to an ever-more dangerous and costly global nuclear arms race.

"In the absence of New START, Washington and Moscow could quickly 'upload' several hundred additional warheads on existing deployed delivery systems to exceed the treaty's 1,550 warhead ceiling," Kimball said. "Such unconstrained nuclear arms racing would be unaffordable and dangerous for both sides."

Kimball said a five-year "clean" extension of the New START would provide a foundation and the time for follow-on discussions and agreements to address "unconstrained nuclear warheads and non-nuclear weapons that impact strategic stability, and to improve opportunities to more fully include other nuclear-armed states, including China, the UK and France, in the arms control process.:

Earlier on Friday, Putin said a world without the New START - the last arms control agreement between the United States and Russia that is set to expire in February - would represent a full-blown threat. Putin also said that Russia has new weapons systems of the kind that the United States does not, but Moscow is willing to discuss this issue.

Putin said he had asked Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to formulate Russia's position on the New STAR, present it to the United States and attempt to receive a clear response from Washington quickly. Lavrov promised he would do this as soon as possible.

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US Immigration Agency Arrests 170 At-Large Illegal Migrants in Sanctuary Cities - DHS

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US immigration enforcement agencies have arrested more than 170 undocumented at-large migrants in a week-long operation in so-called sanctuary cities, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release on Friday.

"The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced Thursday the conclusion of a week-long targeted enforcement operation that resulted in the apprehension of more than 170 at-large aliens throughout the United States, where sanctuary policies have largely prohibited the cooperation of law enforcement agencies in the arrest of criminal aliens," the release said.

Immigration officers conducted the operation from October 3-9 in Seattle, New York City, Charlottesville and other cities throughout the United States, the release said.

These migrants were wanted for crimes such as child abuse, identity theft, commercial sex abuse of a minor, and other crimes, the release also said.

In late September and early October, US immigration enforcement arrested a total of 128 at-large undocumented migrants in sanctuary cities, the release added.

Sanctuary cities are jurisdictions that limit cooperation with US federal authorities to protect low-priority immigrants from deportation.

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O'Brien Says 'Not a Lot' Left to Sanction in Russia, US Eyes Other Responses on Belarus

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has already imposed so many sanctions on Russia that it now lacks targets to designate in response to the situation in Belarus, so Washington is looking for other ways to show its displeasure, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said on Friday.

"The problem we have with the Russians is there is not a lot left to sanction. Our trade has diminished to a level that, you know, we've sanctioned I think 300 entities and oligarchs in Russia, we've sanctioned all the energy companies," O'Brien said at an event with the Aspen Security Forum. "There is not a lot we can do on the sanctions front with Russia, but we are looking for additional places where we can show our displeasure. It's getting harder to do because of the comprehensive nature of the sanctions we have on them."

Commenting on the recent EU sanctions in response to Belarus, O'Brien said the United States has "got a process" that is still ongoing.

"The EU has taken more of a lead," he said. "We are fully supporting it. I am in touch with my colleagues, my national security adviser colleagues at our major European allies, also with the Swedes, with the Baltic countries, and you know, we are doing what we can to support the environment there but it's a difficult situation."

O'Brien said the US wants to help the people of Belarus but at the same time seeks to avoid triggering a crackdown on protesters.

"We don't want to come in and be accused of fomenting another color revolution that would give license to the Russians or Lukashenko or someone to crack down on these protesters," he said. Mass anti-governmental demonstrations erupted in the Belarusian capital of Minsk and the country's other major cities following the disputed results of August 9 presidential elections won by incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko. Brussels has condemned both the results of the vote, which it believes to be fraudulent, and subsequent police violence towards protesters opposed to Lukashenko's victory.

Amid the ongoing protests, the largest of which are on weekends, the EU imposed sanctions on 40 Belarusian officials over the election results and also expressed support for Belarusian opposition politician Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who has since fled the country after coming second in the elections.

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UN Human Rights Chief Calls for Peaceful Conduct During Bolivia Election - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, October 16 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on the political actors in Bolivia to refrain from any actions that could undermine the peaceful conduct during the general election on Sunday.

"Everyone should be able to exercise the right to vote in peace, without intimidation or violence. It is essential that all sides avoid further acts of violence that could spark a confrontation," Bachelet said in a statement on Friday.

Bolivia has experienced political turmoil since the presidential election last November as former President Evo Morales left his post under threat by the country's opposition, which accused him of election fraud.

Bachelet said the upcoming general election represents an opportunity for Bolivia to move forward on social and economic issues and defuse the extreme polarization that has plagued the country over the years.

Bachelet also expressed serious concern about the inflammatory language and threats made by some political actors in recent weeks and the increasing number of physical incidents.

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Lockheed Martin, Aerojet Join in Bid For Next Missile Interceptor Contract - Release

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin and Aerojet Rocketdyne have joined forces offering a joint proposal for the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) contract for the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), Lockheed said in a news release on Friday.

"Lockheed Martin is offering an interceptor designed from the ground up as an all-up-round to address all elements of environmental survivability from day one," the release said. "Our partner Aerojet Rocketdyne will power our primary propulsion to address all US Northern Command challenges to last for decades."

Lockheed's Missile Defense Programs Vice President Sarah Reeves said it was vital to further develop the evolution of the US Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system to defend the US homeland.

"We support the MDA's vision for NGI, particularly in light of the Redesigned Kill Vehicle termination and a fast-moving threat environment," Reeves said in the release.

Aerojet Rocketdyne had provided propulsion on the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system since its inception and is now evolving its propulsion technologies to improve performance, company CEO and president Eileen Drake said in the release.

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US Delegation to Visit Brazil Sunday to Discuss Bilateral Relations - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien will lead a US delegation to Brazil over the weekend to discuss the two countries' bilateral partnership, the National Security Council (NSC) said in a statement on Friday.

"O'Brien will lead a delegation to Brazil on Sunday to highlight the robust relationship between our two countries," the NSC said via Twitter.

Members of US International Development Finance Corporation, Export-Import Bank and the Office of the US Trade Representative will join O'Brien, the NSC also said. The US delegation also seeks to discuss new opportunities in the United States' relations with Brazil, the NSC added.

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US Troops 'On Path' To Stay in Afghanistan Past Christmas, Despite Trump's Tweet - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said on Friday that American troops are "on path" to remain in Afghanistan into early next year, despite President Donald Trump's tweet that they will be out by this Christmas.

"If these intra-Afghan negotiations could work out well, there would be nothing greater than have our troops home by Christmas, but right now we are on a path ... that looks like about 4,500 this fall and a smaller number in January-February," O'Brien said in an event with the Aspen Security Forum.

He called Trump's tweet an expression of a desire shared by all American presidents since the Revolutionary War to have troops home by Christmas.

"If the conditions permitted, look, we would love to get people out earlier. I think that's the desire that the president was addressing," O'Brien said. "We would like the troops out as soon as possible, we need to get out of Afghanistan."

After US reached the deal with the Taliban opposition movement in February, the number of its troops in Afghanistan was drawn down to 8,600 in July and another 4,000 troops are expected to leave in the fall. O'Brien used to say that by early next year the contingent may be reduced to 2,500 servicemen. According to Pentagon officials, the United States is conducting "prudent planning" to withdraw all its military forces from Afghanistan by May 2021, though no specific orders have been issued so far.

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US Awaits Russia's Response to Offer on Extending New START Treaty - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is awaiting Russia's response to the offer to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for one year in exchange for Russia freezing the number of its nuclear warheads during the same period, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said on Friday.

"We made a proposal. It was a relatively straightforward proposal that we extend New START for a year and that the Russians cap their nuclear warhead number for a year," O'Brien said.

"We'll see if they get back to us and what the response is."

O'Brien made the comment during a question-and-answer session at the Aspen Security Forum. However, he did not address Russian President Vladimir Putin's suggestion to extend the New START for one year without any conditions.

O'Brien emphasized that the United States is prepared to go forward with a US-Russia arms control deal, but must await Moscow's answer.

"It very well may be that the Russians don't respond and continue to build warheads and refuse a short-term freeze," he said.

O'Brien also said that Russia may prefer to wait responding to the United States' proposal until the US presidential election scheduled for November 3.

US negotiators have made it clear they want Russia to constraint the buildup of its nuclear arsenal not covered by the original New START.

The treaty - the only remaining arms control accord between the United States and Russia - is set to expire in February.

O'Brien said the US government believes it has made a really fair proposal that will give the parties another year to negotiate an overall big deal.

"We thought we had some favorable movement on that front. [US Special Envoy for Arms Control] Marshall [Billingslea]... and his team went to Helsinki right after my meeting with General [Nikolay] Patrushev in Geneva. We were hopeful that we will get some traction, we thought it was a very fair deal," O'Brien said.

Earlier this week, Billingslea said there is an agreement in principle, but his Russian counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, said huge differences still remain.

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US Calls on Kazakhstan to Do More to Fight Human Trafficking - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Kazakhstan to increase efforts to fight human trafficking and resolve the rights of refugees from China's Xinjiang province, US State Department officials said during a virtual press briefing on Friday.

"We call on the Kazakh government to do more to fight human trafficking," US Ambassador-at-Large John Cotton Richmond told reporters.

The Kazakh government should pay particular attention to ethnic Kazakhs who have become victims of human trafficking, Richmond said.

The government should amend its laws and reverse the four-year decline in convictions for human trafficking, he added.

Assistant Secretary of State Robert Destro called on Kazakhstan to resolve the legal status of refugees from China's Xinjiang province and allow non-governmental organizations to advocate for the refugees' their rights.

"Central Asian countries should really stand up for these victims," Destro said.

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US Company Pfizer Expects to Seek Vaccine Authorization by Late November - Chairman

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer expects to apply for emergency federal authorization of its coronavirus vaccine by late November, the company's CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement on Friday.

"So let me be clear, assuming positive data, Pfizer will apply for Emergency Authorization Use in the US soon after the safety milestone is achieved in the third week of November," Bourla said. Bourla noted that the US Food and Drug Administration requires companies to provide at least two months worth of safety data before seeking emergency authorization of any potential vaccine. Pfizer expects to reach that milestone by late November, based on its current enrollment and dosing pace, he said.

"All the data contained in our US application would be reviewed not only by the FDA's own scientists but also by an external panel of independent experts at a publicly held meeting convened by the agency," Bourla added.

Bourla also reiterated that Pfizer may know by the end of October whether or not its vaccine candidate is effective.

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RPT - Russian National Boiko's Trial in US Expected to Start in 2021 - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The trial of Russian national Maksim Boiko, arrested in the US on cybercrime-related charges, is not expected to be held until 2021, his lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik.

"We anticipate that trial will be in 2021. Because of the COVID-19, I do not anticipate any hearing this year," Bukh said on Thursday.

Bukh said his client has pleaded not guilty and they are fighting the charges. The investigation, he added, may take a few years.

The US Department of Justice announced earlier that Boiko was arrested during his stay in the United States in March. US authorities accused him of participation in QQAazz multinational criminal group, allegedly linked to cybercrimes and money laundering.

US authorities charged 14 individuals from Latvia, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria, linked to QQAazz, the Department of Justice said. Another five members of the group were charged in 2019, it added.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden Admits Court-Packing Option, Escapes Grilling on Son's Deals in Town Hall

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden admitted during a televised town hall that he may resort to court-packing to prevent the conservative majority in the judicial branch of power for generations ahead and was spared uncomfortable questions on newly emerged details of his son's business dealings abroad.

Biden's conversation with voters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was aired by ABC concurrently with a similar event held by Republican incumbent Donald Trump in Miami, Florida, and broadcast live by NBC. Dueling town halls replaced their head-to-head pre-election showdown. The second round of presidential debates was canceled after Trump briefly contracted coronavirus and refused to meet Biden virtually.

COURT PACKING

In what was arguably the biggest revelation of otherwise uneventful show, Biden said that he is not a fan of court-packing, but will explore the option if the Republicans establish the conservative majority in the Supreme Court by appointing Amy Coney Barrett, Trump's pick, before the election.

"I have not been a fan of court packing. I am not a fan... it depends on how this [Barrett's nomination] turns out... how it's handled," Biden said. "I am open to considering what happens from that point [Barrett's confirmation vote] on."

The Republican-controlled Senate is expected to vote on Barrett before Presidential election. Biden accused the opponents of "rushing this through" while having no time to deal with more pressing issues. Former Vice President explained that he is intentionally vague on court-packing not to divert public attention from Barrett's confirmation issues.

SOMETHING LACKING

Conspicuously absent among topics raised during the town hall were Hunter Biden's commercial ties with foreign entrepreneurs and fresh allegations that Joe Biden may have been involved in his son's dealings.

On Wednesday, The New York Post published two letters of Vadym Pozharskyi, an adviser to the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma, to Hunter Biden. In one of the emails, Pozharskyi thanked him for organizing a meeting with his father, while in the other one the representative of the Ukrainian company asked Biden Jr. to think how he could use his influence to support the company. If true, these letters contradict Joe Biden's statements that he had nothing with his son's cooperation with Burisma.

Facebook and Twitter have been preventing users, including White House officials, from sharing articles, causing an additional uproar among Trump supporters.

COVID-19

During the town hall Biden routinely criticized Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic. He cited scientists who suggest that vaccines may not be available until next spring, significantly later than Trump projects.

Biden advocated face masks, which, according to his estimates, may have saved about 100,000 American lives and prevented a full-scale economic shutdown.

He admitted, however, that even as president he is unlikely to be able to enforce their universal use, as well mandate vaccination against COVID-19. Biden also doubted that renewed lockdowns will be required to battle the disease.

TAXES/OIL

He promised to eliminate only a part of his predecessor's tax cuts that benefited the wealthiest few.

"When I said about the Trump tax cuts about \$1.3 trillion of the \$2 trillion in these tax cuts went to the top one tenth of one percent. That's what I am talking about eliminating, not all the tax cuts that are all out there," Biden said.

He cited Moody's study which projected that his tax reform will create 19.6 million new good-paying jobs and add to US GDP \$1 trillion more than under Trump's policies.

Biden also vowed to halt oil subsidies but promised not to ban fracking. The former vice president said his administration would shoot to reach zero net emissions by 2035 from "the creation of energy."

FOREIGN POLICY

Biden questioned Trump's foreign policy accomplishments and doubted whether the incumbent has a coherent agenda for the future.

"We find ourselves less secure than we have been before," he said.

However, Biden did compliment the president on the recently brokered peace deal between Israel and two Gulf states - the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Trump caused cracks in NATO, "embraces all thugs in the world," and fails to stand up to Russian President Vladimir Putin during their six conversations, he claimed.

"I would respectfully suggest that no, there is no... coherent plan for foreign policy," Biden said. Biden suggested that he would return to being a professor in the University of Pennsylvania in case of the election defeat, which would mean that he is "a lousy candidate" rather than discrediting America as a whole.

Trump and Biden are expected to face off on October 22. The final debate will be held in Nashville, Tennessee, and both have agreed to participate. Biden made it clear that he would expect Trump to reaffirm that he is no longer contagious after coronavirus.

"It's just decency to be able to determine if you are clear," he said.

Their first and thus far the only showdown, held in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 29, was marred by insults and frequent mutual interruptions. The organizers promised to amend the rules to give a moderator more tools to enforce order.

Last week, US Vice President Mike Pence and his rival Kamala Harris squared off for their only round of pre-election debates in Salt Lake City, Utah. The event gained an unexpected prominence as Trump's diagnosis raised concerns over longevity of both presidential candidates and the aptitude of their running mates to step in if needed.

US general elections are to be held on November 3. Trump so far trails Biden in most polls.

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RPT - US Company Opening Survival Communities on Election Day in Case of Civil Unrest

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The US company Fortitude Ranch will operate its three vacation condos as survival communities on November 3 in anticipation of possible civil unrest that may follow the presidential and general elections, the company's Vice President for Sales and Business Development Alicia Cachuela told Sputnik.

"We are going to open up as a survival community on November 3 and spanning out for several days after that for the members... just in case of civil unrest, social unrest, the potential of a civil war," Cachuela said.

The United States has experienced protests and riots after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. In addition to peaceful protesters, a number of armed far left and far right paramilitary groups have emerged and become more visible, including the NFAC, Black Legion, Redneck Revolt, Army of God, Aryan Nations, White League, Alpha 66, Hutaree, Boogaloo Boys, Militia of Montana and others.

There are between 200,000 and 300,000 active members of militias and paramilitary organizations in the United States, according to media reports. In addition, there are tens of thousands of armed gang members like the Bloods and the Crips.

Last week, Michigan state and federal authorities arrested 13 individuals for plotting to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer allegedly because they were against her draconian lockdown orders amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. One of the arrestees, Brandon Caserta, had posted a video featuring an anarchist flag and a message that President Donald Trump is "not your friend," but is a "tyrant" and an "enemy."

Fortitude Ranch offers members an escape from urban areas that may be the site for violent unrest. The company has ranches in the states of West Virginia and Colorado that are nearly at full capacity and another ranch that may open around November 3 in northern Nevada. Each ranch can occupy about 500 members.

The company places five US military veterans on guard duty at each compound, Cachuela said, adding that any members at each ranch with weapons training can also volunteer to be guards. Each ranch is able to sustain itself with a large solar system, barns to house live animals, multiple gardens and supplies, Cachuela said.

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RPT: REVIEW - Trump Pressed Hard on COVID-19 Diagnosis, Tax Debt During Town Hall Meeting

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The Thursday night nationally televised panel, consisting of answering voter questions, ran at the same time as Democratic rival Joe Biden held a similar meeting. A face-to-face debate had

been canceled after Trump tested positive for the virus and refused to engage in a virtual setting.

COVID-19 BATTLE

The president was pushed on why his battle with the novel coronavirus has not influenced him to support greater mitigation efforts to slow the spread of the disease.

Trump said the state-wide lockdown imposed by several US governors to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is unconstitutional.

"The fact is we're winning all these cases because it's unconstitutional what they're doing and I think they're doing it for political reasons," Trump said.

Trump said his opinion on wearing masks has not changed after contracting COVID-19 earlier this month, mostly because he has been okay with whether individuals wear masks or not.

"As president I can't be locked in a room someplace for the next year and just stay and do nothing," Trump said, adding that a majority of people who wear masks still contract the novel coronavirus.

Regarding his personal battle with COVID-19, Trump said his medical staff never told him that he had pneumonia but that his lungs were a little bit infected.

RACIAL INJUSTICE

Regarding racial injustice, Trump said he has done more for the Black community than his rivals.

The US president blamed Democrats in Congress for blocking a Republican bill to implement meaningful police reform in order to address policy brutality issues among the African-American community.

Trump also reiterated that he has denounced white supremacy many times and emphasized that the left-wing Antifa group is causing much destruction in US cities.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Trump was asked if he was familiar with the QAnon conspiracy theory and their belief that Democrats are part of a satanic pedophile ring that he will defeat.

"I know nothing about QAnon," Trump said when asked to disavow the group. "What I do hear about it is they are very strongly against pedophilia and I agree with that, I do agree with that and I agree with it very strongly."

In addition, Trump was asked to respond to why this week he retweeted a tweet that pushed a conspiracy theory that his Democratic rival Joe Biden orchestrated to have Navy SEAL Team 6 members killed to cover up the fake death of Osama Bin Laden, the former leader of al-Qaeda (a terrorist group banned in Russia).

Trump said he does a lot of retweets and that the opinion was of someone else.

TAXES

The president hit back when asked about reports that he is in deep debt of over \$420 million. He said the reports were wrong, besides the amount was a tiny percentage of his net worth.

He cleared up any conspiracies that he may owe money to Russia, but he did mention that he "probably" may owe some money to a foreign entity.

The New York Times recently reported that Trump paid \$750 yearly in taxes for 2016 and 2017 and paid no income taxes at all in ten of the previous 15 years largely because of reported business losses.

Trump also said the New York Times acquiring his taxes is illegal and individuals responsible for it should go to jail.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ON ABORTION

The US president refused to give an opinion on the Roe v. Wade decision, which ruled in 1973 that a state law in Texas could not ban abortions.

Trump said he did not want to influence any potential decision in the Supreme Court to overturn the ruling, but he did mention it is something each state should decide.

The final debate between the Trump and his Democratic rival Joe Biden will be October 22 in Nashville, Tennessee.

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2020 US Election

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden continued to expand his lead with less than 3 weeks until election day, new polling revealed shortly before the two candidates held separate simultaneous televised town hall meetings.

DUELING TOWN HALLS

Biden during his town hall on Thursday, which consisted of answering questions from voters, said that if elected he will eliminate a fraction of his predecessor's tax cuts that benefited the top one tenth of one percent. The former vice president also vowed to halt oil industry subsidies, promised not to ban fracking and said his administration would shoot for net-zero emissions by 2035.

Trump during his town hall meeting in Miami, Florida, went head to head with NBC News moderator Savannah Guthrie on several personal issues such as the president's experience infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), his tax returns, in addition to several policy issues.

A face-to-face debate had been canceled after Trump tested positive for the virus and refused to engage in a virtual setting. The final debate between the Trump and his Democratic rival Joe Biden will be October 22 in Nashville, Tennessee.

BIDEN AHEAD OF TRUMP

Biden would beat President Donald Trump by 11 percentage points nationwide if the presidential election were held today, a three point drop since the days following the candidates' September 29 debate, a new NBC/Wall Street Journal (WSJ) poll revealed on Thursday.

The poll conducted after Trump returned to the White House from his hospitalization for the coronavirus, found Biden ahead 53-42%.

RESULT OF ELECTION

US President Donald Trump said in an interview on Thursday that the result of the upcoming November 3 presidential election should be available on Election Day.

The president has predicted on multiple occasions that the race will be decided by the Supreme Court and not on election day. He also put plans in motion to contest a Biden victory because he believes mail-in ballots will lead to voter fraud.

BIDEN'S TEST

Biden shared a flight with an individual who was diagnosed with coronavirus, but never approached him close enough to necessitate quarantine measures, campaign manager Jen Dillon said in a statement.

The Biden campaign later in the day said the former vice president tested negative for the virus. An announcement came hours after Biden's running mate Kamala Harris suspended her travel plans through Sunday as two people from her entourage tested positive for the disease.

EARLY VOTING

US voters plan to take advantage of early voting by almost a 2-to-1 margin with Biden voters far more likely to cast such ballots, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Thursday. 80% of Biden supporters will vote early compared to 46% of those who back Trump, the poll revealed. Overall, 65 percent of those in jurisdictions where early voting is available say they plan to take advantage of the opportunity,

The US state of Colorado has witnessed unprecedented early participation in the presidential election this year, with the number of voters at this time outpacing the 2016 count by 24 times, the state's Secretary of State Jena Griswold said on Thursday.

"Colorado is seeing record turnout. As of yesterday, over 300,000 Coloradans have voted, which is 24 times more than at this point in 2016," Griswold said via Twitter.

Unlike many other US states, Colorado has had a mail-in voting system in place since 2013 in which ballots are mailed to all registered voters.

ELECTION SURVIVAL

The US company Fortitude Ranch will operate its three vacation condos as survival communities on November 3 in anticipation of possible civil unrest that may follow the presidential and general elections, the company's Vice President for Sales and Business Development Alicia Cachuela told Sputnik.

"We are going to open up as a survival community on November 3 and spanning out for several days after that for the members... just in case of civil unrest, social unrest, the potential of a civil war," Cachuela said.

The United States has experienced protests and riots after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. In addition to peaceful protesters, a number of armed far left and far right paramilitary groups have emerged and become more visible, including the NFAC, Black Legion, Redneck Revolt, Army of God, Aryan Nations, White League, Alpha 66, Hutaree, Boogaloo Boys, Militia of Montana and others.

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REVIEW - Biden Admits Court-Packing Option, Escapes Grilling on Son's Deals in Town Hall

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden admitted during a televised town hall that he may resort to court-packing to prevent the conservative majority in the judicial branch of power for generations ahead and was spared uncomfortable questions on newly emerged details of his son's business dealings abroad.

Biden's conversation with voters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was aired by ABC concurrently with a similar event held by Republican incumbent Donald Trump in Miami, Florida, and broadcast live by NBC. Dueling town halls replaced their head-to-head pre-election showdown. The second round of presidential debates was canceled after Trump briefly contracted coronavirus and refused to meet Biden virtually.

COURT PACKING

In what was arguably the biggest revelation of otherwise uneventful show, Biden said that he is not a fan of court-packing, but will explore the option if the Republicans establish the conservative majority in the Supreme Court by appointing Amy Coney Barrett, Trump's pick, before the election.

"I have not been a fan of court packing. I am not a fan... it depends on how this [Barrett's nomination] turns out... how it's handled," Biden said. "I am open to considering what happens from that point [Barrett's confirmation vote] on."

The Republican-controlled Senate is expected to vote on Barrett before Presidential election. Biden accused the opponents of "rushing this through" while having no time to deal with more pressing issues. Former Vice President explained that he is intentionally vague on court-packing not to divert public attention from Barrett's confirmation issues.

LACK

Conspicuously absent among topics raised during the town hall were Hunter Biden's commercial ties with foreign entrepreneurs and fresh allegations that Joe Biden may have been involved in his son's dealings.

On Wednesday, The New York Post published two letters of Vadym Pozharskyi, an adviser to the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma, to Hunter Biden. In one of the emails, Pozharskyi thanked him for organizing a meeting with his father, while in the other one the representative of the Ukrainian company asked Biden Jr. to think how he could use his influence to support the company. If true, these letters contradict Joe Biden's statements that he had nothing with his son's cooperation with Burisma.

Facebook and Twitter have been preventing users, including White House officials, from sharing articles, causing an additional uproar among Trump supporters.

COVID-19

During the town hall Biden routinely criticized Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic. He cited scientists who suggest that vaccines may not be available until next spring, significantly later than Trump projects.

Biden advocated face masks, which, according to his estimates, may have saved about 100,000 American lives and prevented a full-scale economic shutdown.

He admitted, however, that even as president he is unlikely to be able to enforce their universal use, as well mandate vaccination against COVID-19. Biden also doubted that renewed lockdowns will be required to battle the disease.

TAXES/OIL

He promised to eliminate only a part of his predecessor's tax cuts that benefited the wealthiest few.

"When I said about the Trump tax cuts about \$1.3 trillion of the \$2 trillion in these tax cuts went to the top one tenth of one percent. That's what I am talking about eliminating, not all the tax cuts that are all out there," Biden said.

He cited Moody's study which projected that his tax reform will create 19.6 million new good-paying jobs and add to US GDP \$1 trillion more than under Trump's policies. Biden also vowed to halt oil subsidies but promised not to ban fracking. The former vice president said his administration would shoot to reach zero net emissions by 2035 from "the creation of energy."

FOREIGN POLICY

Biden questioned Trump's foreign policy accomplishments and doubted whether the incumbent has a coherent agenda for the future.

"We find ourselves less secure than we have been before," he said.

However, Biden did compliment the president on the recently brokered peace deal between Israel and two Gulf states - the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Trump caused cracks in NATO, "embraces all thugs in the world," and fails to stand up to Russian President Vladimir Putin during their six conversations, he claimed.

"I would respectfully suggest that no, there is no... coherent plan for foreign policy," Biden said. Biden suggested that he would return to being a professor in the University of Pennsylvania in case of the election defeat, which would mean that he is "a lousy candidate" rather than discrediting America as a whole.

Trump and Biden are expected to face off on October 22. The final debate will be held in Nashville, Tennessee, and both have agreed to participate. Biden made it clear that he would expect Trump to reaffirm that he is no longer contagious after coronavirus.

"It's just decency to be able to determine if you are clear," he said.

Their first and thus far the only showdown, held in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 29, was marred by insults and frequent mutual interruptions. The organizers promised to amend the rules to give a moderator more tools to enforce order.

Last week, US Vice President Mike Pence and his rival Kamala Harris squared off for their only round of pre-election debates in Salt Lake City, Utah. The event gained an unexpected prominence as Trump's diagnosis raised concerns over longevity of both presidential candidates and the aptitude of their running mates to step in if needed.

US general elections are to be held on November 3. Trump so far trails Biden in most polls.

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The president was pushed on why his battle with the novel coronavirus has not influenced him to support greater mitigation efforts to slow the spread of the disease.

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Trump said his opinion on wearing masks has not changed after contracting COVID-19 earlier this month, mostly because he has been okay with whether individuals wear masks or not.

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RACIAL INJUSTICE

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The US president blamed Democrats in Congress for blocking a Republican bill to implement meaningful police reform in order to address policy brutality issues among the African-American community.

Trump also reiterated that he has denounced white supremacy many times and emphasized that the left-wing Antifa group is causing much destruction in US cities.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Trump was asked if he was familiar with the QAnon conspiracy theory and their belief that Democrats are part of a satanic pedophile ring that he will defeat.

"I know nothing about QAnon," Trump said when asked to disavow the group. "What I do hear about it is they are very strongly against pedophilia and I agree with that, I do agree with that and I agree with it very strongly."

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Biden Says May Consider Court-Packing if Barrett Confirmed Before Election

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said he is not a fan of court-packing, but will explore the option if the Republicans establish the conservative majority in the Supreme Court by appointing Amy Coney Barrett before the election.

"I have not been a fan of court packing... it depends on how this [Barrett's nomination] turns out [and] how it's handled," Biden said during a televised town hall event on Thursday. "I am open to considering what happens from that point [Barrett's confirmation vote] on."

The Republican-controlled Senate is expected to vote to appoint Barrett picked by Trump before Presidential election. Biden accused the opponents of "rushing this through" while having no time to deal with more pressing issues.

Former Vice President explained that he is intentionally vague on court-packing not to divert public attention from Barrett's confirmation issues.

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UPDATE 2 - Biden Promises to Eliminate Tax Cuts for Wealthiest Few

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said that, if victorious on Election Day, he will eliminate a fraction of his predecessor's tax cuts that benefited the top one tenth of one percent.

"When I said about the [President Donald] Trump tax cuts about \$1.3 trillion of the \$2 trillion in these tax cuts went to the top one tenth of one percent. That's what I am talking about eliminating, not all the tax cuts that are all out there," Biden said during a televised town hall event Thursday evening.

He cited Moody's study which projected that his tax reform will create 19.6 million new good-paying jobs and increase US GDP by \$1 trillion more than under the incumbent Donald Trump.

Biden also said defunding police would be wrong. More police mean less crime.

He also said he would establish a group comprised of law enforcement, social workers and minorities to look into community policing.

Regarding Trump's move to try and fast-track confirmation of supreme court pick before the election, Biden said if he is elected he would not rule out "packing" the court himself, although he is not a "fan."

Biden said he will maybe lay out his view on court-packing before the election.

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UPDATE - Trump Says COVID-19 Lockdowns Unconstitutional, Opinion Has Not Changed on Masks

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"The fact is we're winning all these cases because it's unconstitutional what they're doing and I think they're doing it for political reasons," Trump said.

Trump also said his opinion on wearing masks has not changed after contracting COVID-19.

The US president added that he has been okay with whether people wear masks or not.

Meanwhile, on another network, Democratic candidate Joe Biden said defunding police would be wrong. More police mean less crime.

Biden also said he would establish a group comprised of law enforcement, social workers and minorities to look into community policing.

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US Company Opening Survival Communities on Election Day in Case of Civil Unrest

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The US company Fortitude Ranch will operate its three vacation condos as survival communities on November 3 in anticipation of possible civil unrest that may follow the presidential and general elections, the company's Vice President for Sales and Business Development Alicia Cachuela told Sputnik.

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The United States has experienced protests and riots after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. In addition to peaceful protesters, a number of armed far left and far right paramilitary groups have emerged and become more visible, including the NFAC, Black Legion, Redneck Revolt, Army of God, Aryan Nations, White League, Alpha 66, Hutaree, Boogaloo Boys, Militia of Montana and others.

There are between 200,000 and 300,000 active members of militias and paramilitary organizations in the United States, according to media reports. In addition, there are tens of thousands of armed gang members like the Bloods and the Crips.

Last week, Michigan state and federal authorities arrested 13 individuals for plotting to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer allegedly because they were against her draconian lockdown orders amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. One of the arrestees, Brandon Caserta, had posted a video featuring an anarchist flag and a message that President Donald Trump is "not your friend," but is a "tyrant" and an "enemy."

Fortitude Ranch offers members an escape from urban areas that may be the site for violent unrest. The company has ranches in the states of West Virginia and Colorado that are nearly at full capacity and another ranch that may open around November 3 in northern Nevada. Each ranch can occupy about 500 members.

The company places five US military veterans on guard duty at each compound, Cachuela said, adding that any members at each ranch with weapons training can also volunteer to be guards. Each ranch is able to sustain itself with a large solar system, barns to house live animals, multiple gardens and supplies, Cachuela said.

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Pentagon Launches \$200Mln Effort to Strengthen US Microelectronics Innovation

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) – The US Defense Department announced awards of \$197.2 million to bolster American companies that specialize in artificial intelligence, 5G communication and other technology, according to a press release.

"The nearly \$200 million will be issued through two DOD programs: the Rapid Assured Microelectronics Prototypes (RAMP) using Advanced Commercial Capabilities Project Phase 1 Other Transaction Award, and the State-of-the-Art Heterogeneous Integration Prototype (SHIP) Program Phase 2 Other Transaction Award," the release said on Thursday.

The RAMP program awarded \$24.5 million to Microsoft and IBM to develop new commercial microelectronics design methods with upgraded security, the release said.

The SHIP contracts totaled \$172.7 million for Intel Federal and Qorvo to develop a new approach to securely integrate advanced microelectronics packages, the release added.

The RAMP and SHIP awards underscore the Department's commitment to accelerate microelectronics innovation through the development of new manufacturing capabilities and new computer chip designs, according to the release.

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UPDATE - Biden Tests Negative for COVID-19 After Flying With Infected Individual

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden shared a flight with an individual who was diagnosed with coronavirus, but never approached him close enough to necessitate quarantine measures, campaign manager Jen Dillon said in a statement. The Biden campaign later in the day said the former vice president tested negative for the virus. An announcement came hours after Biden's running mate Kamala Harris suspended her travel plans through Sunday as two people from her entourage tested positive for the disease.

"We have been advised by the Vice President's doctor and the campaign's medical advisers that there is no need for the Vice President to quarantine," Dillon said in a statement earlier on Thursday.

She assured that Biden did not even have "a passing contact" with a sick person described as an administrative member of the aviation company that charters candidate's aircraft. At all times they had over 50 feet between them and both wore masks during the entire flight, according to the statement.

Biden's Republican rival, US President Donald Trump, contracted coronavirus himself, but quickly recovered and returned on a campaign trail. On Thursday, Biden and Trump are scheduled to hold competing televised town hall events.

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Twitter Says Probing Massive Outage, No Evidence of Security Breach

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Twitter is experiencing a massive outage that is being investigated, the company said in a statement on its API page.

"We are currently investigating this issue. More updates to come," the company said on Thursday.

Tens of thousands of users have complained of not being able to use the platform. The DOWNDECTOR.COM monitoring site showed that over 50,000 complaints were made between around 5:15 p.m. EST (9:15 p.m. GMT) and 6:30 p.m. AFP reported that the Twitter outage is world wide.

Later on Thursday, Twitter said in an update that the company had an issue with its internal systems but did not find evidence of a security breach. The company is continuing to work to get the platform working for all user still affected by the outage, the statement said.

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US Senator Seeks Unredacted FBI Spreadsheet Showing Efforts to Verify Steele Dossier

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Lawmakers probing origins of the Trump-Russia investigation are demanding an unredacted copy of a 94-page spreadsheet that reportedly details unsuccessful FBI attempts to validate a bogus dossier that helped trigger the investigation, Senate Finance Committee Chair Charles Grassley said in a press release. "This spreadsheet clearly shows that the FBI failed to corroborate key information in the discredited, DNC [Democratic National Committee]-funded, Steele dossier yet continued to use it to justify surveillance against Carter Page," the release said on Thursday.

The discredited dossier compiled by former British spy Christopher Steel was used to obtain warrants to eavesdrop on Carter Page, an aide in the 2016 campaign by President Donald Trump.

On Wednesday, Grassley and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chair Ron Johnson wrote to FBI Director Christopher Wray and Director John Ratcliffe seeking a copy of the original spreadsheet.

"Although this spreadsheet falls squarely within the scope of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's (HSGAC) August 6, 2020 records subpoena, the FBI has failed to produce the original version of the spreadsheet," the letter said.

A heavily redacted version previously made public shows that the FBI failed to corroborate key information in dossier yet continued to use it to justify surveillance against Page, the letter added.

The dossier helped trigger former Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of Democratic allegations that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia to defeat Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.

The Mueller probe eventually concluded that no collusion had taken place after the investigation dominated the first two years of the Trump administration.

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Chinese Ambassador Urges Canada Not to Grant Asylum to Hong Kong Protesters

TORONTO, October 16 (Sputnik) - China's Ambassador to Canada Cong Peiwu urged Ottawa during a video conference not to grant asylum to Hong Kong protesters.

"We strongly urge the Canadian side not [to] grant so-called political asylum to those violent criminals in Hong Kong," the ambassador said on Thursday as quoted by the Canadian Press. The Chinese ambassador said if Canada is interested in the safety and prosperity of Hong Kong residents, including some 300,000 Canadian nationals, it would support law and order in the special administrative region.

China has blasted Australia's and the United Kingdom's suggestion to offer safe haven to Hong Kong residents following the enactment of the China's law on national security in the special administrative region that has sparked mass protests.

While Canada has not publicly broached the idea, there is speculation that the ongoing diplomatic spat between Ottawa and Beijing could spur such action.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after the Canadian authorities detained Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States to which China responded by the arrests of two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage in China.

The tense relationship has been further exacerbated by Canada's condemnation of the newly enacted Chinese law on national security in Hong Kong and a suspension of some bilateral agreements with the special administrative region. Beijing has said that it reserves the right to respond to any interference by Canada and hold Ottawa accountable for all consequences.

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Twitter Says Investigating Massive Outage, Tens of Thousands of Users Report Complaints

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - Twitter is experiencing a massive outage that is being investigated, the company said in a statement on its API page.

"We are currently investigating this issue. More updates to come," the company said on Thursday.

Tens of thousands of users have complained of being able to use the platform. The DOWNDECTOR.COM monitoring site showed that over 50,000 complaints were made between around 5:15 p.m. EST (9:15 p.m. GMT) and 6:30 p.m. AFP reported that the Twitter outage is world wide.

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Iranian National Gets 23-Month Sentence For Violating US Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - A US judge sentenced the Iranian founder of a financial firm to 23 months in prison for violating sanctions against the Islamist republic, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"[Sajjad] Shahidian lied to US suppliers, illegally transferred funds from Iran, used fraudulent passports and ids, and established a business whose entire purpose was to circumvent U.S. sanctions and to enable others to do the same," Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers said in the release on Thursday.

Shahidian, a citizen of Iran, was arrested in London in November 2018, extradited to the United States in May 2020, pleaded guilty in June and was sentenced Thursday by Judge Patrick Schiltz of US District Court in the state of Minnesota, the release said.

Shahidian founded the internet-based financial services company, Payment 24, with about 40 employees and offices in Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan. The company helped Iranians conduct prohibited financial transactions with US businesses, including the unlawful purchases of computer software, software licenses and computer servers from American firms, the release added.

Payment 24 sold a package to assist its Iranian clients with making online purchases from US businesses using PayPal, Visa gift cards, and fraudulent identification using internet servers in the United Arab Emirates, according to the release.

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Russian National Boiko's Trial in US Expected to Start in 2021 - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik) - The trial of Russian national Maksim Boiko, arrested in the US on cybercrime-related charges, is not expected to be held until 2021, his lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik.

"We anticipate that trial will be in 2021. Because of the COVID-19, I do not anticipate any hearing this year," Bukh said on Thursday.

Bukh said his client has pleaded not guilty and they are fighting the charges. The investigation, he added, may take a few years.

The US Department of Justice announced earlier that Boiko was arrested during his stay in the United States in March. US authorities accused him of participation in QQAazz multinational criminal group, allegedly linked to cybercrimes and money laundering.

US authorities charged 14 individuals from Latvia, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria, linked to QQAazz, the Department of Justice said. Another five members of the group were charged in 2019, it added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 16 (Sputnik)

US PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

- * US President Donald Trump said in an interview on Thursday that the result of the upcoming November 3 presidential election should be available on Election Day.
- * Former Vice President Joe Biden would beat Trump by 11 percentage points nationwide if the presidential election were held today, a three point drop since the days following the candidates' September 29 debate, a new NBC/Wall Street Journal (WSJ) poll revealed.

EU, UK SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

- * The European Union added Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin to the list of individuals slapped with sanctions in view of the situation in Libya, according to the Official Journal of the EU.
- * Prigozhin said that EU sanctions against him were regretful and may force him to close down some project in EU countries.
- * The United Kingdom introduced sanctions against Russian officials in connection with the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Foreign Office said.
- * The United Kingdom imposed sanctions against Prigozhin over his alleged breach of Libyan arms embargo, the Foreign Office said.

SYRIA

- * The Russian Foreign Ministry has accused the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW) leadership of political bias after a fact-finding mission into attacks carried out in Syria's Saraqib and Aleppo could not prove that chemical weapons were in fact used.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

- * US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview on Thursday that Turkey is amplifying the risks of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by supplying weapons to Azerbaijan and reiterated his call for a ceasefire.
- * To settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Yerevan is ready to implement the steps that were agreed upon in Moscow at the trilateral consultations between the foreign ministers of Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said in an interview with Sputnik.
- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu discussed the importance of agreeing control mechanisms for the ceasefire in the Karabakh region, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Baku remains committed to the OSCE Minsk Group principles for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev told Sputnik.

* Russia will continue to play a stabilizing role in the Karabakh region after the military phase of the conflict ends, Aliyev told Sputnik.

MH-17 CRASH INVESTIGATION

* Moscow finds it impossible to further participate in trilateral consultations with Australia and the Netherlands on the deadly MH17 crash after the Dutch lawsuit filed against Russia with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday, noting that the country is still ready to cooperate with Dutch competent agencies.

* The Hague is the only one to blame for derailing consultations of Russia, Australia and the Netherlands on the MH17 plane crash over eastern Ukraine, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The Netherlands regrets Russia's decision to withdraw from trilateral consultations on MH17 with Australia, Foreign Minister Stef Blok said.

KYRGYZSTAN POLITICAL CRISIS

* Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov said Thursday he had decided to step down.

* Kyrgyz Prime Minister Sadyr Japarov said that he assumed presidential powers after parliament speaker Kanat Isayev refused to do so following the resignation of Jeenbekov as the country's president.

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, commenting on the resignation of Jeenbekov, that any step that could promote stabilization in the Central Asian country was important.