

## 10/15/20 Wires

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### CSPAN Suspends Steve Scully for Lying About His Twitter Account Being Hacked - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The cable network C-SPAN said in a statement on Thursday that it has suspended its lead reporter Steve Scully after admitting he lied about his Twitter account being hacked when he publicly reached out to former US President Donald Trump's aide Anthony Scaramucci on the social media platform.

"Starting immediately, we have placed Steve on administrative leave," the statement said. "After some distance from this episode, we believe in his ability to continue to contribute to C-SPAN." On October 8, Scully asked Scaramucci in a now-deleted tweet whether he should respond to Trump after Trump criticized him on national television that day.

Scully was originally set to server as the moderator in the now-canceled second presidential debate that would have taken place on Thursday night.

Scully said in a statement that he sent the tweet to Scaramucci because he was frustrated over criticism he received on social media and from the US president.

CSPAN said Scully informed the network and the Commission on Presidential Debates on Wednesday that his hacking claim was false.

Trump said in a statement the second presidential debate would have been rigged and that the Commission has not treated his re-election campaign fairly.

The Commission was investigating Scully's hacking claim and had reported the incident to the FBI and Twitter.

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### Individual on Plane With Biden Tests Positive for COVID-19 - Campaign

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 on Thursday. 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.

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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US Willing to Work With MAS Candidate in Event of Bolivian Election Victory - Official

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to work with Evo Morales' Movement for Socialism (MAS) candidate Luis Arce should he prevail in the upcoming Bolivian presidential election, a senior US State Department official told reporters on Thursday. "That would be a yes on that second answer," the official said in response to a question on the US' willingness to work with Arce.

A second State Department official defended Washington's approach to the previous election campaign that some have derided as a US-backed coup through the Organization of American States (OAS) against Morales, saying that "what we're doing now is very consistent with our views then."

Bolivia has been in political turmoil since last year's November election after Morales was forced to leave his post by the opposition, which accused him of mass falsifications during the presidential election.

The OAS played a key role in the ouster after publishing its final report of the audit of the elections in Bolivia, concluding that "intentional manipulation" and "serious irregularities" made it impossible to validate Morales' victory, initially declared by the electoral authorities.

The recent polls show that the plurality of Bolivian citizens – from 30 to 40 percent – support MAS member and former Minister of Economics and Public Finance Arce.

Jeanine Anez, installed as Interim Bolivian President after the contentious election results, announced the withdrawal of her candidacy from the upcoming election last month.

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US Fines Private Equity Fund Chief \$139Mln for Unpaid Taxes, Hiding Money - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The chief executive of a private equity fund based in San Francisco, California, agreed to pay a \$139 million penalty for concealing money in offshore accounts and avoiding taxes, the US Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

As part of what the release called a "Non-Prosecution Agreement," company CEO Robert Smith agreed to continue cooperating with a number of related investigations.

"Smith has agreed to pay approximately \$56 million in taxes and penalties stemming from the unreported income and another \$82 million in penalties stemming from his concealment of his

offshore bank accounts. Taken altogether, Smith will pay more than \$139 million in taxes and penalties," the release said.

Smith admitted that he established two offshore companies, Excelsior Trust in Belize and Flash Holdings in Nevis, with bank accounts in the British Virgin Islands and Switzerland, to conceal income, the release added.

In addition, Smith admitted using unreported income to purchase a private vacation home in the state of California, two ski resorts and a commercial property in France, according to the release.

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Russia Ready to Launch Consultative Business Council With US - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Moscow is prepared to launch a mechanism of the Consultative Business Council with the United States but is waiting for reciprocal steps from Washington, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said during opening remarks at an event on Thursday.

"One of the initiatives suggested at the highest level, which is intended to implement the understanding of the heads of states, is to establish... a Consultative Business Council including business leaders," Antonov said at the annual US-Russia Business Council (USRBC) meeting. "As for the Russian side, we are ready to launch the mechanism. We have proposed concrete ideas to the US administration and now we are waiting for reciprocal steps from Washington." Antonov underscored that he was sure that much will depend on the consolidated position of US entrepreneurs.

"At least in my conversations with [US] Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross this year, they assured me that in its economic policy the White House is guided, first of all, by the voice of national businesses. It is encouraging that the American business community keeps on working actively in Russia despite all the restrictions," the ambassador said.

Antonov continued to say that Moscow sees a great potential of commercial ties in chemical and light industries, construction, transport, agriculture, medicine, services and information technology.

"By the way, international experts mark the high level of Russian pilot projects - so called 'startups' - in advanced technologies and telecommunications," he said. "Direct ties between regions could also provide a solid boost for business cooperation. Heads of Regions of the Russian Federation also tell us about their readiness to engage in a direct dialogue with American businesses."

Antonov also pointed out that anti-Russia sanctions impact businesses most.

"Of course, in the conditions of never-ending sanctions (there were 90 rounds since 2011) and trade barriers, imposed by the administration, it is extremely difficult to sustain a constructive agenda of our bilateral relations," he said. "We see that business is the most affected. Business

operators have to look for law "gaps" to fulfill joint projects and not to be punished by their own government."

Antonov stressed, however, that the development of trade and investment relations could make a stabilizing impact on all the complexities of the ties between Moscow and Washington.

"This was acknowledged by our presidents multiple times. Donald Trump personally spoke out in favor of a qualitative increase of business contacts," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward an initiative to establish a group uniting Russian and US business "captains" during his historic meeting with US President Donald Trump in Helsinki in July 2018.

The Russian-US advisory business council is expected to determine steps for expanding the bilateral cooperation on trade and investment. However, no sessions have been held so far.

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Trump Admin. Plans Limits on 'Special Immunity' For Internet, Social Media – Regulator

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) – The US Federal Communications Commission plans to begin drafting new rules to "clarify" the meaning of a legal clause that protects social media companies from being sued over third-party content on their platforms, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said in a press release on Thursday.

"Social media companies have a First Amendment right to free speech. But they do not have a First Amendment right to a special immunity denied to other media outlets, such as newspapers and broadcasters," Pai said in the release.

Section 230 of the US Communications Act states that no provider of an "interactive computer service" can be held liable for content that users post on their platforms, or for any action taken "in good faith" to restrict access to objectionable material, even if that material is lawful and constitutionally protected.

Pai said that while he favors free expression, "many advance an overly broad interpretation" of the legal clause.

"I intend to move forward with a rulemaking to clarify its meaning," Pai said.

Pai's initiative follows a decision by Facebook and Twitter to restrict access to an article in the New York Post about former Vice President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden and the younger Biden's business dealings in Ukraine.

President Donald Trump in May directed the Commerce Department to petition the FCC to re-evaluate the rule after Twitter placed a fact-check warning on one of his tweets. Twitter has put multiple warning labels on Trump's tweets since then.

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#### UN Special Coordinator Calls on Israel to Cease All Settlements in West Bank - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, October 15 (Sputnik) - Israel's advancement of nearly 5,000 housing units in the occupied West Bank is illegal and the country should stop all settlement-related activities there, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov said in a statement on Thursday.

"On 14 and 15 October, the Israeli authorities advanced nearly 5,000 housing units, most of which are in outlying locations deep inside the occupied West Bank. Settlement construction is illegal under international law and is one of the major obstacles to peace. I call on the authorities to cease immediately all settlement-related activities," Mladenov said.

Mladenov noted that the significant number and location of the resettlement advancements are of great concern to all those committed to advancing peace between Israelis and Palestinians and undermine the prospect of reaching a two-state solution.

The Palestinians have been demanding the return to the pre-Six-Day War borders, something that Israel has refused to do.

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#### Russia Open to Intensive Consultations With US on Strategic Stability - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to continue intensive consultations with the United States on the issues of strategic stability, but wants the dialogue to cover its major concerns, including American plans to deploy the global missile defense shield and place weapons in space, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov told Newsweek magazine. "Russia's main concerns are the global missile defense system, the development of non-nuclear strategic offensive weapons within the framework of the concept of a global strike, the growing threats of weapons deployed in space, quantitative and qualitative imbalances in conventional weapons in Europe and so on," Antonov said in remarks provided to Newsweek.

With these concerns in mind, he added, Russia is "ready to continue intensive consultations to find solutions to these key factors of strategic stability."

Russia and the US are in the midst of negotiations on the future of the New START treaty - the only remaining bilateral arms control regime which is set to expire next February. Russia calls for its unconditional extension, while the Americans seek to include in the framework broader array of nuclear weapons and want China to join the pact.

US negotiators did not object to discussing Russia's concerns, including the missile defense issue, but refused to make any commitments.

Parties provide conflicting assessments as to the progress made during negotiations. US Special Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said earlier this week that there is an agreement in principle at top political levels only to be publicly disavowed by his Russian counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, who insists that "huge differences" persist.

Antonov said that Russia sees a "deep crisis of confidence" in its relations with the US.

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#### Canadian Watchdog Slams Ruling That Denies New Probe in Trudeau Lobbying Case

TORONTO, October 15 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Supreme Court struck a blow to fighting government corruption by dismissing a new probe into whether a religious leader lobbied Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Democracy Watch co-founder Duff Conacher said in a statement on Thursday.

The high court earlier denied a quest for a new probe into allegations that the Aga Khan lobbied Trudeau during a trip to the religious leader's private island.

"In its shocking refusal to allow Democracy Watch's appeal, the Supreme Court has joined the Federal Court of Appeal in striking a serious blow against the public's rights to complain about corruption and wrongdoing by politicians, government officials and lobbyists, and to hold democracy watchdogs accountable for failing to do their jobs properly and issuing rulings that protect wrongdoers," Conacher said.

Conacher added that the ruling will set a precedent that will be "used across Canada to stop the public from holding government and other watchdogs accountable for wrongful decisions."

The Supreme Court ruling also ends four other Democracy Watch appeals, including the Lobbying Commissioner's rulings that cleared other business and special interests groups of lobbying Trudeau and other members of his cabinet.

The Federal Court of Canada sided with the advocacy in 2019, ruling that former Lobbying Commissioner Karen Shepherd's September 2017 decision was "unreasonable" and ordering a new investigation.

The decision was overturned by a panel of judges from the Federal Court of Appeals who said that the Lobbying Commissioner is under no obligation to examine complaints initiated by the public.

The scandal began after a Canadian learned that Trudeau had been misleading the public about his vacation itinerary. The subsequent investigation revealed that Trudeau accepted the Aga Khan's invitation to spend a holiday at the private island in 2014 and spent ten days there at the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017.

Shepherd later cleared the Aga Khan, the chair of the Aga Khan Foundation – a registered lobby group – because a Foundation employee claimed the religious leader wasn't explicitly paid to lobby Trudeau on those occasions.

While Trudeau was vindicated by the Lobbying Commissioner, the Prime Minister was subsequently in violation of conflict of interest rules by the country's Ethics Commissioner, which was the first of now three investigations against him.

Trudeau was later in violation of conflict of interest rules for interfering in the corruption investigation of Canadian engineering giant SNC-Lavalin's dealings in Libya and is currently under investigation for his role in the ongoing WE Charity scandal.

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Senate Panel May Subpoena Twitter CEO Over Censorship of Biden Allegations - Senator

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz on Thursday accused Facebook and Twitter of "active interference" in the election campaign by blocking New York Post articles alleging wrongdoing by Democratic nominee Joe Biden and announced that Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey may be subpoenaed next week to testify before a Senate panel.

"The Senate Judiciary Committee wants to know what the hell is going on," Cruz said in remarks to reporters. "And the Committee today will be noticing a markup on Tuesday to issue a subpoena to Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter, to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee next Friday - to come before this Committee and the American people and explain why Twitter is abusing their corporate power to silence the press and to cover up allegations of corruption." Facebook and Twitter have been preventing users, including White House officials and Senator Cruz himself, from sharing a New York Post article on Hunter Biden's business dealings abroad, possibly involving his father, former US Vice President Joe Biden.

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 letters, 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 to do with his son's cooperation with Burisma.

Biden's campaign has denied that any such meeting took place, as have several of his former top advisers.

"We have seen Big Tech, we have seen Twitter and Facebook actively interfering in this election in a way that has no precedent in the history of our country," Cruz said. "Never before have we seen active censorship of a major press publication with serious allegations of corruption of one of the two candidates for President."

Facebook explained its decision by saying it needed to carry out additional fact-checking procedures. Twitter said that the publication of New York Post contradicted the privacy policy of the social network.

In the House of Representatives, controlled by the Democrats, Republican members of the Oversight Committee on Thursday called on their Democratic colleagues to hold a similar emergency hearing on "Big Tech's censorship and election interference."

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Some 14Mln Americans Back in Poverty After Expiry of COVID-19 Help - Study

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Some 14 million Americans have fallen back into poverty as the coronavirus pandemic throttles the economy, a Columbia University study revealed on Thursday.

"The CARES Act's stimulus checks and unemployment benefits lifted more than 18 million individuals out of monthly poverty in April, but this number fell to around 4 million individuals in August and September after the expiration of the \$600 per week unemployment supplement," Columbia's Center on Poverty & Social Policy said in a paper published Thursday.

Congress passed four packages of CARES — or the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act — in the second quarter of this year, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as PPP for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid to qualifying US citizens and residents.

The White House and rival Democrat lawmakers have been locked in a stalemate since on a successive package to the relief, arguing over its size, as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risk losing their jobs without further aid.

"The CARES Act, despite its shortcomings, was initially successful at mitigating what would have been large increases in poverty," the Columbia study concluded. "The expiration of its two major income support provisions has reversed that progress."

Some 21 million American jobs were lost between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. About 2.5 million jobs was added back to the economy in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For all of September, there were just 661,000 job additions.

The US economy itself shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 31.4 percent, after a drop of 3.4 percent in the first three months of the year. In 2019, the economy grew by 4.1 percent.

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China COVID-19 Measures Provide 'Potent' Stimulus to Economy - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - China's containment of the coronavirus and its response to the pandemic has been integral to its economic recovery and ability to post growth for this year, the only country to do so, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Thursday.

"China has taken to containing the pandemic very decisively and with measures to provide a potent stimulus for the economy," Georgieva said at the 42nd meeting of the IMF-led International Monetary and Financial Committee. "And we see the outcome in the performance of the Chinese economy and our projections for its future for next year."

The IMF released its latest World Economic Outlook this week, predicting global gross domestic product will contract by 4.4 percent in 2020. China was the only economy to show a positive growth in 2020, with its gross domestic product forecast to expand 1.9 percent this year, according to the report.

For 2021, the IMF projects Chinese GDP will grow by 8.2 percent.

Despite the praise from the IMF, as well as the World Health Organization, for its handling of the pandemic and response, China has been sharply criticized by the United States, particularly President Donald Trump, who accuses it of creating and spreading the COVID-19 which he calls the "China virus".

Georgieva told Thursday's IMF meeting 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 Working to Create International Protocols to Restore Safe Travel Amid Pandemic - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is working on establishing international rules to restore international travel amid the COVID-19 pandemic, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview with Paul W. Smith of The Paul W. Smith Show on WJR Detroit on Thursday.

"We're working to create a set of international protocols so that we can do the right thing, make sure people stay safe and healthy, but make sure also that people can do the things they need to do to take care of their families and their businesses," Pompeo said.

US airlines continue to crisscross the nation with a surfeit of empty seats while some international flights are nearly empty. Congress required that airlines continue servicing existing routes as a condition to receive \$25 billion in grants under the CARES Act.

The global airline industry is among the worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic as most countries were forced to shut borders and ground flights to curb the contagion.

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Colorado Sees Record Early Voter Turnout in US Presidential Election - Secretary of State

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - 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.

Dozens of other states have scrambled to put similar systems in place in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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#### Lockheed-Martin Adds 3 Companies to Team Developing Mid-Range Hypersonic Glider

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Three US defense companies joined an effort to create a hypersonic glide missile as subcontractors, the main developer Lockheed Martin said in a press release on Thursday.

"Joining prime contractor Lockheed Martin on the OpFires Phase Three Weapon System Integration program are Northrop Grumman, Dynetics, and Electronic Concepts & Engineering, Inc (ECE)," the release said.

The Defense Advance Research Products Agency (DARPA) said it contracted with Lockheed Martin to develop an intermediate-range ground-launched system of hypersonic boost glide projectiles capable of penetrating modern enemy air defenses.

The technology requires a rocket to boost a glide missile to the edge of outer space at hypersonic speed, where a maneuverable glider is released to plunge toward Earth at speeds of at least five times the speed of sound.

Northrop Grumman will develop a solid fuel motor for the lift rocket, Dynetics will create the glide projectile's outer shell and fins, while ECE will provide additional booster power, the release said.

The United States is scrambling to create maneuverable hypersonic weapons capable of overwhelming existing missile defenses in response to successful demonstrations of the technology by both China and Russia.

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#### UN Special Representative Arrives in Kyrgyzstan to Help Find Way Out of Crisis - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 15 (Sputnik) - UN Special Representative for Central Asia Natalia Gherman arrived in Bishkek on Thursday to discuss a peaceful resolution of the ongoing political crisis in Kyrgyzstan, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"The Special Representative for Central Asia, Natalia Gherman, had a visit plan to Kyrgyzstan. She arrived in Bishkek not long ago this evening, and tomorrow, she will start to engage with relevant actors in support of what is obviously a peaceful solution to the current situation," Dujarric said on Thursday.

Gherman was scheduled to meet with Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who announced his resignation earlier.

Dujarric said that in light of the announcement, Gherman's agenda is being worked on and she will meet all key actors in the country.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has called on Kyrgyzstan to ensure that decisions on the way forward for the country have been reached, Dujarric added.

Protests started in Kyrgyzstan after the October 4 parliamentary election. Supporters of the political parties that did not make it to parliament charged that election fraud took place and seized the parliament building. Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov resigned shortly after the protests started.

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#### Eight in 10 Biden Backers Plan to Vote Early, Nearly Double Trump Voting Plans - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US voters plan to take advantage of early voting by a two-to-one margin, with Biden voters far more likely to cast ballots before Election Day than those backing President Donald Trump, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Thursday.

"Eighty percent (80%) of those who plan to vote for Democrat Joe Biden are likely to vote early, compared to 46% of those who support President Trump," a press release explaining the poll said.

Overall, 65 percent of those in jurisdictions where early voting is available say they plan to take advantage of the opportunity, while 33 percent plan to wait until Election Day on November 3, the release said.

Early voting, either by mail or at designated locations likely to be less crowded than Election Day polling centers, has become increasingly popular during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

As a result, many state and local jurisdictions warn that the time-consuming task of hand counting paper ballots sent by mail or placed in designated drop boxes means that results will not be available on Election Day as in previous elections.

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#### Griffiths Says UN Will Soon Convene Yemeni Parties to Discuss More Releases of Prisoners

UNITED NATIONS, October 15 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths said during a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday that he will soon bring the country's warring parties together to discuss additional releases of conflict-related prisoners. Earlier on Thursday, the parties to the conflict started freeing prisoners and detainees in Yemen that is expected to exceed a thousand people.

"However, this prisoners' agreement does not include many thousands of Yemenis detained during the course of this conflict," Griffiths said. "We will soon convene the parties to discuss more releases, in line with the commitment they made in Stockholm in December 2018 to release all conflict-related prisoners and detainees."

Griffiths also called on the Yemeni parties to unconditionally and without delay release all arbitrarily detained civilians, including journalists and political prisoners.

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**Pompeo Says Turkey Increasing Risk in Karabakh Conflict by Giving Resources to Azerbaijan**

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview on Thursday that Turkey is increasing the risk in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by supplying resources to Azerbaijan.

"It is dangerous. We now have the Turks, who have stepped in and provided resources to Azerbaijan, increasing the risk, increasing the firepower that's taking place in this historic fight over this place called Nagorno-Karabakh, a small territory with about 150,000 people," Pompeo said.

Pompeo stressed that the conflict is a longstanding one and its resolution should only come through peaceful negotiations rather than by arms "and certainly not with third party countries coming in to lend their firepower to what is already a powder keg of a situation."

"We're hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing, and that they will all, before that takes place, get the ceasefire right, and then sit down at the table and try and sort through this - that is - what is a truly historic and complicated problem set," Pompeo added.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said in an interview with Sputnik earlier that there is evidence of Turkey deploying militants from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh because Azerbaijan cannot fight there on its own.

Pashinyan also said Turkey's and Azerbaijan's plans to take control of Nagorno-Karabakh with a blitzkrieg have failed so far.

The fighting on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27 with Armenia and Azerbaijan accusing each other of initiating the hostilities. The international community strongly condemned the escalation and called on the parties to settle the conflict via dialogue, while Turkey has pledged its full support for Azerbaijan.

The two sides have agreed to a Russian-brokered humanitarian ceasefire last week, but fighting has continued.

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**Pompeo Says Turkey 'Increasing Risk' in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict by Providing Arms**

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - 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.

"It is dangerous. We now have the Turks, who have stepped in and provided resources to Azerbaijan, increasing the risk, increasing the firepower that's taking place in this historic fight over this place called Nagorno-Karabakh, a small territory with about 150,000 people," Pompeo said.

Pompeo stressed that the longstanding conflict should only be resolved through peaceful talks, not through armed conflict, "and certainly not with third party countries coming in to lend their firepower to what is already a powder keg of a situation."

"We're hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing, and that they will all, before that takes place, get the ceasefire right, and then sit down at the table and try and sort through this -- that is -- what is a truly historic and complicated problem set," the secretary added.

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US Consolidates Hypersonic Research, Testing at Naval Surface Warfare Center - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The US military designated the Naval Surface Warfare Center (NSWC) in the state of Indiana as the primary base for developing hypersonic weapons, the Defense Department announced in a press release on Thursday.

"Leveraging the capabilities at NSWC Crane, we can not only develop effective hypersonic technologies, but we can also develop them affordably at the speed of relevance to our warfighters," Acting Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Mark Lewis said in the release.

The consolidation will allow scientists and engineers to leverage earlier and ongoing investments to help US military services develop hypersonic weapons with more rapid, adaptable and modular upgrades, the release said.

The release coincided with a virtual ribbon-cutting ceremony in which the Pentagon's Joint Hypersonics Transition Office opened the hypersonic research center at the NSWC in Crane, Indiana.

The center now has more than 300 people working on hypersonic weapons, the release said. The center previously received \$150 million to set up an underwater launch test complex, a missile technology evaluation facility, and a simulation lab for hardware and software developers, the release added.

This year, the United States launched an accelerated push to develop hypersonic missiles that fly at speeds between five and 20 times the speed of sound in response to successful demonstrations of the technology by China and Russia.

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Canada Imposes Sanctions on 31 Additional Belarusian Officials - Global Affairs

TORONTO, October 15 (Sputnik) - Canada has imposed sanctions on 31 additional Belarusian officials just weeks after announcing the first round of restrictive measures that included the country's President Alexander Lukashenko, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Thursday.

"Following the adoption of a first set of targeted sanctions in coordination with the United Kingdom on September 29th, the Government of Canada is today listing an additional 31 Belarusian officials under the Special Economic Measures (Belarus) Regulations," the statement said.

The latest round of sanctions have been imposed on Justice Minister Oleg Slizhevskiy, first deputy Interior Minister Gennady Kazakevich and former Attorney General Aleksandr Konyuk, among others.

The updated blacklist brings Canada in line with the United States' and the European Union measures, the statement said.

Last month, Global Affairs announced sanctions against Lukashenko, his son Viktor, Interior Minister Yuri Karaev, Election Commission Head Lidia Yermoshina and seven other officials over their alleged participation in election fraud and for violence against protesters.

Minsk has countered with "symmetric restrictions" against Canadians earlier this month. The Belarusian government has not indicated how it will respond to the latest round of sanctions.

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Global Recovery Underway But Uneven With Significant Uncertainty - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - A global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is underway, but it is partial, uneven and marked by significant uncertainty, requiring relentless fiscal support, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Thursday.

"A tentative global economic recovery is underway, supported by extraordinary macroeconomic policy responses. But the recovery is partial, uneven, and marked by significant uncertainty, with the pandemic continuing to spread in places," Georgieva said at a meeting of the IMF-led International Monetary and Financial Committee. "So the IMF message ... is very clear: Avoid premature withdrawal of support by pulling the plug too soon and risking serious self-inflicted harm."

Georgieva said governments across the world could add an estimated \$9 trillion to global income by 2025 that could help narrow the income gap between richer and poorer nations. "The value of cooperation right now cannot possibly be overstated together," she added.

The IMF managing director also suggested the Group of 20 (G20) nations push forth debt service suspension for at least another six months from end of 2020, with the option of further extensions to enhance recovery.

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UN Hopes to Receive Approval in Next Days to Access Decaying Tanker in Yemen - Official

UNITED NATIONS, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations expects to receive formal approval in the coming days from the Houthi rebel movement to conduct an assessment of the abandoned Safer oil tanker stranded in the Red Sea and undertake initial repairs, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said on Thursday.

"We continue to speak to the Ansar Allah [Houthi] authorities about the SAFER oil tanker. The discussions have accelerated in recent weeks, and we hope to receive formal, written approval in the coming days for the UN mission to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the vessel and to undertake initial repairs," Lowcock said in a Security Council meeting.

The United Nations has been trying to send a technical team to the tanker since July. The vessel, which is loaded with 1 million barrels of crude oil, can break apart or explode at any time and cause an environmental disaster in the region.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in August called on the Houthi movement that controls the nearby area near the tanker to remove any obstacles and grant access to independent technical experts to conduct possible repairs.

An oil spill from the tanker would directly impact as many as 1.6 million people, causing catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects to the area around the port of Al-Hudaydah, according to the United Nations.

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US Charges 14 Members of Transnational Cybercrime Group - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged 14 members of a transnational cybercrime group for involvement in money laundering, the US Department of Justice said in a statement on Thursday.

"Fourteen members of the transnational criminal organization, QQAZZ, were charged by a federal grand jury in the Western District of Pennsylvania in an indictment unsealed today," the statement said.

The charged individuals are from Georgia, Latvia, Belgium, Bulgaria and Romania. Five other persons were charged a year ago, while Russian national Maksim Boiko was arrested in March during his stay in the United States.

The group, acting in cooperation with cybercriminals across the world, was conspiring to launder money stolen from victims in the United States and throughout the world via computer fraud.

"More than 40 house searches were conducted in Latvia, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy, with criminal prosecutions initiated in the United States, Portugal, Spain and the

United Kingdom," the statement said. "The largest number of searches and arrests were carried out in Latvia by the Latvian State Police, and an extensive bitcoin mining operation associated with the group was seized in Bulgaria."

The indictment alleges that the QQAAZZ network laundered or attempted to launder tens of millions of dollars worth of stolen funds from victims of cybercrimes since 2016.

"Comprised of several layers of members from Latvia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Belgium, among other countries, the QQAAZZ network opened and maintained hundreds of corporate and personal bank accounts at financial institutions throughout the world to receive money from cybercriminals who stole it from bank accounts of victims," the statement said.

The members of the group were transferring funds to other bank accounts and sometimes converted them to cryptocurrency. The list of US victims includes dozens of companies, organizations and individuals across the United States.

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Trump Releases National Strategy for Critical, Emerging Technologies - White House

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump moved to protect emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing from theft by other nations with a strategic plan outlining steps to protect a US competitive advantage, the White House said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, President Trump released the 'National Strategy for Critical and Emerging Technologies,'... which outlines how the United States will promote and protect our competitive edge in fields such as artificial intelligence, energy, quantum information science, communication and networking technologies, semiconductors, military, and space technologies," the release said.

The release accused "countries like China and Russia" of stealing technology, coerce companies into handing over intellectual property and diverting civilian technologies for military use.

The release included a link to an 18-page report explaining the plan.

"Our market-oriented approach will allow us to prevail against state-directed models that produce waste and disincentivize innovation, but we will also protect ourselves from unfair competition and prevent the use of our technology for authoritarian activities," the report said. The report includes a number of initiatives, such as greater enforcement of US laws controlling exports of technology with military applications while continuing to allow sharing of such technologies with allied and partner nations.

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Trump Says Not Looking to Speak to Chinese President Xi at Present

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said in an interview on Thursday that he is not looking to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping at present.

"I have not spoken to him in a while because I don't want to speak to him," Trump said. "I haven't spoken to him a while, not looking to speak to him right now."

When asked whether Xi has reached out to him, Trump said, "I do t want to comment on that." "But they want to talk," Trump added.

Relations between the United States and China have significantly deteriorated as the Trump administration accused Beijing of unfair trade practices and a non-transparent way in dealing with the novel coronavirus outbreak, among other issues.

In June, Trump signed into law the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act that allows the US government to impose sanctions over alleged human rights violations of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China.

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Taliban Promises to Reduce Operations Against Afghan Government - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The Taliban opposition movement has promised the United States it will reduce its operations against Afghanistan's authorities that should result in a significantly lower number of casualties, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad said on Thursday.

"Following several meetings General Austin Miller and I had with the Taliban, we agreed to re-set actions by strictly adhering to implementation of all elements of the US-Taliban Agreement and all commitments made. This means reduced numbers of operations," Khalilzad said via Twitter.

The United States and the Taliban - Afghanistan's major armed opposition movement - signed a peace agreement in February that paved the way for reducing violence in the country, a gradual troop withdrawal and for intra-Afghan negotiations that started in Qatar earlier this month. The US government has said the Taliban has since ceased attacking foreign troops, but continues to target Afghan forces.

"At present, too many Afghans are dying. With the re-set, we expect that number to drop significantly," Khalilzad said.

The number of attacks has increased weeks, threatening the peace process, alarming the Afghan people and their regional and international supporters, he said.

Khalilzad promised to actively monitor the implementation of agreements.

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Trump Says Election Result Should Be Available on November 3

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - 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.

"It should be," Trump said when asked whether he expects there should be an election result on November 3.

"We've won a lot of the case," Trump said. "A lot of cases that we've won, they have to give a result... we've won a lot of cases where November 3 is becoming a very important date."

Trump emphasized that all he wants is a fair election.

It is uncertain if the winner of the election will be announced by the end of November 3 because six swing states - Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin - will allow mail-in ballots to arrive late so long as they are postmarked by Election Day.

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Trump Wants Another COVID-19 Relief Deal, But Pelosi Puts 'Politics in the Way' - Mnuchin

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration remains hopeful that an imminent COVID-19 economic stimulus will be provided to the American people, but Democrat lawmakers have put "politics in the way" and are demanding more money in an all-or-nothing approach that makes reaching a deal before the November 3 elections difficult, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said on Thursday.

Mnuchin is scheduled to meet with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other congressional Democrats on the COVID-19 stimulus later in the day.

"A deal would be hard to get before the election, but we're going to keep trying," Mnuchin told CNBC. "I think her all-or-nothing approach doesn't make sense for the American public, and politics are getting in the way."

Congress has passed four packages of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion to workers, loans and grants for businesses and other aid to qualifying US citizens and residents.

Republicans and Democrats have been locked in a stalemate since on a successive package to the CARES Act, arguing over the size of the next relief deal as millions of Americans risk losing their jobs without further aid.

President Donald Trump has offered a \$1.8 trillion package - as opposed to the Democrats' demand for \$2.2 trillion - and accused Pelosi of playing political football ahead of the November 3 election at the expense of people in need. Pelosi has said that a deal should be to the advantage of the American people rather than for Trump's political expediency.

Pelosi and Mnuchin have spoken at least twice since, but have been unable to agree to a deal. Mnuchin told CNBC that there was still \$300 billion left over from the last CARES Act package that could be used to send out checks to financially distressed Americans and prevent struggling businesses from laying off employees. But even that allotted money requires a bipartisan approval to be dispensed, he said.

"With Congressional approval, we could send second payments to small businesses that were hurt and have declining revenues. We have money left over that could do more payroll support so that the airlines could absolutely hire those people back," Mnuchin said.

Mnuchin said another snag has been over language involving aid for coronavirus testing, and he was determined not to allow that item to disrupt the chance of reaching a deal because "we need to get money to the American public now, the people that are most hurting."

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#### Harris Halts Travels After 2 People Involved in Campaign Contract COVID-19 - Manager

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Democratic vice-presidential nominee Kamala Harris canceled her travel plans till next Monday after two people associated with the Biden campaign tested positive for COVID-19, the campaign manager Jen Dillon announced on Thursday. Joe Biden's running mate was not in close contact with either of the individuals - a non-staff flight crew member and Liz Allen, her communications director - during the two days prior to their diagnosis and therefore does not need to quarantine, according to the statement.

"Regardless, out of an abundance of caution and in line with with our campaign's commitment to the highest levels of precaution, we are canceling Senator Harris's travel through Sunday, October 18th, but she will keep a robust and aggressive schedule of virtual campaign activities to reach voters all across the country during this time," Dillon said.

Harris has taken two PCR tests for COVID-19 recently, the latest one on Wednesday, and all were negative. According to the campaign, she was on a flight with both individuals, but wore a mask and never approached them closer than six feet for more than 15 minutes.

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#### Biden Keeps Double-Digit Lead Over Trump, Margin Slips 3 Points Since Debate - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Former Vice President Joe 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 ... finds Biden ahead of Trump by 11 points among registered voters, 53 percent to 42 percent," NBC said in a report explaining the poll.

An NBC/WSJ poll conducted immediately after the first presidential debate on September 29, although the NBC report said that the shrinking gap is within the survey's margin of error.

The poll also shows how the race could tighten in the final days, especially as Trump returns to the campaign trail, the report added.

Polls in the weeks ahead of the 2016 presidential election also showed then-candidate Hillary Clinton with a solid lead over Trump.

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#### USS Ronald Reagan Returns to South China Sea For 'Security Operations' – Navy

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The US naval strike group led by the nuclear-powered supercarrier USS Ronald Reagan has returned to the South China Sea to conduct security operations, Navy spokesperson Sean Brophy said in a statement on Thursday.

"The Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group has returned to the South China Sea for the third time of its 2020 deployment," Brophy said. "The strike group is conducting maritime security operations, which include flight operations with fixed and rotary wing aircraft, maritime strike exercises, and coordinated tactical training between surface and air units."

The group includes the embarked Carrier Air Wing, guided-missile cruiser Antietam, and guided-missile destroyers Halsey and John S. McCain, he added.

"Throughout the 2020 deployment, Ronald Reagan and accompanying units have routinely integrated with ally and partner naval forces to build high-end warfighting readiness through air defense, anti-submarine warfare, maritime strike, and force protection exercises," Brophy said. US Navy sailors will focus on conducting operations in coordination with regional allies and partners. They plan to build up warfighting readiness through air defense, anti-submarine warfare, maritime strike, and force protection exercises, the statement read.

The latest deployment is likely to anger Beijing, which claims the South China Sea as sovereign territory. The United States views the sea as an international waterway and routinely defies China with patrols by US and allied warships in so-called freedom of navigation exercises.

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#### Senate Panel Sets Vote on US Supreme Court Nominee for October 22 - Chairman

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) – The Senate Judiciary Committee agreed to vote on President Donald Trump's nomination of Judge Amy Corey Barrett on Thursday October 22 as the final day of confirmation of hearings began on Thursday, committee Chair Lindsey Graham announced.

"The motion is passed. We will vote on Amy Coney Barrett, the associate justice of the Supreme Court at 1:00 on October 22," Graham said.

Republicans sought a vote on Thursday, however, committee rules allow any senator to request that a nomination be delayed, a rule that is routinely used in similar situations.

The hearing began with Senator Dick Durban as the only Democrat present, who moved to adjourn the hearing, claiming a committee rule requires at least two minority members present to conduct business.

Durban's motion was unsuccessful and other Democrats then joined the hearing, repeating claims that the Senate should wait for the next president to be chosen by voters in the November 3 election before filling the seat vacated by the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

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US Posts 898,000 Weekly Jobless Claims For Week to Oct 10 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Some 898,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, up 6 percent from the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle six months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending October 10, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 898,000," the department said in a news release. It revised claims in the previous week to October 3 to 845,000, putting the current week's rise at 53,000.

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RPT - Canada Gun Ban Case Puts Property Rights to Test - Firearms Group

TORONTO, October 15 (Sputnik) - A legal challenge to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's gun ban could determine whether the country's citizens have property rights, the head of a firearm rights group told Sputnik.

Earlier this year, the Canadian Coalition for Firearm Rights (CCFR) initiated legal proceedings to challenge Trudeau's regulatory ban on 1,500 models and variants of military-grade assault weapons that was introduced in May. Lawful gun owners will have two years to comply with the new regulations under an amnesty clause, the government said.

"We want to know whether Canadians have property rights, actually have the right to truly own anything. And by extension, if the government takes property from people, do they have to justify it at any reasonable level? So that's to me, that's the most important part of this fight," CCFR CEO and Executive Director Rod Giltaca said.

Two separate Supreme Court of Canada judges have previously ruled that firearms possession is a privilege, not a right in Canada.

Giltaca said the ruling will have implications for all Canadians, even his detractors.

"[The case] is highly consequential as not only do you not have a codified right to own firearms in Canada but you have no right to own anything. This usually isn't a problem until you arrive at a time where people applaud the use of government force against each other for political

differences. Unfortunately, we are here now. Someone has to take on this fight. It just so happens it's gun owners," Giltaca said.

The ban was less than two weeks after the deadliest mass shooting in Canadian history, in which a Nova Scotia gunman went on a rampage killing 22.

Giltaca said he is upset that Trudeau used the Nova Scotia tragedy to embark on an ideologically motivated "gun grab" that leaves lawful owners to face the music for the actions of criminals.

"It was immoral and a clear demonstration of the calculating nature of [Trudeau's] Liberal Party of Canada," Giltaca said, adding that gun owners are not asking for much. They are only asking for "reasonable restrictions" and to be left alone, he added.

The ban is already having a profound impact on the sport shooting industry, Giltaca added. He estimates that the ban has impacted approximately 80 percent of the industry, where two-thirds of events utilize the banned guns.

According to Giltaca, the Canadian Sporting Arms and Ammunition Association (CSAAA) are conducting a financial impact study in conjunction with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH). Neither CSAAA nor the OFAH responded to a request for comment.

The CCFR has since filed an injunction seeking an expedited trial process, with growing fears that the case will not make it through the courts before the amnesty clause expires in two years. The next court date has not been set, while affidavits are being filed.

Canada's gun control activists welcomed the regulatory ban, some saying too many people died because of violence. One prominent gun-control activist, Heidi Rathjen, said in an interview that "weapons of war" do not belong in the hands of ordinary people.

Giltaca dismissed these assertions as "propaganda." The CCFR's head says that the semi-automatic rifles in question have been heavily regulated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) - some for over 50 years - and that the regulations also outlaw bolt action rifles and shotguns found on many farms throughout the country.

Canadian gun activists and enthusiasts point out that the ban has done little to curtail rising gun violence in parts of the country.

Weapons including the M16, AR-10, AR-15 rifles and M4 carbine were all designated as prohibited weapons, the government said during a technical briefing following Trudeau's announcement in May. Those found not to be compliant after this time will face charges of unauthorized possession of a firearm, which potentially carries a jail term of up to ten years for a first offense, according to Canada's criminal code.

In Canada's largest city, Toronto, in spite of the coronavirus induced shutdown, gun violence is up nearly 10 percent compared to last year – a year that saw a record-high number of shootings - and there have been 255 shootings since the ban was introduced – a 4.5 percent increase over the same period last year.

A major part of the problem is that a significant proportion of Canadian firearm offenses involve illegally obtained guns, which usually trace back to the United States. In fact, all of the weapons prepared ahead of the 13-hour rampage in the province of Nova Scotia on April 18 were purchased illegally in the United States, according to law enforcement. Despite this, there is little to no data available about the source of seized guns at the national or provincial levels.

"Currently, there is no national repository for this type of information in Canada. The Canadian Firearms Program does not collect or track statistics with regard to the origin of illegal or stolen firearms," the RCMP said in a statement to Sputnik.

According to information obtained by Dennis Young, an independent firearms researcher, through dozens of access-to-information requests, the Ontario Provincial Police also does not maintain a database dedicated to gun tracing.

Data showed that nationally between 2013 and 2017, law enforcement seized 122,214 firearms, of which only 13,548 were legally registered and the percentage of legally owned firearms never exceeded 11 percent in any of the years. The data also showed that firearm seizures declined by 18.6 percent in the five years.

And while national and provincial authorities do not track firearm sourcing, some local jurisdictions, including the Toronto Police Service (TPS), do.

In a statement to Sputnik, TPS spokesperson Connie Osborne said that as of October 2019, Canada's largest municipal police force seized 296 firearms, 222 of which – 75 percent - were traced back to the United States. In 2018, 70 percent of recovered guns were US-sourced, more than double the amount of those traced to back to domestic sources and nearly five times the number of legally owned firearms seized.

As such, the "Trudeau gun grab," as some have described it in the local media, has gun owners up in arms. Last month, over 5,000 gun owners and advocates converged upon Ottawa for one of the largest demonstrations in recent memory in the nation's capital.

Aside from this legal challenge and protests, an e-petition by parliamentarian Michelle Rempel Garner garnered the highest number of signatures in Canadian e-petitions history, although it is unclear whether any legislative proposals will arise from it. Garner did not respond to requests for comment.

The regulatory ban will also cause irreparable damage to multi-billion-dollar industries, the lawsuit alleges. According to the Governor General in Council (GIC), the sport shooting is a near \$1.5 billion industry that creates \$652.12 million in labor income and supports over 14,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Additionally, according to estimates, there are 1.3 million hunters in Canada, who contributed approximately \$3.08 billion to Canada's GDP to \$1.5 billion in labor income.

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## 2020 US Election

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The Democratic Party is ahead in early ballots cast in the crucial swing state of Florida, where more than 1.4 million in total have already voted, while the early turnout in Texas hit new record highs amid escalating enthusiasm ahead of the November 3 presidential election.

### DEMOCRATS LEAD IN FLORIDA EARLY VOTING

Early voting numbers for mail-in ballots received in the battleground state of Florida for the November election show Democrats have come out in greater numbers than Republicans, the

state's Elections Division revealed in data on Wednesday. Data shows Democrats have 402,633 more votes than Republicans as of late Wednesday morning. Republicans have 564,455 votes and Democrats have 967,088 votes so far, the data shows.

In 2016, then-Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton beat then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump by less than 247,000 in early ballots case. However, on Election Day, Trump won Florida by about 113,000 votes, just over 1 percent. Democratic candidate Joe Biden has a 2.7 point lead in the state, according to the Realclearpolitics (RCP) poll aggregator.

#### HIGH TEXAS TURNOUT

The US state of Texas has had a record turnout on the first day of early voting this week, the Office of the state's Secretary of State revealed in data, with a 31 percent increase compared to the 2018 midterm.

A total of 907,054 votes were counted for Tuesday and 691,770 votes were counted on the first day of early voting in the 2018 midterm election, the data shows.

In the 2016 presidential election, Texas had 576,416 votes counted on the first day of early voting. Trump is up by 5 percent among likely voters in the RCP average of six recent polls.

#### VIRGINIA EXTENDS DEADLINE

The deadline for voter registration in the US state of Virginia has been extended until Thursday evening after the state's registration system crashed a day earlier, Governor Ralph Northam said in a statement. Several US lawmakers from Virginia and state officials appealed to Northam to extend the voter registration deadline by 72 hours after the technical problems emerged.

The Virginia Department of Elections said the state's voter registration system went down on Tuesday - the last day for residents to register before the November 3 presidential and general elections - as a result of a cut cable.

#### TRUMP BIDEN PLAN TOWN HALLS

President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden are set to hold competing town hall televised events on Thursday instead of a head-to-head pre-election debate showdown that was scrapped.

The Republican incumbent's questions and answers session with potential voters will be broadcast by NBC from Miami, Florida, while the Democratic nominee is scheduled to appear simultaneously on ABC from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the networks said on Wednesday.

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.

#### TRUMP CONSIDERS FOREIGN POLICY SPEECH

President Donald Trump is considering a sweeping foreign policy speech in advance of the November 3 election in which he may announce a further US troop reduction in Afghanistan, though not a total pullout, which his advisers have resisted, media reports said.

Trump has been pushing his national security advisers to speed up the Afghan troop cuts and other initiatives, NBC News said on Wednesday. The report cited two senior administration officials who were not identified as its prime sources.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Trump, Biden Hold Rival Town Halls Instead of Debate Canceled After COVID-19 Spat

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump and his rival Joe Biden are set to hold competing town hall televised events on Thursday instead of a head-to-head pre-election debate showdown that was scrapped.

The Republican incumbent's questions and answers session with potential voters will be broadcast by NBC from Miami, Florida, while the Democratic nominee is scheduled to appear simultaneously on ABC from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Their one-hour-long duel for TV audiences comes as a replacement of the second presidential debate which was canceled after Trump briefly contracted coronavirus and refused to meet Biden virtually. NBC said it made an arrangement with the US president when top medical experts vouched that he is not contagious anymore.

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.

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.

The US general election will be held on November 3. Trump so far trails Biden in most polls.

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US Navy Underestimates Cost of New Frigate Class Ship by 40% - Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The US Navy underestimated the cost of the first new guided missile frigate ships by 40 percent, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said in a report.

"CBO estimates the cost of the 10 FFG(X) ships would be \$12.3 billion in 2020 (inflation-adjusted) dollars, about \$1.2 billion per ship, on the basis of its own weight-based cost model," the report said on Wednesday. "That amount is 40 percent more than the Navy's estimate."

The US Navy had estimated that the first ten new frigate ships cost \$8.7 billion, which is an average of \$870 million for each ship, the report said.

Several months ago, the Navy awarded a \$795-million contract to Fincantieri Marinette Marine to build the first ship.

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#### US Welcomes Release of 2 American Citizens From Houthi Custody in Yemen - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the release of two US citizens who were held captive by Houthi rebels in Yemen, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press release.

"Today, we join with all Americans in welcoming the release of two US citizens from Houthi custody in Yemen," Pompeo said in the statement on Wednesday. "My deepest condolences go out to the family of a third American who died while in captivity, but whose remains are being repatriated."

Pompeo thanked Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia for helping negotiate the release of the two Americans.

Earlier on Wednesday, media reported a Royal Oman Air Force plane with the two US hostages and the remains of a third American left the Houthi-controlled capital of Sanaa hours after the arrival of more than 200 hundred Houthi militants who had been stranded in Oman.

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#### At Least 52 Syrian Mercenaries Killed Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - Fifty two Syrian mercenaries were killed recently fighting for Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Washington Post reported citing relatives of the deceased.

The mercenaries were recruited by Turkish-backed militias in Syria, the report said on Wednesday.

The family members of two dead Syrian mercenaries told the newspaper the fighters had been promised a monthly salary and flew to Azerbaijan from southern Turkey.

The report said Turkey denies sending Syrian fighters to help Azerbaijan.

The fighting on the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27. 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.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin invited the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia to come to Moscow and meet with their Russian counterpart in a bid to negotiate a ceasefire. The talks resulted in an agreement on a humanitarian ceasefire beginning at noon on October 10.

The pause was for the parties to exchange prisoners and bodies of killed soldiers as well as negotiate additional details of the ceasefire. However, sporadic clashes are still underway as both sides blame each other for violating the ceasefire.

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#### Fauci Says Trump Poses No Threat of Transmitting Novel Coronavirus to Others

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci in an interview said that US President Donald Trump is no longer contagious after being treated for the novel coronavirus.

"I, and one of my colleagues... Dr. Cliff Lane, came to the conclusion... that he [Trump] is of no threat to transmit the virus to anybody else," Fauci told CBS News on Wednesday.

Fauci's determination comes one day before the US President is set to participate in a town hall event amid his presidential campaign in Miami, Florida.

Trump tested positive for the novel coronavirus at the beginning of October and was sent to the Walter Reed Military Medical Center for treatment. The US president was discharged from the hospital three days later and said he feels "great."

Ahead of the Monday campaign rally in Florida, White House Physician Dr. Sean Conley said that Trump had tested negative for the coronavirus on consecutive days and was not infectious to others.

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#### US, South Korea Committed to Denuclearizing Pyongyang - Esper

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea remain strong military allies and both are still committed to the goal of getting North Korea to scrap its nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said, welcoming recently appointed Seoul Defense Minister Suh Wook to the Pentagon.

"We agree that North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs remain a serious threat to the security and stability of the region and the world. In the face of these and other threats, the United States remains committed to the security of the Republic of Korea," Esper said on Wednesday.

Esper said the US government shared South Korea's goal of achieving a fully verified denuclearization of North Korea.

The two leaders also discussed policies to boost their joint deterrent capabilities, increasing cooperation in space and cyberspace and meeting all conditions to transition operational military control of Korean peninsula forces to a South Korean commander. Esper said the process would take time, but would strengthen the alliance, the release said.

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US Approves First Treatment for Ebola Using Monoclonal Antibody Cocktail - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) Inmazeb, a mixture of three monoclonal antibodies, became the first medication approved to treat the deadly Ebola virus, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in a press release.

"Inmazeb was evaluated in 382 adult and pediatric patients with confirmed Zaire ebolavirus infection in one clinical trial (the PALM trial) and as part of an expanded access program conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during an Ebola virus outbreak in 2018-2019," the release said on Wednesday.

In the PALM trial, Inmazeb was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial, in which 154 patients received Inmazeb (50 mg of each monoclonal antibody) intravenously as a single infusion, and 168 patients received an investigational control, the release added.

Of the 154 patients who received Inmazeb, 33.8 percent died after 28 days, compared to 51 percent of the 153 patients who received a control.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the DRC Ebola outbreak over on June 25, 2020. Of 3,480 cases, 2299 people died and 1,162 survived.

The FDA warned that some patients experienced side effects of Inmazeb and said the drug should be discontinued "in the event of a hypersensitivity reaction."

In addition, the release said the drug should not be taken by patients who received the FDA approved vaccine Ervebo, which was widely administered during the DRC outbreak.

The vaccine uses a live but weakened virus and Inmazeb could limit replication of the virus, the FDA said.

Monoclonal antibodies are grown in a laboratory to mimic antibodies produced by the body to fight an infection.

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Canada Gun Ban Case Puts Property Rights to Test - Firearms Group

TORONTO, October 15 (Sputnik) - A legal challenge to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's gun ban could determine whether the country's citizens have property rights, the head of a firearm rights group told Sputnik.

Earlier this year, the Canadian Coalition for Firearm Rights (CCFR) initiated legal proceedings to challenge Trudeau's regulatory ban on 1,500 models and variants of military-grade assault weapons that was introduced in May. Lawful gun owners will have two years to comply with the new regulations under an amnesty clause, the government said.

"We want to know whether Canadians have property rights, actually have the right to truly own anything. And by extension, if the government takes property from people, do they have to

justify it at any reasonable level? So that's to me, that's the most important part of this fight," CCFR CEO and Executive Director Rod Giltaca said.

Two separate Supreme Court of Canada judges have previously ruled that firearms possession is a privilege, not a right in Canada.

Giltaca said the ruling will have implications for all Canadians, even his detractors.

"[The case] is highly consequential as not only do you not have a codified right to own firearms in Canada but you have no right to own anything. This usually isn't a problem until you arrive at a time where people applaud the use of government force against each other for political differences. Unfortunately, we are here now. Someone has to take on this fight. It just so happens it's gun owners," Giltaca said.

The ban was less than two weeks after the deadliest mass shooting in Canadian history, in which a Nova Scotia gunman went on a rampage killing 22.

Giltaca said he is upset that Trudeau used the Nova Scotia tragedy to embark on an ideologically motivated "gun grab" that leaves lawful owners to face the music for the actions of criminals.

"It was immoral and a clear demonstration of the calculating nature of [Trudeau's] Liberal Party of Canada," Giltaca said, adding that gun owners are not asking for much. They are only asking for "reasonable restrictions" and to be left alone, he added.

The ban is already having a profound impact on the sport shooting industry, Giltaca added. He estimates that the ban has impacted approximately 80 percent of the industry, where two-thirds of events utilize the banned guns.

According to Giltaca, the Canadian Sporting Arms and Ammunition Association (CSAAA) are conducting a financial impact study in conjunction with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH). Neither CSAAA nor the OFAH responded to a request for comment.

The CCFR has since filed an injunction seeking an expedited trial process, with growing fears that the case will not make it through the courts before the amnesty clause expires in two years. The next court date has not been set, while affidavits are being filed.

Canada's gun control activists welcomed the regulatory ban, some saying too many people died because of violence. One prominent gun-control activist, Heidi Rathjen, said in an interview that "weapons of war" do not belong in the hands of ordinary people.

Giltaca dismissed these assertions as "propaganda." The CCFR's head says that the semi-automatic rifles in question have been heavily regulated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) - some for over 50 years - and that the regulations also outlaw bolt action rifles and shotguns found on many farms throughout the country.

Canadian gun activists and enthusiasts point out that the ban has done little to curtail rising gun violence in parts of the country.

Weapons including the M16, AR-10, AR-15 rifles and M4 carbine were all designated as prohibited weapons, the government said during a technical briefing following Trudeau's announcement in May. Those found not to be compliant after this time will face charges of unauthorized possession of a firearm, which potentially carries a jail term of up to ten years for a first offense, according to Canada's criminal code.

In Canada's largest city, Toronto, in spite of the coronavirus induced shutdown, gun violence is up nearly 10 percent compared to last year – a year that saw a record-high number of shootings

- and there have been 255 shootings since the ban was introduced – a 4.5 percent increase over the same period last year.

A major part of the problem is that a significant proportion of Canadian firearm offenses involve illegally obtained guns, which usually trace back to the United States. In fact, all of the weapons prepared ahead of the 13-hour rampage in the province of Nova Scotia on April 18 were purchased illegally in the United States, according to law enforcement. Despite this, there is little to no data available about the source of seized guns at the national or provincial levels.

"Currently, there is no national repository for this type of information in Canada. The Canadian Firearms Program does not collect or track statistics with regard to the origin of illegal or stolen firearms," the RCMP said in a statement to Sputnik.

According to information obtained by Dennis Young, an independent firearms researcher, through dozens of access-to-information requests, the Ontario Provincial Police also does not maintain a database dedicated to gun tracing.

Data showed that nationally between 2013 and 2017, law enforcement seized 122,214 firearms, of which only 13,548 were legally registered and the percentage of legally owned firearms never exceeded 11 percent in any of the years. The data also showed that firearm seizures declined by 18.6 percent in the five years.

And while national and provincial authorities do not track firearm sourcing, some local jurisdictions, including the Toronto Police Service (TPS), do.

In a statement to Sputnik, TPS spokesperson Connie Osborne said that as of October 2019, Canada's largest municipal police force seized 296 firearms, 222 of which – 75 percent - were traced back to the United States. In 2018, 70 percent of recovered guns were US-sourced, more than double the amount of those traced to back to domestic sources and nearly five times the number of legally owned firearms seized.

As such, the "Trudeau gun grab," as some have described it in the local media, has gun owners up in arms. Last month, over 5,000 gun owners and advocates converged upon Ottawa for one of the largest demonstrations in recent memory in the nation's capital.

Aside from this legal challenge and protests, an e-petition by parliamentarian Michelle Rempel Garner garnered the highest number of signatures in Canadian e-petitions history, although it is unclear whether any legislative proposals will arise from it. Garner did not respond to requests for comment.

The regulatory ban will also cause irreparable damage to multi-billion-dollar industries, the lawsuit alleges. According to the Governor General in Council (GIC), the sport shooting is a near \$1.5 billion industry that creates \$652.12 million in labor income and supports over 14,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Additionally, according to estimates, there are 1.3 million hunters in Canada, who contributed approximately \$3.08 billion to Canada's GDP to \$1.5 billion in labor income.

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US Schedules Test Flight of 5th Generation Drone Prototype in Late October - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - A stealthy, low altitude 5th generation drone prototype designed for target practice by 5th generation fighter jets and other weapons will make its first test flight later this month, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"To determine whether a system really is combat-credible, we must test it under realistic conditions. That includes putting it up against a realistic threat," the release said on Wednesday. "Right now, we lack a test platform that truly represents fifth-generation air capabilities. Filling that gap as soon as possible is absolutely essential to both testing and training."

Media reports during the system's development said the prototype 5GAT - or 5th generation aerial target - is designed to mimic low-altitude enemy drones with stealth technology and will be used to evaluate air-to-air and surface-to-air weapons designed to defeat attacks by unmanned aircraft.

The 40-foot-long "fighter-sized" drone with a 7.3 meter wings span is powered with two afterburning jet engines. It features a 95 percent carbon fiber airframe and requires a conventional runway to launch and land, according to industry reports.

The Defense Department said tests beginning in late October will demonstrate the drone's flight characteristics, subsystems' performance and the aircraft's auto-takeoff and auto-landing capabilities. Subsequent flight tests will progressively expand the aircraft's flight envelope in altitude, speed and greater gravity-force loading.

The prime contractor, Sierra Technical Services, created the prototype in less than three-and-a-half years, using engines and other elements harvested from decommissioned Defense Department military aircraft, as well as an existing US Army ground-based aircraft control system, the release said.

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US Appoints Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has appointed a Special Coordinator for Tibetan issues who will also work on humanitarian matters concerning Tibetans, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement.

"I am pleased to announce the concurrent designation of Assistant Secretary Robert A. Destro of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to serve as the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues," Pompeo said in the statement on Wednesday.

Pompeo explained the Special Coordinator will lead the United States' efforts to promote dialogue between China and the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, or his representatives, as well as work to protect the Tibetans' religious and linguistic identity.

"He also will support US efforts to address the humanitarian needs of Tibetan refugees and to promote sustainable economic development and environmental conservation in Tibetan communities on the plateau," he said.

Pompeo said the United States remains concerned about China's repression of the Tibetan community.

"Special Coordinator Destro will engage Tibetan leaders and international partners and experts to address these issues," he said.

The Special Coordinator will also carry forward the State Department's engagement with and support for Tibet's global diaspora and their many courageous advocates for the protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief, Pompeo added.

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**Barrett Says Can Not Opine if US President Can Pardon Himself Without Knowing Pardon Scope**

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US Supreme Court nominee Amy Barrett said during her confirmation hearing that she can not opine on whether the US president can pardon himself for committed crimes without her going through the judicial process to decide on the issue, but emphasized that no one is above the law.

"That question may or may not arise, but it's one that calls for legal analysis of what the scope of the pardon power is," Barrett told the US Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday. "So because it would be opining on an open question, when I haven't gone through the judicial process to decide it, it's not one on which I can offer a view."

Two years ago, Trump said via Twitter that he had the right to pardon himself but suggested will use that power. While Trump has not spoken lately about how far-reaching his presidential powers were, he has not changed his stance on the issue.

Barrett said during her confirmation hearing that the Supreme Court "can't control whether or not the president obeys."

However, she said the Supreme Court rulings have the force of law and "no one is above the law."

The Supreme Court lacks enforcement power and relies on the other branches of government to execute its decisions, Barrett added.

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**PREVIEW - Trump, Biden Hold Rival Town Halls Instead of Debate Canceled After COVID-19 Spat**

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump and his rival Joe Biden are set to hold competing town hall televised events on Thursday instead of a head-to-head pre-election debate showdown that was scrapped.

The Republican incumbent's questions and answers session with potential voters will be broadcast by NBC from Miami, Florida, while the Democratic nominee is scheduled to appear simultaneously on ABC from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Their one-hour-long duel for TV audiences comes as a replacement of the second presidential debate which was canceled after Trump briefly contracted coronavirus and refused to meet Biden virtually. NBC said it made an arrangement with the US president when top medical experts vouched that he is not contagious anymore.

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.

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.

The US general election will be held on November 3. Trump so far trails Biden in most polls.

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#### US First Lady Says Her Son Barron Contracted Coronavirus, But Now Tests Negative

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) - The First Family's youngest son Barron contracted the novel coronavirus earlier this month, but has since tested negative, First Lady Melania Trump said in a statement.

Both, US President Donald Trump and the First Lady had contracted the novel coronavirus, but have recovered.

"Naturally, my mind went immediately to our son. To our great relief he tested negative, but again, as so many parents have thought over the past several months, I couldn't help but think 'what about tomorrow or the next day?'" she said on Wednesday. "My fear came true when he was tested again and it came up positive. Luckily he is a strong teenager and exhibited no symptoms."

The First Lady added that 14-year-old Barron previously exhibited only minor symptoms, but has recently tested negative.

On Saturday, Trump delivered a speech telling his supporters that he was feeling great. The US president said later on Wednesday that his son Barron was also feeling great.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 15 (Sputnik) -

#### NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and they spoke in favor of intensifying the political process on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.
- \* US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters that he has discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh with US President Donald Trump earlier in the day.
- \* The United States calls on Azerbaijan and Armenia to observe the ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Pompeo told reporters.
- \* Armenian Defense Ministry spokesperson Shushan Stepanyan said that the Azerbaijan's armed forces targeted a hospital in northwestern Karabakh, where civilians were receiving treatment.
- \* Azerbaijan's armed forces gained control of several more settlements in the Karabakh region, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said.

#### US-RUSSIA TALKS ON ARMS CONTROL

- \* It is too early to speak of any definitive agreements with the United States on the extension to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday.
- \* Russia is ready to include two weapons out of five in the New START with the United States, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- \* US Secretary Mike Pompeo told reporters that he discussed on Wednesday arms control negotiations with President Donald Trump, who is focused on the matter and would welcome an agreement with Russia.

#### SITUATION IN SYRIA

- \* A warehouse with ammunition and chlorine-containing substances, prepared by militants, was blown up in Syria some 13 kilometers north of Idlib, the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Syrian Reconciliation said at a daily briefing on Wednesday.
- \* During a phone conversation, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan noted the effective nature of coordination between Russia and Turkey on Syrian and Libyan issues, the Kremlin said.
- \* A source in the Syrian opposition denied to Sputnik on Wednesday that Syrian fighters from the conflict-hit breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region had returned, noting that each of them has a six-month contract.

#### CORONAVIRUS DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Russia's second registered coronavirus vaccine EpiVacCorona is planned to be introduced for civilian use on January 1, 2021, according to the data of the vaccine registration certificate published in the state registry of medicines.
- \* French President Emmanuel Macron announced a curfew amid the second wave of COVID-19 in a number of cities, including Paris, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse.

#### UNREST IN KYRGYZSTAN

\* The office of Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov refuted on Wednesday statements about his resignation within three days.

\* Jeenbekov announced that he would step down after parliamentary elections in the republic, the Kyrgyz leader's spokeswoman, Tolgonay Stamaliev, told Sputnik.

\* Jeenbekov and new Prime Minister Sadyr Japarov are currently engaged in negotiations on the head of state's resignation, Stamaliyeva told Sputnik.