

08/12/21 Thursday

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US Supreme Court Strikes Down Part of New York State's Ban on Evictions During Pandemic by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In addition to roughly 11 million Americans behind on rent due to pandemic-related financial issues, another 1.75 million homeowners are also behind on their mortgages, threatening a tsunami of evictions once federal protections are lifted.

The US Supreme Court struck down part of New York state's ban on tenant evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic less than three weeks before it was due to expire.

The highest US court issued an injunction blocking part of New York's eviction ban, the COVID-19 Emergency Eviction and Foreclosure Prevention Act of 2020 (CEEFFPA), that had been challenged in June by a petitioning group of New York landlords. The enjoined part of the law allowed tenants to self-certify that they were suffering from financial hardship during the pandemic, meaning they will now have to seek court approval of their hardship claims in order to successfully block an eviction under New York law.

CEEFFPA is already set to expire on August 31.

The law was passed separately and in addition to the nationwide ban issued by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). While the [CDC's new ban](#) issued earlier this month has been challenged in a DC federal court, that court has not yet ruled, so for the moment, the New York landlords who petitioned the Supreme Court are not yet able to [begin removing tenants](#) behind on their rent.

The [ruling was 6-3](#), with liberal justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, and Stephen Breyer dissenting against the conservative majority. The trio disagreed that the New York law violates landlords' right to due process of law by denying them the right to challenge their tenant's claim of financial hardship in court, arguing rather that it delays that right but doesn't deprive them of it. The justices also disagreed that a requirement to provide factual information to tenants amounted to compelled speech, which would be a violation of free speech, or that the landlords had even demonstrated sufficient hardship as to require the high court's intervention.

"While applicants correctly point out that there are landlords who suffer hardship, we must balance against the landlords' hardship the hardship to New York tenants who have relied on CEEFFPA's protections and will now be forced to face eviction proceedings earlier than expected," Breyer wrote in the dissenting opinion.

"This is troubling because, as noted, New York is in the process of distributing over \$2 billion in federal assistance that will help tenants affected by the pandemic avoid eviction ... Ending CEEFFPA's protections early may lead to unnecessary evictions. It is impossible - especially on the abbreviated schedule of an application for an emergency injunction - to know whether more hardship will result from leaving CEEFFPA in place or from barring its enforcement," he added. Last week, Albany lawmakers [moved to extend](#) the moratorium another two months, until October 31, in the face of rapidly expanding numbers of COVID-19 cases as the virus' Delta

variant sweeps the country. The Empire State has only distributed a small amount of the roughly \$2.7 billion set aside for emergency rental assistance, and the lawmakers argued the government needed more time to get the money into tenants' hands. However, it is only enough to cover the needs of 200,000 families.

According to the [New York Times](#), more than 500,000 households in New York City alone - a city of 8.1 million - are behind on their rent, and more than 62,000 evictions have been filed in the city since the pandemic began in March 2020, with between 400 and 800 new evictions being filed every week.

Nationwide, an [estimated 11 million](#) Americans are behind on their rent, being protected from eviction by the federal eviction ban or by state bans similar to New York's, with estimates of their collective rent owed totaling between \$60 billion and \$73 billion. The US federal government has appropriated [some \\$46 billion](#) in emergency rental assistance. However, like New York state's government, it has only distributed a tiny fraction of the funds.

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China's COVID-19 Outbreak Hits Ningbo, Shuttering World's Largest Cargo Terminal
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the rush to find better immune protections against the Delta variant of COVID-19, China's medical products regulator has signed off on trials combining the country's indigenous SinoVac vaccine with a new vaccine by the US-based company Inovio. SinoVac has also reported trials on a third shot show substantial immune benefits.

Ningbo-Zhoushan, the world's busiest port facility in terms of throughput, ground to a halt on Thursday after a port worker tested positive for the Delta variant. Faced with its largest outbreak in a year, China has implemented sweeping controls to ensure the virus isn't allowed to reach the point of uncontrolled spread.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), an employee at the port's Meishan Terminal tested positive on Wednesday with an asymptomatic COVID-19 infection. The worker is 34 years old, and had received both doses of the SinoVac vaccine. According to the [Global Times](#), they became infected through contact with foreign cargo or personnel, not via community transmission.

The Times noted that Yu is under hospital quarantine and all close contacts are "under epidemic management."

A local official told the state-owned news outlet that while the SinoVac vaccine "is highly effective in preventing serious illness," its protection rate is not 100%. The same has been found of a number of other COVID-19 vaccines in high use, including the American Moderna vaccine and the German-American Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

In response, the entire Meishan area was locked down, including the terminal and associated warehouse, but also public venues such as cafes, theaters, gyms, and houses of worship.

It's a familiar scene playing out in cities all across China as daily COVID-19 cases spiked over the last two weeks to more than 100 cases per day and more than 1,000 since the outbreak began on July 20, proliferating in more than 40 cities.

Following a model established in Wuhan in early 2020 that successfully blunted the initial outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the government has ordered people to stay home as warehouses work to send daily necessities to their front doors and health officials conduct massive COVID-19 testing sweeps and contact tracing operations.

On Wednesday, for the second day in a row, the Chinese National [Health Commission reported](#) a declining number of cases - 81 new cases, compared to 111 the day before and 143 the day before that. The decline reflected both fewer indigenous cases and few imported cases.

However, the shuttering of Meishan Terminal, which according to the Global Times is presently expected to be indefinite, will only reinforce an already declining volume of shipping entering the country after several typhoons swept through the region.

Typhoon In-Fa, which [hammered the Yangtze](#) River Delta last month as a category 2 storm, caused severe disruptions in the East China Sea and brought record rainfall to central China, exacerbating the flooding in Henan Province that killed [more than 300 people](#). Some of China's busiest ports were temporarily closed, including Ningbo and Zhoushan, the latter of which In-Fa's eye passed over, but also Hangzhou and Shanghai, the latter of which is home to the world's busiest container port.

Those cities have also had their own coronavirus-related shutdowns and delays that threaten to create a global bottleneck and to make congestion in Hangzhou Bay, where cargo ships for all the region's port cities anchor in wait, even worse. [According to Reuters](#), on Thursday the queue for Yangshan Port topped 30 ships while the line to access Zhoushan's port was more than 40 ships, leading some shipping companies to redirect their vessels to other cities.

"While the congestion is rampant around major global ports, currently all attention is on China... because its ports are so large in scale, and exports starting from there would impact the overall global supply chain," Akhil Nair, vice-president of global carrier management and ocean strategy at Seko Logistics, told SCMP.

On Wednesday, the Shanghai International [Port Group inaugurated](#) a new empty container dispatching center intended to relieve the worst cause of shipping delays by making available empty containers for new cargo.

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Fauci Warns All Will 'Likely' Need Booster Shots Eventually Amid Vaccine 'Diminution'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Annual influenza vaccines - flu shots - have become a cash cow for drugmakers, with some 175 million distributed in the 2019-2020 flu season. With the likelihood that COVID-19 will become similarly endemic, drugmakers like Pfizer have salivated at the profits to be made from "durable demand" for their life-saving vaccines.

The Biden administration's chief medical adviser, Dr. Anthony Fauci, warned on Thursday amid talk of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) preparing to approve a booster shot of some COVID-19 vaccines for people vulnerable to the Delta variant that, eventually, everyone is likely to need another shot as the immune effects wear off.

"We're already starting to see indications of some diminution" of vaccine effectiveness, [Fauci told CBS](#) on Thursday. The medical adviser heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), an elite medical research facility outside Washington, DC.

However, he cautioned that "we don't feel at this particular point that, apart from the immune-compromised, we don't feel we need to give boosters right now."

"No vaccine, at least not within this category, is going to have an indefinite amount of protection," Fauci [later told NBC](#).

While the FDA is reportedly preparing to give emergency authorization for a third dose of the respective COVID-19 vaccines made by Pfizer- BioNTech and Moderna in order to boost the immune systems of vulnerable people, the corporate pharmaceutical giants have been preparing for the eventuality of booster shots for months.

In May, [Sputnik reported](#) that Pfizer's long-term business plans project massive profits from COVID-19 drugs as the world goes "from a pandemic situation to an endemic situation," as Pfizer CFO Frank D'Amelio put it in [a March phone call](#) with investors.

"[F]actors like efficacy, booster ability, clinical utility will basically become very important" when the primary buyers of vaccines become private customers instead of governments. "We view that as, quite frankly, a significant opportunity for our vaccine from a demand perspective, from a pricing perspective," D'Amelio said, noting that in "normal market conditions," the price per shot could rise by up to 900%.

Indeed, earlier this month, the [Financial Times reported](#) that in supply contracts with the European Union for billions of shots over the next two years, Pfizer hiked its prices by more than 25% and Moderna upped its prices by 10%. The deals came in the wake of worries about the effectiveness and safety of the cheaper vaccines made by Johnson & Johnson and Oxford-AstraZeneca, the latter of which has been the primary vaccine for the EU and many of its partners.

A [new study](#) by the Mayo Clinic, posted earlier this week on the medRxiv preprint server but which is awaiting full review, has claimed that Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine is more effective against the Delta variant of the virus than Pfizer's vaccine is. The study found that across some of the worst-hit US states in July, breakthrough infections happened in almost twice as many people who received the Pfizer vaccine as had received the Moderna vaccine.

As several First World nations with high vaccination rates - including the United States - began considering giving out third shots amid rapid spreading of the Delta variant in July, the World Health Organization urged them to focus on the larger goal of primary vaccination first, as billions of people in the Third World still haven't gotten any kind of COVID-19 vaccine.

While the US has fallen behind Western Europe as well as its own rapid vaccination goals, for which it bought up some 1.5 billion shots, it is still well ahead of the poorest parts of the world.

[According to WHO](#) Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, just over 50% of the US population is vaccinated, but just 1.6% of the continent of Africa is vaccinated, and of the roughly 4 billion vaccine doses administered worldwide, 80% "have gone to high- and

upper-middle income countries, even though they account for less than half of the world's population."

The WHO chief [warned last month](#) that the growing disparity was leading to a "two-track pandemic - the haves are opening up, while the have-nots are locking down."

Despite Ghebreyesus' comments, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the dilemma was a ["false choice."](#) as the Biden administration believes it can "do both."

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USGS Detects Massive 7.5-Magnitude Earthquake in South Atlantic, Says No Tsunami Danger to Islands

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) reported on Thursday it had detected an earthquake in the South Atlantic with a magnitude of 7.5 on the Richter scale. Despite the size of the quake, no tsunami warning has been issued.

According to [USGS data](#), the earthquake occurred deep in the Earth's crust, at a depth of 63 kilometers. Its location was about 100 kilometers northeast of Montagu Island, part of the South Sandwich Islands, or 2,150 kilometers southeast of Stanley in the Falkland Islands. St. Helena is of about equal distance. The islands are a British dependency.

As the location was especially remote, with the closest spots of land being desolate volcanic islands, some of which are active, no one has reported having felt the earthquake on the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre's website as of yet.

Another smaller earthquake [of magnitude 5.9](#) was reported about 15 minutes later at a depth of 47.3 kilometers inside the Earth and about 50 kilometers north of the first quake. A few minutes after that, [a third quake](#), also of magnitude 5.9, was also reported; however, it was much shallower, at just 18.9 kilometers deep.

A fourth quake was reported soon after the third, but several hundred kilometers to the south, near the Southern Thule Islands, which are also uninhabited. The quake [was magnitude 5.7](#) in strength and occurred at a depth of 48 kilometers into the Earth. More than a dozen such aftershocks came in the hours after the initial quake, scattered along the length of the fault line east of the South Sandwich Islands and falling between the strengths of 4.6 and 5.8 magnitude.

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US Deploying 3,000 Troops to Afghanistan to Assist in Departure of Embassy Staff, Pentagon Reveals

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the US State Department ordered the evacuation of staff at the US embassy in Afghanistan in light of the "security conditions" being posed by the increasing control by the Taliban. Officials, however, have also stressed that the move is part of ongoing withdrawal procedures from the war-torn nation.

The US Department of Defense revealed on Thursday that it will be sending approximately 3,000 US troops to Afghanistan as part of the branch's efforts to assist in the departure of diplomats and other American civilians in the country.

The Thursday revelation was announced by Pentagon spokesperson Adm. John Kirby, who also informed reporters that the additional troops would be on top of the 650 US troops already stationed in Afghanistan.

Kirby explained that 3,000 troops would be deployed to the Hamid Karzai International Airport over the "next few days," and that a reserve force of 3,500 to 4,000 will stage out of Kuwait. Forces being ordered to Kuwait will be pulled from a combat team based out of North Carolina's Fort Bragg.

"This is about prudent preparations," the admiral underscored when asked about the high troop figures. "We believe it's appropriate to the security situation."

Kirby went on to explain that officials are also anticipating the possibility of undertaking airlifting measures in order to quicken withdrawal procedures for diplomats, as well as applicants for the newly-launched visa process in Afghanistan.

When asked whether Kabul airport would be used as a headquarters to stage airstrikes, Kirby rejected the notion and emphasized that "there is no planning and no discussion of using Hamid Karzai International Airport as a base for conducting airstrikes in and around Afghanistan."

The official further detailed that there are no current plans to break the August deadline. "The drawdown itself is still on track to be complete by August 31," he stressed.

Kirby's remarks came just moments after Ned Price, spokesperson for the US State Department, confirmed to reporters staff at the US embassy would be [drawn down](#). Although Price did not provide specifics in terms of titles and positions, he did state that it would be personnel who are able to perform their functions elsewhere.

"This is not a full evacuation," he stressed, before going on to underscore that the US embassy would remain open at its current location, and that departure procedures in no way indicate that the US is "abandoning" Afghanistan amid the increase in the Taliban's reach.

In addition to the US troops being sent to the region, UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace also revealed on Thursday that the British government will be dispatching about 600 troops to Afghanistan in order to aid in evacuation procedures.

The latest developments come on the heels of repeat announcements from the Taliban that the group has gained control of 11 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals. In fact, earlier Thursday, the militant force declared that it had captured the [Herat](#) police headquarters after fighting Afghan security forces.

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Photos: Panamanian-Flagged Vessel Splits in Two Off Northern Japan After Running Aground

2nd Regional Coast Guard Headquarters - Japan Coast Guard/Handout
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Local authorities have stated that the shipping mishap prompted no fatalities or injuries, and that no other cargo vessel was involved in the incident. Officials are focusing their efforts on containing the oil spill, which has been labeled minor.

A cargo ship transiting the northern waters off the coast of Japan shockingly split in two just moments after running aground, it was revealed by officials with the Japan Coast Guard on Thursday.

Citing a spokesperson for the agency, Reuters [reported](#) that the Panamanian-flagged cargo ship ran into troubles toward the end of its travels from Thailand as it entered the Hachinohe harbor in northern Japan and ran aground.

Although the 39,910-tonne cargo ship named "Crimson Polaris" did manage to free itself, it eventually split in two and began leaking oil after being forced to anchor nearby as a result of poor weather.

Aerial photos shared by the local authorities show the vessel's stern tipped upwards as the other half of the carrier is seen listing to port. Coast Guard officials had noted that neither part of the vessel has shifted since the disaster unfolded.

AFP [reported](#) that all crew aboard the wood chips carrier were safely rescued from the scene, and that the incident resulted in no fatalities or injuries. In all, the crew was composed of 21 Chinese and Filipino sailors.

A view of the Panamanian-registered ship 'Crimson Polaris' after it ran aground in Hachinohe harbour in Hachinohe, northern Japan, August 12, 2021, in this handout photo taken and released by 2nd Regional Coast Guard Headquarters

Approximately three patrol boats and three aircraft were deployed to assess the situation, with authorities currently directing their efforts toward containing the oil leak that has grown to be about 5.1 kilometers long and about 1 kilometer wide.

The extent of the environmental impact from the oil leak remains unclear amid the ongoing investigation.

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Britney Spears' Dad Agrees to Eventually Step Down as Conservator Once 'Several Matters' Are Handled
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The former teen pop idol was placed under a conservatorship in February 2008, with her father granted full control over her life and career. The move came about after the musician endured a public breakdown.

Jamie Spears, father of the famed pop singer Britney, has agreed to eventually step down as conservator to the musician's estate after having served in the position for some 13 years, it was revealed on Thursday.

Citing new legal filings, TMZ [reported](#) that Spears is choosing to resign from the conservator post after having been "the unremitting target of unjustified attacks."

"There are, in fact, no actual grounds for suspending or removing Mr. Spears as the Conservator of the Estate ... and it is highly debatable whether a change in conservator at this time would be in Ms. Spears' best interests," the filing reportedly reads before detailing Spears' decision to step down.

"[Spears] does not believe that a public battle with his daughter over his continuing service as her conservator would be in her best interests," the document reads. "So, even though he must contest this unjustified Petition for his removal, Mr. Spears intends to work with the Court and his daughter's new attorney to prepare for an orderly transition to a new conservator."

In a [statement](#) to NBC News, Spears' legal team confirmed to the outlet that his decision to step aside was not effective immediately, as he intends to have some "matters" dealt with before fully parting from the arrangement. The motion itself states that "there are no urgent circumstances justifying Mr. Spears' immediate suspension."

"Regardless of his formal title, Mr. Spears will always be Ms. Spears' father, he will always love her unconditionally, and he will always look out for her best interests," the filing goes on to note. However, that wasn't all that was detailed in the latest court documents. The legal filing also goes on to take a dig at Lynne Spears, Britney's mother, in light of her recent remarks in the ongoing conservatorship saga. Spears accuses his former wife of having no credibility on account of not being involved in the conservatorship.

Lynne and her younger daughter Jamie Lynn Spears have both come under fire of late over criticism that both failed to provide sufficient support for the "...Baby One More Time" singer. In fact, after giving her testimony in court, Britney slammed her younger sister for performing her music at awards shows, writing in an [Instagram post](#) that "my so-called support system hurt me deeply !!!! This conservatorship killed my dreams."

Mathew Rosengart, who serves as Britney's lawyer, responded to the development and told TMZ that while the team was "pleased" about the move, they are "not necessarily surprised that Mr. Spears and his lawyer finally recognize that he must be removed."

"We are disappointed, however, by their ongoing shameful and reprehensible attacks on Ms. Spears and others," he added.

"We look forward to continuing our vigorous investigation into the conduct of Mr. Spears, and others, over the past 13 years, while he reaped millions of dollars from his daughter's estate, and I look forward to taking Mr. Spears's sworn deposition in the near future. In the interim, rather than making false accusations and taking cheap shots at his own daughter, Mr. Spears should step aside immediately."

A timeline for the conservatorship change is not clear, however, it's worth noting that a full removal of the conservatorship will be a multi-step process that will require the courts to agree on its dissolution. Efforts to close the conservatorship were previously roadblocked by the pop icon's father.

The push to remove the arrangement gained renewed attention in the public sphere after the release of the "Framing Britney Spears" documentary, and more recently with Britney's own testimony that saw the singer [describe in detail](#) the abusive conservatorship.

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Facebook Strikes Again: Tech Giant Censors Latest Hunter Biden Story Months After New York Post Saga
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, social media giants Facebook and Twitter were blasted after it became clear both platforms were deliberately disabling the sharing of articles regarding a missing laptop and emails said to belong to US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter. At the time, officials explained the move as part of an effort to limit the spread of misinformation.

Months after being blasted for having intentionally limited the sharing of articles tied to Hunter Biden, Facebook is at it once again, but this time the focus isn't on reports from the New York Post. Now, it's all about an exclusive report released by the UK's Daily Mail.

The story at the center of this latest case was [published](#) on Wednesday and centers around newly surfaced video footage of a naked Hunter Biden in bed with an unidentified woman who is described as being a "prostitute."

In the footage, Biden is heard claiming that "Russian drug dealers" stole one of his laptops as part of a blackmail scheme when he was partaking in illicit drugs during a 2019 stay at an unspecified hotel room in Las Vegas, Nevada.

"They have videos of me doing this," Biden is heard claiming in a video recording obtained by the Daily Mail, referring to his habit of filming his sexual encounters. "They have videos of me doing crazy f***ing sex f***ing, you know."

The story, especially in light of the fact that footage was pulled from a laptop owned by Biden, raises strong similarities to the October 2020 case in which the New York Post shared an exclusive story purporting to reveal Biden's 2014 invocation of his father's name during business dealings in Ukraine.

As soon as that October story hit the airwaves, Facebook and Twitter immediately went into lockdown mode, with Twitter outright banning it and Facebook instantly reducing its shareability while third-party fact checkers reviewed the details. At one point, the New York Post saw its Twitter account blocked by the tech giant as it refused to delete its post.

Although both platforms later backtracked, it seems at least Facebook is now back to its old ways of censoring content linked to the Biden White House, specifically the Biden family. Garland Nixon, a host on Sputnik Radio's Critical Hour who also happens to serve on the national board for the American Civil Liberties Union, recently found out that Facebook was back to its old practices the hard way - when he was put in Facebook jail for three days for sharing that Daily Mail exclusive.

"I put it up and didn't think anything of it," Nixon recalled, detailing that the Facebook post didn't include any offensive remarks, just a note harking back to the Steele Dossier. "I go to post again, and it says 'restricted, you can't post.'"

Nixon noted that Facebook offered absolutely no explanation on why he was given the three-day sentence. "It didn't give me an opportunity to challenge it, it didn't have any reasons why - it didn't have anything," he stressed.

He shared the same post on Twitter, but unlike Facebook, that post is still active on his feed. While Nixon remains uncertain about the whys in the sudden move, he did hint that the White House's past remarks about how it's reviewing Facebook posts could have played a role in the matter.

In mid-July, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [revealed](#) to reporters that the Biden administration was taking on its own initiative to flag misinformation posts about the COVID-19 pandemic and the US' ongoing vaccination campaign.

That flagging operation effectively "puts a chilling effect on Facebook," Nixon said of the White House's flagging effort, "where now Facebook knows the White House is going to be searching at all times ... and they're just preemptively striking anything that the White House wouldn't want to see."

As Nixon is left with questions about his stay in Facebook jail, he isn't alone in raising concerns about the platform's deliberate censorship.

Mark Dankof, a member of the US National Rifle Association and investigative journalist, told Sputnik that Facebook and Twitter are "engaging in a brand of woke censorship which has turned both into the enemies of the First Amendment and Freedom of Speech for Americans specifically and others generally."

"The censorship of the New York Post exposé on Hunter Biden and his laptop by Facebook and Twitter during the 2020 American Presidential Campaign, and the present censorship of the new UK Daily Mail article on Hunter Biden's corruption and recklessness underscore that these social media outlets are under the spell of the Democratic Party establishment, the American Deep State, the Israeli Lobby, and anyone who responsibly questions their official narrative on [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Russia, Iran, COVID-19 vaccines and masks, Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ, the Second Amendment, American Empire wars, you name it," he added.

Facebook has yet to respond to Sputnik's inquiries about its reasoning behind blocking Nixon.

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Texas State Senate Passes GOP-Backed Voting Bill After 15-Hour Filibuster
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Democratic Texas Sen. Carol Alvarado took to the Senate floor on Wednesday and launched a filibuster against the GOP-backed voting reform bill that, in part, calls for a ban on 'drive-thru voting,' enhanced restrictions on mail-in voting and added protections for partisan poll workers. After Alvarado set forth a 15-hour filibuster, the Texas Senate recorded an 18-11, party-line vote in favor of passing SB 1.

During the filibuster, which began around 5:50 p.m. local time on Wednesday, Alvarado was prohibited from eating, drinking, or going to the bathroom. She was also required to keep speaking for the duration, and could not sit, or lean.

Alvarado used her hours-long protest to highlight her grievances with SB 1, which has gone through several versions since it was introduced earlier this year.

"Senate Bill 1 slowly, but surely, chips away at our democracy. It adds, rather than removes, barriers for Texas seniors, persons with disabilities, African Americans, Asian, and Latino voters from the political process. LBJ said the Voting Rights Act stripped away the last major shackle of the fierce ancient bond of slavery," Alvarado testified.

"Senate Bill 1 is a regressive step back in the direction of that dark and painful history," Alvarado added.

Republican Texas Sen. Bryan Hughes, who authored the bill, has dismissed Democrats' concerns, and asserted that the new legislation actually makes it easier to vote and hard harder to cheat.

He also claimed the voting reform bill has improved as time has progressed.

"It cracks down on those vote harvesters, those paid political operatives who try to coerce voters, who try to mislead voters, who try to get in between the voter and her ballot," Hughes said prior to the filibuster on Wednesday, [as reported by the Texas Tribune](#). "We will not have that in Texas."

Alvarado also spoke with the outlet on Wednesday, explaining that her filibuster comes as a Democratic effort to "use every tool in the toolbox" and highlight "what is at stake."

The matter now advances to the Texas House of Representatives, which has been unable to reach quorum [since the beginning of the second special legislative session](#).

Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan, a Republican, [has signed the arrest warrants of 52 House Democrats](#), Texas State District Judge Brad Urrutia (D) has granted a temporary restraining order to several fugitive Democrats.

As of this article's publication, no Texas state lawmakers have been jailed in relation to arrest warrants signed by Phelan.

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Chicago's Top Doc: 'No Evidence' Lollapalooza Was a Super-Spreader Event, Despite 385,000 Attendees

by [Evan Craighead](#)

An estimated 385,000 individuals flocked to Grant Park in Chicago, Illinois, this year to attend the Lollapalooza music festival, which notably required attendees to show proof that they were fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or recently tested negative for the contagious disease.

Dr. Allison Arwady, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Health, announced on Thursday that there is "no evidence" Lollapalooza - which ran from July 29 to August 1 - was a "super-spreader" event in terms of the coronavirus.

"The bottom line is, we've not seen anything that has surprised us related to this Lollapalooza outbreak," she told reporters.

According to official counts, some 385,000 individuals attended the multi-day event, and around 90% of attendees showed proof that they were vaccinated against COVID-19.

As of the Thursday news conference, 203 attendees of the music festival tested positive for COVID. This translates to approximately 0.05% of attendees.

"If we were more than 90% vaccinated as a city, as a country, we would probably be done with COVID," Arwady said.

She also explained that the city normally records individuals who need emergency services, and decided this year to extend that tagging system for two weeks after the festival.

"Every year we see people come to the emergency department for substance use issues, heat problems or dehydration," she noted.

However, no additional emergency cases associated with COVID have been posted.

The determination provided by Chicago's top doctor comes contrary to the expectations of many netizens and even doctors, like Chicago-based maternal and child health epidemiologist Theresa Chapple-McGruder, [who told Time Magazine](#) that the event "had the makings" of a super-spreader event.

"We've seen data suggesting that vaccinated people are more likely to be breakthrough cases now than at other points in time with other variants, and that vaccinated people who are breakthrough cases may spread just as easily as unvaccinated people," she said. "Those two pieces really lead to the concern about community transmission."

According to Arwady, the COVID results from Lollapalooza show that individuals going to large events should get vaccinated, as it "helps reduce [the] risk for everybody."

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Weinstein Avoids Sexual Battery Charge in CA Rape Case as Statute of Limitations Runs Out by [Evan Craighead](#)

Late last month, disgraced Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein was extradited to Los Angeles, California, where he appeared in court and pleaded not guilty to four counts of both forcible rape and forcible oral copulation, as well as two counts of sexual battery via restraint and one count of sexual penetration by use of force.

Weinstein, 69, scored a legal victory on Thursday after Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Lisa B. Lench granted the defense motion to dismiss a charge related to a May 11, 2010, incident in which Weinstein allegedly assaulted a woman in a Beverly Hills hotel room.

The charge was dismissed because it had surpassed the 10-year statute of limitations.

Although Weinstein was originally slapped with the related charge in January 2020, prosecutors did not get an indictment until some six months later, around two months outside the statute of limitations.

The 69-year-old, who is alleged to be in poor health, was seen donning shackles and LA County jail attire while sitting in a wheelchair.

Lench told prosecutors that it is possible that, in the event a grand jury is reconvened, the charge could be accepted via the new indictment.

She did not expound on any recommendations.

"I can't tell you what to do," the judge said to prosecutors.

However, according to Alan Jackson, Weinstein's defense attorney, prosecutors will be unable to salvage the charge.

"That count is going away and it's never coming back," he said outside the courthouse on Thursday. "It's gone forever."

Nevertheless, Weinstein faces up to 140 years behind bars in this particular trial, and was sentenced last year to 23 years behind bars for sexual assault and rape.

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Fresh US Intelligence Data Suggests Russian Efforts to Meddle in 2022 Election - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is getting regular intelligence reports which claim that Russia is attempting to interfere in 2022 US midterm elections, CNN reported citing current and former officials familiar with the matter.

According to the outlet, Moscow's strategy is evolving and is becoming more sophisticated than the one it used in the 2016 election. Russian operatives are allegedly trying to promote debate in the US over vaccines and face masks, the sources said, adding without elaboration, that the upcoming vote is not the only target.

In late July, Biden warned of a possible threat of war with Russia stemming from cyberattacks and claimed that Russia was already meddling in next year's midterm elections in the United States during remarks to the US national intelligence community.

In March, the US intelligence community accused Russia of interfering in the 2020 US election. The Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement that the accusations are groundless and that no facts or concrete evidence have been provided to support those claims.

A US intelligence report on foreign threats to the 2020 elections claims that Putin authorized efforts to undermine the then-Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

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White House Announces Additional Funds to Tackle COVID-19 in Rural Areas Across US

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is announcing new actions to boost the fight against the novel coronavirus in rural areas across the United States, including measures to cover healthcare providers' costs associated with the pandemic, White House said on Friday.

"Today, the Biden Administration is taking action to improve the health of rural communities by making millions of dollars in American Rescue Plan funding available to meet immediate COVID-19 needs," White House said in a release. "This funding, which will also help rural hospitals stay open in the long run and improve the care provided to rural communities, builds on efforts the Administration has already taken to help rural communities tackle the COVID-19 crisis and improve access to health care."

In the coming weeks, the US Department of Health and Human Services will start providing \$8.5 billion in compensation to healthcare providers serving rural Medicare, Medicaid, and Children's

Health Insurance Plan patients for lost revenue and increased expenses related to the coronavirus pandemic, the release said.

The US Department of Agriculture is going to distribute \$500 million to create the Emergency Rural Health Care grant program with \$350 million for helping rural hospitals increase access to COVID-19 vaccines and testing and \$125 million in grants to implement models that help improve the long-term viability of rural health care providers, according to the release.

The list of new actions also includes measures to train new rural health care providers, expand access to pulmonary rehabilitation services, and increase access to telehealth services, the release also said.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden called on Congress to take necessary steps to lower prices for prescription drugs, including measures to ensure Medicare can negotiate prices for a group of expensive drugs that are not subject to any market competition.

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RPT - Canada's Trudeau Expected to Call Election as Early as Sunday - Sources

TORONTO, August 12 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will pull the trigger on a national election within the next week, potentially as early as Sunday, sources familiar with the matter told Sputnik.

Canada has lived under the swirl of election threats for nearly a year, with the country being on the edge of a call to the polls on several occasions, beginning with the heated discussions regarding the prime minister's COVID-19 recovery plan last September.

The "writ drop" will come on Sunday, one of the sources told Sputnik.

Another source purported that the election would be called immediately following the conclusion of the Nova Scotia general election, set for Tuesday, August 17. Analysts say the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the governing Liberal Party are attentively watching the race in Atlantic Canada, a Liberal stronghold where the party holds 27 out of 32 federal seats.

The rules set out by Elections Canada mandate that campaigns last between 36 and 50 days, meaning the earliest Canadians will go to the polls is September 20. However, one of the sources said that at least one of the opposition parties would be seeking an extended campaign of 50 days, which would see the election date set for some time in early October.

It is widely believed that Trudeau will ask newly minted Governor General of Canada, Mary Simon, to dissolve parliament citing non-confidence in the incumbent Liberal government on the part of opposition parties.

The leaders of Canada's two largest national opposition parties have called on Trudeau to press pause on an election call and put political interests aside ahead of an expected fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We shouldn't be rushing to an election," Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole said during a press briefing in Belleville, Ontario on Monday, adding, "Mr. Trudeau always seems to put his own self-interest ahead of the interest of Canadians."

New Democrat Party Leader Jagmeet Singh echoed O'Toole's comments, saying that the election "does not have to happen," while slamming Trudeau's alleged reasoning for calling an election. Singh stressed that the Liberals have been able to pass key legislation throughout the pandemic, rejecting the prime minister's claims that "toxicity" and "obstructionism" are hampering the minority parliament.

Trudeau's Liberals hold a nationwide lead as large as 12 percent, according to some of the latest polling numbers, which projections say would be enough for Trudeau to regain the majority mandate he lost in the 2019 federal election.

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RPT - Venezuelan Envoy's Defense Team 'Confident' W. African Court Will Block Extradition to US

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Cape Verde (or Cabo Verde) justices during proceedings on Friday are likely to rule against extraditing Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab to the United States given the lack of any basis in international law, defense attorney Jose Manuel Pinto Monteiro told Sputnik.

Cape Verde authorities, acting on behalf of the United States, arrested Saab during a fuel stop last July for alleged sanctions violations. Saab was en route to Iran on a humanitarian mission as special envoy for the Venezuelan government when he was apprehended in Cape Verde, an island-nation situated off West Africa's coast.

"My team and I are confident, given the precedents of the Constitutional court itself, that the Honorable Justices will recognize these and decide against extradition," Pinto Monteiro said.

"There is simply no basis for Cabo Verde to flout its obligations under the international law."

The court, he added, has an obligation under the 1961 Vienna Convention to respect in transitu immunity of special envoys.

"Whether Cabo Verde knew about Mr. Saab's diplomatic status at the time of his apprehension, it is certainly aware of it now, given the numerous oral and written representations by both Venezuela and Iran," the defense attorney said.

Moreover, he added, considering there is no bilateral extradition treaty between the United States and Cape Verde, the court enjoys "tremendous discretion as to whether to grant such requests." Not to mention the fact that the US Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals is likely to uphold Saab's claim given how strongly in transitu immunity is anchored in American law.

"It would be a travesty for Cabo Verde not just to violate its solemn international law obligations, but send a special envoy of the two countries with which it enjoys excellent relations - Venezuela and Iran - to the United States, only to have US courts release Mr. Saab," Pinto Monteiro said.

In addition to ties with Iran and Venezuela, he warned that a decision to extradite could damage the island-nation's relations with other regional partners who are members of the African Union.

On Thursday, the court accepted as new evidence a revised warrant with Saab's name on it to replace the original, which was under someone else's. Pinto Monteiro said the prosecutor submitted this "new evidence" a month ago without notifying the defense team.

In the meantime, the defense lawyer said his client is under house arrest and being watched by up to 50 heavily-armed guards despite the Supreme Court of Cape Verde declaring that Saab is "free."

On Thursday, the Deputy Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department, N.T. Lakhonin, condemned Saab's detention which he said could set a harmful precedent. He warned that the desire of US authorities to extradite a third-country diplomat may have a "boomerang effect" and a negative impact on international relations.

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US Supreme Court Sides With New York Landlords, Blocks State Eviction Ban - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court blocked New York's eviction moratorium because it violates landlords' due process of law, a court document revealed.

The Supreme Court in a 6-3 decision said New York's eviction moratorium violates the Court's longstanding teaching that no man can be a judge in his own case, in accordance with the Due Process Clause, court documents said after the ruling on Thursday.

The moratorium prohibits New York landlords from legally challenging tenants who claim financial hardship in order to avoid eviction.

The eviction moratorium is slated to expire on August 31, according to court documents.

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Austin, Blinken Tell Ghani US Remains Committed to Afghanistan's Security - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The heads of the Pentagon and State Department told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani the US administration is reducing the presence of American civilian personnel in Afghanistan, but stressed the United States will maintain strong diplomatic and security relations, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke today with President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani to stress that the United States remains invested in the security and stability of Afghanistan in the face of violence by the Taliban," Price said on Thursday. "The Secretaries both emphasized that the United States remains committed to maintaining a strong diplomatic and security relationship with the Government of Afghanistan."

Blinken and Austin informed Ghani the United States is reducing its civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation and will accelerate the pace of Special Immigration Visa (SIV) flights for Afghan interpreters, Price said.

Both secretaries discussed with Ghani the current security situation in Afghanistan, efforts to curb the violence, and ongoing diplomatic efforts with the Taliban, Price said.

The US officials emphasized the United States will maintain a strong diplomatic and security relationship with the Afghan government. Blinken added that the United States remained committed to support a political solution to end the conflict.

The Taliban have captured several important provincial capitals in Afghanistan over the last several weeks, including the country's second largest city Kandahar earlier on Thursday.

The Defense Department announced that it will send several thousand troops back into Afghanistan to assist with the departure of US embassy staff and accelerate the processing of Special Immigrant Visa applications for Afghans who assisted US forces.

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Biden Must Provide Afghans With Air Support Beyond August 31 - US Senate Minority Leader

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden should commit to providing air support to Afghan forces beyond the original August 31 end date due to escalating violence and a Taliban (banned in Russia) advance in the country, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said.

"President Biden should immediately commit to providing more support to Afghan forces, starting with close air support beyond August 31st. Without it, al Qaeda and the Taliban may celebrate the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks by burning down our Embassy in Kabul," McConnell said in a statement on Thursday.

The Taliban have captured several important provincial capitals in Afghanistan over the last several weeks, including the country's second largest city Kandahar earlier on Thursday. The Defense Department announced that it will send several thousand troops back into Afghanistan to assist with the departure of US embassy staff and accelerate the processing of Special Immigrant Visa applications for Afghans who assisted US forces.

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China Says Canadian 'Megaphone Diplomacy' Will Fail, Warns Against 'Irresponsible Remarks'

TORONTO, August 12 (Sputnik) - Canada's attempts to overwhelm China through coordinated diplomatic pressure is bound to fail, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said in response to Ottawa's tough talk following the sentencing of two Canadian nationals.

On Wednesday, a Chinese court sentenced Michael Spavor to 11 years in prison for espionage, a day after another court upheld the death sentence for Canadian Robert Schellenberg for drug smuggling. Ottawa strongly condemned the verdicts, with the Foreign Minister calling the case against Spavor "a mock sham trial."

"A word for the Canadian side: the attempt to conduct "megaphone diplomacy" and gang up on China failed in the past, and will never have its way in the future. We urge relevant countries to follow the spirit of the rule of law, respect China's judicial sovereignty, and stop making any irresponsible remarks," Hua said during a press briefing on Thursday.

The verdicts were condemned by the United States as well as several European Union officials, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Hua said China is governed by the rule of law, stressing that the Canadians in question were handed sentences for serious transgressions and that their rights were respected throughout the legal process.

Spavor and Michael Kovrig, another Canadian facing espionage charges, have been in custody for more than 900 days. Ottawa maintains that the "arbitrary" detentions came in retaliation for Canada's arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) -

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United Kingdom will send about 600 troops to Afghanistan to assist in the evacuation of its citizens and former Afghan employees, Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said on Thursday.
- * The United States will deploy 3,000 infantry soldiers to Kabul within the next 24 to 48 hours to ensure the safety and security of US civilian personnel in Afghanistan, spokesperson John Kirby said in a press briefing on Thursday.
- * The United States anticipates having less than a 1,000 troops on the ground supporting the US embassy in Kabul once the mission to secure the city's airport and evacuate Afghan immigrants is completed, Kirby said.
- * The Defense Department plans to facilitate the reduction of US troops and personnel in Afghanistan by August 31, Kirby said.
- * The US will move approximately 1,000 military personnel to Qatar in order to hasten the processing of Afghan Special Immigrant (SIV) Visa applicants, Kirby said.
- * EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell called on the Taliban (recognized as terrorist organization and banned in Russia) to immediately stop violence in Afghanistan and return to full-fledged negotiations with the government.

OPEC FORECAST FOR OIL MARKETS

- * The OPEC's forecast for oil demand growth has remained unchanged from the previous month's assessment and stands at 6 million barrels a day (mbd) this year, while in 2022 the demand will increase by 3.3 mbd year-on-year, the organization said in a report on Thursday.
- * OPEC has upgraded 2021 forecast for Russia's oil and condensate production by 0.15 million barrels a day (mbd) to 10.78mbd, while in 2022 the country's output will grow significantly - by 1 mbd - to 11.78 mbd, the organization said.
- * The compliance of OPEC member states with the oil cuts deal last month reached 115%, a 5 percentage point (pp) decrease in comparison with June as the oil producers continue to gradually increase their output, the figures from the OPEC monthly report indicated.

TRUMP TAX RETURNS

* The US House Committee on Oversight and Reform appealed the court ruling that authorized its members to access only some of former President Donald Trump's tax records, the court filing revealed on Thursday.

* Trump submitted an appeal to a ruling by a district court judge on Wednesday that authorized members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee to access some of his tax records.

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Wall Street's S&P500 and Dow Extend Record High Streak on Upbeat US Jobs Data

NEW YORK, August 12 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's S&P500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average indices extended their record high streak on Thursday after upbeat weekly US jobs data prompted investors to buy aggressively into blue chip and industrial stocks.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, hit an all-time high of 4,461 before settling just shy of that peak at 4,460, for a gain of 12 points or 0.3 percent on the day.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange that lists mostly industrial stocks, also made a historic peak at 35,511 points. It finished the session at 35,500 for a gain of 15 points or 0.04 percent.

Big tech stocks lagged blue chips and industrials as they had since the start of the week as investors exhibit more caution toward them due to what has been cited as overvaluation concerns.

The Nasdaq Composite, which includes tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed up 51 points, or 0.4 percent, at 14,816. Unlike the S&P500 and Dow, Nasdaq has not hit a record high all week, peaking on Thursday at an intraday high of 14,824.

Stocks started the week on a sluggish note on worries that resilient jobs growth for July might prompt the Federal Reserve to pull the plug earlier than thought on its \$120 billion of monthly stimulus to the economy and markets.

As the week progressed, caution turned into optimism, with investors throwing their lot behind the S&P500 and the Dow Jones, sending them to one record high after another. Friday's weekly update on jobless claims again suggested steady labor market recovery from the pandemic, prompting the flow of more investor dollars into stocks.

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US Special Envoy Feltman to Visit Djibouti, Ethiopia, UAE August 15-24 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will meet with senior officials from Djibouti, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates to discuss

regional peace when he visits the three countries August 15-24, the State Department said on Thursday.

"U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will travel to Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates from August 15 to August 24. Special Envoy Feltman will meet with senior officials in the three countries to discuss opportunities for the United States to promote peace and support the stability and prosperity of the Horn of Africa," the State Department said in a release.

Ethiopia is experiencing a conflict in one of its northern provinces. Fighting in the Tigray region broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia.

In late 2020, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said that Eritrea, which was technically at war with Ethiopia until 2018, had sent troops across the border in support of Ethiopian government forces.

An estimated two million of Tigray's six million people are reported to have fled their homes, and an estimated 900,000 people are likely experiencing famine conditions. In addition, about 33,000 severely malnourished children are projected to face imminent risk of death if more aid is not forthcoming to the people of Tigray.

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China Currently Building Missile Field to House New ICMBs - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - China is constructing a new missile field that will contain over 100 new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the Washington Times reported on Thursday citing sources.

US intelligence agencies purportedly identified the construction project using satellite imagery collected over the last several weeks. It appears to be equal in size to two other new missile fields found by the US.

The silos at the missile site will be used to house Dongfeng-41 ICBMs, which can carry up to 10 nuclear warheads each and travel up to 14,000 kilometers, or roughly 8,700 miles, the Post reported.

The head of US Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard on Thursday described the growth and modernization of Chinese forces as "breathtaking."

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Deputy Secretary Sherman, China Ambassador to US Review Tianjin Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and China's new ambassador to Washington Qin Gang have met to review the talks Sherman held with Beijing officials in Tianjin last month, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"On August 12, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with appointed Ambassador from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the United States Qin Gang to welcome him to Washington, DC," Price said in a readout.

Sherman and Qin reviewed issues from the deputy secretary's meetings with PRC officials in Tianjin last month, the readout said.

Sherman also "expressed the United States' commitment to continuing discussions," Price added.

In the Tianjin talks on July 26, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Sherman that the United States, more than any other country in the world, should think about its own compliance with international rules.

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Afghan Peace Talk Participants Urge for Acceleration of Peace Process - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - A group of participants in the Afghan peace talks that took place in Doha, Qatar, have issued a joint statement calling for accelerating the peace process between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban movement (banned in Russia). "Participants agreed that the peace process needs to be accelerated as a matter of great urgency on the basis of the negotiations of concrete proposals from both sides," the joint statement said.

The joint statement was issued by the representatives of China, Uzbekistan, United States, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Qatar, United Nations, Germany, India, Norway, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan as well as the European Union.

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Doha Parties Say They Will Not Recognize Any Afghan Gov't Imposed Through Military Force

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Participants involved in the Afghan peace talks in Doha reaffirmed they will not recognize any Afghan government imposed through military force, according to a joint statement released on Thursday.

"Participants reaffirmed that they will not recognize any government in Afghanistan that is imposed through the use of military force," the joint statement said.

The signatories in the statement include ambassadors and representatives from China, Uzbekistan, United States, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Qatar, United Nations, European Union, Germany, India, Norway, Qatar, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.

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Doha Talk Participants Call for End to Violence, Attacks in Afghanistan - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Participants of talks about intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, Qatar issued a joint statement on Thursday calling on both sides in the country to end violence such as attacks on provincial capitals and bring peace to the country.

"Participants urged both sides to take steps to build trust and accelerate efforts to reach a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire as quickly as possible," the joint statement said. "Participants called for a stop to violence and attacks immediately in and against provincial capitals and other cities."

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US Not Planning to Add More Troops in Afghanistan if Situation Deteriorates - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning to deploy more troops to Afghanistan if the security situation worsens in the country, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

When asked whether the Pentagon is considering adding more troops if the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, Kirby stated, "No."

"Three infantry battalions are on the way now, and the brigade combat team is being brought over into the region as reserves. So, there are no plans right now for additional forces," Kirby said.

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US to Have Less Than 1,000 Troops to Support Diplomatic Mission in Kabul After Drawdown

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States anticipates having less than a 1,000 troops on the ground supporting the US embassy in Kabul once the mission to secure the city's airport and evacuate Afghan immigrants is completed, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Once this mission is over - I won't get into specific numbers here - but we anticipate having less than 1,000 US troops on the ground to support the diplomatic presence in Kabul," Kirby said during a news conference.

The United States has been reported to send several thousand troops to Afghanistan to secure the airport and expedite the processing of Special Immigrant Visa applications for Afghans who aided the US war effort in the country.

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US Embassy in Kabul Remains Open at Its Current Location - State Department

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US embassy in Kabul remains open at its current location, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Thursday.

"The embassy remains open at the current location," Price said when asked to comment on reports of the possible relocation of the embassy.

He added that the embassy will continue to provide consular services and other priority functions. Also, the embassy will continue working on the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program.

Speaking about the reduction of the US embassy staff in Kabul, Price said that the personnel who are leaving are those who may be able to perform functions elsewhere, including in Washington.

"This is not a full evacuation," he stressed.

The US is in "no way abandoning the people in Afghanistan," Price said, adding that still there will be significant challenges for the US personnel and the US in Afghanistan.

Violent clashes and terrorist attacks continue to ravage Afghanistan despite peace talks between the government and the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) in the Qatari capital of Doha. The Islamist movement has managed to overrun a significant chunk of the country's rural areas and several provincial capitals. The brunt of the hostilities is borne by the civilian population, as casualties continue to mount and with many fleeing their homes in face of the Taliban's advance.

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Demographic Data From 2020 US Census Shows Increasingly Multiracial Nation - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US population is becoming increasingly multiracial as mixed racial demographics begin to increase in number and percentage across the board, the Census Bureau said in a presentation on United States redistricting and demographic data on Thursday.

"Although the white-alone population decreased by 8.6 percent since 2010, the white in-combination population saw a 316 percent change during the same period," Nicholas Jones, Senior Adviser of Race and Ethnic Research and Outreach at the Census Bureau's Population Division, said.

The Hispanic population in the United States similarly experienced a 52.9 percent decline in the percentage of their population that identified as "white alone" since 2010, but saw an increase of 567 percent in the percentage of Hispanics who identified as "two or more races."

The "some other race" population also surpassed the Black or African-American population to become the second largest demographic group in the US, Jones said.

The Census Bureau officials noted that substantial changes in methodology, including how questions are asked and coded, could account for some of the change between the 2020 census and previous ones. They said this census was the most accurate in terms of capturing the best picture of the United States' diverse population.

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US Not Planning to Use Kabul Airport as Base to Stage Airstrikes in Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States does not plan to use the Kabul international airport as a base to stage airstrikes in Afghanistan, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Thursday.

"There is no planning and no discussion of using Hamid Karzai International Airport as a base for conducting airstrikes in and around Afghanistan," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Aims to Facilitate Troop, Personnel Reduction in Afghanistan by August 31 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon plans to facilitate the reduction of US troops and personnel in Afghanistan by August 31, spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We're aiming to facilitate the reduction of these civilian personnel by August 31," Kirby said during a press briefing. "The drawdown itself is still on track to be complete by August 31."

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US Will Deploy First 3 Infantry Battalions to Kabul Airport in 24 to 48 Hours - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department will deploy three infantry battalions to Kabul consisting of some 3,000 personnel within the next 24 to 48 hours to ensure the safety and security of American civilian personnel in Afghanistan, spokesperson John Kirby said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"To enable the safe, orderly reduction, the Secretary of Defense has directed the Department to position temporary enabling capabilities to ensure the safety and security of US and partners' civilian personnel. The first movement will consist of three infantry battalions that are currently in the Central Command Area of Responsibility. They will move to the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul within the next 24 to 48 hours," Kirby said. "Those three infantry battalions will comprise approximately 3,000 personnel, and they will be in addition to those troops that are already in Kabul."

Kirby also said the United States will deploy within the next week one infantry brigade combat team out of Fort Bragg to Kuwait, where they will be postured and prepared to provide additional security at the airport, if needed.

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US to Move 1,000 Troops to Qatar to Accelerate Processing of Afghan Immigrants - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US will move approximately 1,000 military personnel to Qatar in order to hasten the processing of Afghan Special Immigrant (SIV) Visa applicants, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"The next movement will consist of a joint US Army-Air Force support element of around 1,000 personnel to facilitate the processing of SIV applicants. Initial elements will arrive in Qatar in the coming days," Kirby said during a press conference.

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US Must Confront Spread of Domestic Terrorism – Biden

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – The United States must confront the spread of domestic terrorism, President Joe Biden said on Thursday marking the fourth anniversary of the violent riots in Charlottesville.

"We must acknowledge what America's intelligence community has already confirmed, and what Charlottesville and so many other communities know all too well: the most lethal terrorist threat to our homeland in recent years has been domestic terrorism rooted in white supremacy. We cannot ignore it. We must confront the spread of hate-fueled violence in every form," Biden said in a statement.

Biden has equated Neo-Nazis, Klansmen and white supremacists and called them forces of hate and violence.

"With torches in their hands and veins bulging from their necks, they spewed the same antisemitic bile that was heard in Germany in the 1930s and with the same beatings and bigotry we saw in Jim Crow America for nearly a century," he said.

Events in Charlottesville motivated him to run for president, Biden acknowledged.

"My Administration laid out America's first-ever comprehensive effort to take on the threat of domestic terrorism," he said. "We are doing so by countering and reducing online radicalization and recruitment to violence, disrupting the networks that inspire violence by domestic terrorists and hate groups, and providing new resources for communities to build up local resilience against the spread of hate."

A white nationalist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017 descended into violence, with a white nationalist killing a counter-protester and injuring others when he drove into a crowd.

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Canada's Trudeau Expected to Call Election as Early as Sunday - Sources

TORONTO, August 12 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will pull the trigger on a national election within the next week, potentially as early as Sunday, sources familiar with the matter told Sputnik.

Canada has lived under the swirl of election threats for nearly a year, with the country being on the edge of a call to the polls on several occasions, beginning with the heated discussions regarding the prime minister's COVID-19 recovery plan last September.

The "writ drop" will come on Sunday, one of the sources told Sputnik.

Another source purported that the election would be called immediately following the conclusion of the Nova Scotia general election, set for Tuesday, August 17. Analysts say the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the governing Liberal Party are attentively watching the race in Atlantic Canada, a Liberal stronghold where the party holds 27 out of 32 federal seats.

The rules set out by Elections Canada mandate that campaigns last between 36 and 50 days, meaning the earliest Canadians will go to the polls is September 20. However, one of the sources said that at least one of the opposition parties would be seeking an extended campaign of 50 days, which would see the election date set for some time in early October.

It is widely believed that Trudeau will ask newly minted Governor General of Canada, Mary Simon, to dissolve parliament citing non-confidence in the incumbent Liberal government on the part of opposition parties.

The leaders of Canada's two largest national opposition parties have called on Trudeau to press pause on an election call and put political interests aside ahead of an expected fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We shouldn't be rushing to an election," Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole said during a press briefing in Belleville, Ontario on Monday, adding, "Mr. Trudeau always seems to put his own self-interest ahead of the interest of Canadians."

New Democrat Party Leader Jagmeet Singh echoed O'Toole's comments, saying that the election "does not have to happen," while slamming Trudeau's alleged reasoning for calling an

election. Singh stressed that the Liberals have been able to pass key legislation throughout the pandemic, rejecting the prime minister's claims that "toxicity" and "obstructionism" are hampering the minority parliament.

Trudeau's Liberals hold a nationwide lead as large as 12 percent, according to some of the latest polling numbers, which projections say would be enough for Trudeau to regain the majority mandate he lost in the 2019 federal election.

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Canada Donating 10Mln Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine to COVAX – Minister

TORONTO, August 12 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government is donating 10 million coronavirus vaccine doses produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals through the COVAX facility, Minister of International Development Karina Gould said on Thursday.

"Today, I am pleased to announce that Canada will share up to 10 million doses of the Janssen vaccine for distribution to low- and middle-income countries," Gould said during a press briefing. The donation will be made through the COVAX facility, Gould added.

The donation brings Canada's COVID-19 vaccine donation total to 40 million doses out of a 100 million doses pledged by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Ottawa has also contributed \$435.3 million in monetary support for COVAX, Global Affairs Canada said in a press release accompanying the announcement.

Despite an advance order of 38 million vaccine doses from the US pharmaceutical and consumer healthcare giant, no Janssen doses have been distributed to provinces, according to Government of Canada data.

Earlier this summer, Ottawa returned a shipment of 300,000 J&J vaccine doses to the manufacturer it was deemed inadmissible by public health officials. The doses originating from the East Baltimore facility, which had previously produced a faulty batch earmarked for the US vaccination regime, did not meet the country's regulatory requirements.

Canadian officials have expressed doubt about the vaccine's place in the vaccination regime of a country, where over 80 percent of residents have received their first dose and few more are expected to receive their first dose.

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US Defense, State Secretaries Spoke to Afghan President to Coordinate Planning

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday that top diplomat Anthony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke to Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani on coordination planning.

"Secretary Blinken together with Secretary Austin had an opportunity to speak with President Ghani to coordinate our planning earlier today," Price said.

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US to Temporarily Deploy Personnel to Kabul Airport to Assist in Drawdown - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - In the coming weeks, the US Defence Department will deploy additional personnel to the Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul to assist in the drawdown of its embassy staff from the country, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"In order to facilitate this reduction [in civilian presence], the Department of Defense will temporarily deploy additional personnel to Hamid Karzai international airport," Price said.

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US to Further Draw Down Staff At Embassy in Kabul Due to Security Situation - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to further decrease its staff in the embassy in Kabul over the security situation on the ground, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"As we said all along the increased tempo of the Taliban military engagements and the resulting increase in violence and instability across Afghanistan is of grave concern. Our embassy in Kabul has been on ordered departure since April 27 and we've been evaluating security situation every day to determine how best to keep those serving at our embassy safe," Price said. "Accordingly, we are further reducing our civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation. We expect to drawdown to a core presence in Afghanistan in the coming weeks."

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Afghan Peace Talks Members Not Recognizing Any Gov't Imposed by Force in Afghanistan - US

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The participants of the Afghan peace talks in Doha agreed they will not recognize any government-imposed through military force, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday at a daily briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, the participants of the peace talks met in Doha to discuss Afghanistan. Apart from the US and host country, Qatar, they included the United Nations, China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, the UK, the EU, Germany, India, Norway, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. "They agreed that the peace process needs to be accelerated. And they agreed that they will not recognize any government-imposed [in Afghanistan] through military force," Price said.

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US Population Growth Continues to Decline, Urbanization Keeps Increasing - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US population growth overall continued to decline this past decade with most of the increases coming in metropolitan areas, the Census Bureau said on Thursday.

"Since the 1950's, percentage increases have generally been declining each decade. This past decade's 7.4 percent increase was lower than the previous decade's 9.7 percent increase, and was, in fact, the second lowest percent increase ever. Only the 1930's had slower growth," Senior Demographer for the Census Bureau's Population Division Marc Perry said during a presentation on 2020 redistricting and demographic data.

As of April 1, the US population was recorded at roughly 331.4 million people, an increase of 22.7 million since 2010. Perry said that in general, counties with smaller populations tended to lose people, whereas counties with larger populations tended to gain people, pointing towards continued urbanization in the US.

The share of the country's population that resides within metropolitan areas of 50,000 people or more rose from 84.3 percent to 86.3 percent between 2000 and 2020. The percentage of people living in both micropolitan and rural communities both decreased in the same time period.

All 10 of the US's largest cities grew in the last decade, with Phoenix experiencing the greatest increase of 11.2 percent, consequently taking over Philadelphia as the nation's 5th largest city.

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US Dealing With 'Unprecedented' Number of Illegal Migrants on Southern Border - DHS Chief

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is dealing with an unprecedented number of illegal migrants on its southern border with Mexico, US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Thursday.

"We are encountering an unprecedented number of migrants in between the ports of entry at our southern border," Mayorkas said in a press conference in Brownsville, Texas.

US Customs and Border Protection apprehended 212,672 illegal migrants on the southern border in July, Mayorkas announced - another consecutive monthly record of apprehensions.

Illegal crossings on the US southern border have hit a 20-year high under President Joe Biden. Since October, more than 1.3 million illegal migrants have been apprehended on the US southern border.

Mayorkas said the administration is expediting deportation proceedings, even deporting migrants deep into Mexico to prevent them from returning to the US southern border.

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US Charges 7 in \$130Mln Scheme to Sell Counterfeit Goods From China - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US charged seven defendants in a scheme to import generic goods from China, apply brand name labels in workshops and sell the goods to consumers and wholesalers in a scheme valued at more than \$130 million, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"The defendants first imported the goods in generic form from China," Justice said in a press release. "Insignias, emblems, trademarks and other brand signifiers were applied to the generic goods, converting them into purported brand name merchandise. These counterfeit goods were then sold as a part of the scheme directly to consumers and to wholesale buyers. The estimated retail value of the counterfeit-branded goods, had they been genuine, was in excess of \$130 million."

Four of the seven defendants were arraigned before United States Magistrate Judge Sanket Bulsara on and released on a \$200,000 bond. Three additional defendants remain at large, the release added.

The charges against the defendants in a 14-count indictment unsealed on Thursday include conspiracy to traffic and trafficking in counterfeit goods and money laundering, according to the release.

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US to Carry Out Daily Flight Relocating Special Afghan Immigrants - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States will start carrying out daily flight bringing Afghan special immigrants, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"They'll [flights] start daily in the coming days. Our focus is on increasing the tempo of our relocation operations," Price said.

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US Embassy in Kabul Remains Open at Its Current Location - State Department

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US embassy in Kabul remains open at its current location, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Thursday.

"The embassy remains open at the current location," Price said when asked to comment on reports of the possible relocation of the embassy.

He added that the embassy will continue to provide consular services and other priority functions. Also, the embassy will continue working on the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program.

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UN Camp in Northern Mali Sustains Attack, Peacekeepers Injured - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations camp in the northern Kidal region of Mali was attacked and several peacekeepers and civilians were injured, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Thursday.

"Our colleagues of the UN mission there tell us that their camp in Aguelok in the Kidal region was attacked yesterday with multiple rounds of both direct and indirect fire landing near the UN premises," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "UN peacekeepers repelled the attack in which three UN military personnel and two civilians were injured."

The incident, which is the fifth attack on this camp this year, came just a few days after on August 8 gunmen attacked villages and killed at least 51 people in northern Mali.

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Biden Ignores Questions on Afghanistan After White House Speech

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden did not respond to questions about Afghanistan as he walked away from the lectern after delivering remarks at the White House on Thursday.

Biden was speaking on his Build Back Better agenda lowering prescription drug prices.

The Taliban is pushing forward to retake Afghanistan as the US and other foreign troops are withdrawing from the country. The troop withdrawal was one of the points of agreement that the Taliban and the United States reached in Doha in February of last year.

The US Embassy in Kabul said earlier that Americans in Afghanistan should leave immediately due to the deteriorating security situation in the country.

The media reported additional US troops will be deployed to Kabul to evacuate the US embassy personnel.

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First 200Mln of Donated Pfizer Coronavirus Vaccines to Be Shipped This Year - White House

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The first 200 million doses of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine, to be donated worldwide, are set to be shipped by the end of this year, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said on Thursday.

"The 500 million Pfizer doses that were announced in June, to be donated to the world, those shipments do begin this month, and we will ship a total of 200 million by the end of this year, this calendar year," Zients said. "So, everything is on schedule there and shipments are beginning in the next several days."

Zients added that the remaining 300 million Pfizer vaccine doses will be shipped no later than in the first half of 2022.

In May, the Biden administration announced its plans to donate at least 80 million Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to the countries which needed it most to fight the novel coronavirus followed soon by another commitment to donate 500 million Pfizer doses to nearly 100 countries starting in August.

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US House Committee Appeals Ruling That Trump Hand Over Only Some Tax Returns - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Oversight and Reform appealed the court ruling that authorized its members to access only some of former President Donald Trump's tax records, the court filing revealed on Thursday.

"Please take notice that Intervenor-Defendant the Committee on Oversight and Reform of the US House of Representatives hereby appeals to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit from the District Court's memorandum opinion and order granting in part and denying in part Plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment and granting in part and denying in part the Committee's cross-motion for summary judgment, which were issued on August 11, 2021," the court filing said.

Trump also submitted his own appeal to this ruling earlier on Thursday.

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Local US Embassy Staff in Kabul Unable to Seek Refuge Under Threat of Taliban - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Local employees at the US Embassy in Kabul are unable to flee Afghanistan because the Taliban (banned in Russia) control checkpoints and the neighboring countries decline to let them enter, NBC News reported on Thursday citing a cable message from the Afghan capital to Washington.

The report said local US embassy staff face death threats from the Taliban for helping the US government occupy Afghanistan.

The US Embassy in Kabul said earlier that Americans in Afghanistan should leave immediately due to the deteriorating security situation in the country.

Media reported additional US troops will be deployed to Kabul to evacuate the US embassy personnel.

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Biden Says He Stands With Local Officials Opposing Governors' Mask Mandate Bans

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he stands together with local officials defying governors who have instituted face mask bans in their states. "To the mayors, school superintendents, educators, local leaders who are standing up to the governors politicizing mask protection for our kids: Thank you, thank you as well," Biden said. "I stand with you all."

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Florida, Texas Accounted for 40% of New Hospitalizations Over Last Week - White House

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Nearly 40 percent of all new coronavirus related hospitalizations in the past seven days have been registered in the US states of Florida and Texas, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said on Thursday. "Florida and Texas alone have accounted for nearly 40 percent of new hospitalizations across the country," Zients said at a press briefing.

The number of the daily coronavirus hospitalizations in the United States has reached nearly 10,000 over the past seven-day period, an increase of about 30 percent from the prior seven-day period, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said at the briefing.

According to CDC data, the seven-day average of new coronavirus cases in the United States has reached 113,000 per day with the so-called Delta variant accounting for most of the infections.

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US to Send Forces in Kabul to Help With US Embassy Evacuation - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is about to send in troops to Kabul, Afghanistan, to assist with the evacuation of the US embassy staff, Reuters reported on Thursday citing Biden administration officials.

Such assistance is a standard practice in conflict zones, the officials said while speaking on condition of anonymity.

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Trump Appeals Court Ruling to Hand Over Some Tax Records to US Lawmakers - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump submitted an appeal on Thursday to a ruling by a district court judge the previous day that authorized members of the US House Oversight and Reform Committee to access some of his tax records.

The appeal was sent to the District of Columbia Circuit of the US Court of Appeals on behalf of Trump himself, as well as the Trump Organization, Inc. and LLC, the Trump Corporation, DJT Holdings LLC, the Donald J. Trump Revocable Trust as well as the Trump Old Post Office LLC. On Wednesday, Judge Amit Mehta ruled that Congress has authority under the Foreign Emoluments Clause to conduct oversight of federal lease agreements, allowing them to access some of Trump's financial records for 2017 and 2018.

The lawsuit came as a result of an investigation launched by the US House Committee on Oversight and Reform in 2019. The Committee's investigative demand for tax records has been met with opposition by Trump in court. The former US president has said Democrats continue their witch hunt against him and try to prevent him to run for office again.

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Court Jails Former US Drug Enforcement Agent For 13 Years For Corruption - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – A series of corruption-related charges against a former special agent for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) resulted in a 160-month prison sentence for crimes including perjury, obstruction of justice and theft, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

“According to court documents, Chad Allan Scott, 53, of Covington, Louisiana, perjured himself and directed others to commit perjury to obtain a conviction against an alleged drug dealer. He also falsified forms so that he could take possession of a truck bought for him by a drug dealer,” Justice said in a press release. “Scott also stole money and possessions from defendants his DEA group had arrested.

Scott and two other law enforcement officers also conspired to throw evidence of their wrongdoing into swamps outside the US city of New Orleans, the release said.

Scott was charged with nine separate criminal offenses and found guilty in August 2019 and June 2021 after his case was severed into two separate federal trials by Federal District Court Judge Milazzo, according to the release.

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UN Staff Set to Stay in Afghanistan Amid 'Very Difficult' Security Situation - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 12 (Sputnik) - United Nations staff and humanitarian personnel are determined to stay in Afghanistan and support the people there while taking into account the volatile security situation, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Our staff, our humanitarian staff are determined to stay and support the people of Afghanistan. But, obviously, we also are taking into account a very, very complex and difficult security situation, given what's happening across the provinces," Dujarric said.

According to the spokesman, some 3,000 UN staff work in the country of which 300 are foreigners.

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Trump Appeals Court Ruling to Hand Over Some Tax Records to US Lawmakers - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump submitted an appeal on Thursday to a ruling by a district court judge on Wednesday that authorized members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee to access some of his tax records.

The appeal was sent to the DC Circuit of the US Court of Appeals on behalf of Trump himself, as well as the Trump Organization, Inc. and LLC, the Trump Corporation, DJT Holdings LLC, the Donald J. Trump Revocable Trust, and Trump Old Post Office LLC.

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Amazon, Facebook, Google Provide Three-Fourths of Ads on Piracy Websites - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Three big US technology giants - Amazon, Facebook and Google - account for nearly three-quarters of advertisements in a billion dollar market for pirated

movies, video games, live events and other entertainment content, the Digital Citizens Alliance said on Thursday.

"For too long, online piracy has been treated as a nuisance and not the multi-billion dollar industry that baits consumers to expose them to fraud and malware, hurts the reputation of brands and the overall advertising ecosystem, harms creators, and poses new challenges for law enforcement," Digital Citizens Alliance said in a press release.

The release summarized a report based on a year-long investigation by Digital Citizens and the internet security firm White Bullet into how brands and advertising intermediaries help support the operators of illegal piracy websites.

Researchers found that advertisements for Amazon, Facebook, and Google accounted for 73 percent of all major brands advertising that appeared frequently on piracy apps, the report said. The report also said the top websites that offer stolen content generate \$1.08 billion in global annual ad revenue and that roughly one in three piracy websites and apps have risky advertising that exposes consumers to fraud and malware.

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UN Chief Following With Deep Concern Fighting in Afghanistan - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 12 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is following with deep concern the ongoing hostilities in the Afghan provinces of Herat and Kandahar, and is particularly worried about the shift of fighting to urban areas, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General is following with deep concern developments in Afghanistan, including the latest fighting in Herat and Kandahar. We're particularly concerned about the shift of fighting to urban areas, with the potential for civilian harm even greater," Dujarric said.

The United Nations hopes the ongoing negotiations between the representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) will bear progress toward a settlement to the conflict, Dujarric added.

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California Man Convicted After Undercover Feds Foil Bomb Plot at Rally – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – A US federal jury has convicted a resident of the San Fernando Valley in California of plotting to bomb a rally in Long Beach more than two years ago, the Department of Justice said on Thursday.

"A federal jury convicted a California man today for attempting to bomb a rally in Long Beach for the purpose of causing mass casualties," the department said in a press release. "Mark Steven

Domingo, 28, of Reseda was found guilty of providing material support to terrorism and attempting to use of a weapon of mass destruction."

The investigation into Domingo was prompted by his online posts and conversations in an online forum in which he expressed support for violent jihad and a desire to seek retribution for attacks against Muslims, the Justice Department said.

"After considering various attacks – including targeting Jewish people, churches and police officers – Domingo decided to bomb a rally scheduled to take place in Long Beach in April 2019," the release explained.

Domingo was convicted of providing material support to terrorism and attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction. He is scheduled to be sentenced on November 1 and faces a statutory maximum sentence of life in federal prison, the release said.

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Harris Will Meet With Microsoft, Other CEOs to Discuss Biden Economic Agenda - White House

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will meet with big business leaders, including the CEOs of Microsoft, Airbnb, Etsy, Gap and others, to discuss the benefits of the Biden administration's economic agenda, the White House said in a release on Thursday.

"On Thursday August 12th, Vice President Harris will meet with business leaders to discuss how the care provisions in the Build Back Better Agenda will help workers, businesses and the economy. Leaders of Airbnb, Chobani, Etsy, Gap, Microsoft, Patagonia, Seventh Generation to join Vice President Harris at the White House," the release said.

The items for discussion will include investments in child care, paid family and medical leave and long-term care for people with disabilities.

The White House said the investments, which are a part of the Biden administration's "Build Back Better" economic agenda, have received support from more than 275 companies.

The Biden administration said its plan seeks to cut the cost of childcare in half for most families, support the creation of on-site child care facilities, create a national paid family and medical leave program, expand access to home and community-based care and provide low and middle-income families a tax cut based on care expenses.

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US Wholesale Prices up 6th Month in Row Amid Inflation Worry - Labor Dept Data

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US wholesale prices rose in July for a sixth month in a row, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, indicating that inflationary pressure was not going away easily despite a consolidation in consumer prices.

The Producer Price Index, which calculates the average changes in prices received by domestic producers for their output, jumped 6.2 percent from July 2020 while growing by 1.0 percent from a month earlier, according to the Labor Department data.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a 5.6 percent year-on-year growth for July and a 0.5 rise on the month — putting what the Labor Department reported at well above estimates. The so-called PPI came on the heels of this week's unveiling of the CPI, or Consumer Price Index, by the Labor Department for July.

A direct measurement of prices paid by consumers, the CPI rose by 5.4 percent over a one-year period to July but remained virtually unchanged from June. That suggested to economists that inflation may be cresting after appearing to be on a runaway path during the first two quarters of the year.

The US economy itself grew by an annualized rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to COVID-19 related shutdowns and other disruptions.

The Federal Reserve estimates growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. The Fed' has been grappling with higher-than-expected inflation in the near term as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic. The central bank's preferred inflation gauge, the core Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, expanded by 3.5 percent in the year to June — its most in 30 years.

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Trump Says Had Discussions With Taliban That Their Current Actions 'Not Acceptable'

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Thursday that he had personal discussions with the leaders of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) during his presidency to make them understand their current actions in Afghanistan would not be acceptable.

"I personally had discussions with top Taliban leaders whereby they understood what they are doing now would not have been acceptable," Trump said in a statement.

Trump said if he were a president now, the United States would conduct a condition-based withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan.

"It would have been a much different and much more successful withdrawal, and the Taliban understood that better than anyone," Trump said. "What is going on now is not acceptable." The Taliban have been reclaiming large portions of Afghanistan as the US and NATO forces near the completion of their withdrawal from the country.

The US embassy in Kabul has urged all Americans in Afghanistan to leave the country immediately.

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Quad's Senior Officials Discuss Security in Taiwan Strait, Myanmar Crisis - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - Senior officials from the so-called Quad countries, Australia, India, Japan and the US, discussed various issues during a virtual meeting, including the security in the Taiwan Strait and the crisis in Myanmar among others, US State Department announced on Thursday.

"Senior officials from the United States, Australia, India, and Japan met virtually as part of regular Quad consultations to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific region," a State Department release said. "The senior officials discussed the importance of peace and security in the Taiwan Strait, the ongoing crisis in Burma, and reaffirmed the Quad's strong support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific."

The senior officials also spoke about the need for sustained international cooperation to end the pandemic in the Indo-Pacific and to promote economic recovery, the State Department added. "The officials examined ways to advance ongoing cooperation on numerous topics of mutual interest, including strategic challenges confronting the region, countering disinformation, promoting democracy and human rights, strengthening international institutions including the United Nations and related organizations, and supporting countries vulnerable to coercive actions in the Indo-Pacific region," the release said.

The State Department noted that the virtual meeting aims to implement the discussions of the Quad leaders held at the first group's summit in March.

"The four democracies acknowledged that global security and prosperity depends on the region remaining inclusive, resilient, and healthy," the release added. "They welcomed the opportunity to continue regular consultations at the ministerial, senior official, and working levels and to hold a second Leaders' Summit this fall."

Beijing has repeatedly called Taiwan a sensitive issue in its relations with Washington, as China considers the island to be a part of its territory and routinely protests whenever US warships transit the strait.

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Washington Calls on Taliban to Spare US Embassy as Fight for Kabul Nears - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is trying to get assurances from the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) that the militants will not attack the US Embassy in Kabul if the group takes the capital, two American officials told the New York Times on Thursday on condition of anonymity.

The effort is reportedly led by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad who regularly conducts meetings with the Afghan government and the Taliban negotiations teams to facilitate dialogue amid the escalating violence.

The aim of the negotiations is to delay the evacuation of the US embassy personnel amid the deteriorating situation in the country, two officials confirmed.

The report comes as the US embassy in Kabul is urging Americans residing in Afghanistan to leave the country immediately.

The Taliban is pushing forward to retake Afghanistan as US and other foreign troops are withdrawing from the country. The troop withdrawal was one of the points of agreement that the Taliban and the United States reached in Doha in February of last year.

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US Sensor Architecture Not Sufficient to Detect Hypersonic Missiles - STRATCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – US military's sensor architecture is not sufficient to effectively detect hypersonic missiles across the world while Russia today is the leading nation for this technology, US Strategic Command chief Adm. Charles Richard said on Thursday. "It [hypersonic technology] creates challenges that permeate the responsibility of STRATCOM, SPACECOM, NORTHCOM, and every other combatant command," Richard said at the 24th Annual Space and Missile Defense Symposium. "Because of these challenges, our current terrestrial and space-based sensor architecture may not be sufficient to detect and track these hypersonic missiles."

Richard noted that Russia, being the world leader in hypersonic technology continues to heavily invest in the development of hypersonic glide vehicles.

Russia's recent launch of its new hypersonic missile Zircon complicates deterrence efforts, the US Strategic Command chief also said.

On July 19, Russia's Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union Gorshkov frigate successfully fired a Zircon hypersonic missile at a ground target located at a distance of over 350 kilometers (217 miles). Following the launch, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov disagreed with Washington's claims that Russia's new developments in the hypersonic weapons sector could violate strategic stability parity.

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US Embassy in Afghanistan Urges Citizens to Leave Country Immediately - Website

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – The US embassy in Afghanistan urged Americans residing in the country to leave it immediately amid escalating violence wrought on by the Taliban (banned in Russia).

"The US Embassy urges US citizens to leave Afghanistan immediately using available commercial flight options," the embassy said in a warning on its website.

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US Veterans Admin. Mandates COVID-19 Jobs For Most Healthcare Workers Starting Friday

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – Most employees, contractors and volunteers will need to be vaccinated against the coronavirus to continue working for the US Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in a policy that takes effect Friday, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) said on Thursday.

“Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough will expand his previous COVID-19 vaccine mandate Friday, Aug. 13, to apply to most Veterans Health Administration employees and volunteers and contractors who work in VHA facilities, visit VHA facilities or otherwise come into contact with VA patients and healthcare workers as part of their duties,” a VA press release said.

Affected employees will have eight weeks to provide proof of vaccination to their local VHA Occupational Health Office, the release added.

“We’re now including most VHA employees and volunteers and contractors in the vaccine mandate because it remains the best way to keep Veterans safe, especially as the Delta variant spreads across the country,” VA Secretary Denis McDonough said in the release.

COVID-19-related vaccine mandates have rapidly expanded in the US, with the highly contagious delta variant now accounting for a majority of new infections, which have soared to more than 100,000 daily this month.

Earlier in the week, the Defense Department mandated vaccinations for nearly all active duty service members. Similar rules have been imposed in schools, state and local government offices and by many private employers in recent weeks.

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US Strategic Command Chief Says China's Nuclear Modernization 'Breathtaking'

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US Strategic Command chief Adm. Charles Richard said on Thursday that China's nuclear and conventional forces modernization efforts are “breathtaking” and warned that Beijing will soon become a nation “capable of coercion.”

“China's explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking. And the word, breathtaking, may not be enough,” Richard said at the 24th Annual Space and Missile Defense Symposium. “What matters is that they are building the capability to execute any plausible nuclear employment strategy, the last brick in the wall of a military capable of coercion.”

According to Richard's estimates, China will soon, if not already, become a pacing threat in most categories in space, cyber, nuclear and missile defense, and is posing an even larger threat when paired up with Russia.

In May, US Strategic Command chief called for establishing a dialogue with Russia and China on nuclear armaments as well as on boosting mutual transparency and building confidence to mitigate risks that are rapidly expanding.

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Northrop Grumman NG-16 Cygnus Cargo Craft Fully Attached to Space Station

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The Northrop Grumman NG-16 Cygnus cargo ship has been fully installed to the International Space Station (ISS) on Thursday, NASA said.

"Following completion of second stage berthing at 9:42am ET, the Northrop Grumman Cygnus cargo ship is fully attached to the Space Station's Unity module. This concludes the spacecraft's journey to the station, which began with an Aug. 10 launch from NASA Wallops," NASA said via Twitter.

The spaceship docked with the station approximately at 6:07 a.m. EST (10:07 GMT) with the help of the Canadarm2 robot manipulator on Thursday.

The Antares rocket carrying the Cygnus cargo ship was launched from the spaceport in the US state of Virginia on Wednesday. Cygnus will undock from the station after three months, later burning in Earth's atmosphere.

The capsule is loaded with roughly 8,200 pounds of cargo for the ISS crew, including supplies, research equipment and hardware - the heaviest load so far taken by Cygnus. The delivery also includes pizza, apples, tomatoes and kiwi, for the astronauts at the ISS.

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US Health Agency to Require More Than 25,000 Workers to Get Vaccinated

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will require more than 25,000 of its healthcare workers to get vaccinated for COVID-19, HHS said in a statement on Thursday.

"To increase vaccination coverage and protect more people from COVID-19, including the more transmissible Delta variant, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will require more than 25,000 members of its health care workforce to be vaccinated against COVID-19," HHS said.

Those who will be required to receive the vaccine include staff at the Indian Health Service, National Institutes of Health, and others who work in federally-operated facilities where they have the potential to come into contact with patients.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy will also be immediately requiring members of the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to get vaccinated to prepare for possible deployment as emergency responders.

"Our number one goal is the health and safety of the American public, including our federal workforce. And vaccines are the best tool we have to protect people from COVID-19, prevent the spread of the Delta variant, and save lives," HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra said. "Instructing our HHS health care workforce to get vaccinated will protect our federal workers and the patients and people they serve."

HHS's decision comes amid similar decisions by other federal entities, including the Defense Department, to require their employees to get vaccinated or risk workplace restrictions and possible consequences. The move was largely prompted by a recent rise in cases caused by the emergent delta variant of the novel coronavirus.

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UN Security Council to Act Soon on Afghanistan - Irish Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 12 (Sputnik) - Irish Ambassador to the United Nations Geraldine Byrne Nason said on Thursday that the UN Security Council might soon act regarding by possibly issuing a call to all parties in Afghanistan to cease hostilities.

"The [UN Security] Council does need to step up its responsibilities and I'm sure we will be doing it sooner rather than later," Byrne Nason told reporters. "The Council always has a role in any international crisis, and what we can do, of course, is to call for an immediate cessation of all hostilities."

The diplomat also said the UN Security Council wishes to see progress reached in the ongoing talks between the Afghan parties in Doha, Qatar, and a negotiated political solution.

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UN Special Envoy for Syria Calls for Immediate Ceasefire in Daraa - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, August 12 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen expressed his growing concern about the intensification of hostilities in southern Syria and called for an immediate end to fighting, Pedersen's office said in a statement on Thursday.

"The Special Envoy reiterated his calls... for an immediate end to the violence and for all parties to uphold the principle of the protection of civilians and civilian objects," the statement said. "He also stressed that immediate, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access must be granted to all affected areas and communities, including Daraa al-Balad, and that the near siege-like situation must end."

The hostilities in the south have already resulted in civilian casualties and forced thousands of people to flee Daraa al-Balad, the statement said.

"Civilians are suffering with acute shortages of fuel, cooking gas, water, and bread. Medical assistance is in short supply to treat the injured. The situation is alarming," it added.

Unless an immediate ceasefire takes effect the situation risks to result in more confrontations and further deterioration, the statement warned.

It also said that northwest Syria has been witnessing a "notable escalation" of violence, which, coupled with the security situation in the southwest, reaffirms the need for a nationwide ceasefire and a political solution.

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Bill Gates Offers \$1.5 Billion For Joint Climate Projects With US Gov't

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) – Bill Gates will put up \$1.5 billion in matching funds if Congress approves a public-private partnership program to develop technologies that combat climate change, the Microsoft co-founder and billionaire philanthropist told the Wall Street Journal in an interview.

Gates said the money would be provided through Breakthrough Energy, an umbrella organization he founded that supports research by private companies to reduce greenhouse gases.

"Critical for all these climate technologies is to get the costs down and to be able to scale them up to a pretty gigantic level," Mr. Gates said. "You'll never get that scale up unless the government's coming in with the right policies, and the right policy is exactly what's in that infrastructure bill."

A \$1 trillion infrastructure bill approved by the Senate this week would earmark \$25 billion for Energy Department demonstration projects funded through public-private partnerships, part of more than \$100 billion in the legislation to address climate change. The House has yet to approved the legislation.

Gates told the Journal that the pending infrastructure bill would fund the types of government policies needed to lower costs of emerging climate technologies so they can be scaled up.

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Afghan Ambassador in Washington Seeks More US Air Support as Taliban Advances

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - There is still hope for Afghanistan if the United States provides more airpower at a time when the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) continues to advance in the country, Afghan ambassador to the United States Adela Raz said.

"But it is feasible because you did that, you did that post 9/11 and it was effective, you took control of the entire country in two weeks, and I was there," Raz told NewsNation Now.

Raz also called upon the United States and its allies to re-impose sanctions, including travel bans, on more Taliban leaders.

"We have been fighting for ourselves and for the peace and security of the rest of the world. That we are doing, and we will do it to the last minute," she said.

Raz also said she is skeptical about the prospects of negotiations with the Taliban to achieve piece.

"Do we have one example [of making peace with terrorists]?" Raz said.

The hostilities between the Afghan government and the Taliban have intensified in the past several months as US and other foreign troops began withdrawing from the country. The Taliban have since captured some 85 percent of Afghanistan and launched offensives on major cities. On Tuesday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said that President Joe Biden continues to believe it is not inevitable for the Taliban to take over Afghanistan, including Kabul.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Stay Below 400,000 as COVID-19 Headwinds Ease - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 12 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims remained below the key 400,000 mark for a second week in a row, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested continued labor market recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending August 7, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 375,000, a decrease of 12,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement.

The drop was right on target with what economists polled by US media were expecting.

"The claims data has dipped back below the 400K level over the last few weeks," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive. "As the emergency unemployment benefits expire in September, claims for unemployment should fall as the number of jobs outstrip the demand now."

The four-week moving average for claims decreased by 144,000, extending the previous week's decline of 366,000. That brought the weekly reading on unemployment down by 0.1 percent to a rate of 2.1 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policy makers. The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the novel coronavirus measures. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020. This year though, growth has been quite dynamic, with a 6.5 percent rebound for the second quarter though that was still below the 8.5 percent expected by economists.

The Federal Reserve thinks growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell also says it may take a while for "full employment" - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower - to occur. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.4 percent in July.