

08/13/21 Friday

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China Prepares to Pass US on Vaccinations as Health Commission Announces 50% Coverage by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Chinese health officials began advising the public to wear masks indoors and outdoors on Friday in a bid to keep tighter control on the COVID-19 outbreak there, even as daily new cases decline for their third straight day.

China's COVID-19 vaccination program hit an important milestone on Friday as half of the country's 1.4 billion people have now been fully vaccinated. The program initially struggled to get going due to the government's incredible effectiveness at defeating the outbreak early on without vaccines.

The National Health Commission (NHC) of the People's Republic of China reported on Friday that a total of [1.83 billion shots](#) had been administered thus far. NHC spokesperson [Mi Feng told reporters](#) that as a result, more than 777 million Chinese have now been totally vaccinated against COVID-19.

The country has seven COVID-19 vaccines in use: five require two doses for full protection, while one is a single-shot vaccine and another requires three doses. However, some more vulnerable parts of the population could soon be receiving [a third dose](#) of SinoVac's vaccine, one of the two-dose vaccines, as recent trials have found it to provide boosted immune responses.

China's massive vaccination campaign is giving out some [20 million shots](#) per day, but it got off to a slow start due to the country's effectiveness at combating the COVID-19 outbreak without the use of vaccines. [As Sputnik reported](#), many Chinese people simply have not felt the urgency to get protected from COVID-19 because the outbreak there has been so small - just 95,000 cases and less than 4,700 deaths, compared to more than 36 million cases and more than 620,000 deaths in the United States, a country one-fourth China's size.

As a result, officials had to invent a [number of incentives](#) to encourage people to get their shots, including coupons for food or entertainment, cash payments, and the holding of community sharing sessions in which vaccinated people talked about their experiences. While many employers have required their employees to get vaccinated, many have also provided paid time off to do so.

While some local governments attempted to compel citizens to get vaccinated with bans on public participation or other schemes, the NHC has repeatedly urged that the vaccination program be "[informed, consented and voluntary](#)."

Friday's report means that China is roughly on par with the United States, which has fully vaccinated 50.4% of its population and given 59.2% at least one shot, [according to data](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, the US' vaccination campaign has slowed considerably from its April high of 4.4 million people per day, with a seven-day average on Tuesday of just 568,000 shots per day.

Despite the impressive numbers, the recent outbreak of Delta variant cases in China has pushed the vaccination campaign into even higher gear.

Wang Huaqing, who heads the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention's immunization program, [told reporters Friday](#) that "children are indispensable to herd immunity," which will likely require 85% of the Chinese population to be fully vaccinated.

"Both adults and children can be the source of infection. We should strengthen the management of children," Wang said, noting that children are not immune from severe or deadly cases of the virus. Some 60 million Chinese children have already been vaccinated, with the lowest age allowed to receive shots being 12.

Both the US and China are experiencing their worst outbreaks since the winter, but unlike the United States, China isn't [relying almost solely](#) on vaccination to protect its population from the virus.

According to the [Global Times](#), some 48 cities in 18 Chinese provinces have detected cases of COVID-19 since the latest outbreak began on July 20, most of which have enacted [extensive lockdowns](#) on the model of those used in Hubei Province in early 2020 to contain the initial outbreak of COVID-19. With residents largely confined to their homes, medical staff are conducting mass testing to identify every single case of the virus and supply warehouses are working round-the-clock to deliver food, medicine, and other necessities to residents' front doors.

As a result, just 1,282 cases have been detected since July 20, and 36 of the 48 cities with cases haven't seen a new case in five days and of the 101 new cases detected on Thursday, 47 were domestically transmitted and 52 came into the country from abroad, He Qinghua, a senior NHC official, said at a Friday press conference.

Also unlike the US, China has balanced its domestic vaccination program with massive vaccine exports. By the end of June, [500 million Chinese vaccines](#) had been shipped abroad, most of them made by Sinopharm. Most of those have been sent to the world's poorer nations, including more than [27 million doses](#) to 40 countries in Africa, [where just 1.5%](#) of the continent's population has been vaccinated.

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DC Federal Court Upholds Biden's Eviction Moratorium, But Expects Dim Future for Ban by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US Associate Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote in June he believed the eviction moratorium could only be legally extended by legislative action, but the Democratic-controlled Congress went into recess without passing such a bill, leaving it up to the White House to keep more than 11 million American renters in their homes.

The nationwide eviction ban put in place by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been allowed to stand by a DC federal court, but only because it was found to be an extension of the previous ban, which the Biden administration had denied.

Judge Dabney Friedrich of the US District Court for the District of Columbia said in [a Friday ruling](#) that “the court’s hands are tied” by [a previous order](#) issued by the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in early June, which barred the eviction moratorium from being preliminarily enjoined.

That ruling barred her from further action because Judge Friedrich argued that [the August 3 order](#) is an extension of the previous moratorium, which her court previously vacated in May, and not a new document, as the Biden administration had [attempted to argue](#). While the old order was allowed to expire on July 31, the renewal four days later was more “targeted,” including only areas with “substantial” or “high” rates of community spread of COVID-19. However, as Judge Friedrich noted in her ruling, that presently includes more than 90% of counties in the United States, due to the exploding numbers of cases driven by the ultra-transmissible Delta variant of the virus. [According to CDC data](#), on Wednesday the seven-day average for daily new cases in the US was 114,190 - the highest it’s been since February 7.

Nonetheless, the basis of her May order vacating the moratorium was based on the CDC having insufficient statutory authority to order such a ban, even if in the interests of slowing community spread of COVID-19, as the CDC claimed.

“The same issue presented a second time in the same case in the same court should lead to the same result,” she noted, expressing her doubts that the Biden administration could find sufficient legal basis to avoid a repeat of the June 29 ruling by the US Supreme Court, which upheld the May strike-down.

The plaintiffs, a group of Georgia and Alabama landlords, are expected to appeal the decision. The social lockdowns adopted early in the COVID-19 pandemic successfully blunted the virus’ spread, but they also brought economic chaos as capitalist economies around the globe struggled under the weight of sudden massive interruptions of manufacturing and commerce, throwing millions into unemployment. Facing a [wave of evictions](#), the federal government and many US state governments imposed bans on evicting tenants who’d fallen behind on their rent, which at its height protected nearly 40 million Americans, according to [the Aspen Institute](#). While the reopening of the economy in the spring of 2021 created millions of new jobs and put many people back to work, millions more than before the pandemic are on unemployment and a similar number of people remain several months behind on rent to the winter of 2020-2021, when the outbreak was at its worst in the US and lockdowns the most extensive. An estimated 15 million Americans are still at risk of being evicted if the moratorium is lifted.

The ban’s reinstatement after a four-day lapse is due in large part to a protest outside the US Capitol Building led by [Rep. Cori Bush \(D-MO\)](#), which turned the order’s expiration into an embarrassing public spectacle for the government. While Justice Kavanaugh hinted he would rule against the moratorium in the future unless it was authorized by legislative action, Congress went into its seven-week summer recess on July 29 without having attempted to pass such a bill, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) insisting only the White House could renew the act.

Another moratorium was also allowed to expire on July 31 that has not been renewed, which protected homeowners with mortgages backed by federal lenders who were behind on their mortgage payments from [being foreclosed on](#). While the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau implemented several mitigating measures to give qualifying homeowners additional time and

flexibility to catch up on their payments, there has been no attempt to renew the foreclosure ban.

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New Orleans, San Francisco Set to Join New York in Requiring Vaccination Proof for Indoor Activities

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While opponents of COVID-19 vaccine passports have attacked them as authoritarian measures typical of a socialist country like China, Beijing's public health agency has made voluntary and informed participation a cornerstone of its nationwide vaccination campaign. In fact, they seem to be more typical of capitalist countries with market economies.

On Thursday, the mayors of both San Francisco, California, and New Orleans, Louisiana, announced plans to require proof of COVID-19 vaccination for indoor activities. The orders come as the pace of vaccination slackens in the US and new coronavirus cases are exploding. San Francisco Mayor London Breed [announced on Thursday](#) that restaurants, clubs, gyms, theaters, and large indoor entertainment venues will have to require proof of vaccination from patrons and employees before they're allowed to enter the premises.

The order takes effect on August 20 and will require staff to be fully vaccinated by October 13. "This is to protect kids, is to protect those who can't get vaccinated, is to make sure that we don't go backwards, is to make sure that I never have to get up in front of you and say, 'I'm sorry, I know we just reopened and now the city is closed again because we are seeing too many people die,'" Breed said, [according to KRON4](#).

He added that the order "also extends vaccination requirements to certain health care providers - including workers at adult day centers, residential care facilities, dental offices, home health aides and pharmacists - who are not already required."

The order doesn't apply to people ordering carryout or to people ineligible for vaccination, such as children under the age of 12. Since California recently rolled out an online vaccine record system, residents don't need to take their paper vaccination cards with them to gain entry, just pull up the record on their cell phones at the door, the [San Francisco Bay Chronicle](#) noted. According to Breed's office, about 78% of San Franciscans are vaccinated, well above the nationwide average of just 50.4%. California's COVID-19 [information portal](#) says that 64.1% of state residents are fully vaccinated, with another 10.1% being partially vaccinated.

Deep South Epicenter

By contrast, Louisiana's vaccination rate is among the nation's lowest, with just 37% of its population vaccinated, according to the [Louisiana Department](#) of Health.

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell also announced on Thursday that the city would begin requiring either proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test in the previous 72 hours in order to gain entry to many indoor venues, including restaurants, bars, casinos, gyms, and sports complexes, according to [The Times-Picayune](#).

According to state data, the region surrounding New Orleans has a much higher vaccination rate than the state overall, with about 49.9% of residents vaccinated. The new standard is expected to take effect on Monday, August 16, but Cantrell urged voluntary compliance before then.

"We are simply out of time," Cantrell said. "The outbreak is extremely severe... It is overtaxing our health care resources."

The state recorded an average of 5,600 daily new cases over the last week, among its highest ever, even compared to the massive wave that hit the US over the winter. [According to WAFB](#), on August 10, the state had set new hospitalization records on each day of the previous week, part of a trend appearing across the region as the Deep South has become the epicenter of the US' latest COVID-19 outbreak.

Florida is driving nationwide numbers, with White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients [noting on Thursday](#) that "in the past week, Florida has had more COVID cases than all 30 states with the lowest case rates combined. And Florida and Texas alone have accounted for nearly 40% of new hospitalizations across the country."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) [recorded](#) 141,000 new cases nationwide on Thursday, with 24,000 of those cases coming from Florida alone. The state's governor, Ron DeSantis, has aroused nationwide fury for his continuing disdain for outbreak-mitigating safety measures, including mask mandates and lockdowns, posturing against them as infringements upon Floridians' freedoms. He has also [specifically banned](#) vaccine passports in the state.

New York [led the charge](#) on vaccine passports in early August, with Mayor Bill DeBlasio referring to them as the "Key to NYC Pass."

"'The key to New York City.' When you hear those words, I want you to imagine the notion that because someone is vaccinated, they can do all the amazing things that are available in New York City," [de Blasio said](#). "This is a miraculous place, literally full of wonders, and if you're vaccinated, all that's gonna open up to you. You'll have the key, you can open the door." "But if you're unvaccinated, unfortunately, you will not be able to participate in many things," he added.

However, unlike New Orleans' or San Francisco's passports, New York's will only require proof of receiving the first shot of one of the COVID-19 vaccines, not full vaccination.

Other city mayors, like Boston's acting [Mayor Kim Janey](#), have dismissed the idea of a vaccine passport, with Janey in particular noting it was too similar an idea to the "freedom papers" required of Black Americans during the era of slavery in order to prove that they weren't escaped slaves.

#### Vaccine Passports Around the Globe

However, some of the most vocal opponents of passports have been conservatives. Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene [has aroused fury](#) for her comparisons between vaccine passports and the Holocaust, while Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), who as House Minority Leader often finds himself castigating his freshman colleague, has [referred to them](#) as "something you'd expect in Communist China, not in the United States of America." Ironically, China's National Health Commission has advised provincial and municipal governments in the socialist country against such policies, saying in July that "[informed](#),

[consented and voluntary](#)" are the most basic principles of a successful public vaccination program.

A number of [European countries](#) have begun requiring proof of vaccination for certain activities, ranging from booking hotels to entering public venues as the new rules in New York do. Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, and Austria have all introduced such measures in the last two months, while governments in the United Kingdom and Germany have also publicly weighed the option of doing so.

In France and Greece, the digital health pass [provoked massive protests](#), which police put down with force.

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Leaked Audio: DHS Sec. Warns US May 'Lose' Southern Border Crisis Amid Influx of Migrant Encounters

by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced on Thursday that border authorities have encountered an "unprecedented number of migrants" at the country's southern border. Officials logged over 212,000 migrant encounters for July, translating to an approximate 13% uptick from June.

While visiting Texas earlier this week, Mayorkas warned US border agents that it appears the Biden administration may "lose" at the southern border as an "unsustainable" amount of migrants attempt to illegally cross into the states.

"A couple of days ago I was down in Mexico, and I said look, you know, 'If, if our borders are the first line of defense, we're going to lose, and this is unsustainable,'" Mayorkas said, [according to leaked audio obtained by Fox News](#).

"We can't continue like this, our people in the field can't continue, and our system isn't built for it."

The DHS Secretary repeatedly emphasized that the current situation at the US-Mexico border "cannot continue" -- primarily because certain sectors of the US' southern border recently came close to "breaking."

As a result of these developments, the DHS will be looking into new policies, Mayorkas noted. [GOP criticism](#) of the Biden administration's handling of the situation at the US-Mexico border has grown alongside the number of migrant encounters.

Shortly after the audio was published, [Arizona Governor Doug Ducey \(R\) issued a statement](#) condemning the DHS Secretary as a "defeatist" who should resign.

"The buck must stop somewhere. A defeatist is not what we need when it comes to fighting for border security," the Arizona governor wrote. "It is time for Secretary Mayorkas to resign, and for him to be replaced with someone who will tell the American people the truth publicly, stand up to the radical activists inside the Biden-Harris administration and once and for all end the crisis at the southern border."

At the same time, the Biden administration is receiving pushback from the other side of the aisle, as progressive Democrats and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union have called for the administration to halt enforcement of Title 42.

Title 42 - a Trump-era policy - allows authorities to turn away a substantial portion of migrants at the border due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

While the Biden administration has hinted at doing away with the policy and bolstering the asylum system, the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention confirmed earlier this month that it would remain in place as the country grapples with surges of the Delta variant.

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NY Assembly Minority Leader Cries Foul as Legislature Plans to Abandon Cuomo's Impeachment Probe  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (D) announced his resignation on Tuesday, just one week after the release of an independent investigation that determined the 63-year-old did sexually harass several women. Prior to Cuomo's resignation, the New York Assembly's Judiciary Committee launched its own related probe on whether the governor should step down. New York Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (D) announced on Friday that the legislative body will suspend its impeachment investigation upon Cuomo's official resignation, which is slated for August 25.

The decision came about following Heastie's consultations with Assembly Judiciary Committee Chair Charles Lavine (D), who [concluded the state constitution does not allow](#) the Assembly to impeach and remove an elected official who has already vacated office.

During the monthslong impeachment probe, the committee gathered "credible evidence" related to Cuomo's sexual misconduct allegations, as well as his alleged misuse of state resources to [publish his COVID-19 leadership book](#) and misleading disclosures on the coronavirus death toll in state-run nursing homes.

"This evidence - we believe - could likely have resulted in articles of impeachment had he not resigned," [the Assembly Speaker emphasized](#).

Lavine has been ordered to turn the aforementioned evidence over to the appropriate investigatory authorities, including New York Attorney General Letitia James (D), who is probing matters relating to Cuomo's book.

Assembly Minority Leader Will Barclay (R) slammed the planned suspension of the impeachment probe on Cuomo, dubbing it a "massive disservice to the goals of transparency and accountability."

Though Cuomo is scheduled to resign, Barclay argued that the probe should remain active because a conviction on articles of impeachment would guarantee that Cuomo cannot run for New York office in the future.

"The Legislature had a chance to deliver accountability and justice to the victims of Andrew Cuomo's failed administration," [the Assembly Minority Leader wrote](#). "Today's announcement is a slap in the face to the people this body was elected to represent."

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EXCLUSIVE: Ex-Schoolmate of Hunter Biden Opens Up About First Son's 'Degenerate' Behavior

Hunter Biden, the 51-year-old son of US President Joe Biden, became a trending topic on social media earlier this week after the Daily Mail published a video showing a nude man - presumed to be Hunter - telling a woman that a laptop filled with incriminating evidence was possibly stolen. The 51-year-old has asserted he has "nothing to hide."

Tyler Nixon, an Army veteran and counselor-at-law, joined Radio Sputnik's "Fault Lines" hosts Jamarl Thomas and Shane Stranahan on Friday to provide his understanding of Hunter Biden, and what the First Son's reputation was back in Delaware.

While many became familiar with Hunter during the last US presidential election cycle, Nixon claimed that he has decades of familiarity with the now 51-year-old because he not only attended the same school and church, but his family also owned property near what used to be the Bidens' residence.

Being that he was only one year younger than Hunter, Nixon had developed somewhat of a relationship with him.

Recounting Hunter's demeanor over the years, Nixon described the politician's son as someone who appeared to be "tormented" by the notoriety of being the son of Joe Biden - even before he became president of the US.

Although he appeared to be impeded by his family's fame in Delaware, "Hunter was always honest about who he is," according to Nixon. "He was never phony."

Throughout their years of knowing each other, there was one particular conversation with Hunter that troubled Nixon and made him believe Hunter "was trying to kill himself."

Without providing too many details, he recounted that Hunter told an extensive story - or 'debauchfest' - about his experiences with escorts and drug dealers in Las Vegas, Nevada. While Hunter had been "tormented," as Nixon described, for some time, this particular story left the Army veteran feeling as if Hunter simply did not care about life anymore - especially after the death of his older brother, the late Beau Biden.

Though some believe the 51-year-old is reclaiming his life and has conquered his addiction, Nixon asserted that it is likely Hunter will "never find any true happiness ... and it's reflected in his behavior."

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## Miss Me Not - Cartoon

Over the last several months, former US President Donald Trump has made an effort of staying relevant in the news cycle, weighing in on a range of topics as he continues to toy with the idea of possibly tossing his name into the 2024 presidential cycle. This Friday the 13th, he was at it again.

Former US President Donald Trump ignited a Twitter showdown early Friday after his team shared a statement in which he asked the wider American public whether they actually missed him in light of domestic and foreign troubles that the Biden administration has encountered. The statement, which was shared via Twitter by spokesperson Liz Harrington, detailed hurdles the Biden White House is dealing with at the US' southern border, ongoing withdrawal procedures in Afghanistan, the rising national crime rate and rising prices nationwide. However, Trump instantly opened a can of worms when he closed the statement with the simple yet eyebrow-raising question of, "Do you miss me yet?" [Responses](#) from netizens ranged from a simple no to inquiring whether he was already in jail, as well as replies that ridiculed claims that he would somehow be "reinstated" as president. Better luck next time, eh?

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US' Afghanistan Exit May Create New 'Breeding Grounds' for Terrorism, Warns UK Defense Secretary  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Negotiated under the Trump administration and then pushed back under the Biden White House, US troops now have a deadline to depart from Afghanistan by August 31, just days ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks that ultimately prompted the US invasion of the war-torn country.

UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace recently took the opportunity to lambast the US decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan, underscoring that the "rotten" pullout agreement constructed by the Trump administration was a complete "mistake."

Wallace, who has been a vocal critic of the withdrawal deal, addressed the ongoing situation with the UK's [Sky News](#) during talks in which he suggested the US exit may likely create an environment for new extremist groups to emerge.

"I'm absolutely worried that failed states are breeding grounds for those types of people," Wallace remarked. "Of course I am worried, it is why I said I felt this was not the right time or decision to make because, of course, al-Qaeda will probably come back, certainly would like that type of breeding ground."

He added that "failed states around the world lead to instability, lead to a security threat to us and our interests."

The agreement to remove American troops from Afghanistan was signed and dotted in 2020, when representatives for the US and the Taliban met in Qatar to sign an “agreement for bringing peace” to the nation after having endured nearly 20 years’ worth of deadly conflict.

At the time, former US President Donald Trump hailed the arrangement, and stated that the initiative proved “the Taliban wants to do something to show we’re not all wasting time.”

“If bad things happen, we’ll go back with a force like no-one’s ever seen,” he stressed at the time.

Recalling Trump’s stances on the withdrawal agreement, Wallace told the outlet that he felt the deal was a complete “mistake,” and that at the end of the day, the “rotten deal ... effectively told a Taliban that wasn’t winning that they were winning.”

“It undermined the government of Afghanistan, and now we’re in this position where the Taliban have clearly the momentum across the country,” he added, touching on recent gains the group has made in over a dozen Afghan provinces.

“We will all as an international community pay the consequences of that [withdrawal agreement], but when the United States as the framework nation took that decision, the way we were all configured, the way we had gone in meant that we had to leave, as well.”

Wallace’s remarks come on the heels of Thursday moves by the Biden administration to [deploy](#) approximately 3,000 US troops to Afghanistan to assist in the departure of non-essential staffers at the US embassy in Kabul. Incidentally, that announcement came as the UK detailed that it too would be sending troops, 600 to be exact, as part of its own measure to evacuate Britons.

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Disgraced Lawyer Who Once Repped Stormy Daniels Loses \$250 Million Defamation Suit Against Fox News

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The lawyer had previously been ordered to serve a 2.5 prison sentence after having been found guilty of trying to extort Nike for millions of dollars by threatening the company with exposing a corruption scandal. At the time, the verdict came just two days after deliberations had begun. A federal judge in Delaware granted a motion to dismiss a hefty \$250 million defamation case against Fox News on Friday that was filed by Michael Avenatti, the former lawyer of adult film star Stormy Daniels.

Judge Stephanos Bibas, who serves the US Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit in the First State, threw out Avenatti’s case without prejudice after determining that news outlets are not liable for minor mistakes when covering public figures or events of public concern.

Avenatti filed the lawsuit against Fox News over their coverage of his [arrest](#) for suspected domestic violence, alleging that the various articles on the matter had amounted to slander and libel as reporters acted recklessly.

At the time, Fox News was one of many outlets that had reported on his arrest. However, Avenatti took issue with the fact that the news organization represented the incident as him being formally charged, whereas he had only been arrested on suspicion of domestic violence.

"Avenatti dislikes how Fox News covered his arrest. But he cannot overcome the truthfulness of the gist of Fox's coverage - he was, after all, arrested for suspected domestic violence," Bibas wrote in his opinion, noting that coverage was "substantially true."

"Police are supposed to have good reason to arrest people. So to the average reader, the 'gist' and the 'sting' would be the same had defendants reported only that he was arrested for suspected domestic violence," the judge added.

Bibas further indicated that Avenatti failed to prove that Fox News reporters had acted recklessly, and was simply "too vague" of an accusation. The judge went on to state that Avenatti had also never requested a retraction on the reporting, which is a [requirement](#) under California law when seeking damages in any libel or slander case.

Fox News has addressed the ruling, with a spokesperson stating that the news organization is "pleased with the court's swift decision."

"Today's ruling is a victory for journalists everywhere, who should not be intimidated into silence when bullies like Michael Avenatti file baseless multimillion-dollar lawsuits," the representative added.

The latest development comes weeks after Avenatti was sentenced in July to 2.5 years in prison for trying to [extort Nike](#) for nearly \$25 million by threatening the powerhouse company with bad publicity.

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US Military Temporarily Suspends All Air Operations at Kabul Airport - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The US military has temporarily suspended all air operations at Kabul airport, CNN reported on Monday from the scene.

The Hamid Karzai Airport turned into a scene of chaos as citizens flocked in a last gasp bid to escape the nation as the Taliban (banned in Russia) swept to power.

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RPT: REVIEW - US Rushes Kabul Evac as Noose Tightens, UN Says Afghanistan 'Spinning Out of Control'

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United States along with several other countries began fast-tracking evacuations of civilians from Afghanistan amid rapid gains by the Taliban (banned in Russia), while the UN urged the insurgents to halt their offensive with the country descending into chaos.

At the end of day Friday, the White House said President Joe Biden spoke to his cabinet about the ongoing efforts to safely reduce the civilian footprint in Afghanistan just hours after the Pentagon announced concerns over the recent rapid advance of the Taliban, which now

controls around half of the 34 provincial capitals and roughly two-thirds of the war-torn South Asian country.

The change in tempo comes after Biden and other administration officials this week repeatedly said the fall of Kabul was not inevitable, despite reports US intelligence predicted the Taliban would take over in 90 days.

The bulk of some 3,000 US troops will arrive to Kabul by the end of the weekend to support the withdrawal of civilians amid a sense of urgency prompted by the pace of the Taliban advances. "We are certainly concerned by the speed with which the Taliban has been moving," Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday. "They [the Taliban] are trying to isolate Kabul."

Kirby said the operation is a "narrowly focused, tailored mission" to help with the secure reduction of civilian personnel in Kabul, as well as to support the acceleration of special visa processing. He said the US intends to evacuate thousands of civilians out of Afghanistan each day.

The Pentagon spokesperson sent a message to the Taliban during the briefing, warning that if US forces are attacked or threatened, they will respond in a "forceful and appropriate way," out of self-defense.

#### TALIBAN TIGHTENS NOOSE

Meanwhile, Politico reported that US personnel are planning a complete evacuation of the embassy in Kabul and are already destroying sensitive materials and burning flags.

To make matters worse, reports surfaced that the Taliban have gotten their hands on advanced aircraft, which the US helped the Afghan Air Force acquire. The Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General published a report on Friday that revealed "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of US equipment had been lost due to poor recordkeeping.

Former officials and experts are predicting that the Taliban could seize power within days, not months.

"The situation is not redeemable," former CIA officer Phil Giraldi told Sputnik. "I fully expect that the government defenses will completely collapse shortly and Kabul will fall in a matter of days. All the momentum is going against them and the will to resist appears to be minimal."

Giraldi also cautioned that Biden's mishandling of the transition could be used by Republican foes to hurt Democrats in next year's midterm congressional elections.

US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, who served as adviser to the Trump administration's Acting Pentagon chief, also said the US would not send any additional troops.

"We are definitely departing. The troops will afford protection on the way out," Macgregor told Sputnik. "The focus on Afghanistan will involve persistent ISR, but no troops on the ground."

In addition to the United States, the UK, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, France, Spain, Belgium, Germany and the Czech Republic - among other states - took steps to protect their citizens, including extracting personnel, cutting staff, closing posts, and calling on them to leave the country.

The UK military began deployment in Afghanistan to support the evacuation of the country's nationals on Friday, the defense ministry said.

Canadian Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan confirmed reports that special operations troops had been deployed to Afghanistan to secure remaining staff. Canada also announced that it will resettle up to 20,000 vulnerable Afghan nationals including female activists and journalists.

#### UN CHIEF SOUNDS ALARM

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that the situation in Afghanistan was descending into chaos and urged the Taliban to halt its offensive and begin negotiating. "Afghanistan is in the throes of yet another chaotic and desperate chapter - an incredible tragedy for its long-suffering people," Guterres said in a statement. "Afghanistan is spinning out of control."

He also called on the world to send a clear message to the insurgents.

"The message from the international community to those on the warpath must be clear: seizing power through military force is a losing proposition," Guterres said.

In addition, the UN chief said he was "deeply disturbed" by early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions on human rights in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women and journalists.

The United Nations, however, is not evacuating personnel at the moment, but the situation is being evaluated on an hourly basis, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, earlier, warned the Taliban movement it will not be recognized internationally if it takes over Afghanistan by force.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Mishandling of Afghan Exit Could Hurt Democrats in Midterm Elections

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - If US President Joe Biden's last ditch mission to evacuate civilians from Afghanistan is not well executed it could deal a significant blow to the Democratic Party in next year's congressional midterms, experts told Sputnik.

The White House on Friday said President Joe Biden spoke to his cabinet about the ongoing efforts to reduce the civilian footprint in Afghanistan just hours after the Pentagon announced concerns over the recent rapid advance of the Taliban, which now controls around half of the 34 provincial capitals and roughly two-thirds of the war-torn South Asian country.

The US evacuation operation is underway with the Taliban on the verge of isolating Kabul, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters earlier in the day, adding that the 3,000 troops will be in Afghanistan by the end of the weekend.

#### POLITICAL BLOW

Biden and other administration officials this week repeatedly said the fall of Kabul was not inevitable despite reports US intelligence predicted the Taliban would take over in 90 days.

"This is a military operation with potential major political impact on Biden and, looking ahead, on next year's election where the GOP [Republican Party] will be hammering on their issue that Joe had a loss of nerve and blew the transition," former CIA analyst and station chief Phil Giraldi, founder of the Council for The National Interest, told Sputnik.

All 435 seats in the US House of Representatives and 34 of the 100 seats in the Senate will be up for elections in November of 2022. The Democrats have control of both houses, but only barely in the Senate, which is divided evenly, with the vice president casting tie-breaking votes.

The collapse of the Kabul regime which successive US administrations had built up and bankrolled over the past 20 years at a cost of close to \$2 trillion was now inevitable, Giraldi, a founder of Veteran intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), added.

"The situation is not redeemable. I fully expect that the government defenses will completely collapse shortly and Kabul will fall in a matter of days. All the momentum is going against them and the will to resist appears to be minimal," Giraldi said.

In the immediate future, the small reinforcements Biden had authorized would be able to protect key US installations briefly during the final withdrawal, Giraldi explained.

"They will however secure the Embassy and Station as well as assisting the Turks to hold the airport until the US facilities are reduced to skeleton staffs to enable their being shut down and evacuated on very short notice," the former CIA official said.

US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, who served as adviser to the Trump administration's Acting Pentagon chief, also said the US would not send any additional troops.

"We are definitely departing. The troops will afford protection on the way out," Macgregor said.

"The focus on Afghanistan will involve persistent ISR, but no troops on the ground."

#### REGIONAL INFLUENCE/IMPACT

Although a mishandling of the transition could hurt Biden, some experts believe the US could also exploit a Taliban administration in Kabul.

"What's happening is part of what the Trump admin started with the Taliban. The plan is clear. It is to reverse regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq back to pre-2001 conditions," Institute for Gulf Affairs Founder and Director Professor Ali al-Ahmed told Sputnik.

Previous regimes in Kabul served as an American leverage against Iran, Russia and China, and Washington would now hope that the victorious Taliban would do that too, al-Ahmed said.

"An Afghanistan under the Taliban means Chinese Muslims who are part of US plans to weaken China can find shelter, training and a station to attack. This is similar to previous American efforts against Syria and the Soviet Union," al-Ahmed said. "If you are wondering why no Afghan forces are fighting to stop the Taliban, it's because they are told not to."

Giraldi predicted that neighboring major powers would not intervene to restrain the Taliban but would watch carefully to make sure side effects from the takeover would not shake them.

"Russia, China and Iran are strengthening their own borders to prevent any spillover of the violence and will be watching closely to see what develops," Giraldi said.

Macgregor, citing a former high ranking DEA official, alleged that the Taliban will likely exploit the lucrative heroin trade in the region, something Russia will want to address.

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REVIEW - US Rushes Kabul Evac as Noose Tightens, UN Says Afghanistan 'Spinning Out of Control'

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United States along with several other countries began fast-tracking evacuations of civilians from Afghanistan amid rapid gains by the Taliban

(banned in Russia), while the UN urged the insurgents to halt their offensive with the country descending into chaos.

At the end of day Friday, the White House said President Joe Biden spoke to his cabinet about the ongoing efforts to safely reduce the civilian footprint in Afghanistan just hours after the Pentagon announced concerns over the recent rapid advance of the Taliban, which now controls around half of the 34 provincial capitals and roughly two-thirds of the war-torn South Asian country.

The change in tempo comes after Biden and other administration officials this week repeatedly said the fall of Kabul was not inevitable, despite reports US intelligence predicted the Taliban would take over in 90 days.

The bulk of some 3,000 US troops will arrive to Kabul by the end of the weekend to support the withdrawal of civilians amid a sense of urgency prompted by the pace of the Taliban advances. "We are certainly concerned by the speed with which the Taliban has been moving," Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday. "They [the Taliban] are trying to isolate Kabul."

Kirby said the operation is a "narrowly focused, tailored mission" to help with the secure reduction of civilian personnel in Kabul, as well as to support the acceleration of special visa processing. He said the US intends to evacuate thousands of civilians out of Afghanistan each day.

The Pentagon spokesperson sent a message to the Taliban during the briefing, warning that if US forces are attacked or threatened, they will respond in a "forceful and appropriate way," out of self-defense.

#### TALIBAN TIGHTENS NOOSE

Meanwhile, Politico reported that US personnel are planning a complete evacuation of the embassy in Kabul and are already destroying sensitive materials and burning flags.

To make matters worse, reports surfaced that the Taliban have gotten their hands on advanced aircraft, which the US helped the Afghan Air Force acquire. The Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General published a report on Friday that revealed "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of US equipment had been lost due to poor recordkeeping.

Former officials and experts are predicting that the Taliban could seize power within days, not months.

"The situation is not redeemable," former CIA officer Phil Giraldi told Sputnik. "I fully expect that the government defenses will completely collapse shortly and Kabul will fall in a matter of days. All the momentum is going against them and the will to resist appears to be minimal."

Giraldi also cautioned that Biden's mishandling of the transition could be used by Republican foes to hurt Democrats in next year's midterm congressional elections.

US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, who served as adviser to the Trump administration's Acting Pentagon chief, also said the US would not send any additional troops.

"We are definitely departing. The troops will afford protection on the way out," Macgregor told Sputnik. "The focus on Afghanistan will involve persistent ISR, but no troops on the ground." In addition to the United States, the UK, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, France, Spain, Belgium, Germany and the Czech Republic - among other states - took steps to protect their citizens, including extracting personnel, cutting staff, closing posts, and calling on them to leave the country.

The UK military began deployment in Afghanistan to support the evacuation of the country's nationals on Friday, the defense ministry said.

Canadian Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan confirmed reports that special operations troops had been deployed to Afghanistan to secure remaining staff. Canada also announced that it will resettle up to 20,000 vulnerable Afghan nationals including female activists and journalists.

#### UN CHIEF SOUNDS ALARM

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that the situation in Afghanistan was descending into chaos and urged the Taliban to halt its offensive and begin negotiating. "Afghanistan is in the throes of yet another chaotic and desperate chapter - an incredible tragedy for its long-suffering people," Guterres said in a statement. "Afghanistan is spinning out of control."

He also called on the world to send a clear message to the insurgents.

"The message from the international community to those on the warpath must be clear: seizing power through military force is a losing proposition," Guterres said.

In addition, the UN chief said he was "deeply disturbed" by early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions on human rights in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women and journalists.

The United Nations, however, is not evacuating personnel at the moment, but the situation is being evaluated on an hourly basis, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, earlier, warned the Taliban movement it will not be recognized internationally if it takes over Afghanistan by force.

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#### US Rio Grande Valley Sector Sees Record 4,000 Border Apprehensions in Single Day - Chief

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US Customs and Border Protection agents apprehended nearly 4,000 illegal migrants in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) sector of the southern border, setting an all-time single-day record, Chief Agent Brian Hastings said in a statement.

"With nearly 4K [4,000] encounters in one day, RGV agents apprehended the highest number in recorded history," Hastings said on Friday.

The RGV sector leads the nation in the number of illegal migrants apprehended on the southern border, accounting for 32 percent of all apprehensions since October.

On Thursday, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced that more than 212,000 illegal migrants were apprehended at the border in July, setting another monthly record. More than 1.3 million illegal migrants have been apprehended on the US southern border since October.

Illegal crossings on the US southern border have hit a 20-year high under President Joe Biden.

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**UPDATE - Canada to Resettle 20,000 Vulnerable Afghan Nationals Amid Taliban Advance**

TORONTO, August 13 (Sputnik) - Canada will resettle up to 20,000 vulnerable Afghan nationals including female activists and journalists as the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) advances in its bid to reclaim control of the war-torn country, Ottawa announced.

"Canada will build on our earlier special immigration program to welcome over 20,000 vulnerable Afghan refugees, in total," Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said during a press briefing on Friday.

Last week, Ottawa announced that it would resettle "thousands" of Afghans through special immigrant programs designed for those who assisted Canadian military efforts in Afghanistan, in particular, interpreters, who the Taliban views as traitors and have vowed vengeance against. Canada's minister noted Friday's announcement would be in addition to the efforts to relocate those who provided direct assistance to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

Mendicino said the Canadian government will welcome individuals at greatest risk of Taliban reprisals, including women leaders, human rights activists, journalists and members of the so-called LGBT community.

The fourth flight carrying refugees landed in Canada just a "few hours ago," Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan said during the same press briefing. The first flight carrying Afghan refugees touched down in Toronto on August 4, carrying an unspecified number of people, with the second and third flights arriving on August 8 and 11, according to Canada's defense chief. According to Sajjan, the Canadian government requested the military's help with the resettlement operation on July 30.

Ottawa has also signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Alberta-based Manmeet Singh Bhullar foundation to relocate Sikhs and Hindus displaced by the Taliban offensive.

Canada, as well as other countries including the United States, are working to assist interpreters and other Afghans facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from the war-torn country.

The scramble comes amid a Taliban advance, which has seen the terror group capture 15 of 34 Afghan provincial capitals including Kandahar, Herat and Pol-e-Khomri in space of one week.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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**ANALYSIS - Biden Mishandling of Afghan Exit Could Hurt Democrats in Midterm Elections**

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#### POLITICAL BLOW

Biden and other administration officials this week repeatedly said the fall of Kabul was not inevitable despite reports US intelligence predicted the Taliban would take over in 90 days.

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All 435 seats in the US House of Representatives and 34 of the 100 seats in the Senate will be up for elections in November of 2022. The Democrats have control of both houses, but only barely in the Senate, which is divided evenly, with the vice president casting tie-breaking votes. The collapse of the Kabul regime which successive US administrations had built up and bankrolled over the past 20 years at a cost of close to \$2 trillion was now inevitable, Giraldi, a founder of Veteran intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), added.

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Previous regimes in Kabul served as an American leverage against Iran, Russia and China, and Washington would now hope that the victorious Taliban would do that too, al-Ahmed said.

"An Afghanistan under the Taliban means Chinese Muslims who are part of US plans to weaken China can find shelter, training and a station to attack. This is similar to previous American efforts against Syria and the Soviet Union," al-Ahmed said. "If you are wondering why no Afghan forces are fighting to stop the Taliban, it's because they are told not to."

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"Russia, China and Iran are strengthening their own borders to prevent any spillover of the violence and will be watching closely to see what develops," Giraldi said.

Macgregor, citing a former high ranking DEA official, alleged that the Taliban will likely exploit the lucrative heroin trade in the region, something Russia will want to address.

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#### Canada's Defense Chief Confirms Special Ops Deployment to Afghanistan

TORONTO, August 13 (Sputnik) - Canada's Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan confirmed reports that special operations troops been deployed to Afghanistan to secure remaining staff in the war-torn country as the Taliban (banned in Russia) advances in its bid to reclaim control of the country.

Late Thursday evening, Global News reported, citing sources, that Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Special Operations Forces were deployed to assist with the evacuation of staff from Canada's embassy in Kabul.

"Yes, the special forces are involved," Sajjan told reporters on Friday, declining to divulge any additional details citing security reasons.

Sajjan said Canadian military personnel have been on the ground in Afghanistan for "quite some time" working on contingency plans, noting that the security situation in the war-torn country is deteriorating.

While Ottawa has now confirmed the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau declined to address reports that the embassy in Kabul has essentially halted operations ahead of an impending evacuation.

Canada's defense chief stressed that the safety and security of embassy staff is a "top priority" and that local staff would be accounted for in case of any urgent developments.

Canada is not alone in its scramble to secure remaining resources in Afghanistan.

The United States is deploying three infantry battalions to Kabul consisting of some 3,000 troops to evacuate civilian personnel from Afghanistan. The mission is currently underway with most of the troops expected to be in Afghanistan by the end of the weekend, the Pentagon said on Friday.

Meanwhile, several other Western nations, including Switzerland, have announced the reduction of their diplomatic presence in the Afghan capital.

The activity comes amid a Taliban advance, which has seen the terror group capture 15 of 34 Afghan provincial capitals including Kandahar, Herat and Pol-e-Khomri in spate of one week.

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### Biden Talks Cabinet Members About US Drawdown From Afghanistan - White House

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden spoke with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan about the ongoing drawdown of US civilian personnel from Afghanistan, the White House said. "Today President Biden spoke with Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan about the ongoing efforts to safely drawdown the civilian footprint in Afghanistan," the White House said via Twitter on Friday.

The call came following a decision by the Biden administration on Thursday to send several thousand troops to Kabul in order to help evacuate Americans at the US embassy and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants alike.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said earlier on Friday that the United States does not expect to have more than 1,000 troops remaining in the country to support the diplomatic mission once the evacuation mission has been complete.

Kirby added that the Taliban appear to be trying to "isolate" Kabul in an attempt to get the city to surrender with relatively little bloodshed, like they did with many provincial capitals in the country.

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### Middle School Student in State of New Mexico Fatally Shot By Classmate - Police

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - A middle school student was fatally shot by a classmate in the US state of New Mexico, Deputy Commander of Albuquerque Police Department Criminal Investigative Division Kyle Hartsock told reporters.

"We were dispatched to Washington Middle School here in downtown Albuquerque in regards to a shooting call," Hartsock said on Friday. "We soon learned the isolated shooting between two male students had taken place; one had been shot and the other one had fired the weapon."

The student who fired the weapon is in police custody and the student who was shot is dead, Hartsock said.

There are no other suspects or victims in this incident, but the investigation is ongoing, Hartsock added.

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### 'Too Much to Speculate' That Starliner Spacecraft Will Launch in 2021 - Boeing

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - Boeing is returning its Starliner spacecraft to the factory to resolve an issue with several propulsion valves, delaying the launch until sometime after November or possibly until next year, company and NASA officials said during a conference call.

"Probably too early to say whether [the launch] it's this year or not, we would certainly hope for as early as possible," Boeing Commercial Crew Program Manager John Vollmer said on Friday. "If we could fly this year it would be fantastic, but at this point I think that would be too much to speculate."

NASA's Commercial Crew Program Manager Steve Stich added that if there was a chance to launch the Starliner spacecraft this year it would happen after the launch period for the Lucy mission, which is sometime between October 16 and November 7. The Lucy spacecraft will explore asteroids in Jupiter's orbit.

Boeing, in an earlier statement, informed NASA that the company would de-stack its CST-100 Starliner spacecraft from the Atlas V rocket and return the spacecraft to the Commercial Crew and Cargo Processing Facility for deeper-level troubleshooting of four propulsion system valves that remain closed.

Boeing scrapped two launch dates, August 3 and 4, over last-minute issues involving the propulsion system in the spacecraft, which was set to deliver its second experimental unmanned cargo delivery to the International Space Station.

On Tuesday, Russian State Space Corporation Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin said he instructed staff of the Keldysh Research Center, which is part of the corporation, to be ready to help colleagues from NASA and Boeing fix Starliner spacecraft malfunctions upon a potential request.

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**US Tells Tunisia President to Appoint New Prime Minister Designate- Natl. Security Council**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joey Hood met with Tunisian President Kais Saied in Tunis and urged him to promptly appoint a Prime Minister designate, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

"Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Finer discussed with President Saied the urgent need to appoint a prime minister designate who would form a capable government able to address the immediate economic and health crises facing Tunisia," Horne said.

Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi following an eruption of anti-government protests in Tunisia in late July. He also suspended parliament for 30 days and froze the lawmakers' legal immunity.

Finer and Hood delivered a message from US President Joe Biden that reaffirmed his personal support and that of his administration, for returning Tunisia to democracy soon.

Finer also met with civil society leaders in Tunisia, conveying the United States' support for their role in building a prosperous and democratic future in the country.

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Blinken, Kazakh Counterpart Discuss Security Situation in Afghanistan - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Kazakh counterpart over the telephone about the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Kazakhstan Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mukhtar Tileuberdi on August 13 to discuss the situation in Afghanistan," Price said on Friday.

The discussion occurred amid a redeployment of US forces to Kabul to aid the evacuation of Americans and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants who aided the United States in the war effort.

Blinken updated Tileuberdi about the United States' plans to reduce its civilian footprint in Kabul, while emphasizing that Washington remains committed to maintaining a strong diplomatic and security relationship with the Afghan government.

Blinken and Tileuberdi also talked about the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and pledged to remain in close contact on the key issues going forward.

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Canada to Resettle 20,000 Vulnerable Afghan Nationals Amid Taliban Advance

TORONTO, August 13 (Sputnik) - Canada will resettle up to 20,000 vulnerable Afghan nationals including female activist and journalists as the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) advances in its bid to reclaim control of the war-torn country, Ottawa announced.

"Canada will build on our earlier special immigration program to welcome over 20,000 vulnerable Afghan refugees, in total," Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said during a press briefing on Friday.

Last week, Ottawa announced that it would resettle "thousands" of Afghans through special immigrant programs designed for those who assisted Canadian military efforts in Afghanistan, in particular, interpreters, who the Taliban views as traitors and have vowed vengeance against. Mendicino said the Canadian government will welcome individuals at greatest risk of Taliban reprisals, including women leaders, human rights activists, journalists and members of the so-called LGBT community.

The first flight carrying Afghan refugees touched down in Toronto on August 4, carrying an unspecified number of people.

Canada, as well as other countries including the United States, are working to assist interpreters and other Afghans facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from the war-torn country. The Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) views facilitator of the US-led mission as traitors and has vowed retribution should it reclaim control of the country. Projections show the terror group is on track to reclaim control of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops is completed.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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**Wall Street Ends Record-Breaking Week Just Slightly Up as Coronavirus Worries Return**

NEW YORK, August 13 (Sputnik) - Blue chip and industrial stocks on Wall Street ended the week just slightly higher despite a streak of record highs as worries related to the US economy and the increase of coronavirus cases dampened the enthusiasm of some investors.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at its fourth record high of the week, hitting 4,468 for a gain of 7 points or 0.2 percent. For the week, the blue chip indicator was up just 0.7 percent despite its streak of all-time highs.

"Stock markets are making modest gains once more on Friday, in what is likely to be rather uneventful trade as we make our way into the weekend," Craig Erlam, analyst at New York's OANDA, said on Friday. "This has been a common feature of the markets recently, small and steady gains. The next couple of weeks could be all about Delta."

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the NYSE that lists mostly industrial stocks, made a historic peak as well for a fourth time at 35,611. It finished the session at 35,515 for a gain of 16 points or just 0.04 percent. For the week, the Dow rose 0.9 percent.

Big Tech stocks once again lagged blue chips and industrials, as they had since the start of the week as investors continued to exhibit caution toward what has been cited as overvalued companies.

The Nasdaq Composite, which includes tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed up 7 points, or also 0.04 percent, at 14,823. For the week, the Nasdaq fell 0.1 percent.

Earlier on Friday, the University of Michigan said its closely-followed US Consumer Sentiment Index plunged to a decade low in August on concerns about another economic slowdown due to the coronavirus.

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**Canada to Mandate Coronavirus Vaccines for Federal Workers, Most Travelers**

TORONTO, August 14 (Sputnik) - Canada will require all federal government employees and inter-provincial passengers to be vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, Ottawa announced. "We are announcing today that we will require vaccinations in the federal public service," Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Dominic LeBlanc said during a press briefing on Friday. The Canadian government did not announce timelines for the implementation of the new mandate, saying that negotiations are ongoing with labor groups.

The requirement also encompasses workers in the federally regulated air, rail, and marine transportation sectors, the Canadian government said in a press release accompanying the announcement, as well as most air, interprovincial rail and marine vessel travelers.

Air, rail and marine transportation sector workers and affected passengers must fulfill the vaccination requirement by the end of October.

The Canadian government is urging Crown corporations and federally regulated sectors to invoke similar measures, according to the statement.

According to the federal government, more than 82 percent of Canadians have received at least one dose of the vaccine, while some 71 percent are fully vaccinated.

Leblanc said that while he does not know the vaccination rate among federal employees, he suspects it is high.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) -

#### AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

\* The Taliban captured Puli Alam, the capital of Afghanistan's eastern Logar province, located 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Kabul, provincial lawmaker Saeed Qaribullah Sadat said.

\* Russia is not satisfied with current developments in Afghanistan and calls for resumption of peace talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

\* The US response to an attack or threat to its forces in Afghanistan will be forceful and appropriate and in line with the right to self-defense, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

\* The bulk of the 3,000 US troops will arrive to Kabul by the end of the weekend to support the withdrawal operation while some elements of one of the Marine infantry battalions are already there, Kirby said.

\* The US military is always worried about adversaries such as the Taliban (banned in Russia) taking American equipment given to allied forces like the Afghan government, Kirby said.

\* The UK military began deployment in Afghanistan to support the evacuation of the country's nationals, the UK Ministry of Defense said.

\* A military solution to the situation in Afghanistan is not being considered now, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said following a meeting of the COBRA government committee on the situation in Afghanistan.

#### STARLINER SPACECRAFT

\* The Starliner spacecraft will miss the August launch window and will be returned to the factory facility in order to be repaired, Boeing announced at a media conference held together with NASA on Friday.

\* The Starliner spacecraft will be de-stacked from the Atlas V rocket to conduct more troubleshooting of four propulsion valves, Boeing said.

#### MERKEL UPCOMING VISITS TO RUSSIA, UKRAINE

- \* German Chancellor Angela Merkel will visit Russia on August 20, German government spokesperson Steffen Siebert said on Friday.
- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold negotiations with Merkel in Moscow on August 20, the Kremlin said.
- \* Merkel will pay a visit to Ukraine on August 22, Seibert confirmed.

#### INCIDENT AT US MILITARY BASE

- \* The authorities at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, located near the US Capitol, said on Friday that the base has been placed on lockdown after a potential armed individual was seen on-site.
- \*The US Defense Department is monitoring the situation at a base in Washington, DC that is on lockdown due to a potential armed person, a spokesperson told Sputnik.

#### CORONAVIRUS

- \* The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) on Friday adopted a resolution that recommends individuals with compromised immune systems should receive a third dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine against the novel coronavirus.
- \* A US judge rejected a bid by a group of landlords to block a moratorium on evictions put into place to protect economically distressed people from being made homeless.
- \* About a hundred parents gathered outside Finland's Institute for Health and Welfare in Helsinki on Friday to protest COVID-19 immunization of children aged 12-15, police said.

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#### US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Extends Remote Voting Until October - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sent a Dear Colleague letter to all representatives on Friday notifying them that the remote voting period has once again been extended, this time until October.

"In light of the attached notification by the Sergeant-at-Arms, in consultation with the Office of Attending Physician, that a public health emergency is in effect due to a novel coronavirus, I am hereby extending the 'covered period' designated on January 4, 2021, pursuant to section 3(s) of House Resolution 8, until October 1, 2021," Pelosi said.

The House Sergeant-at-Arms, William Walker, notified Pelosi on Friday that the public health emergency due to the novel coronavirus will remain in effect.

Republicans initially challenged the allowance of remote voting, claiming it to be unconstitutional after it was first decided upon in May.

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Three US Army Employees Face Bribery, Money Laundering Charges - Justice Dept.  
WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - Three former employees of the US Army at Fort Bragg in North Carolina face charges of bribery with the third also accused of money laundering, the Justice Department announced on Friday.

"Three men formerly employed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina were arrested today on charges of bribery of a government official," the Justice Department said in a release. "Calvin Alfonza Jordan, 64, Edward Wade Crisco, 59, and Stephen Paul Sabato, 50, were charged... with Jordan also charged with money laundering."

According to court documents, from 2011 to 2019, Jordan was a procurement agent assigned to the Operations and Maintenance Division, Directorate of Public Works (DPW), at Fort Bragg, the release said. The DPW is responsible for the design, construction, maintenance and operation of utility systems on the base, it added.

"The indictment alleges that Jordan, Crisco, a flooring technician assigned to DPW, and Sabato, a roofing technician assigned to DPW, each accepted payments from companies and individuals in return for increasing the amount of federal contracts with those companies," the release said.

Jordan is alleged to have received thousands of such payments of at least \$200 each. Over the eight-year period, payments received for such work orders amounted to a total estimated income to Jordan of \$1,080,400, according to the release.

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US Ready to Evacuate Mission in Kabul, Destroy Sensitive Materials, Burn Flags - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing a full evacuation of its mission in Kabul and is already destroying sensitive materials and burning flags, sources familiar with the matter told Politico's newsletter NatSec Daily.

The sources claim the US Defense Department sees a full embassy evacuation as "inevitable."

"Facilities will provide destruction support between 0830 and 1600 daily until further notice.

Please take advantage and reduce the amount of sensitive material on the property. Please also include items with embassy or agency logos, American flags, or items which could be misused in propaganda efforts," the memo, obtained by NatSec Daily, said.

According to the memo, the embassy's personnel should get rid of the materials via a disintegrator, burn bins, an incinerator or a compactor.

Meanwhile, on Thursday, US State Department said that the US embassy in Kabul remained open at its current location. It added that the US expected to further decrease its staff in the embassy in Kabul over the security situation on the ground.

Afghanistan has recently suffered a spike in violence as the Taliban (banned in Russia) have begun an offensive across the country since the foreign forces began withdrawing after more than two decades of the war.

So far, militants have managed to take over major parts of the country's north and west, including 18 provincial capitals, and continue to target major cities.

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#### US House Minority Leader Says Biden Must Ensure Afghanistan Not Haven for Terrorists

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Friday that President Joe Biden must ensure the safe withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan and provide a plan on how he will prevent the country from becoming a haven for terrorists. "President Biden must immediately focus all efforts on making sure there is a plan to safely extract all American service members and civilians still remaining in Afghanistan," McCarthy said in a statement. "He also owes the American public an answer on what he plans to do to make sure the region doesn't turn into a breeding ground for more violent extremism that will lead to large-scale global attacks of terrorism."

The statement comes amid an offensive by the Taliban (banned in Russia) in which the opposition movement has retaken Afghanistan's provincial capitals and threatens to isolate the capital of Kabul. The Biden administration on Thursday decided to deploy 3,000 troops back to Kabul to assist the State Department with its evacuation of US personnel and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants.

"It should have been the government's responsibility to execute a responsible exit as we withdrew the remaining forces from the country. But in a matter of months, the Biden administration has led a botched withdrawal process that has now predictably handed an entire country over to terrorists," McCarthy said.

The Defense Department has said it plans to complete its withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of August, but will still maintain "over the horizon" counterterrorism capabilities.

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#### US Claims of Huawei CFO's Deception 'Ambiguous at Best,' Risk to HSBC 'Illusory' – Lawyer

TORONTO, August 13 (Sputnik) – US claims of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou's fraudulent behavior are at most opaque, while the risk to HSBC was fictitious, a lawyer representing the executive told a Canadian judge on Friday.

Friday marked the first day of final submissions from Meng's legal team, which counts more than half-dozen lawyers, before British Columbia Supreme Court Associate Justice Heather Holmes.

The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed fraud by misleading HSBC into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014 through a Tehran-based shell company, Skycom.

"The alleged deception is ambiguous at best, and the risk of loss to the alleged victim, HSBC, is wholly illusory," Defense attorney Eric Gottardi told the court.

Gottardi stressed that eight years after Reuters first reported on the true nature of the relationship between Huawei and Skycom and that the Tehran-based firm was selling telecommunications equipment to Iran, in contravention of US sanctions, no penalties have been imposed on HSBC, which cleared the transactions.

"Fraud requires a real risk of pecuniary loss," the lawyer said, urging Holmes to reject the Attorney General of Canada's alleged attempt to expand the law of fraud beyond the scope of what has been defined by the Supreme Court of Canada.

The defense also re-invoked a report drafted by John Bellinger, a former White House legal adviser during the Bush era, according to which the relationship between Huawei and Skycom was irrelevant to HSBC's sanctions risk in clearing the payments through the United States. The legal counsel added that there is no evidence Skycom's business dealings in Iran violated any of Washington's sanctions, noting that it is not an offense to send Iran-related payments from China to the United Kingdom.

Earlier this week, the Canadian Justice Department submitted that the extradition request for Meng is about dishonesty in commercial dealings, with Crown attorney Robert Frater calling alleged misrepresentations made to HSBC the "essence of fraud."

The United States alleges Meng personally assured HSBC executives that Huawei and its partners, including Skycom, were in compliance with international sanctions on Iran. According to a PowerPoint presentation admitted as evidence, Huawei also made assurances that Skycom was no longer under its control, despite the opposite being true.

The meeting between Meng and HSBC executives was spurred by the series of Reuters articles.

Frater, one of the prosecutors representing the AGC on behalf of the United States, has painted the extradition case against Meng as one that is not distinct from other fraud extradition cases. Gottardi rejected Frater's submission, calling the case "exceptional" from both a legal and factual standpoint.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018, at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

The executive remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

The final arguments are expected to wrap up on August 20.

Holmes is expected to give her recommendation on the United States' extradition request to AGC and Justice Minister David Lametti later in the fall. Lametti has the final say on the request and has the right to refuse extradition in exceptional circumstances.

Analysts say Lametti's decision could hinge on developments in China, where the fate of multiple Canadians is held in the balance.

The hearings in Vancouver are being held against the backdrop of judgments in China, where a court upheld the death penalty for Canadian Robert Schellenberg for drug smuggling and a separate court sentenced businessman Michael Spavor to 11 years for espionage.

Spavor and Michael Kovrig, the other Canadian national held in China on espionage charges, have been in Chinese custody since 2018. Ottawa maintains that the "arbitrary" detentions came in retaliation for Canada's arrest of Meng.

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**New York State Assembly Says Suspending Cuomo Impeachment After Governor Resigned**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The New York State Assembly has decided to suspend the impeachment proceedings against Governor Andrew Cuomo after he announced his resignation amid allegations of sexual harassment, Speaker Carl Heastie said on Friday.

"The Assembly will suspend its impeachment investigation upon the governor's resignation taking effect on August 25," Heastie said in a statement.

Hastie cited two reasons for the decision: Cuomo's resignation had resolved the question of whether the governor should remain in office amid the allegations against him; and the fact that there were no provisions for the Assembly to remove an elected official who was no longer in office.

However, Hastie emphasized that a committee put together by the Assembly had investigated the harassment allegations - as well as other accusations against Cuomo - thoroughly and found there were adequate grounds to remove him from office, had he not resigned.

"Underscoring the depth of this investigation, this evidence concerned not only sexual harassment and misconduct but also the misuse of state resources in relation to the publication of the governor's memoir as well as improper and misleading disclosure of nursing home data during the COVID-19 pandemic," he said.

Cuomo, who served as governor for a decade, resigned a week after New York State Attorney General Letitia James concluded that a months-long investigation found him having harassed nearly a dozen colleagues. Cuomo has denied any wrongdoing.

On stepping down, Cuomo named New York State Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul as his replacement.

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**Guterres Says Now Time for Taliban to End Offensive, Start Negotiations, Avoid Civil War**

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday this was the moment for the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) to halt its

offensive on Afghanistan, engage in serious negotiations and avoid a civil war and international isolation.

"This is the moment to halt the offensive. This is the moment to start serious negotiation. This is the moment to avoid a prolonged civil war or the isolation of Afghanistan," Guterres said in a statement.

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US Military 'Always Worried' About Enemies Like Taliban Seizing Equipment - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The US military is always worried about adversaries such as the Taliban (banned in Russia) taking American equipment given to allied forces like the Afghan government, Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We are always worried about US equipment that could fall into an adversary's hands, and that's something we never lose focus on, and what actions we might take to prevent that, or forestall it, I just simply won't speculate about that," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby was responding to a question about whether the US will take action to prevent the Taliban from obtaining advanced aircraft such as the Super Tucano, which the US helped the Afghan Air Force acquire.

He added that the US commitment to helping the Afghan Air Force refurbish their Blackhawk and Mi-17 helicopters remains in place.

The Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General published a report on Friday that called upon US forces participating in the Afghan withdrawal to take greater care to keep records on equipment, noting that both they and the Government Accountability Office have documented the loss of "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of US equipment due to poor recordkeeping.

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UN Chief Calls on Taliban to Immediately Cease Offensive, Negotiate in Good Faith

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday called on the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) to immediately end its offensive on Afghanistan and negotiate in good faith.

"I call on the Taliban to immediately halt the offensive and to negotiate in good faith in the interest of Afghanistan and its people," Guterres said in a statement.

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**Lockdown Lifted at Military Base Near US Capital, Suspect Detained - Statement**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The lockdown at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in the US capital has been lifted with the armed suspect detained, authorities at the facility said on Friday. "Authorities have responded to the scene, and the threat of an armed individual on Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling has been cleared," the authorities said. "The individual was detained and will be transferred to Metropolitan Police Department custody. First responders are still assessing the situation."

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**States Must Convey to Taliban Forceful Seizure of Power 'a Losing Proposition' - Guterres**

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the international community to send a clear message to the Taliban (banned in Russia) that capturing power through military force in Afghanistan is a losing proposition. "The message from the international community to those on the warpath must be clear: seizing power through military force is a losing proposition. That can only lead to prolonged civil war or to the complete isolation of Afghanistan," Guterres said in a statement.

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**US to Respond in 'Forceful, Appropriate' Way if Forces Attacked in Afghanistan - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The US response to an attack or threat to its forces in Afghanistan will be forceful and appropriate and in line with the right to self-defense, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday. "If these forces [supporting withdrawal from Afghanistan] are attacked and threatened, we have the ability and the right to self-defense, and we will respond in a forceful and appropriate way" Kirby said at a press briefing.

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**Violent US Extremists May Carry Out Attacks Over New COVID-19 Restrictions - DHS**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - Violent extremists may conduct attacks in the United States over the re-establishment of coronavirus-related restrictions, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in an advisory on Friday.

"Through the remainder of 2021, racially- or ethnically-motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists will remain a national threat priority for the United States," the advisory said. "These extremists may seek to exploit the emergence of COVID-19 variants by viewing the potential re-establishment of public health restrictions across the United States as a rationale to conduct attacks."

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**UN Chief Says Deeply Disturbed Taliban Limiting Human Rights In Areas Under Control**

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday he was deeply disturbed by the indicators that the Taliban (banned in Russia) was limiting human rights in the provinces and cities it has captured.

"I am also deeply disturbed by early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions on human rights in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women and journalists," Guterres said in a statement.

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**Pentagon Says Monitoring Lockdown at DC Military Base Due to Potential Armed Person**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is monitoring the situation at a base in Washington, DC that is on lockdown due to a potential armed person, a spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

"We're aware and are monitoring the situation," the spokesperson said. "The 11th Security Forces Squadron in coordination with the Metropolitan Police Department are responding to the incident."

Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling is on lockdown after receiving reports of a potential armed suspect seen on-site.

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**Situation in Afghanistan Spinning Out of Control - UN Chief**

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday the situation in Afghanistan is spinning out of control as the Taliban (banned in Russia) accelerates its offensive toward the capital of Kabul.

"Afghanistan is in the throes of yet another chaotic and desperate chapter – an incredible tragedy for its long-suffering people," Guterres said in a statement. "Afghanistan is spinning out of control."

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US Will Have Capacity to Evacuate Thousands of Afghan Civilians Per Day - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United States intends to evacuate thousands of civilians out of Afghanistan each day, US Defense Department Press Secretary John Kirby said on Friday.

"We will be able to move thousands per day [out of Afghanistan]... our intention is to be able to move thousands per day," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says Taliban Trying to 'Isolate' Kabul

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The Taliban group (banned in Russia) is trying to isolate Kabul, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"They are trying to isolate Kabul, isolating provincial capitals... from their actions, [we can say that] they [Taliban] are trying to get Kabul isolated," Kirby said.

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Pentagon Says Bulk of 3,000 Troops to Arrive in Afghanistan This Weekend

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The bulk of the 3,000 US troops will arrive to Kabul by the end of the weekend to support the withdrawal operation while some elements of one of the marine infantry battalions are already there, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Some elements of one of the Marine infantry battalions are already there in Kabul," Kirby said at a press briefing. "The rest of their forces will continue to flow over the next couple of days and I expect that by the end of the weekend the bulk of the three thousand, that we talked about yesterday, will be in place."

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US Troops Movements for Afghanistan Drawdown Underway - Pentagon  
WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US troop movement to support the withdrawal operation from Afghanistan has begun with 3 battalions preparing to move from their current locations to Kabul, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Troop movements, that we mentioned yesterday, are happening as we speak. Three battalions are preparing to move from their current locations in the Central Command Area of Responsibility to Kabul," Kirby said at a press briefing.

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NASA Says Russian Media Allegations That US Astronaut Drilled Hole in ISS 'Not Credible'

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The accusations made by Russian media claiming that NASA Astronaut Serena Aunon-Chancellor had a nervous breakdown and damaged a Russian spacecraft to get home are not credible, Kathy Lueders, who is leading NASA's human spaceflight program as the Associate Administrator of the Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate, said at a press conference on Friday.

Russia's TASS recently published a story, citing an unnamed source in the Russian Space Agency Roscosmos, that claimed Aunon-Chancellor had an emotional breakdown in space and she made a microfracture in the Russian spacecraft to return early during a mission in 2018. "Absolutely," Lueders said when asked whether NASA will defend its astronaut. "Our NASA crews perform their missions with professionalism and integrity. She [Aunon-Chancellor] is a well-respected crew member who has served her country and made a valuable contribution. I stand behind her and her professional conduct and I did not find this accusation credible." Aunon-Chancellor traveled on Soyuz MS-09 in 2018 for a six-month mission to the ISS together with ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst and Roscosmos commander Sergei Prokopyev.

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CDC Recommends Coronavirus Vaccine Booster for People With Weak Immune Systems

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) on Friday adopted a resolution that recommends individuals with compromised immune systems should receive a third dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine against the novel coronavirus.

"An additional dose of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (≥12 years) or Modern COVID-19 vaccine (≥18 years) is recommended following a primary series in immunocompromised people," the ACIP said.

The ACIP approved the recommendation in a unanimous 11 - 0 vote after the US Food and Drug Administration on Thursday authorized the emergency use of the third dose of Pfizer or Moderna for immune-compromised individuals.

The recommendation does not apply to the one shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine due to a lack of available information about whether an additional dose would be safe and effective.

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#### US Treasury Says Paid Out \$15Bln in Child Relief Payments Amid COVID-19 Resurgence

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US families have received over \$15 billion in child tax credit over the past two months, the Treasury Department announced on Friday, as fiscal authorities anticipated renewed financial difficulties for Americans amid a resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic.

"More than \$15 billion were paid to families that include roughly 61 million eligible children in the second monthly payment of the expanded and newly-advanceable Child Tax Credit from the American Rescue Plan passed in March," the Treasury said in a statement.

Eligible families received up to \$300 per month for each child under age six and up to \$250 per month for children aged between six and 17 under the payment deposited directly into bank accounts by the Internal Revenue Service.

The Biden administration has been deepening its assistance to Americans amid a resurgence in coronavirus cases from the Delta variant of the virus.

Over the past week, an average of roughly 124,200 coronavirus cases have been reported each day in the United States alone, an increase of 86 percent from two weeks ago. Average daily hospitalizations are up to more than 68,800, an 82 percent increase over the last two weeks.

The number of new deaths reported is up by 75 percent, to an average of 552 deaths per day.

Also on Friday, a US judge rejected a bid by a group of landlords to block a moratorium on evictions put into place to protect economically distressed people from being made homeless and put at risk of contracting COVID-19.

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"Absolutely," Lueders said when asked whether NASA will defend its astronaut. "Our NASA crews perform their missions with professionalism and integrity. She [Aunon-Chancellor] is a well-respected crew member who has served her country and made a valuable contribution. I stand behind her and her professional conduct and I did not find this accusation credible."

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**West African Court to Announce Ruling on US Bid to Extradite Venezuelan Envoy in 7 Days**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - A Cape Verde constitutional court will announce in a week its decision on whether to extradite Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab to the United States, his defense team said in a statement obtained by Sputnik after the final hearing on Friday. Last July, authorities on Cape Verde (or Cabo Verde) - an island-nation off West Africa - arrested Saab during a fuel stop based on a US extradition warrant over alleged sanctions violations. Saab was on a humanitarian mission to Iran as special envoy for the Venezuelan government.

"Mr. Saab was not permitted to attend the hearing and remains in the extraordinary position of never having been permitted to defend himself in person since the start of this process," the defense team said in a statement. "The defense requested extra time to present its oral arguments given the complexity of the case but was restricted to 15 minutes only."

The Cape Verde justices will now meet in private and announce their judgment in seven days, the release added.

"The defense team remains confident that the Constitutional Court will recognize the procedural and legal errors which have occurred at the lower courts in Cabo Verde, and we hope that justice will prevail," lead defense counsel Jose Manuel Pinto Monteiro said in the statement. Saab's appeal asserts that twelve unconstitutionality had taken place throughout the extradition proceedings, according to the release.

Ahead of Friday's hearing a group of people demonstrated in the vicinity of the Constitutional Court demanding Saab's release, although police blocked them from getting closer, local news agency Inforpress reported.

On Thursday, Pinto Monteiro told Sputnik the Cape Verde justices must live up to their international obligations to respect the in transitu immunity of special envoys. The lawyer also said, in the meantime, 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." Earlier this week, the Deputy Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department, N.T. Lakhonin, condemned the US effort to extradite Saab, warning that it could have a "boomerang effect" and negatively impact international relations.

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**UPDATE 2 - Military Base Near US Capitol on Lockdown After 'Potential Armed' Person Reported On-Site**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The authorities at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, located near the US Capitol, said on Friday that the base has been placed on lockdown after a potential armed individual was seen on-site.

"There is a potential armed individual on Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, the last known location was on the South side near Blanchard Barracks," the authorities said in a statement.

"Description of the individual is a black male with a medium build carrying a Gucci Bag."

The authorities said earlier they were looking for a second suspect who may be injured but later clarified that they are now just looking for one suspect on base. It was unclear if the possible second suspect was arrested.

The US Naval Research Laboratory, located about three miles from Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, also warned all employees to remain in place.

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**US Oil Rig Count up by 10 This Week to 397 - Baker Hughes Data**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The number of rigs actively drilling for oil in the United States rose by 10 this week to 397, the highest since April 2020, industry firm Baker Hughes said on Friday in its weekly survey of the rig count.

Energy analysts polled by US media had expected oil rigs to grow by just two this week, similar to last week.

The weekly Bakers Hughes survey is an indicator of future production and is closely watched by industry firms as well as participants in energy markets.

Oil rigs stood at a record high of 1,609 in October 2014 when the United States first overtook Saudi Arabia as the world's largest crude producer. Following a price crash over the next two years, they fell to below 400, before picking up again to above 800 by mid-2019.

At the height of US oil production in March 2020, and just before the breakout of the coronavirus pandemic, rigs stood at 664. The United States produced 13.1 million barrels per day of crude then. Currently, US crude production is at 11.1 million barrels daily.

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**Starliner Craft to Return to Factory for Repairs, Will Miss August Launch Window - Boeing**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The Starliner spacecraft will miss the August launch window and will be returned to the factory facility in order to be repaired, Boeing announced at a media conference held together with NASA on Friday.

"We are disappointed that we are unable to make this issue resolved in time to make this launch window," Boeing Commercial Crew Program Vice President John Vollmer said. "We gonna get it back to the factory... We are not be launching it in August."

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The authorities added that they are looking for a second suspect who may be injured.

The US Naval Research Laboratory, located about three miles from Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, also warned all employees to remain in place.

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**UN Remains in Contact With Taliban Amid Worsening Situation in Afghanistan - Spokesman**

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations remains in contact with the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) as it continues to advance its offensive on Afghan cities, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

"Contacts are remaining and are continuing as they are obviously critical to the situation on the ground," Dujarric said.

The spokesman also said the United Nations does not believe that the imposition of government by force is the right solution in Afghanistan.

"Only those that have the authority to recognize can withhold recognition," Dujarric pointed out.

When asked whether the United Nations is preparing to evacuate its staff amid the volatile security conditions, Dujarric said the situation in Kabul and other locations is being evaluated on an hourly basis, and there is no evacuation of UN personnel going on at the moment.

Following the departure of US-NATO forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban have launched a major offensive across the country, taking control over much of the north and west of the country and some provincial capitals.

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#### **Military Base Near US Capitol on Lockdown After 'Potential Armed' Person Reported on Site**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The authorities at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, located near the US Capitol, said on Friday that the base has been placed on lockdown after a potential armed individual was seen on-site.

"There is a potential armed individual on Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, the last known location was on the South side near Blanchard Barracks," the authorities said in a statement.

"Description of the individual is a black male with a medium build carrying a Gucci Bag."

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#### **Boeing Starliner Spacecraft Needs More Troubleshooting of 4 Propulsion Valves - Statement**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - Boeing will de-stack its Starliner spacecraft from the Atlas V rocket to conduct more troubleshooting of four propulsion valves, the company said on Friday.

"Today, Boeing informed NASA that the company will de-stack its CST-100 Starliner from the Atlas V rocket and return the spacecraft to the Commercial Crew and Cargo Processing Facility (C3PF) for deeper-level troubleshooting of four propulsion system valves that remain closed after last Tuesday's scrubbed launch," the company said in a press release.

Last week, Boeing scrapped two launch dates over last-minute issues involving the propulsion system in the spacecraft, which was set to deliver its second experimental unmanned cargo delivery to the International Space Station.

The Starliner spacecraft has been atop of the Atlas V rocket since August 4, but a new launch date will be set once the valve issue is resolved, the release said.

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#### **US Judge Denies Bid to Block COVID-Related Evictions Ban Challenged by Landlords**

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - A US judge on Friday rejected a bid by a group of landlords to block a moratorium on evictions put into place to protect economically distressed people from being made homeless.

"Accordingly, it is... ordered that the Third Amendment Lawyers Association's motion for leave to file brief is denied as moot," Judge Dabney L. Friedrich wrote in her ruling that blocked lawyers for the landlords in the state of Alabama from challenging the moratorium put into place by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Judge Friedrich also ruled that the landlords must go to the US Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia if they wished to mount another challenge to the 60-day CDC moratorium that is set to expire on October 3.

The moratorium has been in place since the height of the coronavirus pandemic last year and was originally due to expire at the end of July. It was nevertheless extended after President Joe Biden told Congress that many renters still faced financial difficulties due to the pandemic and those driven from their homes could face heightened risk from the more dangerous Delta variant of the virus.

Over the past week, an average of roughly 124,200 coronavirus cases have been reported each day in the United States alone, an increase of 86 percent from two weeks ago. Average daily hospitalizations are up to more than 68,800, an 82 percent increase over the last two weeks. The number of new deaths reported is up by 75 percent, to an average of 552 deaths per day.

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UN Chief to Deliver Statement on Afghanistan Friday Afternoon - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will make a statement later on Friday on the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan as more cities fall under control of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"I do expect the Secretary-General to be at the Security Council stakeout around 2:30 [EDT] to deliver a statement on the current situation in Afghanistan," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

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US Homeland Security Chief Says Crisis on Southern Border 'Unsustainable' - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials that the crisis on the US border with Mexico is unsustainable, according to leaked audio obtained by Fox News on Friday.

"A couple of days ago I was down in Mexico, and I said look, you know, if, if our borders are the first line of defense, we're going to lose and this is unsustainable," Mayorkas said. "We can't continue like this, our people in the field can't continue and our system isn't build for it."

On Thursday, Mayorkas made the remarks during a visit to the US border with Mexico in Texas. He announced that more than 212,000 illegal migrants were apprehended at the border in July, setting another monthly record.

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.

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#### US Consumer Sentiment Down Most in 10 Years as COVID Fears Bite - UMich Survey

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US consumer sentiment has plunged to its lowest in a decade on concerns about another economic slowdown over the Delta variant of COVID-19, the University of Michigan said in its closely-followed survey on Friday.

"Consumers reported a stunning loss of confidence in the first half of August," the survey's chief economist Richard Curtin said, reporting a 13.5 percent drop to 70.2 in the UMich Consumer Sentiment Index for August, down from 81.2 for July, the sharpest of its kind since April 2020. Curtin said the tumble was mainly due to worries about a resurgence in coronavirus infections. Over the past week, an average of roughly 124,200 coronavirus cases has been reported each day in the United States alone, an increase of 86 percent from two weeks ago. Average daily hospitalizations are up to more than 68,800, an 82 percent increase over the last two weeks. The number of new deaths reported is up by 75 percent, to an average of 552 deaths per day. "Consumers have correctly reasoned that the economy's performance will be diminished over the next several months, but the extraordinary surge in negative economic assessments also reflects an emotional response, mainly from dashed hopes that the pandemic would soon end," Curtin said. "There is little doubt that the pandemic's resurgence due to the Delta variant has been met with a mixture of reason and emotion."

Curtin also said that over the past half-century, the Consumer Sentiment Index has only had larger losses on six other occasions, all connected to sudden negative changes in the economy. Notably, there was a 19.4 percent drop in the economic shutdown in April 2020 at the height of the pandemic and 18.1 percent during the Great Recession in October 2008.

The losses in early August were widespread across income, age, and education subgroups and observed across all regions, the survey's results showed. They also covered all aspects of the economy, from personal finances to prospects for the economy, including inflation and unemployment.

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 thinks growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. The Fed's problem though is 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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## US Imposes Sanctions On Omani Broker Allegedly Smuggling Iranian Oil – Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions against Omani broker Mahmood Rashid Amur Al Habsi, other individuals and businesses for their alleged role in smuggling oil from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Treasury Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating individuals and businesses involved in an international oil smuggling network that supports Iran's IRGC-QF," the statement read. "OFAC's action targets a foreign broker, Mahmood Rashid Amur Al Habsi, who has partnered with senior IRGC-QF officials and used several companies to facilitate shipments of Iranian oil to foreign customers, including buyers in East Asia."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized that Al Habsi used several companies in different countries.

"Two of these companies are based in Oman and one is registered in Liberia. The broker also controls a company in Romania. The broker and those companies are being sanctioned pursuant to Executive Order 13224," the statement read.

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## FBI Staff, Others May Face Charges in US Investigation of Russia Probe Origins - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel John Durham is expected to present the results of his two-year investigation into the origins of the Trump-Russia collusion and there are chances criminal charges will be pressed against several employees of the FBI, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

Durham was appointed as a Special Counsel by the former US Attorney General William Barr in May 2019 to review the FBI's actions in the alleged Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on a former Trump campaign adviser. Durham was expected to present the results of his investigation by the end of this summer but the report said this term will be pushed back.

Durham's team of prosecutors has also focused the probe on individuals outside the FBI who provided information that helped fuel the 2016 investigation into the alleged collusion and whether tipsters knew the information they provided was false, the report said.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland will decide whether Durham's investigation can be stretched beyond the September deadline.

In May, the Justice Department published the Special Counsel statement of expenditures between October 19, 2020 and March that amounted to nearly \$1.5 million.

In 2020, the former director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe declassified a slew of documents that appear to show senior FBI officials improperly obtaining warrants to spy on the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

The allegations about Trump-Russia malfeasance ultimately collapsed with former Special Counsel Robert Mueller concluding at the end of a two-year probe that no collusion had taken

place. Trump had called the allegations of collusion and probe - a political witch hunt to undo the results of the 2016 election.

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US Must Learn From Past Mishandling of Sensitive Info, Records Amid Afghan Exit - DoD

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The US military must learn from its past mishandling of sensitive information and records in order to improve their practices during the ongoing withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Defense Department's Office of the Inspector General (DoD OIG) said in a report published Thursday.

"The lessons from past oversight of contingency operations should be used to ensure better controls during the ongoing withdrawal from Afghanistan," the DoD OIG said. "Insufficient practices related to the handling of equipment containing sensitive information, identified in past oversight work, increased the risk of theft or compromise of the information maintained on that equipment."

The report mentioned the need to make sure that laptops, cell phones, and other equipment that may contain the private medical information of soldiers are properly cleared of any sensitive material. A 2014 DoD OIG audit of the Kandahar airfield in Afghanistan found that troops failed to clear the hard drives of equipment they were giving to the redistribution team, which the DoD OIG said risks the compromise and theft of sensitive information.

They also said that previous joint reports with Government Accountability Office have documented the loss of "hundreds of millions of dollars worth of equipment" due to poor recordkeeping and maintenance.

"The proper retention of records associated with the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan is critical. For example, maintaining control of all associated documentation will decrease the risk of equipment loss, facilitate equipment re-use, and keep sensitive equipment, including weapons and vehicles, out of the hands of our enemies," the DoD OIG said.

The report ended by saying that the mistakes compiled within it can serve as a "reference" for personnel overseeing the retention of the records both during the ongoing Afghan withdrawal and future operations.

While the US initially planned to be fully withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of August, a Taliban advance through much of the country's provincial areas has prompted the Biden administration to redeploy several thousand troops to Kabul in order to aid with the protection of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants and the US diplomatic mission.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 Cuban Interior Ministry Officials, Military Unit - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 13 (Sputnik) - The United States on Friday unveiled sanctions on two Cuban Interior Ministry officials and a military unit over purported human rights abuses, the US Treasury Department announced.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned two Cuban individuals and one Cuban entity pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and targets perpetrators of serious human rights abuse and corruption around the world," the department said.

The individuals targeted are Romarico Vidal Sotomayor Garcia (Sotomayor) and Pedro Orlando Martinez Fernandez (Martinez) from the ministry and the Tropas de Prevencion of the Cuban Ministry of Revolutionary Armed Forces, it added.