

08/18/21 Wednesday

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'Unprecedented Fire Behavior' Seen as California Blazes Grow to Endanger Major Towns
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Extremely dry and windy conditions in the American West have led to the explosive growth of several wildfires in the last few days, which have quickly grown and spread enough to endanger major area towns. More than 100 wildfires are burning in the region.

Cal Fire warned in [a Wednesday update](#) that the Caldor Fire, which was sparked on Saturday, had experienced "unprecedented fire behavior and growth due to extremely dry fuels pushed by the south west winds," tripling in size overnight from Monday into Tuesday and swelling to a conflagration consuming some 53,000 acres.

California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a [state of emergency](#) on Tuesday in El Dorado County, which is downwind of the fire, after it destroyed the town of Grizzly Flats, which had been home to 1,200 people.

"It's a pile of ash," Grizzly Flats resident Derek Shaves told [the Associated Press](#). "Everybody on my block is a pile of ash and every block that I visited - but for five separate homes that were safe - was totally devastated."

A police warning directed residents "to be alert and be ready to evacuate" at a moment's notice, and the Governor's Office of Emergency Services [reported Wednesday](#) afternoon that more than 31,000 people had been directed to evacuate ahead of the Caldor Fire.

Meanwhile, about 100 miles to the north, [the Dixie Fire](#) has consumed a colossal amount of land since starting on July 13, likely due to a spark from Pacific Gas & Electric equipment. On Wednesday the [blaze had consumed](#) 635,728 acres, or 940 square miles, and was advancing on the town of Susanville, the county seat of Lassen County. The town is home to 18,000 residents and 6,000 prisoners incarcerated at two area prisons.

The powerful and dry Diablo Wind, driven by dry, sinking air blasting its way down the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, can reach hurricane-like speeds and are helping to fan California's streak of colossal wildfires. With the winds showing no sign of ending anytime soon, PG&E has begun pre-emptively [shutting off electricity](#) on many power lines judged to be in danger, depriving more than 50,000 customers of power.

In June 2020, the [company admitted](#) to having caused the Camp Fire, a 2018 blaze that killed 85 people and started not far from where the Dixie Fire began. It was the deadliest fire in California history. PG&E paid a \$3.48 million penalty and was required to set up a trust to provide around \$13.5 billion in compensation to victims of the Camp Fire and other wildfires dating back to 2015.

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Photos: US Troops at Kabul Airport Processing 'Eligible Civilians' as Airlift Established
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told reporters Wednesday that about 4,500 US troops had already arrived at Kabul's main airport, but that the Taliban had not interfered with their actions and lines of communication with the militant group have remained open.

The US Department of Defense released images on Wednesday showing thousands of US troops help civilians at Hamid Karzai International Airport, days after they were reported to have fired into crowds mobbing transport aircraft that were attempting to leave.

The uncertain situation remained tense on Wednesday, as thousands of US troops began to arrive and set up operations. However, the issue of thousands of Afghans seeking to leave the country remained unresolved.

The Pentagon published several images of the troops assisting civilians at the airport, passing out water and helping to process the applications of what they called "eligible civilians."

The operation, dubbed "Allies Refuge," will see some 6,000 US troops deploy to Karzai airport on the northern edge of Kabul, which the Taliban militant group seized on Sunday after it surrendered without a fight. Their sudden capture of the city, which US and Afghan officials didn't anticipate would happen for at least a month, sent [throng of people](#) to the airport seeking to exit the country.

Ironically, their deployment comes as the [final departure day](#) for US forces at the end of a 20-year-long occupation war is just days away. Having negotiated a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, the last US troops were slated to exit Afghanistan on August 31.

CNN correspondent Clarissa Ward, who [interviewed Afghans](#) lined up outside the airport on Wednesday, reported that many were among the hundreds of thousands who had collaborated with the US occupation and the US-backed government. Many had papers, including green cards, but were being barred from entering the airport after the chaos of Sunday and Monday, when many people were [killed or wounded](#) in scuffles, shooting, and [attempts to hitch rides](#) on the outside of US military aircraft taking off.

One C-17 that took off on Sunday was found after it landed in Qatar to have carried 640 passengers; the plane is certified for just 134 passengers and the huge volume of people nearly exceeded its maximum weight limit.

"I certainly don't want to do anything to make the airfield less safe and we won't do that. But we will continue to coordinate, deconflict with the Taliban and make sure that those people that need to get to the airfield have the right credentials to ensure passage," US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told reporters on Wednesday. "And the Taliban has been checking those credentials, and if they have them, they have allowed them to pass."

US Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, added that the US Air Force was establishing an airlift to evacuate as many people as possible from the airport, with up to 20 sorties of C-17 Globemaster III transports flying every 24 hours and the capacity to increase that even more. US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman also said that the US had evacuated more than 2,000 people in the last 24 hours and processed another 4,800 willing to go. Milley added that the Taliban was "in and around" the capital city but was not interfering with US military operations.

As the 300,000-strong Afghan army crumbled before a nine-day Taliban blitz, then-President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, reportedly with bags of money, although he [later denied taking](#) anything but the clothes on his back in a video filmed in the United Arab Emirates.

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Afghan Ex-President Karzai, Reconciliation Chief Abdullah Talk Peace With Taliban's Anas Haqqani
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After the deadly chaos that gripped Kabul airport amid a Taliban seizure of power on Sunday, thousands of US troops arrived and negotiations began with the Islamic militia to allow US officials and others to leave the country if they wish.

Delegations from the deposed Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency, which seized the capital over the weekend, have met for peace talks as the Taliban seeks to form a new government.

According to a Taliban official who [spoke with Reuters](#), the Wednesday meeting occurred between former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Afghan reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah on the government's side and Anas Haqqani, a senior official in the Haqqani Network, a faction of the Taliban, on the other.

Not mentioned in the report was the third leader of the Afghan government's reconciliation team, [Gulbuddin Hekmaytar](#), a warlord who leads the Hezbi-Islami militia and once fought alongside Anas Haqqani's father, Jalaluddin Haqqani, when they both were US-backed mujahideen fighting the Soviets, but who later mounted his own bid for power opposite the Taliban in the civil war that ensued after the socialist government was overthrown in 1992.

A spokesperson for Karzai's office told [the Associated Press](#) that the meeting was intended to set the stage for negotiations with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's top political leader who is expected to become the head of state of the Taliban's new government.

After the Taliban secured the surrender of Kabul on Sunday, at least a month before American officials expected the capital to come under threat, then-Afghan President Ashraf Ghani suddenly fled the country, first going to Uzbekistan before going to the United Arab Emirates. [Speaking Wednesday](#) from the UAE, Ghani rejected claims he'd fled with suitcases stuffed full of money, saying he only left Afghanistan to prevent further bloodshed.

As the Taliban seized the capital city, Karzai, a former CIA asset who fought for the Americans during the 2001 invasion before becoming interim president from 2001 until 2004, then president from 2004 until 2014, posted a video online saying he hoped "to solve the issue of Afghanistan with the Taliban leadership peacefully."

After Ghani's flight on Sunday, his now-former vice president, Amrullah Saleh, declared himself to be the caretaker president. Saleh is believed to be in the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul, and [a photo of him](#) on August 15 showed him sitting next to Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary guerilla fighter and Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who resisted Taliban rule

and was assassinated two days before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda in the United States.

Taliban Brings Sharia

Meanwhile in Kabul, the Taliban is attempting to establish an air of international legitimacy and reconciliation, promising to form an “inclusive, Islamic” government and offering amnesty to government workers, who have been urged to return to work.

However, at the same time they have totally rejected western notions of democratic government, with Taliban spokesperson Waheedullah Hashimi [telling Reuters](#), “There will be no democratic system at all because it does not have any base in our country. We will not discuss what type of political system we should apply in Afghanistan because it is clear. It is Sharia law and that is it.”

The Taliban ruled the country from 1996 until 2001 after winning the civil war, but only being recognized as the Afghan government by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Pakistan. Like their rival groups, including Hekmatyar’s, Haqqani’s, and Massoud’s, the Taliban began as insurgents against the socialist Afghan government and their Soviet allies, being armed for the fight by the United States and Pakistan.

The government outlined by a Taliban spokesperson at a Tuesday press conference is close to the structure from that era, with a ruling council making day-to-day decisions and Baradar presiding from afar. Their rule was known for being extremely socially restrictive, especially of the rights of women and girls, who were denied the ability to go to school or to work, to show their faces in public, or to travel outside the home without a male relative.

However, the Taliban was also known for [effectively clamping down](#) on the opium trade, which flourished before and after their rule, but saw its lowest output in decades between 1996 and 2001.

The United Nations on Monday called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government that included members of other groups, as well as women, and to reject support for terrorism or terrorist groups like al-Qaeda.

“Our ulema [scholars] will decide whether girls are allowed to go to school or not,” Hashimi told Reuters. “They will decide whether they should wear hijab, burqa, or only [a] veil plus abaya or something, or not. That is up to them.”

Vying for International Legitimacy

Unlike during their first takeover, a number of nations have already spoken favorably of the potential for future cooperation with a Taliban government on issues of regional stability and trade, including Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey.

“If we are going to recognize a government, we will have to wait till the government is formed,” Chinese Foreign Ministry [spokesperson Zhao Lijian](#) said Wednesday. “Only after that, will we come to the question of diplomatic recognition.”

China’s major concern in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has been the group’s past harboring of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Islamic terrorist group that aims to separate the Xinjiang Autonomous Region from the rest of China and has carried out deadly terrorist attacks in the country.

However, with promises that support will end, Zhao said that “China will continue to support the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan and provide assistance to Afghanistan’s economic and social development within its capacity.”

Washington has so far plotted an ambiguous position in the aftermath of the overthrow of the government it worked nearly 20 years to build up, arm, and support. On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Antony [Blinken told CNN](#) that the US “could recognize” the Taliban government if it respects human rights and doesn’t harbor terrorists, but warned that if not, sanctions would remain in place. At present, Afghanistan’s \$9 billion in assets in Washington are frozen. In addition, US national security adviser [Jake Sullivan said](#) Tuesday that “at this point, [Ghani] is no longer a factor.”

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China, Tajikistan Join Up for Security Drills Amid Taliban Victory in Neighboring Afghanistan by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The rapid advance of the Taliban since May set regional governments on edge, with Tajikistan and Pakistan rushing troops to their borderlands, and Russia and China conducting military and security drills in Tajikistan as well, amid fears the war could spill across the porous, high-altitude borders.

Chinese security experts traveled to the Tajik capital of Dushanbe on Wednesday for two days of joint security drills with their counterparts in the mountainous nation. Dubbed the “Counterterrorism Collaboration 2021” exercises, the drills were planned in advance and are part of a longstanding security collaboration between the two nations.

However, the exercises have taken on a new urgency as the Taliban’s blitz on the Afghan government encountered wild success over the weekend, sending the Afghan military into complete collapse and former President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country as Kabul surrendered without a fight.

“The current international situation is changing and the regional counterterrorism situation is not optimistic,” China’s State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi wrote in letters to Ramazon Hamro Rahimzoda, Tajikistan’s internal affairs minister, and Saimumin Yatimov, chairman of its State Committee for National Security, that were viewed by the [South China Morning Post](#).

Zhao said the exercises “would enhance the level of operational readiness of the counterterrorism forces of the two sides to practise counterterrorism skills, and demonstrate the determination of both sides to combat terrorism and effectively respond to the terrorist threats faced by both countries.”

Tajikistan, a former Soviet republic that gained independence in 1991 and fought a five-year civil war that ended in a stalemate in 1997, shares an 843-mile-long border with Afghanistan, nearly all of it with the northeastern Badakhshan Province. Last month, Dushanbe mobilized some [20,000 reserve troops](#) to the border after Afghan civilians, and even soldiers began fleeing across the border to safety ahead of a Taliban offensive in the area. [Russian forces](#) based in Tajikistan soon followed.

China's primary concern in Central Asia is stability, particularly in Afghanistan, where Beijing hopes to convince the Taliban to end its support for terrorist groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which in the past [has been allowed refuge](#) in Taliban-controlled territory. The terrorist group seeks to separate China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which shares a narrow border with Afghanistan, from the rest of China and is responsible for numerous deadly acts of terrorism in China.

"People from other countries who want to use Afghanistan as a site [to launch attacks] against other countries, we have made a commitment that we will not allow them in whether it's an individual or entity against any country including China," Taliban spokesman Suhail [Shaheen told SCMP](#) in a July interview.

Last month, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi said](#) on a visit to Dushanbe that if a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan wants to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a Eurasian political, economic and security bloc, it will have to prove it can rule in a "responsible" manner, including rejecting terrorism and building an inclusive government. Afghanistan has been an observer since 2005.

Tajikistan is slated to host a meeting of bloc leaders next month, which includes Tajikistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan, all of which share a border with Afghanistan. Other members include Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and India. The issue of Afghan security is sure to figure at the top of their agenda.

China and Tajikistan have cooperated on military and other security issues since 2006, via the SCO. Late last month, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe agreed on the need to enhance security cooperation, particularly on controlling the spread of terrorism across international borders, [according to Xinhua News Agency](#).

China and Tajikistan, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan, have cooperated on counter-terrorist efforts since 2016 via the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM). The following year, relations between Pakistan and the now-former Afghan government broke down after Ghani accused Islamabad of waging an ["undeclared war of aggression,"](#) Dushanbe-Beijing relations further flourished.

According to [unconfirmed western reports](#), a deployment of between dozens and hundreds of Chinese troops have been posted since then in far eastern Tajikistan, along the closest road to China's remote 47-mile border with Afghanistan.

Wang also discussed the situation in Afghanistan with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a Monday phone call. The two expressed mutual willingness to work together on stabilizing Afghanistan, and agreed that the Taliban government must "make a clean break with extremism," [as Xinhua put it](#). While Blinken hoped Beijing would play a major role in this, Wang cautioned that Washington "cannot, on the one hand, deliberately contain and suppress China and undermine China's legitimate rights and interests, and on the other hand, expects support and cooperation from China."

The US has accused China of genocidal policies against the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang in its efforts to clamp down on terrorist groups like ETIM; [Beijing has countered](#) that its rehabilitation and training programs for former extremists are voluntary and in line with the United Nations' Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism guidelines.

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US Expected to Open Up COVID-19 Booster Shots to Fully Vaxxed Adults on September 20
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued amendments to the emergency use authorizations of both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines to allow an additional dose, or 'booster shot,' be administered to immunocompromised individuals. The move comes amid a US surge in cases of the delta variant of COVID-19.

American public health officials and medical experts of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced on Wednesday that the administration intends to roll out a new COVID-19 booster shot initiative, with the hopes of further curbing hospitalizations related to the contagious disease and its delta variant.

"The available data make very clear that protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection begins to decrease over time following the initial doses of vaccination," the public health officials expressed in a joint statement.

As a result, the federal government is "prepared to offer booster shots for all Americans beginning the week of September 20," HHS detailed.

US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy emphasized that this rollout remains pending an independent FDA evaluation on the safety and effectiveness of a third dose of the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA vaccines.

According to the tentative plan, fully vaccinated adults in the US will be eligible for their booster shot eight months after the date of their second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine.

Those who will be immediately eligible for the shot are considered to be among the most vulnerable to COVID-19, such as US health care providers, residents of nursing homes and other senior citizens, according to the Surgeon General.

"We will also begin delivering booster shots directly to residents of long-term care facilities," Murthy revealed.

US health officials believe those who received Johnson & Johnson's single-shot COVID-19 vaccine will also need a booster shot. However, the data needed to confirm this recommendation has not been delivered to officials. The Surgeon General signaled that more information will be available to officials "in the coming weeks."

The US push to extend COVID-19 booster shots to fully-vaccinated Americans comes weeks after World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called on members to hold off on boosters, citing a vaccination gap between poor and wealthier countries.

The plea was almost immediately opposed by several countries, including the US, Germany, France and Israel, [which has recommended a third dose be administered after a five-month period](#) for "adults 50 years of age and older, healthcare workers, patients with high risk for a severe COVID-19 illness" and other vulnerable individuals.

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Suspect on the Loose After Injuring Three Students in South Carolina Drive-by Shooting
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Local law enforcement officials evacuated students from the Orangeburg, South Carolina, school after the incident, and then transported the individuals to the school's technology center, where they were reunited with their parents.

Local authorities announced on Wednesday that at least three students of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School were injured that afternoon as the school was conducting its dismissal.

According to law enforcement, the gunfire came from a vehicle that was driving by the school's campus. The students in question are believed to have sustained injuries that are non life-threatening.

Students at Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School were preparing to end their third day of the new school year at the time of the incident.

Orangeburg, approximately 50 miles south of Columbia, South Carolina, is a college town with a population of fewer than 13,000 people, and a crime rate of 75 per 1,000 residents, according to Neighborhood Scout.

Based on the data, one in 13 individuals is likely to become the victim of a property crime or even a violent crime.

No suspects have been apprehended by authorities.

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US Army Looking to Procure High-Altitude Jammer Ahead of Upcoming Exercises
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last year, the US Army established a new integration directorate aligned under three offices within the Program Executive Office for Intelligence, Electronic Warfare and Sensors. The directorate, in part, determines what new systems, like the Multi-Domain Sensing System (MDSS), can be used to transmit data from sensors and nodes to the battlefield.

Speaking to attendees of the TechNet Augusta conference in Augusta, Georgia, on Tuesday, US Army Col. Daniel Holland revealed that the service is looking to develop a high-altitude cyber, intelligence and electronic warfare sensor that is capable of providing data to allies.

Holland, who serves as the Army's capability manager for electronic warfare, also expressed that the sensor should be able to jam or disrupt enemy signals.

"The idea is blanketing the deep area with low-cost [attributable] sensors to enable deep sensing and deep effects," said Holland, [as reported by C4ISRNet](#).

"Essentially our question is can we get the payload light enough to fly on this penetrating, high-altitude, attributable platform, get close enough to place our effects on target, likely with a special purpose electronic attack or [radio-frequency]-enabled cyber."

Holland added that the system, dubbed the High-Altitude Extended-Range Long Endurance Intelligence Observation System (HELEIOS), comes as part of the MDSS family, and is designed to operate around 60,000 feet (18288 meters) or higher.

HELEIOS will likely take form as a sensor mounted on a solar glide vehicle or balloon.

According to the Army's timeline, the service will begin experimenting with the system during [Project Convergence 2022](#) and a technology demonstration slated to take place in the Indo-Pacific during Fiscal Year 2022.

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Ghani Vows Return to Afghanistan to Exact 'Justice' for Afghans, Refutes He Fled With Millions by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier reports detailed that former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had fled Afghanistan with large sums of money, a figure that some speculated amounted to about \$169 million. It was initially believed that he had either fled to Tajikistan or Uzbekistan before it was confirmed earlier Wednesday that he fled to the United Arab Emirates.

Exiled Afghan President Ashraf Ghani addressed the public on Wednesday and declared that he fully intends to return to Afghanistan in the near future in order to provide "justice" for all Afghan nationals.

"I am in consultation with others until I will return so that I can continue my efforts for justice for Afghans," Ghani said, reiterating that he chose to leave his countrymen in order to prevent any further bloodshed and avert any "huge disaster" after Taliban forces broke promises to not enter Kabul over the weekend.

It's unclear how Ghani would be able to retake the presidency with Taliban officials at the helm. Jake Sullivan, who serves as the national security adviser to the Biden White House, [informed reporters](#) during a Tuesday briefing that the former Afghan president "was no longer a factor" in Afghanistan as he had fled the country. Similar statements were reiterated by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman on Wednesday.

Ghani also took the opportunity to blast earlier reports that he had left the Central Asian country with millions in tow, underscoring that such allegations were entirely false and baseless. "They are lies," he said in his address.

Reports of Ghani having fled Afghanistan with millions in cash emerged as a spokesperson for the Russian embassy previously [told](#) Sputnik that Ghani had departed with four cars that had been filled to the brim with money.

"They tried to put part of the money into a helicopter, but everything did not fit," the official said, before adding that "some of the money was left on the runway."

Follow-up reports alleged that the dollar amount Ghani escaped with was upwards of \$169 million. However, that figure was never confirmed.

"I hope in these coming days that we will get over this and Afghanistan will experience peace and stability," he stated.

Ghani went on to state that he would be detailing the events that prompted his decision to leave at a later time, and that he welcomed talks between Taliban officials and former Afghan President Hamid Karzi, who [recently announced](#) that he had launched a coalition group to ensure peace for the country.

Ghani's latest remarks came moments after the UAE's Foreign Ministry [confirmed](#) that Ghani and his family were allowed entry into the Middle Eastern nation on "humanitarian grounds." However, the brief release did not offer specifics on any asylum conditions that may have been raised or his exact location. It's also unclear how Ghani is funding his UAE stay.

Since the announcement that the US would be withdrawing from the war-torn nation, the Taliban continued to make strides in regaining control of much of the country over a short period of time. Meeting little to no resistance from US-trained Afghan forces, the militant group managed to enter Kabul on Sunday, bringing to a close nearly 20 years' worth of fighting with American troops.

The Taliban, which had ruled the nation for decades, was forced from government with the 2001 US-led invasion that was prompted by Taliban officials refusal to turn over Osama bin Laden and close al-Qaeda training camps in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

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Florida County Declares State of Emergency After COVID-19 Spike Prompts Hospital Shortages by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several weeks, the US has experienced a new spike in COVID-19 cases in the hard-hit states of Texas and Florida. However, the Sunshine State has been placed on another level entirely after becoming the new epicenter of the pandemic within the US, a development that was further bolstered by actions taken by Gov. Ron DeSantis (R).

Florida's Palm Beach County became the latest district in the state to have implemented a state of emergency after rising COVID-19 cases overwhelmed medical facilities and prompted hospital bed shortages.

The county-wide [state of emergency](#) will be in effect until August 24, with a possible extension being implemented should the situation not improve over the next seven days.

While the order will require daily updates on available beds at the county's hospitals, it will not mean that a mask mandate or any preventative COVID-19 restrictions will be enforced, as such measures have been banned by Gov. Ron DeSantis (R).

The move was initially proposed by Commissioner Melissa McKinlay on Tuesday after it was revealed that all 12 beds for the intensive care unit at the county's Lakeside Medical Center had been filled, 11 with COVID-19 patients.

McKinlay had admitted at a Tuesday meeting with county officials that Palm Beach County simply did not "have the resources available right now in our community to address the needs in certain parts of our community."

Local news outlet WPTV [reported](#) that the sudden bed shortage had further forced the Lakeside facility to begin transferring patients within the emergency room to other medical centers in nearby Miami and Orlando.

However, not all hospitals have the capability to take in new patients. Darcy Davis, the CEO of the Health Care District of Palm Beach County, told the station that staff with Lakeside Medical Center had called some 13 hospitals to pinpoint a facility that could take new patients to no avail.

“There are so many patients, it’s overwhelming a lot of the hospitals,” the official acknowledged. At times, the situation has become so dire that ambulances have been forced to wait for extended periods of time before a patient could actually be admitted.

Latest figures released by Palm Beach County have indicated that the area saw the documentation of over 9,000 new COVID-19 cases between August 9 and 12, with the positivity rate jumping to nearly 18% during that same period. On average, officials are seeing about 1,000 new cases each day.

Dr. Kleper De Almeida, an infectious disease specialist, [told](#) the WPTV station shortly after the order was implemented that Palm Beach County is not likely to see the peak of cases for “another four to six weeks.”

The Florida county was previously under a state of emergency at the height of the pandemic, lasting between March 13, 2020 and June 26, 2021.

Aside from Palm Beach County, many other Florida counties are weighing the possibility of implementing initiatives to hold off increasing case counts. Commissioners for Florida’s Alachua County are expected to hold an emergency meeting on potentially reinstating masking requirements, according to the [Sun-Sentinel](#).

At present, much of the US is being ravaged by the Delta COVID-19 variant, which officials have stressed is far more contagious than previous strains of the respiratory illness. Many parts of the US are experiencing case highs similar to those that were previously recorded over the winter.

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Biden Says He Did Not See Way to Withdraw From Afghanistan Without 'Chaos Ensuing'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several days, US President Joe Biden has remained adamant that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a necessity, underscoring that reasoning for the pullout was further bolstered by the fact that US-trained Afghan armed forces chose to not fight back against advances made by the Taliban militant group.

US President Joe Biden acknowledged on Wednesday that there was no way to avoid the chaotic scenes that unfolded in Afghanistan over the weekend, and that, if needed, US forces would be staying past the August 31 deadline to evacuate all Americans.

Biden, who made the unexpected remarks during an [exclusive interview](#) with ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos, further maintained that regardless of the mayhem, the withdrawal was necessary.

"No, I don't think it could have been handled in a way that, we're gonna go back in hindsight and look - but the idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens," Biden stated when asked whether the chaotic scenes were avoidable. "I don't know how that happened."

When pushed on the matter, Biden reiterated that the possibility of madness unfolding in Afghanistan always weighed on the withdrawal decisions, but that US officials understood it was going to be an "enormous" situation to oversee and handle from the get-go.

Biden's comments were in stark contrast to earlier statements in which he indicated that the withdrawal process would be orderly, as well as his [past beliefs](#) that it would be "highly unlikely" the Taliban would not be "overrunning everything and owning the whole country."

However, the conversation also geared back toward the Trump administration, which had negotiated the US withdrawal with the Taliban with an original deadline of May 1. Leaning into the threat of violence for US troops, Biden surprisingly admitted that one of the main reasons that attacks against American forces had been pulled back was because of the Trump White House's peace deal.

"I hear people say, well you had 2,500 folks in there and nothing was happening. You know, there wasn't any more - but guess what, the fact was, that the reason that wasn't happening, was the last president negotiated a year earlier that he'd be out by May 1st and that the return, there'd be no attack on American forces. That's what was done. That's why nothing was happening," Biden said.

"I had a simple choice. If I said, 'we're gonna stay,' then we'd better be prepared to put a whole lot hell of a lot more troops in."

Although Biden White House officials had previously dodged questions on whether US forces would stay past the August 31 deadline to evacuate all Americans from Afghanistan, the commander-in-chief stressed during the exclusive interview that troops would indeed stay longer if needed. "We're going to stay until we get them all out," he said.

Snippets of the exclusive interview were released to the public shortly after US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley held a joint news conference revealing that the US does not presently have the ability to remove large numbers of Americans who are outside of Kabul, but that the US would continue to conduct evacuations "for as long as we possibly can."

US officials have indicated that they successfully evacuated just over 3,000 individuals from Afghanistan, including all non-essential US embassy personnel. Figures suggest that about 15,000 Americans and 65,000 visa-carrying Afghan nationals are set to leave on one of the many evacuation flights being scheduled.

In the moments after the Taliban entered the Afghan capital of Kabul, a trove of images and video footage emerged online showing hundreds of Afghans flocking to the Hamid Karzai International Airport with the hopes of getting out of the war-torn nation on one of the many US flights.

Recordings shared online documented Afghans clinging to C-17 military transports, even as the aircraft were taxiing down the runway. One video [reportedly](#) captured an unidentified body flailing under an aircraft. In another instance, graphic video showed what is believed to be two bodies falling from another transport plane.

Touching on the dramatic scenes emerging out of Kabul, Biden told Stephanopoulos that the images emphasized the need for officials to "gain control" of the evolving situation. "We have to

move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did," he said.

Biden's remarks come on the heels of statements made by Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor, who told reporters at a recent Pentagon briefing that officials are seeking to start evacuating between 5,000 and 9,000 passengers daily, so long as the situation at the airport does not deteriorate. It has been reported that the Taliban's control of checkpoints have been complicating evacuation efforts; however, administration officials have been in talks with the Taliban to rectify the matter.

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Hurricane Grace to Bring Mudslides, 'Destructive Waves' to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US National Hurricane Center earlier predicted that the 2021 hurricane season would be one more of the more destructive and active to date, with as many as 21 named storms. Of the tally, between three and five storms are expected to become major hurricanes.

Hurricane Grace is set to bring heavy rainfall and "destructive waves" that may likely prompt disastrous mudslides across much of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula after making landfall early Thursday, forecasters have warned.

Upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane early Wednesday, Grace is presently moving toward the Yucatán Peninsula in a west-northwestward motion at a pace of just 16 miles per hour. The cyclone has maintained maximum sustained wind speed of 80 miles per hour, and is about 170 miles east of the ancient Mayan port city of Tulum.

At present, hurricane-force winds have been recorded as being felt up to 15 miles from the center of the storm, with tropical storm-force winds extending out some 140 miles. Tropical storm winds have been reported near western Cuba.

An [advisory](#) released by the US National Hurricane Center indicates that after making landfall early Thursday, the system is forecasted to eventually move over the southwest Gulf of Mexico sometime late Thursday into early Friday.

"Some strengthening is possible before the center of Grace reaches the Yucatán Peninsula," reads the bulletin. "Weakening will occur while the center moves over the Yucatán Peninsula on Thursday, with restrengthening expected when Grace moves over the southwest Gulf of Mexico on Friday."

However, the system is expected to downgrade into a tropical depression by midday Saturday. Hurricane warnings have been initiated for much of the peninsula, with alerts being activated from the resort town of Cancún to Campeche and as far south as Puerto Costa Maya. Tropical storm warnings have been implemented for similar areas, as well as the Cayman Islands.

The US agency has stated that as much as 12 inches of rain is likely to swamp portions of the peninsula through Friday, and bring about flash flooding, mudslides, and storm surges of up to 5 feet.

And that's still not all, folks.

“Near the coast, the surge will be accompanied by large and destructive waves,” the advisory notes. “Swells are likely to cause life-threatening surf and rip current conditions.”

Grace is currently just one of three systems sounding off alarms along the Atlantic. Aside from the Category 1 cyclone, there’s also tropical storm Henri and the remnants of tropical storm Fred, which has eagle-eyed forecasters concerned that the storm could still prompt [isolated tornadoes](#) along the US East Coast.

As for Henri, the US agency is [warning](#) that the system could become a hurricane by Friday, and potentially pose threats all along the US East Coast through the [upcoming weekend](#).

8/19/2021 9:31:55 AM -04:00

UN Officials Appeal for Donors to Meet \$800Mln Gap for Afghanistan – Joint Statement
WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – The principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the United Nations on Thursday appealed for donors to help pool an additional \$800 million in funding for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

"Timely funding saves lives, protects livelihoods, eases suffering and prevents further displacement. A total of US\$1.3 billion is required to reach almost 16 million people with humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan; only 37 per cent of required funds have been received, leaving a shortfall of almost \$800 million," the statement said.

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UN Officials Call on Governments to Keep Borders Open for Afghan Refugees

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the United Nations, which is tasked with coordinating humanitarian missions, on Thursday called on the countries neighboring Afghanistan to keep their borders open for those fleeing to seek refuge following the Taliban (banned in Russia) takeover of power in the country.

“We call on Governments to keep borders open to receive Afghan refugees fleeing from violence and persecution and refrain from deportations. This is not the time to abandon the Afghan people. Member States must provide all possible support to Afghan nationals at risk, including a moratorium on repatriations. We urge neighbouring countries to ensure the protection of Afghans displaced across their borders,” the statement said.

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US Jobless Claims Fall to New Pandemic Low of 348,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US jobless claims fell by 29,000 from the previous week to a new pandemic low of 348,000 in a boon to recovery, according to Labor Department data revealed on Thursday.

"In the week ending August 14, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 348,000, a decrease of 29,000 from the previous week's revised level. This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000," the department said in its report.

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Biden Says Will Get COVID-19 Vaccine Booster Shot

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told ABC in an interview that he and his wife, Jill, will get their COVID-19 booster shots, discounting concerns of inequitable global access to vaccines.

"We're gonna get the booster shots... We got our shots all the way back in, I think December. So it's past time... yes, we will get the booster shots," Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos.

When asked whether he was comfortable with Americans getting a third shot when millions worldwide haven't had their first, he said "absolutely."

"We're providing more to the rest of the world than all the rest of the world combined. We got enough for everybody... We're keepin' our part of the bargain. We're doin' more than anybody," he said, adding that more than half a billion shots would be shipped worldwide from the US.

On Wednesday, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that all Americans will be able to receive booster shots starting September 20. These booster shots will be offered at no cost to everyone in the United States regardless of their immigration or health insurance status.

At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that there was no need for booster shots as of yet and added that further research into the matter was needed, expressing concern over global equity of access to the life-saving vaccines.

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Biden Says US Withdrawal from Afghanistan Could Not Have Been Handled Better

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said in an interview with ABC News on Thursday he does not think the exit operation from Afghanistan could have been handled better.

"No," Biden said when asked whether the withdrawal operation from Afghanistan could have been organized in a better way.

Biden also said that before he made a final decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, he met with all US allies, including NATO allies in Europe who agreed with his conclusion.

The Taliban (banned in Russia) militants entered the Afghan capital on August 15, ending a weeks-long offensive and resulting in the collapse of the US-backed government. The seizure of

power has forced thousands of Afghans to seek escape from the country for fear of reprisals from the militants. Thousands of Afghans continue to break into Kabul airport every day in hopes of flying out of the country.

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Biden Says Would Still Have Tried to Withdraw If Trump Had Not Announced Pullout Deal

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday said he would still have tried to withdraw US troops out of Afghanistan even if his predecessor, Donald Trump, had not announced the pullout deal back in 2020.

"I would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes, because look, George. There is no good time to leave Afghanistan. Fifteen years ago would've been a problem, 15 years from now. The basic choice is am I gonna send your sons and your daughters to war in Afghanistan in perpetuity?," Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos.

The Trump administration signed a deal with the in February 2020 that requires the US to withdraw all forces in exchange for counterterrorism assurances. The pullout was initially set for May 1, 2021, but the Biden administration delayed the withdrawal deadline until August 31.

Asked about the possibility of US troops remaining in Afghanistan after August 31, Biden left the door open to missing the deadline to withdraw.

"It depends on where we are," he said.

On Sunday, the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani resigned and left the country to prevent what he described would be a bloodshed. Numerous countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation.

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Taliban Know If They Take US Citizens, US to 'Strike Them Back Like Hell' - Biden

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden on Thursday said the Taliban terrorist group (banned in Russia) knows that if they take the US citizens or the US military, Washington will 'strike them back like hell'

"The Taliban knows if they take on American citizens or American military, we will strike them back like hell won't have it," Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos in an interview.

8/19/2021 7:48:02 AM -04:00

Biden Says US Faces Greater Terror Threat From Syria, Other Countries Than Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told ABC in an interview that the United States faces a more serious terror threat from Syria and other countries than it does from Afghanistan.

"Al Qaeda, ISIS, they metastasize. There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria. There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa. There's significant greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan. And we have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out. We're - we don't have military in Syria to make sure that we're gonna be protected," Biden told ABC News.

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Biden Says Does Not Believe Taliban Have Changed, May Not Want International Recognition

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden in an interview with ABC on Thursday said he does not believe the Taliban (banned in Russia) have changed over the past 20 years and he is unsure whether the group is seeking international recognition.

"No," Biden said when asked whether the Taliban have changed. "I think they're going through sort of an existential crisis about do they want to be recognized by the international community as being a legitimate government. I'm not sure they do."

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RPT - Housing Afghan Refugees at US Bases Raises Transparency, Accountability Issues - Advocate

EL PASO, August 18 (Sputnik) - Afghan refugees should not be kept on military bases because it may lead to transparency and accountability issues with respect to treatment and living conditions, Border Network for Human Rights Executive Director Fernando Garcia told Sputnik. At least 22,000 Afghan refugees will soon be housed at two additional US military bases, including Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, according to US defense officials. Meanwhile, the United States and Qatar were reported to be finalizing an agreement to temporarily house some 8,000 Afghan nationals who worked with the US military, including 1,000 due to arrive soon.

"It's going to bring a lot of issues for us," Garcia said. "I strongly believe refugees don't belong in a military base, so there's multiple issues about that: transparency, accountability, conditions." President Joe Biden came under fire this week after footage went viral of chaos at the Kabul airport as the US rushed the evacuation of civilians and refugees in the wake of the Taliban takeover. On Tuesday, photos emerged showing some 600 Afghans crammed wall-to-wall in a US Air Force C-17 transport plane that was en route from Kabul to Qatar. This was in addition to videos and photos of Afghans falling from military aircraft that was preparing to takeoff. The El Paso-based immigrant rights group is in the early stages of talks with the US Office of Refugee Resettlement about plans to help Afghan refugees when they arrive to Fort Bliss,

Garcia said. At the moment there is no information about when the Afghan refugees will arrive to Fort Bliss or how many are expected to arrive, he added.

The Hope Border Institute, another El Paso-based migrant rights group, told Sputnik they have requested information from a few federal agencies about the number of Afghan refugees who will be received at Fort Bliss and their status, but they also have not received any answers.

"There is no current refugee resettlement agency in El Paso so local organizations and advocates are looking into how we can best support them, but without more information from the federal government, there is little that can be done," Hope Border Institute Deputy Director Marisa Limon Garza said.

Fort Bliss currently houses several thousand undocumented migrant children who came to the United States without a parent or other legal guardian. Whistleblowers have complained about poor conditions at the federal facilities on base.

There are currently about 2,000 Afghan refugees in Virginia's Fort Lee military base.

Meanwhile, several other countries said they would accept Afghan refugees including the UK (20,000), Canada (20,000), and North Macedonia (450), among others. India intends to provide visas and shelter to Afghan refugees, but they haven't said how many they would take in yet. On Sunday, as the US forces move close to finishing their withdrawal, the Taliban completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani left the country to prevent what he described as bloodshed that would occur if militants had to fight for the city. This development has left many people trying to leave the country out of fear of reprisals from the radical movement.

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RPT: FEATURE - Assistant Says Bishop Rodzianko Acted Fearlessly in Kremlin Amid 1991 Coup Attempt

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Renowned Russian Orthodox Bishop Basil Rodzianko found himself in the Kremlin during the 1991 attempted coup, but did not fear for his personal safety, the bishop's longtime assistant Marilyn Swezey told Sputnik.

The coup started the morning of August 19, when the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) attempted to remove then-Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev from power while he was vacationing in the Crimea. The attempted coup ended unsuccessfully on August 22 but it is widely believed that it significantly contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Bishop Basil was in the Kremlin on the day of the coup attempt because he was one of many emigres invited back to Moscow for the Congress of Russian compatriots. On August 19, when the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, he participated in the first historical liturgy in many decades in the Kremlin's cathedral.

"Bishop Basil had been a prisoner of the Soviets several years in Yugoslavia in 1940s, so, he was not afraid," Swezey said. "In August 1991, Bishop Basil essentially saw that the church was affected by this coup, and he, of course, was most concerned about the church regaining its gradual road to freedom, which is what had been started with Gorbachev's perestroika."

The bishop was the grandson of Mikhail Rodzianko, the Russian State Duma president during the reign of Emperor Nicholas II. He became a prominent teacher of Orthodox Christianity in the Soviet Union, the United States and in other countries through his ministry via the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC had broadcast Rodzianko's sermons from the United Kingdom and later from the United States to audiences throughout the world.

"Bishop Basil was at the altar and described the atmosphere. He heard the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, Alexey II, say that he was careful and thus commemorated the country and the people, but avoided commemorating leaders, so it did not interfere with what the GKChP was trying to do," Swezey said.

Christians attending the mass did not know what was happening outside and surrounded the bishop asking him spiritual questions while tanks and police cordons besieged the Kremlin, she said.

Swezey said a friend who saw the bishop, expressed concern the authorities would arrest him and assisted in trying to prevent such an outcome.

"She explained to the police that Bishop Basil is a very important person from the United States who had to go to the Patriarch's reception," Swezey said.

Speaking about the bishop's attitude toward Gorbachev's policy of perestroika, Swezey said he was prayerfully supportive of the continuation of what Gorbachev was doing to loosen the remains of control on the church that the Soviets had imposed for many years.

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"It's going to bring a lot of issues for us," Garcia said. "I strongly believe refugees don't belong in a military base, so there's multiple issues about that: transparency, accountability, conditions." President Joe Biden came under fire this week after footage went viral of chaos at the Kabul airport as the US rushed the evacuation of civilians and refugees in the wake of the Taliban takeover. On Tuesday, photos emerged showing some 600 Afghans crammed wall-to-wall in a US Air Force C-17 transport plane that was en route from Kabul to Qatar. This was in addition to videos and photos of Afghans falling from military aircraft that was preparing to takeoff. The El Paso-based immigrant rights group is in the early stages of talks with the US Office of Refugee Resettlement about plans to help Afghan refugees when they arrive to Fort Bliss,

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Biden Says He Did Not See Way to Withdraw From Afghanistan Without 'Chaos Ensuing'

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in an interview that he did not see any way to pull the United States out from Afghanistan without an ensuing chaos.

"I don't think it could have been handled in a way that, we're gonna go back in hindsight and look - but the idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens," Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos on Wednesday.

Asked about the developments in Afghanistan over the last several days and whether there was any failure on the part of the intelligence community, the execution or planning of the withdrawal, Biden said, "It was a simple choice."

"When you had the government of Afghanistan, the leader of that government, get in a plane taking off and going to another country; when you saw the significant collapse of the Afghan troops we had trained, up to 300,000 of them, just leaving their equipment and taking off - that was, you know, I'm not, that's what happened. That's simply what happened," Biden said.

Commenting on his first reaction to the pictures and videos showing chaotic scenes at the Kabul airport, Biden said his first thought was "to gain control of this."

"We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did," Biden said.

On Sunday, the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani resigned and left the country to prevent what he described would be a bloodshed. Numerous countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation.

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Blinken, UK Foreign Secretary Discuss Ways to Keep Afghan People Safe - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab held a telephone conversation and discussed ways to safeguard Afghans and foreigners in Afghanistan after the rapid Taliban takeover, the State Department said.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke today with UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab about continued coordination in Afghanistan, including ... the safety and security of all Afghan and international citizens," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

Blinken and Raab also discussed ways to encourage adherence to international obligations in the country, where some 4,500 US troops now remain guarding the final evacuation from Kabul airport, Price said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Raab said the United Kingdom will also be looking at the creation of an international contact group on Afghanistan.

The United Kingdom is planning to convene a special meeting of Group of Seven leaders to consider a concerted and co-ordinated response to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Raab added.

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US Charges New York Observer Editor With Cybercrimes Despite Pardon From Donald Trump

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr. has charged New York Observer Editor-in-Chief Kenneth Kurson with cybercrimes despite his being previously pardoned by former President Donald Trump, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office said on Wednesday.

"Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance, Jr. today filed charges against Kenneth Kurson, 52, in New York County Criminal Court," the office said in a press release. "Kurson is charged with eavesdropping and computer trespass, each a class E felony... while he served as Editor-In-Chief of Observer Media Group."

On October 23, 2020, Kurson was charged for related conduct but on January 20, 2021, he was granted a full pardon by outgoing president Trump. However, the latest New York State charges follow an investigation that began in January 2021 after the pardon was issued, the release said.

"We will not accept presidential pardons as get-out-of-jail-free cards for the well-connected in New York. As alleged in the complaint, Mr. Kurson launched a campaign of cybercrime, manipulation, and abuse from his perch at the New York Observer, and now the people of New York will hold him accountable," Vance said.

As alleged in the Manhattan Criminal Court Complaint, from September 24, 2015, to March 3, 2016, Kurson unlawfully used an electronic monitoring software program commonly known as "spyware" on a computer belonging to his then-wife, with whom he lived, the release said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) -

AFGHANISTAN

* President Joe Biden and the national security team discussed the issue of monitoring any potential terrorist threats in Afghanistan, the White House said on Wednesday.

* The US military has evacuated 2,000 more people from Afghanistan over the last 24 hours and processed over 4,800 people willing to leave the country over the last several days, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said.

* The United States does not have the capability to get large numbers of Americans outside the airport in Kabul, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

* The United Nations is receiving reports that life in Afghanistan is slowly returning to normal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative Caroline Van Buren said.

* Afghanistan cannot access its Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) or other IMF funds given that the international community lacks clarity on the recognition of the Taliban (banned in Russia) government, an IMF spokesperson said.

* INTERPOL has suspended Afghanistan's access to its databases following the Taliban's (designated terrorist by the UN and Russia) power takeover, the organization's spokesperson told Sputnik.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon discussed the situation in Afghanistan over the telephone, the Kremlin said.

* Germany will deploy up to 600 servicemen to evacuate citizens from Afghanistan, it is up to Bundestag to determine the mandate, cabinet spokesman Steffen Seibert said.

CORONAVIRUS

* Two studies have shown that effectiveness of the coronavirus vaccines is waning in the context of the virus' Delta variant, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

* The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced on Wednesday that all Americans will be able to receive coronavirus booster shots starting on September 20.

* Coronavirus booster shots will be offered at no cost to everyone in the United States regardless of their immigration or health insurance status, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said.

* President Joe Biden is announcing new regulations to require all workers in nursing homes across the United States to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, the White House said.

* Russia's single-shot Sputnik Light vaccine against the coronavirus showed a high safety profile and a 93.5 percent efficacy in Paraguay's ongoing vaccination campaign, the Russian Direct Investment Fund said.

BELARUS-LITHUANIA BORDER DISPUTE

* The Lithuanian government on Wednesday issued a note of protest to Belarus and announced it would boost border security after an incident involving 12 Belarusian border guards allegedly crossed into Lithuania when trying to push back dozens of migrants.

* Belarus's Border Committee on Wednesday rejected Lithuania's accusations of border violations by Belarusian border guards, stressing that no objective proof has been provided in the matter.

IRAN-RUSSIA TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi discussed the situation in Afghanistan during a telephone conversation on Wednesday, the Kremlin said.

* Putin congratulated Raisi on winning in the recent presidential election in his country and taking office during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.

INTERNATIONAL AID TO HAITI

* The United Nations will continue to provide aid for Haitians affected by the devastating earthquake, including medical support and emergency shelter, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

* The Canadian government is working with the Haitian government and diaspora to help assist the country after it was hit with a magnitude 7.2 earthquake over the weekend, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

MERKEL UPCOMING VISIT TO RUSSIA, UKRAINE

* During her upcoming visit to Moscow on Friday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and hold negotiations and a joint press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin, German cabinet spokesperson Steffen Seibert said.

* Merkel will meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on Sunday in Kiev, she will also lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Seibert said.

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Biden to Announce COVID-19 Vaccine Requirements for US Nursing Home Workers - White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is announcing new regulations to require all workers in nursing homes across the United States to be vaccinated against COVID-19, the White House said on Wednesday.

“Today, President Biden is announcing that HHS [the Department of Health and Human Services] will develop new regulations requiring nursing homes to require that all of their workers be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as a condition of participating in the Medicare and Medicaid programs,” the statement said.

Some states have already taken similar steps to protect nursing home residents, and this action will ensure consistent and equitable standards across the country, the statement acknowledged. “These new regulations would apply to over 15,000 nursing home facilities, which employ approximately 1.3 million workers and serve approximately 1.6 million nursing home residents,” the White House said

Data from US nursing homes showed a sharp decline in immunity from Pfizer and Moderna coronavirus vaccines due to the Delta variant and waning effectiveness over time, a report published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Wednesday.

Two doses of mRNA vaccines from the two companies were 74.7 percent effective among nursing home residents from March to May 2021 but in June and July their effectiveness fell to 53.1 percent, the report said. It suggested a third dose of vaccine might be considered for nursing home and long-term care residents.

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RPT - Afghanistan Cannot Access Reserve Assets Due to Lack of Taliban Recognition - IMF

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan cannot access its Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) or other IMF funds given that the international community lacks clarity on the recognition

of the Taliban (banned in Russia) government, an IMF spokesperson said in a statement on Wednesday.

"There is currently a lack of clarity within the international community regarding recognition of a government in Afghanistan, as a consequence of which the country cannot access SDRs or other IMF resources," the statement said.

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Afghanistan Cannot Access Reserve Assets Due to Lack of Taliban Recognition - IMF

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan cannot access its Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) or other IMF funds given that the international community lack of clarity as to the recognition of the Taliban government, an IMF spokesperson said in a statement on Wednesday.

"There is currently a lack of clarity within the international community regarding recognition of a government in Afghanistan, as a consequence of which the country cannot access SDRs or other IMF resources," the statement said.

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US Will Conduct Evacuations For As Long As Possible - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to evacuate people from Afghanistan for as long as it is able to do so, Pentagon Chief Lloyd Austin said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We are going to evacuate everybody that we can physically, possibly, evacuate and we'll conduct this process for as long as we possibly can," Austin said.

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US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Says No One Foresaw Collapse of Afghan Army in 11 Days

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Senior US Defense Department officials did not expect the Afghan army to collapse in 11 days, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday.

"I did not, nor did anyone else, see the collapse of an army that size in 11 days," Milley said during a press briefing.

The Afghan army had more than 300,000 service members, in addition to an Air Force and other US-supplied equipment, according to US officials.

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US Will Continue to Coordinate, Deconflict With Taliban - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to coordinate and deconflict with the Taliban (banned in Russia) to ensure safe passage to the Kabul airport, Pentagon Chief Lloyd Austin said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"I certainly don't want to do anything to make the airfield less safe and we won't do that. But we will continue to coordinate, deconflict with the Taliban and make sure that those people that need to get to the airfield have the right credentials to ensure passage," Austin said. "And the Taliban has been checking those credentials, and if they have them, they have allowed them to pass."

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Delta Variant Drops Vaccine Effectiveness in US Nursing Homes From 75% to 53% - Report

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Data from US nursing homes showed a sharp decline in immunity from Pfizer and Moderna coronavirus vaccines due to the Delta variant and waning effectiveness over time, a report published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Wednesday.

"Two doses of mRNA vaccines [Pfizer and Moderna] were 74.7 percent effective against infection among nursing home residents early in the vaccination program (March-May 2021). During June - July 2021, when B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant circulation predominated, effectiveness declined significantly to 53.1 percent," the report said.

As a result, the report suggested that an additional dose of coronavirus vaccine might be considered for nursing home and long-term care facility residents to optimize a protective immune response.

The suggestion coincides with US approval of booster jabs for people with compromised immune systems and Wednesday's recommendation that everyone receive a booster shot eight months after being vaccinated with the two-jab Pfizer and Moderna inoculations.

The study was unable to differentiate the impact of the Delta variant from the potential waning of vaccine-induced immunity, the report said.

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US Has No Capability to Collect Large Number of Americans Outside Kabul Airport - Austin

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have the capability to go out and get large numbers of Americans outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters on Wednesday.

"We do not have the capability going out and collect of large numbers of people," Austin said during a press briefing.

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US Conducting 20 Sorties of C-17 Aircraft Out of Afghanistan Per Day – Milley

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The US military is currently conducting 20 sorties of C-17s aircraft per day out of Afghanistan and is capable of significantly increasing this number, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday

"Right now, we are averaging about 20 sorties of C-17 every 24 hours. We have the capability to significantly increase that throughput, as the Department of State makes evacuees available," Milley said at a press briefing.

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US Growth to 'Remain Strong' Despite Inflation, Risks of Delta Variant - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve officials gave during their July meeting an upbeat assessment for US economic growth prospects for the remainder of the year, albeit factoring in the dual challenges of inflation and the coronavirus Delta variant, according to minutes of the meeting released on Wednesday.

"Economic growth was expected to remain strong over the second half of the year, supported by the further reopening of the economy, accommodative financial conditions, and easing of supply constraints," minutes of the July 27-28 meeting of the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee meeting said.

However, Federal Reserve officials tempered the assessment with a warning that uncertainty affecting the US economic outlook remained "quite high," with the coronavirus Delta variant posing one challenge and inflation another.

"Some members noted 'upside risks to inflation,' in particular that conditions Fed[ederal Reserve] officials have labeled as transitory might last longer than anticipated," the minutes said.

The committee decided to maintain an accommodative monetary policy, keeping short term interest rates near zero until labor market conditions achieve levels consistent with the Federal

Reserve's goals of maximum employment and inflation moderately exceeding the 2 percent target.

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US Cannot Ensure Safe Passage for American Citizens to Kabul Airport - Embassy

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot ensure a safe passage for American citizens and residents to Kabul international airport due to the rapidly changing security environment in the region, the US Embassy in Kabul said on Wednesday.

"The United States government cannot ensure safe passage to the Hamid Karzai International Airport," the Embassy said in a security alert. "The security situation in Kabul continues to change quickly, including at the airport."

Flights are being issued to American citizens and residents on a first come, first serve basis, however, they are advised to shelter in place until they have been informed by email that they have an opportunity to get on a flight, the security alert said.

In a press briefing shortly after the alert was published, Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman said that the US was working to provide safe passage not only for US nationals and diplomats of third countries but for "for everybody who is trying to get to the airport."

On Tuesday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said some 11,000 individuals in Afghanistan self-identify as Americans. At least 5,000 have been evacuated as of Wednesday afternoon.

On Sunday, the Taliban (terrorist group, banned in Russia) completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani left the country to prevent what he described as bloodshed that would occur if militants had to fight for the city. Most countries have reduced or evacuated their diplomatic missions in the country following the events.

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US Military Focused on Non-Combatant Evacuation Mission in Kabul - Joint Chiefs Chairman

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US military is focused on its non-combatant mission to establish security at the Kabul international airport and to evacuate civilians from Afghanistan, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley said on Wednesday.

"Currently, the United States military is focused on specific mission of conducting a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) from Afghanistan, this is likely to be probably the second largest NEO conducted by the United States," Milley said. "Our key tasks are to establish and maintain security at the Kabul international airport."

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US Joint Chiefs Chairman Says Security Situation in Kabul Still Very Dangerous

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday the security situation in Kabul following the Taliban (banned in Russia) takeover is still very dangerous.

"Today, the situation is still very dangerous, very dynamic, and very fluid," Milley said during a press briefing.

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Airport in Kabul Able to Function Safely - US Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US force has secured the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, and it is able to function safely, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters on Wednesday.

"In concert with forces from allies, our troops have set up defensive positions around the airport and the airport is able to function safely," Austin said during a press briefing.

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US Working to Ensure Safe Passage to Airport for All - Deputy Secretary of State Sherman

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US is currently working on trying to further ensure the safe passage of all categories of people wishing to leave Afghanistan following the takeover by the Taliban (banned in Russia), Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday during a press briefing.

"I will say that we are in discussions, trying to ensure that there is not only safe passage for American citizens, for diplomats of third countries and third-country nationals, but for everybody who is trying to get to the airport. That work is ongoing," Sherman said. "The Taliban has said it will not have reprisals, that it has established an amnesty, that the roads are open, that people can move."

Sherman said that so far the "track record is quite good" for Americans getting to the airport in Kabul and that the Taliban's commitment to safe passage for American citizens appears to be "solid."

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Deputy State Secretary Says Ghani No Longer a Figure in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is no longer of relevance a figure in the country, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday during a press briefing.

"We saw the announcement by the UAE this morning that Ghani had been welcomed by the government, and that is that," Sherman said. "He is no longer a figure in Afghanistan."

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US Not Tolerating Kabul Gov't That Allows Country to Be Safe Haven for Terrorists- Sherman
WASHINGTON , August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will not tolerate an Afghan government that allows country to be safe haven for terrorists, Deputy US Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"We remain committed to combating terrorism in Afghanistan, will not tolerate a government that allows it to again become a safe haven for terrorists," she said at a briefing.

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US Engaging Directly With Taliban Amid Reports Of Group Blocking Afghans - Sherman

WASHINGTON , August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is engaging directly with the Taliban (terrorist group, banned in Russia) amid reports of group blocking Afghan people from reaching Kabul airport, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"We have seen reports that the Taliban are blocking Afghans who wish to leave the country from the airport. We're engaging directly with the Taliban to say that we expect them to allow anyone who wishes to leave, to leave," she said at a briefing.

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US to Double Number of Consular Officers in Afghanistan by Friday - Deputy Secretary

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The US plans to nearly double the number of consular officers on the ground in Afghanistan by Friday, while the additional officers have already started to arrive in Kabul to facilitate the evacuation effort, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"Additional consular officers arrived in Kabul today, and we will nearly double the number of consular officers on the ground by Friday," Sherman said at a press briefing.

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US Evacuated 2,000 People From Afghanistan in Last 24 Hours - Deputy Secretary Sherman
WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US military has evacuated 2,000 more people from Afghanistan over the last 24 hours and processed over 4,800 people willing to leave the country over the last several days, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday. "In the last 24 hours US military flights evacuated approximately 2,000 more people," Sherman said at a press briefing. "Over the last several days, we have processed more than 4,840 people for evacuation."

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Biden Admin Seeking to Block Taliban From Accessing \$400Mln in IMF Funds – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration seeks to block the Taliban (banned in Russia) from gaining access to more than \$400 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), New York Times reported on Wednesday citing a Treasury Department official.

IMF has been scheduled to distribute \$460 million of the fund reserve assets to Afghanistan next week, according to the report.

The official didn't provide any details as to the steps the US was taking to block the Taliban from getting access to the funds, the report said.

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Some 1.2Mln People in Haiti Affected by Earthquake - UN Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - About 1.2 million Haitians, with nearly half of them children, have been affected by the 7.2-magnitude earthquake that struck the country over the weekend, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"Our UNICEF colleagues tell us that they estimate about 1.2 million people, that's including 540,000 children, are affected by the earthquake," Dujarric said.

Criminal activity in Haiti is delaying the delivery of humanitarian aid throughout the country, Dujarric said.

On Monday, the UN allocated \$8 million from its Central Emergency Response Fund to support the humanitarian response in Haiti.

The 7.2 magnitude earthquake hit Haiti on Saturday, claiming the lives of nearly 2,000 people. It was soon followed by a tropical storm that brought a heavy downpour, hampering rescue and aid delivery efforts.

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Ohio Man Admits to Laundering \$300Mln in Bitcoin on Darknet - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - An Ohio resident pleaded guilty for being engaged in a conspiracy that illegally money-laundered more than \$300 million via a Bitcoin cryptocurrency service on the Darknet, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Larry Dean Harmon, 38, of Akron, admitted that he operated Helix from 2014 to 2017," the Justice Department said in a news release. "Helix functioned as a Bitcoin 'mixer' or 'tumbler,' allowing customers, for a fee, to send Bitcoin to designated recipients in a manner that was designed to conceal the source or owner."

The Justice Department said in the release that Helix was linked to and associated with "Grams," a Darknet search engine also run by Harmon.

Harmon advertised Helix to customers on the Darknet to conceal transactions from law enforcement, the release said.

"Harmon admitted that he conspired with Darknet vendors to launder bitcoin generated through drug trafficking and other illegal activities," FBI Washington Field Office Assistant Director in Charge Steven D'Antuono said.

Harmon admitted that Helix partnered with several Darknet markets, including AlphaBay, Evolution, Cloud 9 and others, to provide Bitcoin money laundering services for market customers. In total, Helix moved more than 350,000 Bitcoin - valued at over \$300 million at the time of the transactions - on behalf of customers.

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Trudeau Says Canada Working With Haitian Government, Diaspora to Provide Aid

TORONTO, August 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is working with the Haitian government and diaspora to help assist the country after it was hit with a magnitude 7.2 earthquake over the weekend, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We're working very closely with officials on the ground, with our partners in the Haitian diaspora and also in the Haitian government to respond to their needs. From the moment that this terrible earthquake hit in Haiti, we were all reminded of the horrific scenes from ten years ago, and we know that the Haitian people can count on Canada to be there," Trudeau said during an event in British Columbia.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Haitian Directorate for Civil Protection said the death toll from the earthquake has increased to nearly 2,000 people. Haiti declared a three-day national mourning for the victims on Monday.

The US government dispatched on Tuesday military teams, including eight helicopters, to Haiti to assist with recovery and rescue efforts. In addition, the European Union has pledged \$3.5 million in humanitarian assistance to Haiti.

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Biden, Merkel Discuss Situation in Afghanistan, Need to Coordinate Aid - White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday spoke with German Chancellor Angela Merkel about the ongoing situation in Afghanistan and the need to coordinate humanitarian aid efforts, the White House said in a readout of the call.

"President Joe Biden and Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke today about the situation in Afghanistan... They also discussed the need for close coordination on the provision of humanitarian aid for vulnerable Afghans in country as well as support for neighboring states, and agreed to continue planning for this work in the upcoming virtual meeting of G7 partners," the White House said.

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UN Received Reports of Human Rights Abuses Against Women in Afghanistan - Refugee Agency

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Refugee Agency has received reports of human rights abuses against women throughout Afghanistan, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative for Afghanistan Caroline Van Buren said on Wednesday.

"We have some reports of human rights abuses against women, we've been told that in some areas women are not allowed to go to work," Van Buren said during a press briefing. "In some areas it's been reported women are not allowed to move without a male family member."

On Sunday, the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) completed its seizure of power in Afghanistan and declared an end of the two-decade-long war in the country. The Taliban also made a set of pledges concerning the safety and human rights of the Afghans and voiced its intention to form an inclusive government.

Van Buren said some Taliban militants on the ground have not yet received instructions from the leadership with regard to protecting human rights.

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Biden to Welcome Israeli Prime Minister to White House on August 26 - White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in Washington on August 26, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"President Biden will welcome Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel to the White House on August 26, 2021," Psaki said in a statement.

Psaki said the two leaders will discuss Iran and other critical regional and global security issues. "The visit will also be an opportunity for the two leaders to discuss efforts to advance peace, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians," she said.

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UN Refugee Agency Has Not Seen Influx of Afghans to Neighboring Countries - Envoy

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Refugee Agency has not seen a mass influx of Afghan refugees into neighboring countries after the Taliban (banned in Russia) seized Kabul, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative for Afghanistan Caroline Van Buren said on Wednesday.

"UNHCR has not observed mass influxes to neighboring countries to date," Van Buren said during a press briefing. "However, at the same time, partners and other sources have reported the movement of Afghans outside of the country has risen in recent months."

A majority of Afghans are displaced within Afghanistan and unable to leave the country through regular channels, Van Buren said.

However, Van Buren added, at least 20,000 Afghan refugees are fleeing to Iran or Pakistan each week through irregular channels.

On Tuesday, the UN Refugee Agency said more than 550,000 Afghans have been internally displaced as a result of conflict and insecurity.

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Biden, National Security Team Discuss Potential Terror Threats in Afghanistan- White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and the national security team discussed the issue of monitoring any potential terrorist threats in Afghanistan, the White House said on Wednesday.

"The President, Vice President, and their team also discussed their focus on monitoring for any potential terrorist threats in Afghanistan, including from ISIS-K [Islamic State-Khorasan terror group, banned in Russia]," the statement said.

Biden and the national security team also discussed efforts to speed up the evacuations of the US citizens, special immigrant visa applicants and other vulnerable Afghans, as well as the facilitation of the safe passage to the Kabul airport.

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Trudeau Promises Major Wildfire Prevention Efforts Should Canadians Reelect Liberals

TORONTO, August 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that if the Liberal Party retains control in the upcoming elections, it will invest almost \$400 million into wildfire prevention efforts before the next fire season.

"A re-elected Liberal government will invest CA\$500 million [US\$395 million] ahead of the next fire season for the firefighters and equipment provinces need," Trudeau said in a speech during an event in the province of British Columbia.

The Prime Minister explained the funds would be put toward training at least 1,000 more firefighters across Canada who could be mobilized immediately in the event of a major fire as well as for supporting indigenous-led fire crews and investing in equipment.

British Columbia experienced a more intense wildfire season than usual this year, having declared a state of emergency in late July after 299 separate wildfires were registered across the province.

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UN Receiving Reports Afghanistan Slowly Returning to Normal, Markets Reopening - UNHCR

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is receiving reports that life in Afghanistan is slowly returning to normal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative Caroline Van Buren told reporters on Wednesday.

"According to the reports that we are receiving, including from our staff members, things are slowly returning to normal," Van Buren, said. "A female staff member told me she went outside today to see the situation and she was able to walk around, look around and some markets are opening as well."

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Identifying Persons Who Wish to Leave Afghanistan Could Endanger Them - Trudeau

TORONTO, August 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government must be careful about how it identifies potential evacuees from Afghanistan because being too specific could put them at risk of retaliation by the Taliban (banned in Russia), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during an event in British Columbia on Wednesday.

"There is a very real concern that identifying people, putting out lists, sending very specific tweets on certain factors could actually endanger people on the ground because the Taliban, of course, are using all the different ways they can to track down people who they see as problematic or opponents or adversaries," Trudeau said. "We have to be continuing to be extremely thoughtful and careful in how we support people."

Trudeau said Canada plans to take in about 21,000 Afghan refugees but noted that the Taliban is putting up barriers and is targeting political opponents who may be seeking to leave Afghanistan. The prime minister added that 92 Afghan refugees arrived in Canada on Tuesday night.

The Canadian government continues to push for the Taliban to agree to the free movement of Afghans who wish to leave their country to reach the airport in Kabul, which is currently being protected by US and other international forces.

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UN Personnel Move From Kabul to Kazakhstan to Reduce Risk - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - A group of UN personnel is traveling from Kabul to Kazakhstan as a temporary measure to reduce the existing risk to the staff, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"As we speak a group of UN personnel is traveling today from Kabul to Almaty in Kazakhstan where they will continue their work remotely," Dujarric said. "This is a temporary measure intended to enable the UN to keep delivering assistance to the people of Afghanistan with a minimum disruption while at the same time reducing the risk to UN personnel."

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US Court Reschedules Sentencing for Russia's Grichishkin to August 20 - Judge

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan decided on Wednesday to postpone sentencing for Russian national Aleksandr Grichishkin, who pleaded guilty to charges related to cybercrime, until August 20.

"I will give you my ruling on the sentence at 4 pm on Friday," District Judge Denise Page Hood said during the hearing, which streamed online.

For his turn, Grichishkin expressed remorse for his crimes. He also asked the court to allow him early deportation in order to reunite with the family as soon as possible.

"I would like to ask the court to consider a lenient sentence," Grichishkin said, adding that he learned his major lesson in a hard way.

Grichishkin previously pleaded guilty to conspiring to provide hosting services to cybercriminal clients who attacked US companies and financial institutions.

Grichishkin and Andrei Skvortsov from Russia, Aleksandr Skorodumov from Lithuania, and Pavel Stassi from Estonia were members of a hosting organization that allegedly helped a number of cybercriminals evade detection by US law enforcement after they caused millions of dollars in losses to victims in the United States, the Justice Department had claimed.

All four pleaded guilty in May and face up to 20 years in prison for conspiring to engage in a Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organization and other related charges, the department said.

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Studies Show Vaccine Effectiveness Waning in Context of Delta Variant - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Two studies have shown that effectiveness of the coronavirus vaccines is waning in the context of the the virus' Delta variant, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"Preliminary data through August 6 from two of our vaccine effectiveness COVID-19 studies that included more than 4,000 health-care personnel, first responders and other front line workers in eight locations across the country show waning effectiveness against symptomatic and asymptomatic infection in the context of the Delta variant from 92 percent prior to Delta to 64 percent with Delta," Walensky said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Department of Health and Human Services announced that all Americans will be able to receive booster shots starting on September 20.

However, the World Health Organization said there is no need for booster shots at present and added that further research in the matter was needed.

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Americans Warm to Calls For Gov't Limits on False Information Posted On-Line – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - A growing number of US adults now express willingness for the government to restrict posts of false information online, a poll by the Pew Research Center said on Wednesday.

"Roughly half of U.S. adults (48%) now say the government should take steps to restrict false information, even if it means losing some freedom to access and publish content, according to

the survey of 11,178 adults conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021," a press release explaining the poll said. "That is up from 39% in 2018."

A majority of adults, 59 percent, continue to say technology companies should take steps to restrict misinformation online, even if it puts some restrictions on Americans' ability to access and publish content, the release said.

Around four-in-ten (39%) take the opposite view that protecting freedom of information should take precedence, even if it means false claims can spread. The balance of opinion on this question has changed little since 2018, the release added.

Partisan divisions on the role of government in policing online content have emerged since 2018, with 60 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents now saying freedom to publish should be protected, even if it means some false information circulates. Nearly as many Democrats (65%) instead say the government should take steps to restrict false information according to the release.

In 2018, 60 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents and 57 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners – agreed that freedom of information should be prioritized over the government taking steps to restrict false information online, the release said.

The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 1.4 percentage points.

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Pentagon Defies Court Order to Expedite Citizenship for Foreign-Born Soldiers - ACLU

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - A motion filed in US federal court accuses the Defense Department of failure to comply with a court order to restore an expedited path to citizenship for non-citizen members of the United States' armed forces, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said on Wednesday.

"We've repeatedly presented the Pentagon with evidence of its non-compliance and proposed reasonable solutions, like identifying an official to assist service members whose chains of command refuse to help them obtain the military certification necessary for the citizenship process," ACLU National Security Project staff attorney Scarlet Kim said in a press release.

Instead, the Defense Department has done virtually nothing and "subjected service members to Kafkaesque ordeals" that have further delayed their attempts to become US citizens as Congress promised, Kim said.

In August 2020, in response to a class-action lawsuit filed by the ACLU on behalf of thousands of US military service members, a federal court struck down a Trump administration policy requiring them to serve for six months or a year before obtaining a military certification required to apply for naturalization. The court also ordered military officials to process class member requests for this certification within 30 days, the release said.

However, at four out of five of the US Army's basic training bases, service members have been repeatedly told they need to complete the Trump administration's requirements in order to be eligible for naturalization. Service members at other US Army installations have also been told they need to meet the unlawful requirements, the release added.

In its motion on behalf of service members, the ACLU is asking the court to demand an explanation for the Defense Department's failures and order it to ensure compliance with the court order and federal law, according to the release.

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Afghan Troops Fled to Uzbekistan as Taliban Advanced in About 46 US Aircraft - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Afghan military personnel fled to Uzbekistan amid the Taliban terror group's (banned in Russia) takeover in at least 46 US-supplied aircraft, the Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday citing US officials.

Some 585 Afghan service members fled in the aircraft to Uzbekistan, the report said.

The report said the 46 aircraft that flew into Uzbekistan account for a large portion of the Afghan Air Force. A handful of aircraft also flew to Tajikistan, the report added.

On Sunday, the Taliban completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Ghani resigned and fled abroad, escorted by cars filled with cash, the Russian embassy told Sputnik on Monday.

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US Adults to Be Eligible for Booster Shot 8 Months After Second Dose – Surgeon General

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – Fully vaccinated US adults will be eligible for a third booster shot 8 months after they received a second dose against the novel coronavirus, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said on Wednesday.

"Today, we are announcing our plan to stay ahead of this [COVID-19] virus by being prepared to offer COVID-19 booster shots to fully vaccinated adults, 18 years and older," Murthy said at a press briefing. "They would be eligible for their booster shot eight months after receiving their second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna mRNA vaccine."

Murthy has also clarified that the new plan is still pending as the US Food and Drug Administration is conducting an independent evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of a third dose Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices is in the midst of issuing booster dose recommendations based on a thorough review of the evidence.

The Surgeon General underscored that while he doesn't recommend getting a booster shot today he encourages everyone to do it in a timely manner starting in the week of September 20 when all fully vaccinated Americans will become eligible for the third vaccine shot.

Earlier in August, the World Health Organization (WHO) called for a moratorium on booster COVID-19 vaccine shots until the end of September to ensure equitable access to vaccines around the globe.

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US Reaches Milestone 200M In Americans With at Least 1 COVID-19 Vaccine Shot – White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The US will reach a milestone of 200 million Americans vaccinated with at least one shot against the coronavirus once today's data is published, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said on Wednesday.

"Once the numbers from today are reported, we will have reached two hundred million Americans with at least their first shot. That's a major milestone," Zients said at a press briefing. Zients added that over the last two weeks nearly 7 million Americans got their first vaccine shot making it the highest two-week total since the beginning of June.

The past month has also seen a 75 percent increase in the average daily number of 12-15 year-olds vaccinated, Zients said.

The US started to report higher vaccination rates after the highly transmissible Delta variant of COVID-19 became the predominant strain across the country in July resulting in the number of cases reaching over 100,000 cases per day in August.

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COVID-19 Booster Shots to Be Free in US Regardless of Immigration Status - White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Coronavirus booster shots will be offered at no cost to everyone in the United States regardless of their immigration or health insurance status, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said.

"Importantly, boosters will be free regardless immigration or health insurance status. No ID or insurance required," Zients said on Wednesday.

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US Public Support for Afghan Withdrawal Tumbles Amid Taliban Resurgence - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Backing among Americans for the United States' exit from Afghanistan plunged by 20 percentage points as the Taliban seized control, with declines among Democrats, Republicans and Independents, a new Morning Consult poll revealed on Wednesday.

"The latest survey found 49 percent of voters support [President Joe] Biden's decision to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan, down 20 percentage points since mid-April, while 37 percent oppose it, up by a similar amount," a press release explaining the poll said. Support for withdrawal fell 15 points among Democrats, 21 points among Republicans and 25 points among independents, the release said.

A 51 percent majority disapprove of Biden's handling of Afghanistan with a 45 percent plurality saying they should not withdraw its military presence in Afghanistan if it means the Taliban regains control of most of the country, the release added.

The poll of 1,999 registered voters was conducted August 13-16 (Friday through Monday) and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percent.

During the four-day period, the Taliban consolidated control over much of the country including the capital Kabul, triggering a panic illustrated by televised images of thousands of Afghans storming the airport seeking seats on US evacuation flights.

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UN Adopts Resolution to Hold Peacemakers' Killers Accountable – Security Council

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has unanimously adopted a resolution calling on member states to hold the killers and perpetrators of violence against the world body's peacekeepers around the world accountable, the global body announced on Wednesday.

"The [resolution] calls upon Member States hosting or having hosted United Nations peacekeeping operations, to take all appropriate measures, in accordance with their national law, and international law ...to bring to justice perpetrators of the killing of, and all acts of violence against United Nations personnel," it said.

The resolution also calls on host states to work with peacekeeping missions to enhance the safety and security of mission personnel and to take all necessary measures to investigate such acts, and arrest and prosecute perpetrators of such acts in line with their national law, the UN said.

The resolution further calls upon "the Member States hosting or having hosted United Nations peacekeeping operations to promote accountability for the killing of, and all acts of violence against United Nations personnel serving in peacekeeping operations, including... their detention and abduction."

The Security Council also called on member states to strengthen their police, justice and corrections institutions to implement effective and efficient investigation and prosecution measures, including technical and logistical support, to address impunity and ensure accountability for such acts, the resolution said.

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'Several Fatalities' as US Plane Flew From Kabul With Afghans Clinging to Side - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is aware of several fatalities after a US military transport aircraft departed Kabul international airport with Afghan civilians clinging to its side, spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Clearly, we know just by visual evidence and by the Air Force's statement that there were at least several fatalities involved in that, but I don't want to get ahead of the Air Force's review in terms of hard numbers of what the total toll was," Kirby told reporters in an off-camera briefing.

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US Homeland Secretary Discusses Afghan Relocation Efforts With 5 Eyes Counterparts - DHS

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Homeland Security Chief Alejandro Mayorkas discussed Afghan relocation efforts with his counterparts from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Wednesday. "Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas participated in a call with Five Eyes counterparts from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom to discuss the ongoing situation in Afghanistan," DHS said in a press release. "Secretary Mayorkas and the Ministers discussed efforts to facilitate the relocation of our citizens and their families, Afghan nationals who have worked for and on behalf of the United States and our allies, and other eligible vulnerable Afghans."

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Blinken Speaks with Canadian Counterpart About Afghanistan Evacuation - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau about the countries' efforts to evacuate people out of Afghanistan, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau last night about the situation in Afghanistan, including our efforts to bring American and Canadian citizens to safety and to assist vulnerable Afghans," Price said.

Blinken also expressed his "profound appreciation" to the Canadian government for helping to resettle 20,000 Afghans, as well as for their ongoing coordination with other international efforts to address the situation in Afghanistan.

A joint statement issued by 20 independent countries and the European Union, including the US and Canada, on Wednesday expressed deep concern for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. It called on the Taliban to guarantee their protection across the country.

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ACLU Suing US Military for Blocking Path to Citizenship for Foreign-Born Soldiers

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said on Wednesday that it is suing the US Department of Defense for violating a federal court order that blocked a minimum service time requirement for foreign soldiers seeking citizenship.

"The Department of Defense is violating a federal court order by blocking a path to citizenship for our military service members. We're suing. Again," the ACLU said via Twitter.

The previous Trump administration attempted to enact a policy in 2017 that would require foreigners in the US military to serve between six months and a year before becoming eligible for an expedited path to obtaining US citizenship.

A federal district court sided with the ACLU in a class action lawsuit they filed on behalf of the military service members four months later. The court ruled that the Defense Department cannot impose such minimum service requirements and is required to process the citizenship paperwork within 30 days.

The ACLU said in a statement that the new court filings come after negotiations between them and the Biden administration reached an impasse because the Defense Department has failed to take actions necessary to fix the issues that service members seeking expedited citizenship are facing.

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US Deputy Secretary of State to Speak on Afghanistan Wednesday Afternoon - State Dept.

*WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will speak to the press about the current situation in Afghanistan on Wednesday afternoon, according to the schedule published by the State Department.

The Taliban (banned in Russia) completed its takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul on Sunday, with President Ashraf Ghani stepping down and fleeing the country. At least 10,000 US citizens have remained in Afghanistan awaiting to be evacuated as well as thousands of Afghans who assisted the US war effort in the country.

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At Least 37 Civilians Killed in Attack on Village in Western Niger - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - At least 37 civilians were killed in the latest attack in western Niger on Monday, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa Marie-Pierre Poirier said in a statement.

"UNICEF is deeply shocked and outraged by the terrible attacks against children and families by unidentified armed groups in the village of Darey-dey... in western Niger that took place on 16 August 2021. We are saddened to confirm that at least 37 civilians - including thirteen children aged 15 to 17 and four women - were killed and several others were injured," Poirier said on Wednesday.

Poirier pointed out this was the third attack on this village this year and the conditions on the ground remain extremely dangerous for children.

"Insecurity is spreading at a rapid pace in Niger. Attacks in the region of Tillabery, and along the borders with Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria have led to significant displacement and continue to wreak havoc on the lives of hundreds of thousands of children," Poirier said.

UNICEF remains committed to take all measures to ensure the safety of children and their families and to reduce the suffering of the victims and strongly urges all parties to stop attacks on children and their families and keep them out of harm's way, Poirier added.

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US Authorizes COVID-19 Booster for All Americans Starting Sept 20 - Health Dept

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced on Wednesday that all Americans will be able to receive booster shots starting September 20.

"We are prepared to offer booster shots for all Americans beginning the week of September 20 and starting 8 months after an individual's second dose," the HHS said in a statement. "At that time, the individuals who were fully vaccinated earliest in the vaccination rollout, including many health care providers, nursing home residents, and other seniors, will likely be eligible for a booster."

At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) on Thursday said that there is no need in booster shots right now and added that further research into the matter was needed.

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Pentagon Spokesman Confirms US Troops Fired Weapons Near Kabul Airport Overnight – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US troops had to fire weapons near Kabul airport overnight as control crowd measures, reporters quoted Pentagon spokesman John Kirby as saying during an off-camera briefing on Wednesday.

"@PentagonPresSec confirms that overnight US troops fired weapons on the airport side of the perimeter 'as crowd control measures,'" one of the reporters said on Twitter. Another reporter quoted Kirby that the Pentagon had no indication of injuries or fatalities.

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US Sets Up New Health Advisory Policy Assessment Body - Centers for Disease Control

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is creating a new organization to improve forecasting and analysis on public health policy decision-making, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced on Wednesday.

"Today, the CDC is announcing a new center designed to advance the use of forecasting and outbreak analytics in public health decision making," the organization said in a press release.

The new Center for Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics will bring together next-generation public health data, expert disease modelers, public health emergency responders, and high-quality communications, to meet the needs of decision makers, the release said.

"The new center will accelerate access to and use of data for public health decision-makers who need information to mitigate the effects of disease threats, such as social and economic disruption ...while serving as a hub for innovation and research on disease modeling," the release said.

The center will undertake modeling and forecasting, support research and innovation in outbreak analytics and science for real-time action, improve capability for data sharing and integration, maximize interoperability with data, expand standards and improve software and interface capabilities, the release added.

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Half of US Workers Favor Employer Vaccine Mandates, One-Third Oppose - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Employer mandates for that all workers be vaccinated provoke strong reactions for and against, despite approval by a slim majority of 52 percent, a new Gallup revealed on Wednesday.

"US workers hold strong opinions on employer vaccination requirements, with two-thirds saying they either strongly favor (36percent) or strongly oppose (29 percent) these. Overall, employees are more likely to favor such mandates, with 52 percent saying they are in favor, 38 percent opposed and 10 percent neutral," a press release explaining the poll said.

Gallup first asked about employee vaccination requirements in May. Since then, there has been an increase in the percentage who "strongly favor" them, from 29 percent to 36 percent. The total percentage of employees who either strongly favor or simply favor vaccination requirements is up from 46 percent to 52 percent, the release said.

Over this time, the percentage opposed has held steady while the percentage claiming neutrality has declined five points to 10 percent, the release added.

The results are based on a July 19-26 COVID-19 tracking survey of a representative sample of US adults. The survey was issued before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance in response to the spread of the coronavirus' Delta variant, according to the release.

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US Officials Warn It Will Be 'Challenging' to Meet Biden's August 31 Deadline – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US officials say it will be “challenging” to meet Biden’s deadline to completely withdraw from Afghanistan by August 31 deadline as the American troops continue arriving in the country to facilitate the evacuation effort, Fox News reported on Wednesday citing unnamed government officials.

"We are still ramping up," one official said as cited by the report.

There are currently more than 4,000 US troops on the ground in Kabul with several thousand

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US Defense Secretary, Joint Chiefs Chair to Brief Media on Afghanistan Wednesday Afternoon

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley will give a press briefing on Wednesday afternoon, the Defense Department announced.

"The Secretary and Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, brief the media at 3 p.m. EDT in the Pentagon Briefing Room," the Defense Department said.

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US Invests \$19Mln to Expand Telemedicine in Rural Communities - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The US government has awarded \$19 million to 36 recipients in a bid to improve health in rural and other underserved communities by expanding access to and the quality of telemedicine, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Wednesday.

"Telehealth expands access to care and is a vital tool for improving health equity by providing timely clinical assessment and treatment for our most vulnerable populations," the HHS said in a

press release. "This funding will help drive the innovation necessary to build clinical networks, educational opportunities, and trusted resources to further advance telehealth."

Projects funded with the \$19 million include \$4.55 awarded to 12 regional and 2 national telehealth resource centers. In addition, nine health organizations will receive \$4.28 million to build telehealth networks and train primary care providers to use the technology in treating patients with complex conditions such as drug addiction and long-lasting symptoms of COVID-19, the release said.

The program also includes \$6.5 million earmarked for two organizations to establish units in academic medical centers that will serve as incubators to pilot new telehealth services, the release added.

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Biden Administration Proposes Overhaul to Speed Up Asylum Processing at US Borders - DHS

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has proposed a plan to make the asylum processing at the US borders swifter and more efficient, the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement on Wednesday.

"In a key step toward implementing the administration's blueprint for a fair, orderly, and humane immigration system, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Justice (DOJ) are publishing a notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) that would amend current regulations to improve the processing of asylum claims," the statement said.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in the statement that the proposed changes will significantly improve the US government's ability to more promptly and efficiently consider asylum claims.

"Individuals who are eligible will receive relief more swiftly, while those who are not eligible will be expeditiously removed. We are building an immigration system that is designed to ensure due process, respect human dignity, and promote equity," he said.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland added the move is a step closer to making the asylum process fairer.

"This rule will both reduce the caseload in our immigration courts and protect the rights of those fleeing persecution and violence," Garland said.

Illegal crossings on the US southern border have hit a 20-year high under the Joe Biden administration, with another record-setting month in July, which saw about 212,000 migrant encounters, according to the Customs and Border Patrol. The total number of apprehensions in the region since October - the beginning of the US government's fiscal year - has now surpassed 1.3 million.