

08/19/21 Thursday

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Iran, China to Cooperate on Regional Stabilization as Beijing Urges Taliban to Keep Promises by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A flurry of communication across Eurasia has followed the quick collapse of the US-backed Afghan government over the last two weeks as regional powers struggle to figure out their orientation to the new Taliban government, which has hinted it might not rule the same way as it did before, which earned it few friends and many enemies.

Beijing and Tehran are rushing to ensure stability in Central Asia after the Afghan capital of Kabul suddenly surrendered to the Taliban without a fight on Sunday, something American and Afghan officials had publicly stated they believed wouldn't happen for at least a month.

On Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke with his Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mahmood Quresh, and on Thursday with his Turkish counterpart, Melvut Cavusoglu, about coordination on their Afghanistan policy.

"The leaders of the Taliban said they would solve the problems faced by the people and satisfy the people's aspirations. This is sending a positive signal to the outside world," [Wang told Cavusoglu](#), adding that the militant group had made promises that it needed to translate into concrete policies.

A Taliban spokesperson told Chinese media last month that the group would not allow Afghanistan to become a base from which other nations could be attacked.

"To this end, the Afghanistan Taliban needs to completely cut off from all terrorist forces with a clear attitude and take measures to combat international terrorist organisations classified by the UN Security Council, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)," Wang added, referring to the Islamic terrorist group active in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which the Taliban has harbored across the border in Afghanistan several times in the past.

A readout of [Wang's and Quereshi's](#) talk said China and Pakistan "should support Afghanistan in its resolute fight against terrorism, and Afghanistan must not become a gathering place for terrorism again."

"We should promote international cooperation involving Afghanistan in an orderly manner, establish various complementary mechanisms and expand consensus. In particular, we should give play to the unique role of neighboring countries, so as to push the situation in Afghanistan gradually into a virtuous circle," Wang added.

Chinese President Xi Jinping also spoke with newly inaugurated Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Thursday, several days after China's special envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, [met with outgoing](#) Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and on Wednesday with [the new foreign minister](#), Hossein Amirabdollahian.

Raisi told Xi that Iran is ready to cooperate with China to establish "security, stability and peace in Afghanistan" and to help the country with further development.

"We believe that the withdrawal of foreigners, as well as past experiences in the country, has highlighted the need for the support and participation of all Afghan groups to ensure the security and development of Afghanistan more than ever," Raisi said, [according to a readout](#) by his office.

Same Old Taliban?

The first time the Taliban was in power, from 1996 until 2001, just four nations recognized their government as the legitimate representatives of the Afghan people - the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan - and the Islamist militant group rushed to implement a strict form of Sharia law that left few rights for women and proscribed torture or death as punishment for many crimes.

On Thursday, the group again declared the country to be the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, reviving their old name, but they have also made certain promises to enact more inclusive policies, [including inviting women](#) to join government ministries for the first time and offering mass amnesties for current bureaucrats.

US President Joe Biden has urged that the Taliban hasn't changed in 20 years, while his senior diplomats have noted they'll believe Taliban promises when they see them.

By contrast, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman [Hua Chunying urged](#) on Thursday that "nothing stays unchanged" and that in order to understand and handle problems, one "should adopt a holistic, interconnected and developmental dialectical approach."

"We should look at both the past and the present. We need to not only listen to what they say, but also look at what they do," she said, adding that "the rapid evolution of the situation in Afghanistan also reveals how the outside world lacked objective judgment on the local situation and accurate understanding of the public opinion there. In this respect, some western countries in particular should learn some lessons."

She added that while the situation "is not fully clear yet," many other nations also believe the Taliban will not "repeat history" and that the group "is more clear-headed and rational than it was in power last time."

It might seem paradoxical that Shiite Iran would be remotely friendly with the Sunni Taliban, who have persecuted Afghan Shiites in the past and even [murdered nine Iranian](#) diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. However, the two forces have come to a [modicum of understanding](#) in which neither wants the Americans around or for the region to fall into chaos.

Iranian officials "recognized that the Taliban inexorably is a part of realities on the ground," Diako Hosseini of Tehran's Center for Strategic Studies, which advises Raisi's office, [told Bloomberg](#) on Thursday. "Continuing enmity between Iran and the Taliban could unleash a relentless clash on the border."

Foad Izadi, a professor at the Faculty of World Studies at the University of Tehran, told the paper the Iranian government and military "realized some time ago that the Taliban were gaining strength" and "established a working relationship with the Taliban. It's not because they particularly like them."

Shanghai Pact Key to Integration Hopes

During the Taliban's first time in power, any hope of regional integration would have had to occur bilaterally, but since 2003, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO or Shanghai Pact) has provided a foundation for networking across the Eurasian continent. Afghanistan has been an

observer since 2012 and many of its neighbors, including China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, are also members of the pact.

Last week, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, [announced only a few](#) "technical formalities" remained before Tehran became the pact's newest member.

Both Iran and Afghanistan lay along what Beijing has called the Silk Road Economic Belt portion of its massive Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure megaproject, and could provide alternate routes for other smaller projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Well before the Taliban seizure of power, [observers were already](#) talking about the SCO's [potential to stabilize](#) Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, which was expected to be complete by August 31. Plus, the country is already a part of a quadrilateral agreement with Pakistan, [Tajikistan and China](#) aimed at fighting terrorism.

However, if the Taliban wants to join the SOO, it will have to prove it can rule with "[stable and healthy](#)" Muslim policies, the same standards Wang laid out for Ghani's exiled government last month. The SOO is slated to meet next month in Dushanbe.

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Biden Admin Looks to Civil Rights Office in Fight Against GOP Governors' School Mask Mandate Bans
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After several state governors have doubled down on their opposition to mask requirements in public schools amid rising COVID-19 cases, US President Joe Biden is looking for new weapons to push compliance with federal safety guidelines, including counting such bans as a form of discrimination against groups of children.

"[S]ome State governments have adopted policies and laws that interfere with the ability of schools and districts to keep our children safe during in-person learning," Biden said in a [Wednesday executive order](#).

"Some of these policies and laws have gone so far as to try to block school officials from adopting safety protocols aligned with recommendations from the CDC to protect students, educators, and staff. And some State officials have even threatened to impose personal financial consequences on school officials who are working tirelessly to put student health and safety first and to comply with their legal obligations to their communities to further the essential goal of a safe, in-person education for all students," he said.

"Our priority must be the safety of students, families, educators, and staff in our school communities," Biden added. "Nothing should interfere with this goal."

On the Department of Education's official blog, Secretary [Miguel Cardona wrote](#) the same day that he had sent letters to eight states - Arizona, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Florida and Texas - informing them that by banning mask mandates in their public school systems, they were not complying with the American Rescue Plan Act.

That law, a massive \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill signed into law in March, “requires each school district that receives Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to adopt a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services” (emphasis in original), Cardona wrote, suggesting those funds may be withheld if the district’s plan is judged unsafe by the department.

“The Department has the authority to investigate any state educational agency whose policies or actions may infringe on the rights of every student to access public education equally,” he wrote, adding that the department could begin an investigation “if facts indicate a potential violation of the rights of students as a result of state policies and actions,” including complaints about “students who may experience discrimination as a result of states not allowing local school districts to reduce virus transmission risk through masking requirements and other mitigation measures” and violations of the federal special education law, which guarantees students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education (FAPE).

Two laws, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, require students to be given FAPE irrespective of race, color or national origin.

Data [published in May](#) from the 2020-2021 school year showed that the progress of all students suffered from a year of remote learning, as measured by test results, but that students of color, low-income students and students with disabilities had the worst setbacks. If schools are forced to close temporarily and shift to online learning due to COVID-19 outbreaks once the school year starts, that would likely mean those same vulnerable students would be left even further behind, as compared to their white and more affluent counterparts.

The statements come as battles in Texas and Florida, the two states with the most COVID-19 cases in the country, which both have Republican governors adamantly opposed to compulsive COVID-19 mitigation measures, double down against uprisings by Democrat-controlled cities and school districts looking to protect their residents.

On Sunday, the Texas Supreme Court issued a temporary order banning mask mandates in several Texas cities, including Dallas and San Antonio, after they issued [orders in defiance](#) of Governor Greg Abbott’s ban on pandemic mandates.

“Let this ruling serve as a reminder to all ISDs [independent school districts] and local officials that the Governor’s order stands,” Texas Attorney General [Ken Paxton wrote](#) on Twitter. Abbott also made a comment on the social media app, saying that his executive order didn’t ban wearing masks.

On Tuesday, [Abbott tested positive](#) for the Delta variant of COVID-19 after having attended a maskless GOP event in Collin County. He was already vaccinated against the virus, so his symptoms have been mild, while his wife, Cecilia, has tested negative. Roughly 45% of Texans are fully vaccinated, not nearly enough to blunt the virus’ spread.

Texas’ daily COVID-19 cases - 23,990 on Wednesday - are the second-highest in the nation, surpassed only by Florida, which counted 23,300 on Wednesday but has a much higher seven-day average, [according to data](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Both states have seen their medical systems pushed to the limit, together accounting for more than [40% of hospitalized](#) COVID-19 cases in the US.

“We are concerned about escalating numbers. Our cases yesterday were higher than our seven-day moving average, our hospitalizations higher than our seven-day moving average, ICUs higher than our seven-day moving average, so we are still real concerned about the

numbers we are seeing,” Austin Mayor Steve Adler, a Democrat, [told The Hill](#) on Wednesday. The Texas capital city was one of several that defied Abbott’s mandate ban.

“We do know that the best way, and really the only way, out of this long-term is for people to get vaccinated, so we are doing everything we can to get more and more people vaccinated,” he added.

The Lone Star State counted more than 11,500 hospitalized cases of COVID-19 on Monday, with just 322 available ICU beds left in the entire state, [according to Spectrum](#) News in El Paso. In Florida, the Florida Hospital Association reported 16,721 hospitalized cases, accounting for 35.6% of all hospital inpatients and 55% of adult ICU patients.

Like Abbott, Florida Governor Ron [DeSantis has banned](#) mask mandates in schools, casting the order as a defense of Floridians’ right to choose. Ironically, with the US Department of Education threatening to cut funding for school districts that don’t comply with federal safety standards, DeSantis has threatened to pull funding if they do put mask mandates into place.

On Wednesday, [DeSantis told a crowd](#) at the 2021 Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association Marketing Operations Summit that “politicians want to force you to cover your face as a way for them to cover their own asses,” adding “that’s just the truth.”

“They want to be able to say they are taking this on and they’re doing this even though it’s not proven to be effective, they want to continue to do it,” he added, picking up a [line commonly used](#) during former US President Donald Trump’s administration and disproven by medical experts.

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Videos: Syrian Anti-Air Defenses Engage Israeli Fighters Over Damascus
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Syrian state television reported late Thursday night that air defenses in Damascus had engaged several projectiles fired by Israeli fighter aircraft over the city.

Video posted on social media showed several incoming projectiles being intercepted by anti-air missiles of an unknown type as fighter jets roar overhead.

The fighters were spotted a few minutes before contact over Damascus while flying low over the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon.

A correspondent from Israel’s Channel 10 posted a video on Twitter of a fire purportedly started by one of the missiles. [According to Al-Arabiya](#), the strikes were aimed at Mazzeh air base north of Damascus and targets in the district of An-Nabek, also known as Qalamoun.

“As always, the Syrians claim to have intercepted the Israeli Air Force missiles. As always in a miraculous way the missiles reach the targets,” he quipped. The Syrian defense ministry has made no comment as of yet about how many of the projectiles it believes it intercepted.

Another Israeli journalist from Kan 11 public broadcasting station noted that several airline flights in the region suddenly diverted course at the time of the Israeli strikes.

The strikes have come on the [night of Ashura](#), a day in the Muslim calendar holy to both Shiites and Sunnis, during which the death of Hussein ibn Ali on the battlefield of Karbala in 680 CE is mourned and commemorated.

The Israeli Defense Forces have made no official comment confirming the strikes as of yet, and typically don't when their attacks on Syria fail. Jerusalem claims its airstrikes against Syria, with which it has no peace treaty or even diplomatic relations, are aimed at alleged Iranian targets it claims are intended to attack Israel.

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Capitol Bomb Threat Suspect Who Wanted President Biden to Resign Surrenders to Police
by [Gaby Arancibia](#), [Sofia Chegodaeva](#)

In early January, a pipe bomb was left at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington DC, a day before Trump supporters staged violent riots at the US Capitol. A suspect who threatened to detonate a bomb outside the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, has surrendered and is now in custody, US Capitol Police confirmed on Thursday.

US Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger told reporters that the suspect, identified as Floyd Ray Roseberry, had voluntarily decided to remove himself from his vehicle, and that he was taken into custody without incident.

"As far as we could tell it was his decision to surrender at that point," Manger remarked, adding that Roseberry was not previously known or flagged by the Capitol Police. The chief did not divulge a possible motive for the incident.

Manger went on to clarify that as the scene is still active, investigators are uncertain whether any explosives were actually inside the vehicle, underscoring that a thorough search would take "hours."

It is presently unclear whether Roseberry made any other stops within the Washington Metropolitan area. However, Manger did note that there is no indication that the individual was working with anyone else.

No charges have yet been filed against Roseberry as talks remain ongoing with the US Attorney's Office, according to Manger, who also sidestepped questions on whether Roseberry would be undergoing a psychiatric evaluation.

The hourslong standoff between Roseberry and investigators saw officials converse with the suspect by writing messages on a white board. Roseberry had earlier refused to use a phone that police had dispatched to him.

Manger revealed during the latest briefing that preliminary findings showed Roseberry had no immediate connections to the US military or any law enforcement agency, and that he had recently been dealing with the death of his mother in addition to "other issues."

Capitol Police initially revealed they were investigating a bomb threat at about 10:30 a.m. local time, later going on to detail that officials were engaged in ongoing negotiations with Roseberry

after he arrived at the Library of Congress and drove up onto a sidewalk. At the time, officials did not specify a motive.

"We are in communication with the suspect... We don't know what his motives are at this time... We do have possible name and identity of the suspect," Manger said at an earlier briefing. Earlier reports indicated that the suspect had launched a livestream on his Facebook account; however, the social media platform subsequently removed the footage after it had been flagged. It was also reported by the outlet that Roseberry had been calling on US President Joe Biden to resign.

Shortly after initial reports had surfaced, police moved to quickly evacuate the building as well as the nearby area. The US Capitol police [urged](#) citizens via Twitter to steer clear of the area until further notice.

Various transportation services, such as bus and metro lines alerted customers to traffic changes related to the incident. Several bus routes experienced delays and possible detours, while metro trains on three lines were directed to bypass the nearby Capital South station, Washington transport authorities said.

Officials who spoke to the Associated Press on condition of anonymity earlier said that investigators were working to determine if the device Roseberry was threatening to detonate was an operable explosive.

Incidentally, shortly after the US Capitol Police reported the bomb threat a [similar incident](#) emerged at New York City's Time Square. However, an investigation by the New York Police Department promptly concluded that a "cookie tin" was "[not suspicious](#)."

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'It's Not True': Biden Denies Afghanistan Will Mirror Taliban Rule Prior to 2001 US Invasion by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several days, US President Joe Biden has come under fire for the chaotic scenes unfolding in the Afghan capital of Kabul following the swift takeover by the Taliban. The American president had previously shot down claims that the militant group would manage to "overrun" Afghanistan as it has since done.

US President Joe Biden has rejected claims that Afghanistan will mirror what the Central Asian nation looked like prior to the US-led invasion that was undertaken shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Biden's comments came during an [exclusive interview](#) on Wednesday between the American president and ABC News correspondent George Stephanopoulos. The pair touched on a variety of issues, but kept the main focus on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dramatic scenes that have been emerging from the area.

Addressing the looming 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Biden stood firm and blasted claims that Afghanistan would go back to how it looked prior to the US invasion, saying that such stances were simply "not true."

"It's not true. They're not gonna look just like they were [when] we were attacked," Biden told Stephanopoulos. "There was a guy named Osama bin Laden that was still alive and well. They were organized in a big way, that they had significant help ... from other parts of the world." "We went there for two reasons, George. Two reasons. One, to get bin Laden, and two, to wipe out as best we could, and we did, the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did it," he added, before acknowledging that the US mission in the war-torn nation subsequently shifted to "nation building."

"We decided to engage in nation building - in nation building. That never made any sense to me," he underscored.

The US launched its invasion of Afghanistan in October after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden and end operations of al-Qaeda training camps in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks. The near 20-year military occupation became the longest US war to date. Biden went on to relay to Stephanopoulos that history would more than likely judge the American experience in Afghanistan as having been "one that we overextended what we needed to do to deal with our national interest."

Although Biden previously stressed during his [address to the nation](#) that his decision to continue with the withdrawal process was necessary, especially after US-trained Afghan forces posed no resistance to Taliban advances, he stated that the pullout does not mean that the US presence will completely disappear.

In fact, Biden noted during his televised speech on Monday that US military operations in Afghanistan would effectively be shifting into a [Somalia-like drone war](#) after admitting that the US conducts "effective counterterrorism missions against terrorist groups in multiple countries where we don't have permanent military presence."

The president touched on that exact stance during the Stephanopoulos exclusive, but emphasized that threats to the US were "significantly greater" [elsewhere](#). "The deal is the threat from al-Qaeda and their associate organizations is greater in other parts of the world to the United States than it is from Afghanistan," he stated matter-of-factly.

Although intelligence reports had detailed that the Taliban would retake Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, no reports indicated that it would unfold so quickly, or that it would happen while US troops were still on the ground. Top US Gen. Mark Milley [clarified](#) during a Wednesday Pentagon briefing that he was unaware of any intelligence reports that outlined the Afghan government would fall within the span of 11 days.

The latest remarks from Biden came hours after exiled Afghan President Ashraf Ghani issued his own televised statement in which he [vowed to return](#) to Afghanistan in order to bring "justice" to all Afghans he had abandoned upon his departure to the United Arab Emirates over the weekend.

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Tune Changin' Joe - Cartoon

Weeks ahead of the chaotic scenes that have been unfolding since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, US President Joe Biden told the world that there was just about no chance of the Taliban “overrunning everything” in the Central Asian nation. Now, he’s changing his tune. US President Joe Biden recently prompted some record scratches after he conceded that there was no way for American troops to withdraw from Afghanistan without “chaos ensuing” following the near 20-year US military occupation.

Biden’s eyebrow-raising remarks came during a [Wednesday exclusive](#) with ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos, and saw the American president stress that the possibility in the war-torn nation falling into utter disarray always played a factor in the withdrawal decision.

While the comments may have been meant more to soften the Biden White House’s handling of the situation, they also were in stark contrast to [earlier statements](#) made by the president. In fact, he had previously told reporters in July that the pullout would be orderly, and the Taliban would by no means be “overrunning everything.”

It seems some statements truly don’t age well.

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Miami-Dade Schools Defy Florida Masking Ban as DeSantis Claims Mandates Are ‘Politically Driven’

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Florida has become the latest epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US as a lack of preventative measures have prompted cases to skyrocket over the last several weeks. The Sunshine State is accounting for about one in every five novel coronavirus cases emerging nationwide.

The Miami-Dade County School Board recently voted in favor of implementing a districtwide mask mandate for all students returning to in-person learning, effectively defying a prior masking ban that was signed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R).

School officials ruled in favor of the mandate late Wednesday with a final 7-to-1 tally. The mandate, which will be in effect for the 2021-2022 school year, will be periodically reviewed on an as-is basis. However, it will also allow parents to opt their children out of the order if they provide a doctor’s note.

The option to be excused from the masking order initially included a religious exemption but it was removed at the request of District 9 Board Member Luisa Santos, according to the [Miami Herald](#).

The single nay vote came from Board Member Lubby Navarro, who sided that the mandate was in violation of DeSantis’ earlier ban. “My constituents of District 7 never elected me to violate state law,” she said at the time.

Officials managed to go forward with the mandate in spite of surging protests by parents who were both in favor and in opposition of the masking guideline. Local CBS Miami news station

[reported](#) that chants and passionate speeches were heard inside the board meeting, as well as outdoors.

Alejandro Serrano, who fully opposed the mandate urged county officials to “not - under any circumstance - violate Floridians constitutional freedoms,” before urging board members to leave the masking decision entirely up to parents and guardians.

On the other side of the argument was Francesa Charon, who showed officials that she had obtained the signatures of over 11,000 individuals who are in favor of the mandate. “We, the parents in favor of [the] mask mandate, are the majority on this matter,” she said.

The measure’s eventual passage came on the heels of overwhelming backing by a medical task force that was composed of six physicians and public health professionals who underscored that there is no gray area when it comes to the preventative COVID-19 effort.

Miami-Dade County Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho told the local station that he was by no means intimidated by threats thrown against him or other school officials, saying, “I’ve been poor, I’ve been homeless, I’ve been alone in the country since I was 17. Threats against my salary or my position do not factor one bit into the decision I will make.”

“It is a small price to pay and what’s at stake here is too important,” he stressed. “We are talking about the health and well-being of our kids, of our teachers, of our principals. I do not know how to turn my back on the teacher who I spoke with this morning, whose mother is a teacher, as she was sobbing on the phone to me as her mom was about to be intubated.”

The school board’s effort fell in line with similar mandates that were imposed by Broward County schools, the Alachua school board, and educational facilities operated by the Archdiocese of Miami. A mandate has also gone in effect for Palm Beach County schools.

Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, health professionals have been calling on the public to adhere to a wide variety of preventative measures, including the proper washing of one’s hands, wearing masks and social distancing guidelines, among other measures.

DeSantis Claims Masks Are All About Politicos Wanting to ‘Cover Their Own A**es’

However, just as medical professionals have vouched for the effectiveness of such methods, others have also clung to claims that such measures are wholly ineffective, and are just a means in which the US government and politicians mean to exact control over the public. Such is the case with Florida’s governor, who has repeatedly touted mask mandates as being part of a so-called “politically-driven” agenda.

DeSantis reiterated his negative view of masking guidelines the very same day that Miami-Dade County Schools had passed their new initiative. Appearing at the 2021 Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association Marketing Operations Summit, the Republican governor blasted mask mandates as politicians simply wanting to “cover their a**es.”

“Politicians want to force you to cover your face as a way for them to cover their own a**es.

That’s just the truth,” DeSantis told the crowd. “They want to be able to say they are taking this on and they’re doing this even though it’s not proven to be effective - they want to continue to do it.”

The governor went on to say that his ban on mask mandates is meant to give parents the opportunity to “be able to send their kids to school in person with or without a mask as they see fit, not as what [the] government tells them to do.”

Anti-prevention efforts in Florida largely mirror initiatives taken in the nearby states of Texas and Georgia. The latter is where fellow Republican Gov. Brian Kemp [signed an order](#) on Thursday to allow businesses to ignore mask and vaccine mandates.

Latest COVID-19 figures indicate that Florida has only continued a surge in cases, with officials documenting an additional 15,586 cases and another 799 COVID-19-related deaths on Thursday. The Miami Herald [reported](#) that 798 of the reported deaths occurred in the past month.

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Afghan Footballer, 19, Identified as Fatality in USAF's Recent Evacuation Efforts
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Monday, at least two individuals were seen falling from an American C-17 Globemaster, shortly after takeoff from the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. It was later reported that the body of another individual was found stowed away in the landing gear of the transport aircraft.

Afghan news agency Ariana reported on Thursday that Zaki Anwari, a 19-year-old footballer on the Afghan national team, was confirmed as one of the individuals who fell from the C-17 transporting individuals fleeing Kabul after the Taliban seized the Afghan capital.

Anwari's death was confirmed to the outlet by the General Directorate for Sport.

"It is with great sadness that Zaki Anwari, one of the players of the national junior football team of the country, died in a bad accident," the group wrote in a social media post. "The late Anwari, among hundreds of young people who wanted to leave the country, fell down in an accident from the air."

Footage published to social media on Monday showed [at least two individuals falling from a C-17](#) after an apparent attempt to flee the country.

[It was reported on Tuesday](#) that an individual believed to be an Afghan was found dead within the landing gear of an American C-17 Globemaster that was evacuating Afghans and US personnel from Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport.

News of the discovery came hours after [a graphic video showed legs flailing under the aircraft](#).

The DailyMail has offered [a conflicting narrative](#), presenting that Anwari was the individual whose remains were discovered in the landing gear of the C-17 following the aircraft's emergency landing on Monday.

According to the UK-based outlet, the two individuals seen falling from the transport aircraft were two brothers, aged 16 and 17 years old, who sold watermelon in Kabul's central market. The US Air Force has announced that its Office of Special Investigations will be reviewing the incidents surrounding the chaotic Monday scene at the Kabul-based airport.

The service has also confirmed the presence of human remains in the C-17's landing gear during an emergency landing at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar.

"The aircraft is currently impounded to provide time to collect the remains and inspect the aircraft before it is returned to flying status," said Air Force Chief of Media Operations Ann Stefanek.

However, US forces have not provided an estimate for those killed and injured during the American-led evacuation.

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Biden Raises Eyebrows After Declaring US Forces 'Don't Have Military' Troops in Syria for Combat

by [Evan Craighead](#)

US President Joe Biden has said that he stands "squarely behind" his administration's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan - even despite the Taliban's swift response to overthrow the Afghan government. The US president argued that "developments" in Afghanistan further proved that the US had no business in the country.

Biden signaled in a Thursday interview with ABC that the US needs to reorient its attention to the "greater" threats, rather than Afghanistan, as groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh "metastasize."

"There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria; There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa; There's [significantly] greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan," [the US president told ABC's George Stephanopoulos](#) during the pre-recorded interview.

"And we have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out." Biden went on to claim that US forces "don't have military in Syria" to ensure protection.

The interview appears to progress without Stephanopoulos, a former White House director of communications, questioning the US president's assertion, which was perceived to be misleading at best.

In fact, the US has approximately 900 US troops stationed in Syria in support of their Kurdish allies, according to estimates published just last month.

[Furthermore, the White House issued a memo in June](#) claiming US forces maintain "a small presence" in Syria as part of a comprehensive strategy to counter Daesh. The release emphasized that US personnel were placed in "strategically significant locations in Syria to conduct operations ... to address continuing terrorist threats emanating from Syria."

Many netizens took issue with commander-in-chief's comments during the ABC broadcast, including Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY).

After the broadcast, members of Biden's administration attempted to [clean up his misleading statement, telling CNN](#) that the US president "was speaking about the al-Qaeda presence in northwest Syria, which remains a threat to the United States and is being addressed without American troops on the ground."

The administration source confirmed that there were a "small number of US and coalition forces" in areas of eastern Syria that had Daesh activity.

Meanwhile, [an official from the White House told Fox News](#) that the troops stationed in Syria are there for "advising and capacity-building," rather than combat.

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Georgia Gov. Kemp Signs Order Allowing Businesses to Bypass Local COVID Mitigation Mandates
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, Johns Hopkins University determined that the US states of Florida, Georgia and Louisiana accounted for one in five new COVID-19 cases, and nearly 40% of all hospitalizations in the country.

While railing against government interference, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp (R) announced on Thursday that he signed an executive order to "protect Georgia businesses."

[Per the order](#), dated August 19, businesses within the southern US state will not be required to adhere to local measures and mandates geared toward slowing the spread of COVID-19, including its highly contagious delta variant.

"Local governments will not be able to force businesses to be the cities' mask police, vaccine police, or any other burdensome restriction that will only lead to employees being let go, revenue tanking and businesses closing their doors," the Georgia governor announced on Thursday.

Kemp, who claims he is committed to protecting both the lives and livelihoods of state residents, argued that "small businesses, from Atlanta to Savannah" would be unable to sustain themselves through another government-ordered lockdown.

The Georgia governor noted that, over the past 15 months, the state's unemployment level has dropped, and its current level remains the lowest of the 10 most populous states in the nation. However, some critics of the governor, such as Democratic Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, have pushed back against the government and its "lack of leadership."

"Mayor Bottoms has followed the science and data from the onset of this pandemic," said a spokesperson for the Atlanta mayor's office, noting that Georgia also ranks toward the bottom in terms of fully vaccinated residents. "Masks save lives and it is absurd we must continuously defend such a simple, straightforward fact."

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US Extends Canada, Mexico Border Restrictions Through Sept. 21 - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended the restrictions on borders with Canada and Mexico through September 21 to minimize the spread of COVID-19, the US Department of Homeland Security announced on Friday.

"To minimize the spread of #COVID19, including the Delta variant, the United States is extending restrictions on non-essential travel at our land and ferry crossings with Canada and Mexico through September 21, while continuing to ensure the flow of essential trade and travel," the DHS tweeted.

The department added that it continues working closely with its partners across the US and abroad "to determine how to safely and sustainably resume normal travel."

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RPT - Vets Fear, Like Post-Vietnam, US Unlikely to Learn Lessons From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) Barrington M. Salmon - US policymakers are unlikely to absorb any lessons from the Afghanistan war, despite accomplishing nothing in 20 years, just like they failed to learn from mistakes made in Vietnam, American Army veterans told Sputnik. Just a couple days after the Taliban (banned in Russia) seized Kabul, the US inspector general for Afghan reconstruction released a "lessons learned" report which shined on a bright light on America's failed efforts to stabilize Afghanistan since 2001. The report, released on Tuesday, also slammed the US military's inability to effectively train Afghan government forces, which collapsed quicker than expected on Sunday.

In fact, the speed of the Taliban takeover blindsided the Biden administration, which has come under fire this week after footage went viral depicting chaos at the Kabul airport as the US tried to evacuate civilians and Afghan refugees, evoking memories of the American exit from Saigon nearly five decades ago.

After criticism over abandoning Afghans, the United States announced that it will house some 22,000 refugees in military bases across the US, including sites where whistleblowers have complained of abuses.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Afghans still need to be evacuated - including thousands who helped the US during the war.

"Lessons learned means that they've messed up and after 2 months, they'll be back doing the same foolishness," US Army veteran Larry Sewer, who served in Vietnam, told Sputnik. "The US will turn on the people who helped them and leave them there, as we saw in Vietnam in 1975."

AND THE CYCLE CONTINUES...

The 79-year-old Sewer, who enlisted in the US Army when he was 19, said he is struck by the arrogance and ignorance shown by the United States in the two decades it fought the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Much of the loss of life, the squandering of American money and resources and the focus on an undefined mission could have been avoided, he added. But hubris, greed, attempts to control the region and visions of expanding the American empire drove those in charge, Sewer said. US leaders, Sewer added, should take time to examine what went wrong and how to avoid such failures in the future after spending \$2 trillion over 20 years, including \$83 billion on training Afghan forces, with no noticeable gains.

Yet political and military leaders will not, he added, hence America could find itself in a similar situation somewhere down the road, as they continue to use the same "playbook."

"What about the equipment and supplies? Some of the Taliban rode into Kabul in a Humvee. Fidel Castro rode into Havana on a military truck. That shows that they have your assets," Sewer said. "Afghanistan and Vietnam look a lot alike with the way things played out at the airport and the last helicopter leaving Saigon."

He said the buzzword Americans like to use is "in America's best interests."

"In the US perspective, everyone has their role, has their place and their value is determined by how they fit in with America's national interests," Sewer said. "If it's not in America's interests, they aren't doing it."

In the meantime, while occupying a country, Sewer said, the United States takes natural resources "on the ground, underground and above ground."

Retired US Army Major Frank Phillips, who was with the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea, also saw similarities between the Afghan exit in 2021 and the Fall of Saigon in 1975.

"I think it is like Vietnam. We've been there for a long time and accomplished little," Phillips told Sputnik. "From a military perspective, it's good that we're out of there... but I don't know if anything came out of this."

The only positive I see is to protect the people who helped us. If not, that will make it difficult to gain people's trust in the future. When we go into these countries, we have to depend on people. They know things we don't, know things we may never know."

"I'm a little disappointed that we left those guys there. That's what brings me the most pain," he said. "From my perspective, at a minimum, I would hope that they get as many people who have worked with Americans as possible. I felt a little more comfortable when I heard that some of them were here."

There is also "always talk about money going into people's pockets," Phillips said, underscoring the high level of endemic corruption the US watchdog reported.

Meanwhile, the Afghans remain unconquered, Phillips added.

PLAYBOOK BLOWBACK

Sewer said racist and classist themes are also at play because Afghans, Blacks and other non-whites are regarded as the "load-bearing" people, those on the frontlines doing the hard work who end up as collateral damage.

"Whites do not learn from nobody," Sewer said. "The only thing they learned is to double down, put money in places where it will fail and then blame the people they gave the money to."

The great powers, including countries like the United States and Britain, he added, have used the same playbook in places like Africa, India, Asia, and Australia, among others.

Sewer warned that the United States could see unrest when troops return, with many angry over the loss of life, injuries and other problems military personnel must deal with.

"It's been 50 years since Vietnam and returning troops coming home will be pissed. America will be under fire," Sewer said. "The insurrection is coming again and police and the military will be deciding who are allowed to leave."

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US, Qatari Defense Chiefs Discuss Evacuation of Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Qatari counterpart during a meeting discussed the transit of American civilians and embassy personnel from Afghanistan, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout.

The call comes as the US is evacuating citizens and Afghan refugees from Kabul in the wake of Sunday's Taliban takeover. The United States and Qatar reportedly were finalizing an agreement to temporarily house some 8,000 Afghan nationals who worked with the US military, including 1,000 due to arrive soon.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met today with Qatar Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs, His Excellency Dr. Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah," Kirby said on Thursday. "Secretary Austin... offered deep gratitude to Minister Al-Attiyah for Qatar's help in facilitating the transit of US citizens and Embassy Kabul personnel out of Afghanistan through Qatar."

The US military footprint in Kabul is now more than 5,200 total troops in the ground, US Army Major General William Taylor earlier in the day.

According to US defense officials, 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.

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US VP Harris to Discuss Public Health, Security on Southeast Asia Trip - Officials

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will be discussing issues ranging from global health to Indo-Pacific security during her upcoming visit to Singapore and Vietnam, a senior administration official told reporters.

"In particular, [Harris] will be focused on global health, economic partnership, and security. She'll work to open up new areas of cooperation and align our approaches to new and emerging challenges because our fates are entwined on all three," the senior administration official said on Thursday.

Harris, who is expected to depart on Friday, will meet with both political leaders and civil society groups while in Singapore and Vietnam, during which time she will discuss issues such as pandemic response, supply chain challenges, and partnership on regional security.

She will also meet with embassy personnel and their families in both Singapore and Hanoi in addition to meetings with US sailors aboard the USS Tulsa at Changi Naval Base while in Singapore and at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on her return to the country.

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US Diplomats in Confidential Cable Warned Blinken in July Kabul May Collapse - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Some two dozen diplomats from the US embassy in Kabul had warned Secretary of State Antony Blinken via an internal cable about the likely collapse of Kabul shortly after the August 31 deadline for the American troops pullout from Afghanistan, media reported.

The July 13 internal memo warned about the fast capture of territories by the Taliban (banned in Russia) and the subsequent collapse of Afghan security forces, The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on Thursday citing US official and a person familiar with the cable.

The diplomats also outlined recommendations on ways to both alleviate the crisis and accelerate an evacuation, according to the newspaper.

Moreover, the cable urged the State Department to use tougher language when describing the Taliban's atrocities, the report said.

The Trump administration signed a deal 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.

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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US Targets 3 Cubans With Magnitsky Sanctions Including Head of Central Army - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States targeted three Cuban nationals with Magnitsky sanctions, including Central Army chief Andres Gonzalez Brito, the US Treasury Department said in a notice.

The US government also designated Abelardo Jimenez Gonzalez and Roberto Legra Sotolongo, who is Deputy Chief of the General Staff Revolutionary Armed Forces, the notice said on Thursday.

The Treasury Department said in a separate press release that it sanctioned the three persons in response to the recent violence the Cuban government inflicted on peaceful demonstrators. "Today's action exposes additional perpetrators responsible for suppressing the Cuban people's calls for freedom and respect for human rights," Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control Director Andrea Gacki said.

The US government accused Legra Sotolongo of deploying a military police unit against protesters, the release said.

Gonzalez Brito was designated for leading the Central Army, which is already under US sanctions, while Jimenez Gonzales is responsible for the treatment and disposition of people imprisoned in Cuba, the release added.

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US Capitol Police Says Found 'Possible Bomb Making Materials' in Suspect's Vehicle

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Officers have found possible bomb-making materials in a car belonging to the suspect in explosion threat case near the Library of Congress, the US Capitol Police Department announced in a press release.

"This afternoon, the United States Capitol Police safely took a bomb threat suspect into custody, cleared the vehicle and has now determined the area is safe," the release said on Thursday.

"Investigators are still on the scene. A bomb was not found in the vehicle, but possible bomb making materials were collected from the truck."

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Ohio Man Pleads Guilty to Charges Over Threats to Kill Biden, Lawmakers - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - A 58-year-old man in the US state of Oklahoma admitted that he sent a series of messages to a local television station threatening to kill President Joe Biden, members of Congress and their families, the Justice Department said.

"John Jacobs Ahrens, 58, pleaded guilty to one count of threat against the President of the United States and two counts of interstate communication with a threat to injure. He will be sentenced on Dec. 22, 2021," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

In his messages, Ahrens demanded money and if it was not sent, he wrote that he would kill the President, members of Congress and their families, the release said.

For example, in a May 10, 2021 message Ahrens said: "Please go to my Facebook page and read what I sent to the men of the United States Congress. They have less than 48 hours to hand over my money or their children will start dying all over the country. I'm going to kill their children," the release said.

In another message, Ahrens said: "America is going to get to see a sitting President get his head blown off right in front of them" and "your families will start dying. After that is over, I'm going to come back here one more time and tell you to hand over my money," the release added.

An executive producer from KOTV Channel 6 television contacted the FBI's National Threat Operations Center to report the threatening emails dated between May and June 2021, according to the release.

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US Earmarks \$61M In For Research on Quantum Information Technology - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US government will invest \$61 million to support the eventual creation of an internet based on quantum computers, the Energy Department said.

"Today's new awards will pursue goals to create new quantum devices and develop a quantum internet," the Energy Department said in a press release on Thursday. "A quantum internet

would enable linking together future quantum sensors and sharing data between quantum computers while providing a new level of security."

The \$61 million initiative includes awards of \$30 million for five Energy Department nano-scale science research centers that are seeking new advances in nanotechnology and quantum information science (QIS), the release said.

Another \$25 million will fund research on quantum-information testbeds, infrastructure needed as the bases of a future quantum internet, the release added.

QIS attempts to use molecules, atoms, parts of atoms and light to replace the millions of on-off switches in conventional computers, according to the release.

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US Will Not 'Look Back With Pride' on Kabul Evacuation - Ex-Deputy Secretary of State

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States will not be able to look back with pride on its record in the chaotic and rushed evacuation of Kabul, Afghanistan, this week, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said.

"I cannot think if we continue the way we have been going that we will look back with pride," Armitage, who also participated in the evacuation of US forces and nationals from Saigon in South Vietnam in 1975, told a podcast of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) on Thursday.

Armitage said the Biden administration and the US military had to be seen to be making a much greater effort to evacuate not only all US nationals but also Afghans who had worked with the United States and now feared ruthless reprisals from the victorious Taliban forces.

"Unless we are seen as moving heaven and earth we will not be able to look with pride on this moment. ... Right now, in my view, the Taliban don't give a damn whether the United States recognizes them or not: They are winners and right now they've got Russia, China [and] Iran in their corner," Armitage said.

Taliban forces may behave better in Kabul, especially around the airport but remained to be seen how they would act in fully occupying and establishing their control over Jalalabad and other provincial centers, he added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik)

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United States has at the moment over 5,000 personnel in Kabul, Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Thursday.
- * About 6,000 people at the Kabul airport have been processed and they will soon board their flight to the United States, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.
- * The Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) expects international recognition and seeks to develop friendly relations with all countries, including the United States, spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said.
- * Russia is ready to provide aviation services to evacuate people from Afghanistan to other countries, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- * The Moscow format on Afghanistan has the greatest potential to create conditions for launching the intra-Afghan dialogue and Russia is ready to resume operation of this format, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * The principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the United Nations appealed for donors to help pool an additional \$800 million in funding for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

RUSSIA-LIBYA TALKS

- * Moscow and Tripoli support the withdrawal of all the foreign troops from the Libyan territory, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday.
- * Lavrov expressed the belief that foreign forces withdrawal from Libya should be synchronized in order not to violate the existing balance of powers in the country.

PUTIN-MACRON TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, discussed the situation around the Iranian nuclear program and joint work on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, the Kremlin said on Thursday.
- * Putin and Macron exchanged views on the internal Ukrainian crisis and expressed concern about the continuing tension, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin discussed with Macron the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power, the Kremlin said.

BIDEN INTERVIEW

- * 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.
- * Biden told ABC that the United States faces a more serious terror threat from Syria and other countries than it does from Afghanistan.
- * Biden 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'.
- * Biden 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.
- * Biden said he does not think the exit operation from Afghanistan could have been handled better.

SECURITY INCIDENTS IN US

- * US law enforcement does not know the motives of the suspect with a bomb near the Capitol building but knows his name and identity, Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said in a press briefing on Thursday.
- * The suspect in the US Capitol Police explosion threat near the Library of Congress in Washington DC has surrendered to law enforcement and is currently in custody, Manger said.
- * Parts of New York City's Times Square have been evacuated and police bomb canines are on the scene after a suspicious object was reportedly thrown at people in Father Duffy Square, a New York City Police Department (NYPD) representative told Sputnik
- * Mayor of the city of Albuquerque in the US state of New Mexico, Tim Keller, said on Thursday that local police officers are receiving emergency care after being shot in the line of duty.

MOSCOW COURT VERDICT IN CALVEY CASE

- * US investor and Baring Vostok investment fund founder Michael Calvey appealed a Moscow court's verdict in the case of embezzlement of \$34.2 million, the court told Sputnik on Thursday.

CORONAVIRUS

- * Two US senators, Republican Roger Wicker from Mississippi and Independent Angus King of Maine, have tested positive for the novel coronavirus after being fully vaccinated, their offices announced on Thursday.
- * The UAE's emirate of Abu Dhabi ended restrictions that have been in place since July now that COVID-19 cases are falling nationwide.
- * The arrest of opponents of lockdown in New Zealand, imposed earlier in the week due to one Delta coronavirus strain case, continues into its second day, the national police said.

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NASA Agrees to Halt Work on Lunar Lander Contract Through November 1 - Court Document

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - NASA has agreed to suspend all work on its lunar lander contract for the Artemis Program at least until November 1 following a legal challenge from billionaire Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company that lost out to competitor SpaceX on a contract for it, US court documents revealed on Thursday.

"NASA Voluntary Say of Performance Expires [on] November 1, 2021," a document on the case filed in the US Court of Federal Claims following a court order said.

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Blue Origin lost out to SpaceX, founded and run by billionaire Elon Musk, in the contest to build the Lander and return the first US astronauts to the Moon since 1972. NASA chose SpaceX to build the \$2.9 billion spacecraft instead.

SpaceX has already received \$439 million in funding from NASA to launch the project, according to published reports.

Blue Origin filed the lawsuit after the Government Accountability Office rejected protests filed by the company along with technology company Dynetics over the US government's decision to award SpaceX the contract to build the Artemis lunar landing system.

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Suspect in US Capitol Police Bomb Threat Surrenders, Now in Custody - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The suspect in the US Capitol Police explosion threat near the Library of Congress in Washington, DC has surrendered to law enforcement and is currently in custody, Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said on Thursday.

"Moments ago, Floyd Roy Rosenberry from Grover North Carolina was taken into custody without incident," Manger said at a press briefing. "He got out of the vehicle and surrendered." The Police Chief also said that the law enforcement officers will be searching the suspect's vehicle to make sure it is safe.

Rosenberry had some criminal history back in his home state and has recently lost his mother amid other family issues, Manger added.

Earlier in the day, the US Capitol Police said in a tweet that they were investigating an active bomb threat near the Library of Congress and Capitol Complex in Washington following reports of a possible truck with explosives.

Later in the day, police said they cleared the vehicle.

"The vehicle related to the active bomb threat near the library of Congress has been cleared. Road closures that were in place have now been lifted. Residents may return to their homes. Thank you all for your patience during this critical incident," police said in a tweet.

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UPDATE - US Trade Commission Files Antitrust Lawsuit to Remedy Facebook's 'Monopoly'

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) on Thursday filed a petition for permanent injunction from the US District Court for the District of Columbia to remedy alleged anti-competitive and monopolistic practices by the social media platform Facebook.

"Facebook's unlawful course of conduct to maintain its monopoly continues today and must be enjoined. Facebook continues to hold and operate the assets it acquired unlawfully and continues to keep them positioned to provide a protective 'moat' around its personal social networking monopoly," the FTC said. "Moreover, Facebook continues to monitor competitive threats and will seek to acquire or kneecap them unless enjoined."

The FTC pointed out in the filing that Facebook has largely maintained its monopoly by following CEO Mark Zuckerberg's strategy of buying potential competitors rather than competing with them. Facebook has consequently tracked such companies in order to acquire them, the filing claimed.

The FTC requested that the court order Facebook to divest from assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp, to restore the competition that would exist absent Facebook's alleged monopolistic conduct. The FTC also requested that the court order any other equitable relief "necessary to restore competition and remedy the harm to competition" caused by Facebook's business practices.

Facebook responded in a series of statements via Twitter later on Thursday, saying it is unfortunate that the FTC has chosen to continue a meritless lawsuit against the company despite the court's initial dismissal of the complaint.

Facebook also said there is no valid claim it maintains a monopoly and the FTC's claims are **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

Blinken, Stoltenberg Discuss Need for Close Coordination on Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed the need for close allied coordination on the path forward on Afghanistan in a telephone conversation, the Department of State said on Thursday. "Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today," State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout. "[They] stressed that close coordination with our Allies and partners is essential ... as well as to plan for NATO's path forward on engaging on Afghanistan."

Blinken and Stoltenberg also discussed a virtual meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers to be held on Friday, the readout said.

"The meeting will bring Allies together to discuss developments in Afghanistan and NATO's efforts to ensure the safe and orderly evacuation of Allied personnel and our Afghan partners," Price said.

Stoltenberg said on Thursday that NATO was working closely with its European and international partners on the evacuation missions in Afghanistan.

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Taliban Ask UN to Stay in Afghanistan, Continue Humanitarian Assistance - Coordinator

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement (banned in Russia) has asked the United Nations to remain in Afghanistan and continue with humanitarian work, UN humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan Ramiz Alakbarov told Sputnik on Thursday. "We have working contacts. They always assure us of support," Alakbarov said. "They again expressed their support for us and asked us to continue to stay here and provide humanitarian assistance."

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US Continues to Rapidly Deploy More Consular Officers to Qatar, Kuwait - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to deploy more consular officers in Qatar and Kuwait to ensure it can evacuate Americans and others amid the situation in Afghanistan, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We're continuing to rapidly deploy additional consular officers [to Qatar and Kuwait] to ensure we can welcome Americans and others," Price said during a press briefing.

On Sunday, the Taliban completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. President Ashraf Ghani resigned and fled the country. Numerous countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation.

On Wednesday, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said the Biden administration plans to nearly double the number of consular officers in Afghanistan by Friday to increase the number of non-combatant evacuees.

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Three US Senators Test Positive for Coronavirus on Thursday – Statements

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Three US senators, Republican Roger Wicker from Mississippi, Democrat John Hickenlooper from Colorado and Independent Angus King from Maine, have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, their offices announced on Thursday.

"Senator Wicker tested positive this morning for the COVID-19 virus after immediately seeking a test due to mild symptoms," his office said in a statement.

Wicker, 70, was already fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and remains in good health, the statement added.

King, 77 announced in a later statement that he had tested positive for the coronavirus. The senator said he was tested after not feeling well on Wednesday.

Hickenlooper, 69, said in his statement that he felt good but was isolating himself as his doctors had instructed.

"I've tested positive for a breakthrough case of COVID-19. I feel good but will isolate per docs instructions. I'm grateful for the vaccine (and the scientists behind it!) for limiting my symptoms," he said in a Twitter message.

In all, 131 representatives and senators have either isolated themselves because of having COVID-19, self-quarantined after exposure, or they took other action or no action after exposure , the GovTrack.com web site said.

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Canadian Armed Forces Arrive in Afghanistan to Assist With Evacuation - Trudeau

TORONTO, August 19 (Sputnik) – Canadian Armed Forces personnel and equipment have arrived in Afghanistan to work in tandem with the US forces on the evacuation of Canadians and Afghan nationals out of the country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"I can confirm that Canadian Armed Forces assets and personnel have arrived on the ground to [Afghanistan to] coordinate at the tactical level with the US and with our allied partners. This will help the Canadians, Afghan nationals and their families to safety," Trudeau said at a press briefing.

Two Canadian Forces C-17 aircraft will be conducting regular flights into Kabul to support evacuation efforts, Trudeau noted.

At the same time, Trudeau said that many of the flights have been leaving Afghanistan not full due to the existing challenges on the ground in terms of getting people out of the country.

Canadian personnel has already been present in Afghanistan while more are set to arrive later today to help process the evacuees, the Prime Minister said.

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 refuge from the country for fear of reprisals from the militants. Thousands of Afghans continue to break into the Kabul airport in hopes of flying out of the country.

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Pentagon Not Developing Any Alternative Plan for Afghanistan After August 31 - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department has not presented any alternative plan to President Joe Biden for US troop operations in Afghanistan after August 31, spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

When asked whether the Secretary is developing options or plans to be presented to the President as to how the military can continue operating in Afghanistan after August 31, Kirby said, " Right now, we are very focused on the mission which to get this done by the 31st (August 31)."

"I know of now alternative concepts of operation that have been presented to the President for decision at this point. We are focused on doing as much as we can, as fast as we can and we are trying to get this accomplished by the end of the month," Kirby said during a press briefing. In 2020, the Trump administration signed a deal with the Taliban (banned in Russia) that stipulates the United States will withdraw all forces from Afghanistan in exchange for assurances the country will not be used for terrorist operations. The US troop pullout was initially set for May 1, 2021, but the Biden administration delayed the withdrawal deadline until August 31.

On Sunday, the Taliban completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani resigned and left the country. Numerous countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation.

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Broadband, Smartphone Use Surges in Rural US But Still Lags Urban Communities – Report
WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – Access to broadband and the use of smartphones in rural America has grown in recent years, although the so-called US digital divide persists, a report by the Pew Research Center said on Thursday.

"While broadband adoption has not significantly increased for urban and suburban Americans in the last five years, rural residents have seen a 9 percentage point rise in home broadband adoption since 2016, when about six-in-ten (63%) reported having a high-speed internet connection at home," the report said.

Roughly seven in ten rural Americans (72%) say they have a broadband internet connection at home, according to a Pew Research Center survey of US adults conducted earlier this year, the report said.

Smartphone ownership also rose significantly (9 points) among rural residents in the past three years, although tablet and home computer ownership has remained largely unchanged, the report added.

The persistence of a US digital divide persists largely reflects a failure of current infrastructure to support consistently dependable broadband access in many rural areas, according to the report. Efforts to increase access to and use of technology in rural American have attracted bipartisan support in Congress.

The trillion-dollar infrastructure bill recently approved by the US Senate directs \$65 billion toward extending US broadband networks for people without access in addition to investments in transportation and utilities.

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Khalilzad Stays in Doha, In Touch with Taliban Reps Who Left for Afghanistan - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad remains in touch with Taliban (banned in Russia) representatives from Doha even though their delegation left the city for Afghanistan, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Ambassador Khalilzad remains in Doha. Much of the Taliban delegation, if not all of it, has relocated from Doha to Afghanistan. We've continued to be in touch with those representatives over the phone. We've been in touch directly on the ground with them as well," Price said during a press briefing.

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Suspect in US Capitol Police Bomb Threat Surrenders, Now in Custody – Police Chief
WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – The suspect in the US Capitol Police explosion threat near the Library of Congress in Washington DC has surrendered to law enforcement and is currently in custody, Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said on Thursday.

"Moments ago, Floyd Roy Rosenberry from Grover North Carolina was taken into custody without incident," Manger said at a press briefing. "He got out of the vehicle and surrendered." The Police Chief also said that the law enforcement officers will be searching the suspect's vehicle to make sure it is safe.

Rosenberry had some criminal history back in his home state and has recently lost his mother amid other family issues, Manger added.

Earlier in the day, the US Capitol Police said in a tweet that they were investigating an active bomb threat near the Library of Congress and Capitol Complex in Washington following reports of a possible truck with explosives.

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Some 6,000 People at Kabul Airport Processed, Soon to Board Flights - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - About 6,000 people at the Kabul airport have been processed and they will soon board their flight to the United States, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday at a daily briefing.

"There are 6,000 people who have been fully processed at the airport, will soon board planes," Price said.

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US Senators Wicker, King Test Positive for Coronavirus on Thursday - Statements

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Two US senators, Republican Roger Wicker from Mississippi and Independent Angus King of Maine, have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, their offices announced on Thursday.

"Senator Wicker tested positive this morning for the COVID-19 virus after immediately seeking a test due to mild symptoms," his office said in a statement.

Wicker, 70, was already fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and remains in good health, the statement added.

King, 77 announced in a later, separate statement that he had tested positive for the coronavirus. The senator said he was tested after not feeling well on Wednesday.

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Four US Police Officers Injured in Shootout in Albuquerque, New Mexico

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – Four police officers were injured in a shootout with two suspects in the US city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, the local police department said on Thursday.

"Please share in honor of the FOUR Albuquerque Police Officers shot today in the line of duty," the police said on Twitter.

One suspect was shot and currently remains in custody, while a manhunt for the other suspect is underway, according to media reports.

All injured are receiving emergency care, Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller said in a separate tweet. Law enforcement are working to find the remaining suspect, he added.

Local TV clarified, citing the police department that three officers were injured, and another one was hit by shrapnel.

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US Allows States to Extend Jobless Benefits Beyond September 6 Expiration - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US states with high unemployment can extend expanded jobless benefits due to the coronavirus pandemic beyond the September 6 expiration by diverting other funds from the American Rescue Plan, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"In states where a more gradual wind down of income support for unemployed workers makes sense based on local economic conditions, American Rescue Plan funds can be activated to cover the cost of providing assistance to unemployed workers beyond September 6th," Yellen said in a letter to chairs of the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means committees. In addition to unemployment programs operated by US states, Congress provided an additional \$300 in weekly benefits as part of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan. When money the federal jobless benefit subsidy runs out, Yellen said states have the option of diverting funds from \$350 billion also provided by the ARP to support pandemic responses by state and local governments. The soon-to-expire extra \$300 in weekly unemployment payments proved controversial in several US states, where officials claimed low wage workers earned more by remaining at home than if they found new jobs.

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Mayor of New Mexico's Albuquerque Says Officers Shot on Duty, Receiving Emergency Care
WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Mayor of the city of Albuquerque in the US state of New Mexico, Tim Keller, said on Thursday that local police officers are receiving emergency care after being shot in the line of duty.

"@ABQPOLICE officers are receiving emergency care after being shot in the line of duty this morning," Keller said on Twitter, calling the incident a horrific act of violence. Law enforcement are working to find the remaining suspect, he added. Local TV clarified, citing the police department, that two officers were shot and injured in the morning. Several schools nearby had been put in a shelter in place.

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UN Chief Says Has Not Been in Contact With Taliban About Afghanistan's Future

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday said that he has not been in touch with the Taliban (banned in Russia) to address the future of Afghanistan, however, is willing to do that.

"I have not spoken myself but our people in Afghanistan are in close contact with the Taliban. I am ready to speak myself when it is clear with whom should I speak [and] for what purpose," Guterres said at a briefing.

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New York Police Say Package in Times Square Cleared, Deemed Not Suspicious

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The package that prompted the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to evacuate parts of Times Square has been cleared by bomb squad canines and is deemed not suspicious, the NYPD said on Thursday.

"The package in Times Square has been cleared and deemed to be not suspicious," the NYPD said via Twitter.

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New York Police Confirm Bomb Squad Probing Times Square After Suspicious Object Found

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Parts of New York City's Times Square have been evacuated and police bomb canines are on the scene after a suspicious object was reportedly thrown at people in Father Duffy Square, a New York City Police Department (NYPD) representative told Sputnik on Thursday.

The NYPD representative told reporters on the scene that police evacuated the area over a suspicious object that resembles a "red cookie jar." They added that the canine was part of a bomb squad.

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US Earmarks \$26Mln To Expand Biodiesel, Ethanol Motor Fuel Blends - Agriculture Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The availability of motor fuels blended with hydrocarbons produced from crops grown by farmers will expand in 23 US states with a \$26 million investment announced by the Agriculture Department on Thursday.

"The funding will help significantly increase the use of biofuels derived from US agricultural products and prioritize climate-smart solutions," the Agriculture Department said in a press release.

The \$26 million will fund investments in the US states of California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas and Wisconsin, the release said.

Examples of projects include a \$1.5 million grant to the California company Paramount to upgrade a distribution facility in a project expected to increase biodiesel sales by 135 million gallons annually, the release added.

The program is intended to help transportation fueling and biodiesel distribution facilities offer higher ethanol and biodiesel blends to customers by sharing the costs to install fuel pumps, equipment and infrastructure. The program seeks to expand the availability of blended fuels by 822 million gallons a year, according to the release.

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New York City Police Say to Avoid Times Square Area Amid Report of Suspicious Container

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The New York City Police Department (NYPD) is telling the public to avoid the area around Times Square amid reports of a suspicious container in the area, the NYPD said on Thursday.

"Due to a police investigation please avoid the area of West 45 Street to 48 Street on Broadway to 7th Avenue in Manhattan. Update to follow," the official NYPD News Twitter account said. A part of Times Square was reportedly evacuated Thursday afternoon after something resembling a "cookie tin" was thrown toward people in Father Duffy Square. There is no indication the object was a real device, but precautions are being taken given the ongoing bomb threat in Washington, DC.

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US Law Enforcement Says Don't Know Motive of Suspect With Bomb Near Near Capitol

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States law enforcement does not know the motives of the suspect with a bomb near the Capitol building but, however, possibly knows his name and identity, Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said in a press briefing on Thursday. "We are in communication with the suspect... We don't know what his motives are at this time," Manger said. "We do have possible name and identity of the suspect."

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US Trade Commission Files Antitrust Lawsuit to Remedy Facebook's 'Monopoly'

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) on Thursday filed a petition for permanent injunction from the US District Court for the District of Columbia to remedy anti-competitive and monopolistic practices by the social media platform Facebook.

"Facebook's unlawful course of conduct to maintain its monopoly continues today and must be enjoined. Facebook continues to hold and operate the assets it acquired unlawfully and continues to keep them positioned to provide a protective 'moat' around its personal social networking monopoly," the FTC said. "Moreover, Facebook continues to monitor competitive threats and will seek to acquire or kneecap them unless enjoined."

The FTC pointed out in the filing that Facebook has largely maintained its monopoly by following CEO Mark Zuckerberg's strategy that is better to buy potential competitors than compete with them. Facebook has consequently tracked such companies in order to acquire them, the filing said.

The FTC requested that the court order Facebook to divest from assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp, to restore the competition that would exist absent Facebook's alleged monopolistic conduct. The FTC also requested that the court order any other equitable relief "necessary to restore competition and remedy the harm to competition" caused by Facebook's business practices.

Facebook responded to via Twitter that they are reviewing the FTC's complaint and will have more to say soon.

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US Capitol Police Say Investigating Active Bomb Threat Near Library of Congress

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) confirmed in a tweet on Thursday that they are investigating an active bomb threat near the Library of Congress and Capitol Complex in Washington following reports of a possible truck with explosives.

"This is an active bomb threat investigation. The staging area for journalists covering this situation is at Constitution and First Street, NW for your safety. Please continue to avoid the area around the Library of Congress," USCP said.

Nearby office buildings have either been evacuated or placed on lockdown. CNN reported that negotiators have been sent to the scene in order to reason with a man in the purported truck. Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser urged people to avoid the area near the Capitol.

"The DC Police Department is assisting the US Capitol Police in the response, and will provide an update when there is additional information to share," she said on Twitter.

US House Sergeant at Arms informed the Congressional staff that two buildings of the Library of Congress were evacuated, while people from one House office building were directed to relocate to another one via the underground tunnels.

"Due to the nature of the incident, this will likely to be a prolonged law enforcement response," he said.

Washington transport authorities alerted customers about traffic changes related to the incident. Several bus routes experience delays and possible detours, while metro trains on three lines bypassing Capital South station, they said.

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UN Should Declare Kabul Protected by Peacekeeping Mission - Afghan Research Institution

UNITED NATIONS, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations must change its usual approach while dealing with the Afghanistan crisis and declare Kabul protected by a UN peacekeeping mission, Davood Moradian, Director General from the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies said during the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on Thursday.

"The UN must overcome its usual approach by declaring the situation as an urgent humanitarian crisis under the chapter seven provision of the United Nations Charter. This should include serious and urgent deliberation to declare Kabul, as safe, protected by a UN peacekeeping mission," he said.

On Sunday, the Taliban (a terrorist group, banned in Russia) completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. Ashraf Ghani resigned as president and left the country to prevent what he described as bloodshed that would occur if militants had to fight for the city. Many countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some pledged to take in their Afghan staff as well. On Monday United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all Afghan parties, especially the Taliban movement to exercise utmost restraint and protect lives to Ensure humanitarian needs can be met. He added that the UN continues to have staff and offices in areas that have come under the Taliban control and that the UN presence will adapt to the security situation.

Relief aid agencies have been warning about a looming humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, exacerbated by extreme weather, the pandemic and armed conflict. One in three Afghans is estimated to experience acute food insecurity.

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US Expects Increase in Flow of People From Kabul Upon Opening Extra Airport Gate-
Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is expecting to see an increase in the flow of people out of Afghanistan with an additional airport gate is opened and more consular officers are available on the ground, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"By opening up another gate, by adding consular officers now, we believe that we will soon begin to see an opening up the aperture, and we are hopeful that that means a more consistent increase in the flow," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby also said that even though the United States is poised to see an increase in evacuation capacity, it is hard to make predictions in the existing situation.

On Wednesday, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said the Biden administration plans to nearly double the number of consular officers in Afghanistan by Friday to increase the number of non-combatant evacuees.

Defense Department officials said the US government managed to evacuate approximately 2,000 people out of Kabul airport in the past 24 hours.

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Lawmakers Demand Release of Special Counsel Report on FBI Spying on Trump Campaign

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – Republican US senators demanded that Attorney General Merrick Garland allow a special counsel investigation of FBI spying on the Trump campaign to continue and publicly release a final report on the probe, Tennessee lawmaker Marsha Blackburn said on Thursday.

"We are over two years into the investigation of how the Obama-Biden FBI spied on an incoming president, and we still do not have answers. America's national security apparatus was weaponized to take down President Trump, and the American people deserve to know how this occurred," Blackburn said in a press release.

The release included a letter signed by Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and more than 40 senators to Attorney General Merrick Garland. The letter requesting an update on an investigation by Special Counsel John Durham, a guarantee that the probe would continue and a pledge from Garland that Durham's final report will be publicly released.

"We ask that you provide an update on the status of Special Counsel Durham's inquiry and that the investigation's report be made available to the public upon completion," the letter read. "The truth pursued by this investigation is necessary to ensure transparency in our intelligence agencies and restore faith in our civil liberties. Thus, it is essential that the Special Counsel's ongoing review should be allowed to continue unimpeded and without undue limitations."

Durham was appointed by former Attorney General William Barr in 2019 to investigate the origins of the FBI's investigation into allegations that the 2016 Trump presidential campaign colluded with Russia.

Durham was subsequently elevated as a special counsel by the outgoing Trump administration – a move that guaranteed the investigation would continue regardless of who won the 2020 presidential election.

Russia has repeatedly denied any collusion, a claim subsequently backed in a final report by an earlier special counsel, former FBI Director Robert Mueller, which also concluded that no collusion had taken place.

Durham's investigation reportedly involves allegations that the FBI misled a secret US court, which oversees wiretaps of US citizens in cases involving foreign nationals, for permission to eavesdrop on a key aide in the Trump campaign.

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Pentagon Says Armed US F-18 Fighter Jets Flew Over Kabul to Ensure Security

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US F-18 fighter jets flew over the Afghan capital of Kabul to ensure security around the airport area, Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Thursday. "As we look at the last 24 hours, F-18s from the Ronald Reagan carrier strike group flew armed over watched flights over Kabul to ensure enhanced security," Taylor said during a briefing. Taylor added that the F-18 jets are flying continuously in support of the US efforts to evacuate Americans and allies from Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby denied that the deployment of F-18 jets is the first armed flight since the beginning of non-combatant evacuations in Afghanistan. "Our mission in Afghanistan is now conducting a non-combatant evacuation in a safe way... Our main mission is airport security, help to get people out," Kirby said.

On Sunday, the Taliban completed their takeover of Afghanistan by entering Kabul. President Ashraf Ghani resigned and fled the country. Numerous countries chose to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation.

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FBI Says Assisting US Capitol Police With Active Bomb Threat Near Library of Congress

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The FBI's Washington Field Office (FBIWFO) is assisting the US Capitol Police (USCP) with their investigation of a truck that possibly contains explosives near the Library of Congress and Capitol Complex, the FBIWFO said on Thursday.

"The FBI Washington Field Office's National Capital Response Squad is responding with our partners, including @CapitolPolice, to reports of a suspicious vehicle and bomb threat near the Library of Congress," the FBIWFO said in a tweet.

USCP said earlier on Thursday that they are investigating an active bomb threat in the area, prompting the closure of street traffic and the evacuation or lockdown of personnel working in nearby office buildings.

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More Than 5,200 US Troops on Ground in Kabul- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has at the moment over 5,000 personnel in Kabul, Army Major General William Taylor said on Thursday. "The US military footprint in Kabul is now more than 5,200 total troops in the ground," Taylor said at a briefing.

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Islamic State Expanding Activities, Strength in Afghanistan – UN Report

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – The Islamic State terrorist group, also known as Da'esh (outlawed in Russia) is now expanding its presence in Afghanistan and has financial reserves estimated between \$25 million and \$50 million, the latest United Nations report on global terrorism delivered to the UN Security Council said on Thursday.

"Da'esh in Afghanistan has prioritized the recruitment and training of new supporters," the report said. "Estimates of the affiliate's strength range widely, with one Member State reporting between 500 and 1,500 fighters, and another stating that it may rise to as many as 10,000 in the medium term."

The terror group has also expanded its presence in several provinces of Afghanistan and strengthened its positions in and around Kabul, where it has targeted most of its attacks against minorities, civil society actors, government employees and personnel of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, the report added.

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Nearby office buildings have either been evacuated or placed on lockdown. CNN reported that negotiators have been sent to the scene in order to reason with a man in the purported truck.

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US Capitol Police Say Investigating Reports of Suspicious Truck Near Library of Congress
WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Thursday that it is investigating a suspicious vehicle near the Library of Congress in Washington, DC amid reports of a possible truck with explosives.

"The USCP is responding to a suspicious vehicle near the Library of Congress. Please stay away from this area and follow this account for the latest information," USCP said via Twitter.

The USCP added in a subsequent tweet that the investigation is ongoing and they are monitoring the situation closely.

The announcements came amid reports that a truck that could possibly carry explosives near the Madison and Jefferson buildings of the Library of Congress. They are located nearby the Capitol and US House of Representatives office buildings.

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US Opens Field Hospital in Algeria to Help Nation Cope With Pandemic – AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – American and Algerian officials inaugurated a state-of-the-art field hospital to treat civilian COVID-19 patients with plans to open an identical unit in the coming months, the US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Thursday.

"Algerian officials from the Ministry of Health accepted the donation by the Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid program of the U.S. Department of Defense," AFRICOM said in a press release.

The field hospital will serve Algeria's civilian population and is equipped with a negative pressure isolation system specifically designed to treat patients with infectious diseases. It has 35 beds, five of which include intensive care systems, the release said.

At a ceremony inaugurating the unit, the defense attache at the American Embassy, Colonel Chris D'Amico, said the US plans to deliver an identical field hospital to Algeria's Health Ministry in the coming months.

The North African country is still reeling from a third wave of coronavirus transmissions that put a strain on the nation's health care system. Daily new cases have dipped below 1,000 in recent days, with a total of nearly 190,000 infections and just under 4,900 deaths, according to health ministry figures.

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

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims fell by 29,000 from the previous week to a new low of 348,000 in a boon to recovery, 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 Labor Department said. The four-week moving average of claims decreased to 377,750, downsized by 19,000 from the previous week's revised average, the Labor Department said. "This is the lowest level for this average since March 14, 2020 when it was 225,500. The previous week's average was revised up by 500 from 396,250 to 396,750," the Labor Department said.

There were 28,676,558 weekly claims filed for benefits in all programs in the comparable week in 2020," the Labor Department added.

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

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

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UN Officials Appeal for Donors to Meet \$800M In 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 19 (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.