

**08/24/21 Tuesday**

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US Supreme Court Rules Biden Admin Must Reinstate 'Remain in Mexico' Immigration Policy by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In a Tuesday ruling, the US Supreme Court said that a federal judge's order to reinstate the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), better known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy, had to be followed. The decision is a major blow to US President Joe Biden's immigration reform promises.

Earlier this month, US District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk of the US District Court for the Northern District of Texas ordered the Biden administration to reinstate the MPP policy, which the US Department of Homeland Security formally [ended in June](#). The policy requires asylum applicants to await the decision on their application outside the United States, which in practice means huge number of people waiting to enter the US accumulate in camps on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border.

The US states of Texas and Missouri, which brought the case before him, had argued the Biden administration failed to use proper administrative procedures in ending the policy - [a common claim made](#) by supporters of former US President Donald Trump's immigration policies, which Biden campaigned on ending.

[Kacsmaryk agreed, arguing](#) that the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 constrains the administration's immigration policy into one of two possible courses of action: either every applicant must await their decision outside of the country or be detained in US custody.

In response, the US Department of Justice appealed to a higher court for a stay on Kacsmaryk's order, and when the appellate court refused, the DOJ went to the Supreme Court.

"The application for a stay presented to [US Supreme Court Justice Samuel] Alito and by him referred to the Court is denied," the Supreme Court said in a [brief memo on Tuesday](#). "The applicants failed to show a likelihood of success on the claim that the memorandum rescinding the Migrant Protection Protocols was not arbitrary and capricious."

The memo notes that the court's three liberal members - Justices Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor - dissented from the decision.

Ending the highly unpopular MPP was at the top of the list on Biden's policy agenda upon taking office, and the directive to halt applications was among the slew of Day 1 executive orders he issued. However, the program had been on hold since early 2020, when then-US President Donald Trump paused it in the interest of limiting COVID-19 cases. In December 2020 there were approximately 23,000 pending MPP cases, according to the watchdog group [Human Rights First](#), whose yearslong wait across the border in Mexico exposed them to numerous dangers and was described as "a humanitarian disgrace and a legal travesty."

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China Ready to Offer 'Genuine' Aid to Afghanistan, Cautions Nations to Lead, Not Pressure Taliban  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The World Bank has predicted a 20% decline in international aid to Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban's seizure of power, which could still grow further, depending on the new government's course. Already inadequate to meet the country's needs, neighboring China could fill that gap and then some, giving Beijing leverage in Kabul.

Chinese firms are ready to "deliver genuine investment and technical support" in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, officials told [the Global Times](#), but noted that the threat of serious Western sanctions was likely to endanger their plans. Beijing has banked heavily on the hope the Taliban can be influenced to form a moderate and stable government with the promise of regional economic integration.

Afghanistan isn't a totally new realm for Chinese investors, but the US withdrawal, coupled with the lightning-quick Taliban victory, have created perhaps the best conditions for peace in the country in decades.

"We have benefited a lot from our business plans in Afghanistan in the past five years, and we believe the operation will run more effectively after the situation stabilizes," Cassie, a Chinese worker at the China Town district of Kabul, where several Chinese-owned factories are located, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

US Versus Chinese Models

Because the US has pursued massive profit-making for its corporations in countries where it has intervened, Western thinkers have assumed China will have the same behavior as it becomes increasingly engaged in Afghanistan. Numerous articles and [think pieces](#) have been written about "[\\$1 trillion in minerals](#)" up for the taking and how Beijing is "[about to tuck Afghanistan](#) under Its Belt and Road." However, as one official from a Chinese state-owned enterprise told the Global Times, their business activities "will be in line with Chinese national strategy," which is interested in stability first.

Many of them have, however, correctly estimated that Beijing will be hesitant to sink money into the Central Asian country, with which it shares a 44-mile-long border, at least until the Taliban provides some concrete results on its promises, which include a pledge to end support for the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) terrorist group. The Islamist terrorist group, which is connected to al-Qaeda and has sought refuge in Afghanistan in the past, is a Xinjiang separatist group that wants to separate China's westernmost province from the country - a cause given Western blessings in recent years, as the US reorients to strategically compete with Beijing. Yu Minghui, director of the China Arab Economic and Trade Promotion Committee, told the outlet that Chinese businessmen had built up a great deal of goodwill with Afghans, including the Taliban, noting that the Islamist militia group has vowed to protect investors because "whoever stayed in the country" after the NATO withdrawal "is helping Afghans."

Many entrepreneurs the paper spoke with said they were relatively “immune” to western sanctions, but that if relations between Kabul and the US and UK continue to sour, it could make further investment risky enough to deter some businessmen.

The US and UK, the two major partners of the NATO occupation force in Afghanistan, have adopted a “wait-and-see” approach similar to China’s on whether the Taliban will keep its promises. For now, sanctions have been levied against the de facto Afghan government, including [freezing \\$9.5 billion](#) in assets in US institutions. On Friday, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi cautioned](#) his British counterpart, Dominic Raab, that being overly aggressive in pressuring the Taliban was likely to backfire.

Qian Feng, director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, told the Global Times there are "a thousand things waiting to be done" in Afghanistan, including rebuilding and expanding virtually every type of infrastructure, from communications to transport, mineral extraction, and agriculture, which China is [uniquely situated](#) to invest in heavily.

#### Regional Coordination

China isn’t the only country pursuing such a course, however: [Iran, Pakistan](#) and [Tajikistan have](#) also been major players in [coordinating a regional](#) orientation toward the new Taliban government, which swept into power earlier this month after Kabul surrendered without a fight and President Ashraf Ghani fled into exile. Other countries, including Russia, India, Uzbekistan, and Turkey, have also been a part of the process.

On Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters that upcoming summits in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, next month of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would place Afghanistan at the top of the agenda. “Clearly, the issue of Afghanistan and the consequences of US actions, which haven’t been agreed [to by] anyone and are now affecting our neighbors, will be the focus of attention,” Lavrov said.

While the US-backed Afghan government had pursued SCO membership in order to gain an upper hand in its struggle against the Taliban, there are common sense justifications to motivate any ruling party to seek increased economic integration. For example, according to a count by [The Diplomat](#), in 2017-2018, 87% of Afghanistan’s imports came from SCO countries and 57% of its exports went to SCO members. With six of eight SCO members being Afghanistan’s neighbors, the centrally located country could become a major transit hub and its products would gain easy access to any number of regional markets.

Indeed, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen recently told [China Global Television](#) that investment by Beijing would be welcomed in the future.

“We need to rebuild our country and to create employment for our people,” Shaheen said. “We have so much need for other countries’ assistance.”

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White House Says US Troops Face 'Added Risk' From Daesh Franchise Longer They Stay in Kabul

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the large US presence at Kabul's airport in the Afghan capital continues amid a massive airlift of NATO assets, the risk of an attack against them by ISIS-Khorasan, the local Daesh franchise, increases, the White House said on Tuesday.

"With each day of operations on the ground, we have added risk to our troops with increasing threats from ISIS-K," White House spokesperson [Jen Psaki said](#) in a Tuesday statement about US President [Joe Biden's meeting](#) with Group of Seven leaders.

Speaking with reporters [later on Tuesday](#), Psaki said the deadline for the final US withdrawal from Afghanistan is still August 31, but that civilian evacuations would have to end before then in order to remove the roughly 4,000 troops on time. However, the itinerary is subject to change depending on certain factors, she said.

"That includes the threat of ISIS, which is of great concern, understandably, to the president, given the threat it poses to our military who are on the ground," she said. "It also includes the essential aspect of having the Taliban's coordination continue over the coming days. So we can facilitate as many people as we've been getting out."

Psaki said that with more than 57,000 people evacuated from Hamid Karzai International Airport over the last week, the airlift was on track to become the largest such operation in US history. However, reporters were concerned that the Taliban had begun turning people away from the airport. Psaki stated that the administration had "conveyed to the Taliban" that evacuees "should be able to get to the airport."

"Our expectation and what we will continue to convey directly through a range of channels we have is that the individuals, the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, those who are eligible, those who we are facilitating their departure, will be able to reach the airport," she added.

A day prior, White House national security adviser Jake [Sullivan told CNN](#) that the threat posed to crowds outside the airport by ISIS-K "is real. It is acute. It is persistent. And it is something that we are focused on with every tool in our arsenal."

"It is something that we are placing paramount priority on stopping or disrupting," he added.

"And we will do everything that we can for as long as we are on the ground to keep that from happening. But we are taking it absolutely deadly seriously."

Sullivan added that the Taliban was in charge of security in Kabul, so any attack by Daesh would be on their shoulders.

The Daesh franchise, which takes its name Khorasan from the ancient Persian-language name for the region that includes much of Afghanistan, is believed to have originated in 2015 among former members of Tahreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, a loose agglomeration of Pashtun militias on Pakistan's side of the border. The US claims ISIS-K works in coordination with the [Haqqani Network](#), but the Taliban, whom ISIS-K has fought in recent years, claims there is no such thing as the Haqqani Network and that the purported group is part of the Taliban.

US Special Operations officials told the [Washington Post](#) last year that the US was also helping the Taliban to fight ISIS-K, which had begun even before the February 2020 peace deal the Taliban signed with then-US President Donald Trump that led to the present withdrawal.

However, many have also claimed that the United States is behind the creation of ISIS-K, if not also supporting its continued existence. In 2018, Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff General

Mohammad Hossein Baqeri said the spread of Daesh into the region would provide the US "with the much desired pretext" to prolong their military presence there.

"After witnessing Daesh and other organized terrorist groups losing their ground in Iraq and Syria, they are now relocating them to Afghanistan," Baqeri said, as quoted by the US state-funded outlet [Voice of America](#). The quote was originally published in English on the Iranian site PressTV, but the US Department of Justice [seized the outlet's domain](#) in June. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has recently become part of the government's peace council after President Ashraf Ghani fled into exile, also told [VOA in April 2017](#) that "I consider Daesh their tool ... I do not differentiate at all between Daesh and America." He explained to [Al-Jazeera later](#) that year that the US had "a hand in" the group's creation and was using Daesh's presence to test out new terror weapons like the "Mother of All Bombs," an 11-ton explosive with a blast radius of nearly 1 mile.

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'Vaccine Nationalism': WHO Calls for Two-Month Pause on Booster Shots to Help Poor Nations Inoculate  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has bought 1.5 billion COVID-19 vaccine shots, enough to vaccinate its entire population more than twice, and promised to export another 500 million over the next year. However, many of the world's poorest nations, dependent on shots donated to the World Health Organization, have paused their campaigns as supplies dwindled.

As the US and several other countries begin offering third "booster" shots of COVID-19 vaccines to some of their most vulnerable citizens, the WHO is renewing its pleas for those nations, which are among the world's wealthiest, to instead use those shots to help people in the world's poorer nations to get their first round of vaccinations first.

"Vaccine injustice and vaccine nationalism" is allowing new COVID-19 variants to emerge, causing more deaths and prolonging the pandemic for the entire planet, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom [Ghebreyesus told reporters](#) in Budapest on Monday.

"Some countries are administering booster doses to people who are already fully vaccinated, while many people in the poorest countries are yet to receive a single dose, including health workers, older people and other vulnerable groups," the WHO chief [said in separate remarks](#) to Hungarian officials.

"That's why I have called for a global moratorium on booster vaccines until at least the end of September, to allow those countries that are furthest behind to catch up."

He added that vaccine equity isn't just ethically right or economically smart, "it is in every country's own best interests."

"The longer vaccine inequity persists, the more opportunity the virus has to spread and evolve into even more dangerous variants, which could evade the vaccines we have, prolonging the pandemic and the economic and social disruption it brings," he added.

Tedros urged “countries with the most financial and geopolitical muscle” to step up and close the gap, as “most of the world’s poor have been left behind” by their extensive vaccination procurement and concentration on vaccinating their own citizens first.

He noted that of the 4.8 billion vaccine doses administered globally, 75% have been used by just 10 countries.

While [nearly half of those](#) shots have been used in the People’s Republic of China, a middle-income nation that houses nearly one-fifth of humanity, the country has also exported [more than 770 million](#) shots to many of the world’s poorest nations, including most of the countries in Africa, and expects to export another 1.5 billion before the end of 2021.

The WHO’s target is for every nation to have at least 10% of its population vaccinated by the end of next month and to reach 40% before the year is out, with a further goal of 70% of the world’s population by the middle of 2022. Tedros said that a little over half of the world’s nations have reached the 10% goal.

However, the US has already [vaccinated 51.6%](#) of its population and other First World nations like Israel have hit [as high as 80%](#), but on the entire continent of Africa, less than 2% of the population is fully vaccinated, according to [WHO data](#).

US President Joe Biden [announced last week](#) that plans to offer a third shot to some of the first recipients of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines in the US would proceed beginning on September 20. The administration is also recommending that Americans receive a third shot eight months after receiving their second dose, in order to boost their immune response and better protect against the Delta variant, which is driving the second-largest explosion of infections in the US thus far.

However, even within the US, vaccination has [been highly unequal](#), with the affluent northeast and west coast having far higher coverage than the poorer states of the South and Great Plains, the latter of which have been the centers of infection driving the nationwide outbreak that began in late June.

Tedros began his push for the booster pause when the Biden administration first announced its plans earlier this month, but White House Press Secretary [Jen Psaki dismissed](#) the suggestion as “a false choice,” saying the White House believes “we can do both.”

[Other countries](#) offering COVID-19 vaccine booster shots or preparing plans to offer them soon to some people include Israel, the UK, Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, and China.

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Pfizer Developing Specialized Vaccine Targeting Delta Variant of COVID-19  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Monday, the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech became the first vaccine of its kind to receive full approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). US President Joe Biden has since urged leaders in the public and private sector to use the FDA approval to implement vaccine requirements and curb the Delta variant's spread.

While the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine [has been granted full FDA approval](#), Pfizer researchers have not slowed down, and are presently pursuing the development of another vaccine to specifically combat the highly contagious Delta variant, according to Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla.

"We are making, right now, a specialized vaccine for Delta," Bourla told "NBC Nightly News" anchor Lester Holt on Monday, speaking of the dominant COVID-19 variant. "I am almost certain that we will not need it because the booster shot of the current vaccine is very, very effective against Delta."

Bourla said that those previously hesitant to take the vaccine should feel more at ease with the FDA fully backing the two-dose shot.

The Pfizer CEO also argued that while there are "serious" side effects, [such as lymphadenopathy](#), they are incredibly rare.

[US health officials announced earlier this month](#) that, beginning Sept. 20, vaccinated individuals will be able to begin scheduling appointments for their COVID-19 booster shot.

The new dose should be administered eight months after the individual's second dose, and is expected to enhance immunity, which wears off after approximately six months.

Immunocompromised individuals in the US can already receive their third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine.

As the federal government [continues to combat the dominant Delta variant](#), other methods of protection have received emergency approval from the federal government, such as the monoclonal antibody treatments that attack the spike protein of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, emphasized on Tuesday that the monoclonal antibody treatments developed by the Eli Lilly and Company, Regeneron and GlaxoSmithKline-Vir Biotechnology have been found to reduce one's risk of hospitalization, or death, by 70% to 85%.

Such treatment must be completed prior to one's infection.

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Pence: Biden's 'Weak' Foreign Policy, Announced Withdrawal Gave Taliban a Green Light  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last week, former US Vice President Mike Pence penned an op-ed decrying the "foreign policy humiliation" the country will endure following the US military's "disastrous withdrawal" from Afghanistan. Slamming Biden as disgraceful and "weak," Pence argued the Taliban\* seized Kabul because "they knew there was no credible threat of force" from the US.

Pence's critique of the US commander-in-chief continued on Tuesday as he proclaimed that the ongoing withdrawal from Afghanistan is "a foreign policy humiliation, unlike anything our country has endured since the Iran hostage crisis."

Though the Biden and Trump administrations were in agreement about leaving Afghanistan, their respective handling of the situation was not, according to the former vice president.

"The difference was strength," Pence said during an appearance on the "Brian Kilmeade Show."

He went on to assert that "you would have not seen the Taliban march into Kabul" if former US President Donald Trump was still in the White House.

Pence claimed the Biden administration's initial announcement of the US military's withdrawal by September 11 was the event that set the entire Afghan "disaster" in motion.

While the new target date was already four months past the initial May 1 deadline, it also appeared as if it was selected by the Biden administration in commemoration of the September 11 terror attacks, rather than the security situation in Afghanistan.

"We all want our troops to come home but not like that," Pence said.

He detailed that the Trump and Biden administrations' approach to handling the withdrawal was "diametrically" different because 45's negotiations with the group took place not long after the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force.

The former vice president argued that the killing gave credence to any negotiation-era threats made by the Trump administration.

"What you're seeing in the Biden administration I think is just an effort to shift the conversation and shift the blame from just an unspeakably poor effort to withdraw troops from Afghanistan," Pence said.

Pence's admonishment of Biden came just hours before the commander-in-chief confirmed that the US is committed, and on track to reach the [August 31 withdrawal deadline established by the Taliban](#).

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Netizens Fire Back After NRA Cancels Annual Texas Meeting Over COVID Concerns  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The annual meeting of the National Rifle Association (NRA) has become a significant multi-day event for the host city's businesses and tourism industry. Officials in Dallas, Texas, estimated that some 70,000 individuals attended the 2019 convention and collectively contributed more than \$40 million to the local economy.

The NRA revealed in a Tuesday announcement that its annual meeting has been canceled due to coronavirus-related concerns for the second year in a row.

"Due to concern over the safety of our NRA family and community, we regret to inform you that we have decided to cancel the 2021 Annual Meeting & Exhibits," the gun rights group said.

The event, originally slated for mid-May, was rescheduled for early September due to "uncertainties" about COVID-19 restrictions in Houston, Texas. The group was also expected to celebrate the 150th anniversary at Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center.

Per the memo, NRA officials arrived at the decision after conducting its own analysis of COVID-19 data in Harris County, Texas, which is home to Houston - the largest city in Texas. Harris County is presently labeled a 'Severe Threat,' which "signifies a severe and uncontrolled level of COVID-19," [according to the public health department](#).

"We also consulted with medical professionals, local officials, major sponsors & exhibitors, and many NRA members before arriving at this decision," the gun rights group said, arguing those in attendance would likely be unable to get "a full annual meeting experience."

Around 850 exhibitors were set to work the event.

Similar COVID-related concerns were behind the cancellation of the NRA's 2020 convention in Nashville, Tennessee.

Social media reactions concerning the decision were divided in motivation, but united in opposition to the NRA's memo.

While some netizens admonished the gun rights group for citing COVID as reasoning for canceling an already-rescheduled event, others scoffed at the NRA emphasizing concern for safety

A Celebration of Freedom - the NRA's next event - is slated to take place in Louisville, Kentucky, in May 2022.

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Two US Diplomats Will Be Medically Evacuated From Vietnam After Suffering From 'Havana Syndrome'

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The "Havana Syndrome" emerged in late 2016 after staffers at the US and Canadian embassies in Cuba began experiencing a variety of odd symptoms that included hearing loss and a sensation or a vibration of pressure in their head. Although an exact cause has not been pinpointed, one US report hinted it was caused by directed radio energy emissions.

Newly surfaced reports have detailed that at least two diplomats stationed in Vietnam reported experiencing symptoms previously associated with the so-called "Havana Syndrome," prompting officials to temporarily delay US Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Hanoi.

Citing two senior US officials knowledgeable on the development, NBC News [reported](#) that the pair of diplomates will be medically evacuated from the Southeast Asian country after having experienced "anomalous acoustic incidents" in Hanoi over the weekend.

The sudden symptoms are said to have occurred while the staffers were at their homes and not at the US embassy on account of many officials working remotely to stay in compliance with Vietnam's COVID-19 lockdown.

However, the unidentified senior officials further detailed that the two reports are not the first to have been documented in Vietnam. Although the sources did not offer an exact number of past reports, it was noted that past similar incidents also involved "acoustic incidents."

It was also revealed that investigations into the older incidents were conducted, but that officials were unable to confirm the sudden events.

Incidentally, the development did prompt Christopher Klein, the chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy in Hanoi, to alert the US vice president's delegation, as the party was set to arrive in Hanoi. The move ultimately forced a 3-hour delay before Harris and company chose to move forward with their travels.

Harris had been departing Singapore for Vietnam when she received word of the events. The vice president is traveling to Southeast Asia as part of a larger effort to strengthen partnership with regional leaders.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters during the Tuesday briefing that there has been no assessment indicating that Harris or a member of her party was targeted as part of the incident.

To date, the US intelligence community has no official explanation about the "Havana Syndrome." Having been documented in Austria and Germany as well, roughly 200 US officials, including CIA agents, have been diagnosed with the mysterious ailment.

A [report](#) conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, which also happened to be commissioned by the US State Department, determined that "directed, pulsed radio frequency energy" had been the "most plausible mechanism." However, investigators urged at the time that more investigation was needed in order to fully pinpoint what was causing the anomalies. While the CIA has steered clear of releasing any additional conclusions on the matter, the agency recently announced that it had chosen an officer to lead probes into the causes of the syndrome. The unidentified officer was [previously reported](#) as being the same individual who led the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

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US House Narrowly Passes \$3.5 Trillion Budget Blueprint, Sets Deadline for Infrastructure Package  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The House of Representatives' Tuesday vote now paves the way for lawmakers to begin writing a safety net package for the \$3.5 trillion infrastructure measure and guarantees a key September 27 vote on the infrastructure package, as well as push to strengthen the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The US House of Representatives narrowly passed on Tuesday the blueprints for the \$3.5 trillion budget plan that may soon pave the way for sweeping changes to the US' health care, education and tax laws.

The vote came down 220 for and 212 against after divisions among moderate and progressive Democrats earlier delayed proceedings. Officials had earlier balked at clearing the resolution without first voting on the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill.

The Tuesday win for congressional Democrats, which also advanced the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, also includes a key, nonbinding commitment for a September 27 vote.

Rep. John Larson (D-CT) remarked to NBC News that the Democratic win should underscore that one should "never bet against [House Speaker] Nancy Pelosi."

"Knowing the enormous amount of work that goes into something like this, and in the very narrow margins that we have, it makes her job even more extraordinary," the lawmaker said. "And she also takes all the heat for being the leader."

US President Joe Biden [remarked](#) during a Tuesday national address that the passages underscores that the US is one "step closer to investing in [Americans]," as well as "building an America that outcompetes the rest of the world."

A vote was previously expected to be held on Monday, however, the effort was trashed by a group of Democrats led by Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) that wanted a separate vote to ensure that the bipartisan infrastructure bill would not be stalled in the chamber.

Efforts by House Democrats will enable US lawmakers to start mapping out a fuller legislation proposal to expand Medicare, family support programs and even divert funds to combatting climate change, among other initiatives. The effort will effectively work toward delivering on many campaign pledges made by Biden.

Funding for the new programs will be pulled from tax increases that will be implemented for the wealthy, a move that will signify a step backwards for the tax overhaul that was enacted under former US President Donald Trump.

While Republicans have largely supported the bipartisan infrastructure measure as it will help bolster the US economy amid the pandemic, many others within the GOP have opposed the additional trillions in spending. Critics have warned that the Democratic funding plans would spike inflation.

The Tuesday procedural motion also cleared the way for a vote on the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would strengthen parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that had been earlier weakened by a pair of Supreme Court rulings. The measure would require states to seek federal approval before making certain changes to their voting procedures.

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Premier League Defies FIFA, Blocks Players From Competing in Looming World Cup Qualifiers by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The international football governing body earlier ruffled feathers after it chose to not extend a rule that would have allowed clubs to exempt players from representing their home countries in upcoming World Cup qualifiers. The rule was meant as a way to avoid subjecting players to strict quarantine restrictions after concluding the games.

The Premier League announced on Tuesday that English clubs would no longer release any players to participate in international qualifiers since strict quarantine measures upon their return would prevent them from being match-ready for the organization.

Marking the latest strike against the FIFA governing body, the Premier League has stated that the decision would affect any players hailing from one of the 26 nations listed on the UK's [red-listed](#) countries and territories.

In total, approximately 60 players from 19 Premier League clubs would be affected by the decision, and see themselves effectively barred from participating in any of the World Cup qualifiers set to take place during September and October.

Some of the players affected by the development include Manchester United's Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani, Everton FC's Colombian midfielder James Rodríguez, and Mohamed

Salah, the Egyptian forward presently on Liverpool's roster. The Reds had also signaled that they would not be releasing Brazilian players Fabinho, Roberto Firmino and Alisson Becker for three of Brazil's nearing qualifiers.

Cavani took to [social media](#) to react to the development, sharing a screenshot of the announcement with a caption that included several question marks.

The league explained in a [Tuesday release](#) that their reasoning was partially rooted in the fact that the UK's preventative COVID-19 measures would see players not be able to prepare for key early season games since they conflicted with the dates for international qualifiers.

"[Players] would also be unavailable to prepare for and play in two Premier League match rounds, a UEFA club competition matchday and the third round of the EFL Cup," the announcement emphasizes.

The UK government's red list stipulates that anyone traveling to the UK from the list of flagged countries would be subjected to a 10-day quarantine at an approved hotel, and ordered to take several COVID-19 tests to examine their status. The list presently includes countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Egypt and Uruguay, among other barred nations.

"Premier League clubs have always supported their players' desires to represent their countries – this is a matter of pride for all concerned. However, clubs have reluctantly but rightly come to the conclusion that it would be entirely unreasonable to release players under these new circumstances," Richard Masters, who serves as the chief executive of the league, said in a statement.

"Quarantine requirements mean that players' welfare and fitness will be significantly impacted. We understand the challenges that exist in the international match calendar and remain open to workable solutions."

The development was further exacerbated by FIFA's decision to extend the September and October international windows in South America by two days as part of a larger effort to catch up on postponed games. Although a potential solution had been for the UK government to allow quarantine exemptions, such a measure has not been considered by officials.

Spain's La Liga has also weighed in on the development and offered their support to any clubs that refuse to release their players, [according](#) to the New York Times. Similarly, France's Paris-Saint Germain football club have filed their own protest against FIFA, likely as part of a push stemming from their newly signed player - Argentine football sensation Lionel Messi.

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Johnson & Johnson Says Booster Shot Offers Nine-Fold Increase in COVID-19 Antibodies

WASHINGTON. August 24 (Sputnik) – US pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson said on Wednesday that a study showed a nine-fold increase in COVID-19 antibodies in participants who took a booster dose of its single-shot COVID-19 vaccine.

"New interim data from these studies demonstrate that a booster dose of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine generated a rapid and robust increase in spike-binding antibodies,

nine-fold higher than 28 days after the primary single-dose vaccination," the company said in a statement.

The company conducted a two-phase study in individuals in the US and Europe who were vaccinated with its single-shot vaccine months earlier, it added. The full study is yet to be released.

"We have established that a single shot of our COVID-19 vaccine generates strong and robust immune responses that are durable and persistent through eight months. With these new data, we also see that a booster dose of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine further increases antibody responses among study participants who had previously received our vaccine," Global Head of R&D, Mathai Mammen, said.

The company plans to discuss with public health officials its potential strategy for COVID-19 vaccine, boosting eight months or longer after the primary single-dose vaccination, he added. The announcement comes days after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it would greenlight booster shots for Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines in September as studies have shown decreased efficacy against the Delta variant.

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#### Cuba Envoy Urges 'More Active' Canadian Role in Economic Initiatives

OTTAWA, August 24 (Sputnik) - Havana would welcome increased Canadian participation in the island nation's economic development initiatives, which would prove fruitful for both countries, Cuban Ambassador in Ottawa Josefina Vidal told Sputnik.

"We would like Canada to be more active, participating in all the plans that we have designed in Cuba for our economic development," Vidal said. "There are options, there are opportunities for investments, for corporation agreements, for trade."

Vidal noted that Canadian companies are already active in a range of industries in Cuba, including mining, energy and tourism, and such involvement has proven to be a "win-win situation."

The ambassador acknowledged the difficult global economic environment brought on by the coronavirus pandemic measures, but emphasized that Cuba is an attractive investment option for Canadian entities - public and private - seeking to diversify their foreign trade portfolios. Vidal pointed out that contemporary Cuba is "much more than cigars, beautiful beaches and good music." She praised the economic reforms undertaken by the Cuban government that allow more room for private sector and entrepreneurship as well as the country's biomedical sector that produces the majority of the vaccines Cubans receive, including the one against the coronavirus.

According to Ottawa, Cuba is Canada's biggest trading partner in the Caribbean-Central American subregion, amounting to more than \$1 billion in trade annually.

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Cuba Grateful for Canada's UN Vote Against US Blockade, COVID-19 Support - Envoy

OTTAWA, August 24 (Sputnik) - Havana is grateful for Canada's vote at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) opposing the US embargo on the island nation and the support provided to Cuba by Ottawa and Canadians in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, Ambassador Josefina Vidal told Sputnik.

On June 23, Canada was among 184 nations to vote in favor of a UNGA resolution calling on Washington to finally lift the economic blockade against Cuba after nearly 60 years. The United States and Israel voted against the resolution, while Brazil, Colombia and Ukraine abstained. "Canada has been voting, traditionally, in favor of Cuban resolution against the US blockade at the United Nations General Assembly. I think this is a very important vote for Cuba, and we always convey our gratitude to the Canadian government for this vote," Vidal said.

The former General Director for US Affairs with the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed ending the 59-year blockade is of the highest priority for Havana. According to Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, the blockade cost his country \$9.1 billion in losses in a pandemic-riddled 2020.

Former US President Barack Obama had taken steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island nation, but the policy was reversed by the administration of former US President Donald Trump, which leveled 243 additional economic sanctions on Cuba. The US blockade has forced Cuba to incur over \$144 billion in losses in the six decades since its imposition, according to Rodriguez.

Cuba's ambassador to Canada also thanked Ottawa for its support in helping Havana combat the COVID-19 pandemic and expressed gratitude to the Canadian citizens, unions and members of the Cuban diaspora, who have been involved in fundraising efforts for the island nation and for a recent donation of nearly 2 million syringes.

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Canada-Cuba Relations 'Stable' Irrespective of Ruling Party in Ottawa - Ambassador

OTTAWA, August 24 (Sputnik) - Bilateral relations between Cuba and Canada have been marked by stability regardless of which political party has been in power in Ottawa, Cuban Ambassador to Canada Josefina Vidal told Sputnik.

Canada is in the middle of its 44th national election after Governor General Mary Simon accepted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's request to dissolve parliament and hold a vote on September 20.

"In general, no matter the political [alignment] of the government in place in one specific moment, relations between Canada and Cuba have been characterized by stability," Vidal said.

Vidal noted that it was Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, a staunch anti-communist, who refused to sever political and economic ties with Cuba in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, despite pressure from the United States.

Additionally, Cuba's ambassador to Canada urged Canadians to reject the talking points emanating from the US state of Florida - home to a sizeable Cuban emigre community that opposes the current government - after Canada's state broadcaster CBC published an article in which an activist said Canadian tourists are feeding the "Cuban regime."

"I would say to Canadians: Don't trust these kind of narratives because they are being produced out of Miami, [Florida]," Vidal said.

The revenues generated by Cuba's tourism sector go directly to the country's budget to cover expenses, including education and healthcare, which ultimately benefit ordinary Cubans, Vidal said.

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US Hopefully Avoids Intervening in Latin America After Afghan 'Failure' - Cuban Envoy

OTTAWA, August 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will hopefully resist any temptation to use Latin America as a staging ground for a revanchist campaign following its problematic withdrawal from Afghanistan, Cuban Ambassador to Canada Josefina Vidal told Sputnik. In mid-August, the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) completed their takeover of Afghanistan. Washington has taken the brunt of the criticism for a poorly planned and executed withdrawal.

"I see that the US doesn't learn those lessons, and that has happened to them after Vietnam after now in Afghanistan, there are many other examples. In the case of Cuba, they have always failed," Vidal said. "But there have been many interventions in Latin America, and they have failed. They failed in Central America. You know, I hope one day they will learn those lessons."

When asked about the possibility of the US intervening in Latin America or Cuba in light of the situation in Afghanistan, Vidal said, "I hope it doesn't." He also called the US mission in Afghanistan a "total failure" and evoked late Cuban leader Fidel Castro's prediction that the American invasion would end unsuccessfully.

The United States has waged short military campaigns to rehab their image following international shortcomings, most notably the invasion of Grenada in 1983 after successive hits to Washington's reputation abroad from the unsuccessful Vietnam War campaign and the Iran hostage crisis.

Vidal, the Cuban foreign ministry's former chief for US Affairs, noted she could not predict what Washington's next steps are but stressed that Cuba always stands ready to defend to defend itself.

Many Cuban-Americans, emigres and the descendants of those who left the Caribbean island for political reasons, have called on Washington to come down hard on Havana by imposing

additional sanctions, while others have advocated for direct military intervention in hopes of triggering regime change.

When asked if those most actively seeking regime change in Cuba should be worried about triggering another humanitarian crisis at a time of multiple humanitarian disasters around the world, Vidal said, "they don't care, they just want revenge and they want to control [Cuba] once again."

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Cuba Protests Perfect Storm of US Embargo Effects, Delta Variant, Pandemic Fatigue - Envoy

OTTAWA, August 24 (Sputnik) - The recent protests in Cuba were the result of a perfect storm spurred by the effects of the US blockade, the surge of Delta variant cases, pandemic fatigue and resource shortages, Cuban Ambassador to Canada Josefina Vidal told Sputnik. Cubans took to the streets in July in what were the largest protests since 1994, fueled by dissatisfaction with power outages and shortages of basic goods and vaccines against the novel coronavirus. The Cuban government deployed security forces across the country and halted communications, including the internet, while its supporters engaged in counter demonstrations. "There is a combination of US sanctions, the epidemic, the fatigue of the epidemic, the shortage of resources and deficiencies that we have in our own economic management. And, so, people went out because they were looking for answers," Vidal said, underscoring that the protests were limited to July 11-12, contradicting reports that unrest continues to this day. Vidal acknowledged that protesters were justified in that they sought answers for legitimate grievances.

The Cuban economy has been battered by the pandemic, with the country's crucial tourism sector brought nearly to a standstill; economic output contracted by 11 percent in 2020, according to Minister of Economy and Planning Alejandro Gil.

Cuba's ability to manage the pandemic has also been increasingly tested by the Delta variant. The country's public health officials had tallied approximately 12,000 cumulative cases between the onset of the pandemic and January 1, 2021. As of Tuesday, Cuba has recorded nearly 600,000 cases, a rise of over 4,800 percent since the start of the year.

Vidal explained that Cuba effectively managed the pandemic until June, but the more infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus spread before the country's vaccination regime kicked into full gear.

More than 5 million Cubans have received at least one dose of the domestic coronavirus vaccines and more than 1 million Cubans have been fully vaccinated, Vidal said, noting domestic production had to be prioritized amid scarce global vaccine supply and hefty prices on the international market.

While Vidal acknowledges government missteps, the diplomat said the violence observed was fueled by disinformation emanating from South Florida, home to the Cuban dissident movement led by emigres and their descendants, and criminal elements exploiting the situation.

The ambassador emphasized that the Cuban security forces acted in moderation and noted the absence of tear gas and rubber bullets in contrast to Western anti-riot practices.

The protests in Cuba spurred similar protests by the Cuban diaspora across the United States. Many Cuban-Americans have called on the US government to turn up the pressure on Havana by imposing additional sanctions, while others have advocated for direct military intervention in hopes of triggering regime change.

The Biden administration has imposed multiple rounds of sanctions targeting the Cuban military and the interior ministry in response to the security forces' intervention against protesters and urging Havana to respect the right to protest.

Vidal, however, insists that if the United States is genuinely interested in supporting the Cuban people during a challenging time, it should lift the existing sanctions.

"If you really want to help the Cuban people, what you have to do is to alleviate the sanctions on the Cuban people," Vidal said, noting that US President Joe Biden has not delivered on his campaign promise to ease the embargo against Cuba.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back the late 1950s after the communist revolution in the island nation and involve at least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but many of those steps were reversed by the former administration of Donald Trump. Over the four years, the Trump administration added 243 new economic sanctions to toughen the embargo on Cuba.

Vidal, who served as General Director for US Affairs at Cuba's Foreign Affairs Ministry, also called for increased global vaccine sharing, emphasizing that no country will be safe from the coronavirus until rest of the world has access to vaccines. She also noted that the efforts to waive vaccine patents have seemingly stalled.

"I heard that there are discussions in that way, I don't know how advanced they are... I am sure that a discussion about patents will last... I remember that the first time that issue was raised was a few months ago, and I haven't heard any more about the state of that discussion at the WTO," Vidal said.

The ambassador noted that throughout the pandemic Cuba has dispatched dozens of medical teams to over 40 countries to assist with the pandemic response, stressing the need for collaboration in combating the deadly virus.

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RPT - Likely Collapse of Afghan Economy Will Severely Undermine Taliban - Ex-US State Senator

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The potential economic collapse in Afghanistan will significantly weaken the Taliban (banned in Russia) which may force them to compromise to remain in power, former Virginia state Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"The Afghan economy is in a shambles. Inflation is rising, banks are closed, money transfers from abroad have been suspended, and its currency is in freefall," Black said. "The country is

essentially a welfare state, and the end of foreign aid may cause millions to go hungry. An economic collapse looks likely, and that will severely undermine the Taliban grip on power."

#### FUTURE UNDER TALIBAN

Black went on to say that while at this early stage, one can only speculate about the future of Afghanistan under the Taliban, he believes that the exigencies of governing may curb their brutal tendencies.

"They may be forced to compromise in order to have any hope of remaining in power," he said. The former lawmaker underscored that contrary to popular opinion, the Taliban are not a monolithic force.

"They are severely overstretched, with 100,000 troops occupying a mountainous nation of 38 million people," he explained. "Their support among the Afghan people is spotty. They are unpopular in vital cosmopolitan centers, where demonstrations against them have erupted several times. The ousted government of President [Ashraf] Ghani was grotesquely corrupt; he reportedly departed with an enormous horde of cash. The Taliban were not popular, but neither was the ousted regime of President Ghani."

He continued to say that no crowds of elated supporters took to the streets to celebrate the Taliban victory, while the Taliban themselves "do not appear exuberant."

"Rather, they look a bit confused and overwhelmed by it all. They lack self-confidence because they lack the support of the people," he said. "They are anxious to quell fears of retribution among the public and international observers. No doubt the sudden collapse of social order will facilitate crime but reports of widespread atrocities are less common than expected. Since most news reports originate from the capital of Kabul, however, Taliban misconduct may eventually prove worse in the hinterlands."

Black also stressed that Afghanistan has never been a cohesive and stable nation, but has been a country of diverse tribal regions, competing militarily with one another.

That is why, the former senator suggested, it is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to effectively unify the country.

"Just days after the Taliban occupied the capital, insurgents drove them from several mountainous districts north of the capital," he said. "The Taliban's overstretched forces will have difficulty maintaining control of such areas. In cities, groups of women have already staged remarkable demonstrations of solidarity with the former Afghan government and have marched against the reimposition of oppressive Sharia law. Many citizens are refusing to fly the Taliban's white banner, insisting that the Afghan flag is the true flag of the nation. Such actions would be unthinkable if the Taliban enjoyed widespread public support."

#### DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Sunday that negotiations between the Taliban (a terrorist group, banned in Russia) and former Afghan President Hamid Karzai had begun.

"The Taliban are negotiating with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other Afghan officials to form a new government that may include women," Black said. "Cooperating with representatives of a vanquished government is unheard of and reflects the Taliban's fragile grip on power."

Black went on to say that Abdul Ghani Baradar has arrived in Kabul to form the new government.

"In 2018, the CIA secured his release so that he could serve as chief negotiator for the Taliban in Doha, Qatar," he said. "Baradar spoke directly with President Trump during the peace negotiations. He appears more pragmatic than some, which explains why the CIA had him released."

On August 15, the Taliban entered Kabul. Ghani resigned and fled the country to prevent what he described as bloodshed that would occur if militants stormed the city. Many countries have since started evacuating their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan.

"The fall of Kabul was quite unlike the violent and bloody collapse of Saigon," Black said. "While the South Vietnamese fought desperately, the Afghan army simply dissolved. In one case, six Taliban fighters took control of an entire province of 60,000."

Black believes that atrocities and war crimes have been underreported.

"The worst reported war crime was the execution of 22 surrendering Afghan commandos on June 16th. There are scattered reports of executions, beheadings and forced marriages, and Amnesty International reported horrific murders of nine Hazara men a month before the fall of Kabul," he said. "To date, however, war crimes and reprisals have not been widely reported, though additional reports may surface over time."

The former lawmaker also pointed out that the Taliban granted the United States temporary control of the airport for evacuations and have not attacked those trying to leave.

"However, two dozen panic-stricken Afghans have been trampled to death or fell from departing aircraft, and a few were shot by US troops struggling to maintain order," he stated. "The evacuation of educated Afghans will impose a painful brain drain on the nation. However, it is unclear whether the Taliban will even attempt to prevent Afghanistan's most valuable citizens from leaving."

Overall, Black considers the fall of Afghanistan to be "a damaging blow to the American deep state, which thrives on a continuous state of warfare."

"Before he ordered the withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden could do no wrong; the press suppressed negative news about him. But now, the media are lashing out with a vengeance, causing his popularity to plummet," he added. "War hawks have warned that al-Qaeda [a terror group banned in Russia] may reemerge in Afghanistan. Their claim rings hollow, since the US has been an unwavering supporter of al-Qaeda in Syria throughout the Syrian War. Under CIA Project Timber Sycamore, the US has channeled vast quantities of anti-tank and anti-air missiles to al-Qaeda affiliates there."

"To this day, the US actively supports the largest concentration of al-Qaeda fighters on earth in Syria's Idlib Province," he said. "It is outrageous to suggest that the US is genuinely concerned that al-Qaeda might reconstitute in Afghanistan, when we are their principal sponsors in Syria." Black believes that although the Taliban are now deemed terrorists by the UN, they will probably achieve recognition in due course.

"If they establish a functional government and prove that they can govern effectively, the UN will respond appropriately," the former lawmaker said.

#### US PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Black underscored that The Taliban do not want American troops to remain in the country, and the United States does not want to stay.

He also noted that The Taliban's agreement with the US allowed the United States to occupy the airport until August 31st, and they do not intend to extend the deadline.

"European nations were shocked by the 20-year-long mission's abject failure; they have utterly no stomach for prolonging it. Despite the momentary uproar over the chaotic withdrawal, the American public is firmly opposed to remaining in Afghanistan," he said. "The deep state has lost the war, and we will leave."

The former state senator also said Afghanistan is not the center of the universe and "not a goldmine of intellectual talent."

"It is landlocked, and its terrain is difficult to traverse. Its culture is dismal," he added. "Our departure would be welcome, were it not for the great loss of trust and prestige we will suffer. The deep state's Potemkin village has vanished and the price in American credibility will be steep."

Black went on to say that China, Russia, and Iran have vital national interests in Afghanistan, but the U.S. does not. Nonetheless, it occupied the country for a generation, "losing thousands of lives and incurring gigantic debts that have sent shudders through the world economy."

"Foremost responsibility for the Afghan debacle rests with President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, who needlessly committed gallant young troops to a hapless war. Ironically, Bush and Cheney - who both avoided combat during the Vietnam War - were falsely cast as heroes simply for sacrificing the lives of others in Iraq and Afghanistan," Black said. The Obama-Biden administration also bears heavy responsibility for institutionalizing never-ending wars and extending them into Libya, Syria, and Yemen," he added.

"The villainy of all the cowards who have callously sacrificed lives and limbs of braver men should darken the pages of history," Black said.

Black also said the US withdrawal was "inevitably chaotic."

"President Trump recognized the futility of the mission and tried to withdraw; however, he was blocked from doing so. Had he succeeded, the pullout would have still been disorderly. Ending wars is messy, but it must be done," Black concluded.

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**US Blew Many Opportunities to Negotiate With Taliban, Avoid Shock Collapse - Ex-Diplomat**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - The United States blew several opportunities to get involved in the reconciliation process with the Taliban over the years, which would have allowed the Americans to execute a safer exit and avoid the surprise collapse of Kabul, former State Department official Matthew Hoh told Sputnik.

For more than a week, the US has overseen a chaotic and disorganized exit from Afghanistan amid and in the wake of the Taliban seizure of Kabul, which fell on August 15. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden said the US has evacuated a total of 70,700 Americans and Afghan special visa applicants since August 14. Meanwhile, vast crowds of Afghans who worked for the past 20 years with the US military and others seeking to escape living under Taliban rule, have flocked to the airport.

"There were plenty of opportunities to negotiate with the Taliban," Hoh said. "I was a State Department official in 2009. There were elements of the Taliban who wanted to talk. [Afghan

President] Hamid Karzai, [US diplomat] Richard Holbrooke and his British counterpart all said the US was the biggest impediment to peace."

Hoh, a former US marine captain who resigned from the State Department in 2009 in protest of the US war strategy in Afghanistan, said the sequence of events currently playing out was not inevitable but for American policy.

"What has occurred now was inevitable because the US framed this in terms of achieving victory. If you say, 'we're gonna win,' that causes defeat," Hoh said. "They could have chosen not to pursue a victory policy - such as pushing to defeat the Taliban although they offered to surrender."

Hoh, a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a member of the Eisenhower Media Initiative, said the United States ended up choosing the path of occupying a nation and jumping into a civil war. In addition, he said, the logic to occupy Afghanistan was flawed anyway. "In 2001, the terrorist act was committed by a group of between 200 and 400 people. The US chose to get in the middle of a civil war when Afghanistan was doing little more than serving as a hotel for terrorists," he explained. "Afghanistan was not integral to the planning of 9/11. They were doing planning in places like Malaysia, Qatar and the UAE."

There are a lot of things the US could have done, he added, including making sure that Pashtuns were included in the government, among other actions.

"They could have chosen not to put the same warlords back in power," Hoh said.

The United States could also have stood on preconditions such as them accepting the government and protecting women's rights, Hoh added.

Hoh said these wars have very little to do with Afghans but with the interests of other nations and the country's 38 million people have been suffering from what has often been proxy wars.

"The Afghan government completely victimized the Pashtuns [in the] south and east. And the narrative of this war being to defend women's rights and human rights is not true," he said. "An entire generation of Afghans were not able to get access to education. One-third of Afghan children are out of school. This narrative is repeated to generate and sustain support for the war."

Hoh said he's not surprised at all by what's happened recently. In the end, the Afghan military and police refused to back a corrupt government.

"But like everybody else, I'm surprised by how quickly the Taliban achieved its objective. I have found very little discussion about this from major American networks. I have seen this from foreign correspondents who don't work for major American networks," he said. "Looking now, a week removed, it makes sense. The Taliban has been planning this for a long time, more than a year. They have been very successful militarily. They negotiated, made deals. I did believe they would take Kabul successfully. And anyone who observed, understood the Taliban's capability and respected what the Taliban could do would have arrived at this conclusion."

A contributing factor to the collapse, Hoh argued is that the Afghan government and military were built on a "house of cards."

"Have you ever seen a house of cards fall slowly? The military leadership and the government were completely corrupt. They were kept in place by the presence of foreign money. The whole thing unraveled," he said. "There is something to it that Joe Biden influenced [the outcome] but he was not the primary/main cause."

Hoh said there is a great deal of anger and feelings of betrayal among veterans.

"I've been feeling it for a long time. I've been doing 8-9 interviews a day for the past week," said Hoh. "Talking about it gets me out. But I've been so busy that I haven't had a chance to really absorb it all. Veterans are angry and despondent. I have been heartbroken for the Afghans. When I look at or consider the lies and corruption of war, that is where my anger is. The people who led wars and lied about it are the ones major corporate media trot out. The duplicity of major American media with these wars, the responsibility they have for these wars is the same as those who led and conducted them."

Hoh described the scale of the corruption and theft going on in Afghanistan for the past two decades as a massive Ponzi scheme.

"We're working under a system where 40 percent of the money never leaves the US. This is overhead and management costs. And subcontractors get their cuts," he said. "The assumption is that 10 cents of every dollars actually went to schools, hospitals and development projects. The scale and scope of this is breathtaking. It's a grift, a racket. It started in the Balkans, this idea of conducting a war with construction and logistics companies. Everyone knew it was corrupt and crooked."

He also said the occupation was "a huge war profiteering effort."

"The Inspector General went to look for medical centers, hospitals and schools and they were not where they said they were. The coordinates of some places was in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea," Hoh pointed out.

In Afghanistan, Hoh said, about 90 percent of the people live on \$2 a day and 70 percent live on \$1 a day. And as the US war in Afghanistan draws to a close, the US is saddled with \$1 trillion in debt and interest payments that taxpayers will pay.

"Banks are making great deals of money. Afghans are not only to blame for corruption. Americans are corrupt too. Ours is just legally accepted forms of corruption," Hoh said. To call the soldiers and police cowards for not wanting to continue fighting the Taliban is misleading, Hoh said.

"The Afghan military didn't want to fight because they didn't want to fight for this government. As far as the Afghan military and government was concerned, this was a business investment," he said. "The soldiers and police needed the money to feed their families. The military commanders stopped giving out money and for at least two months the police and military didn't receive pay."

The former marine then underscored at least one of the reasons behind the decision to stop fighting.

"The Taliban became a better option," Hoh concluded.

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US Supreme Court Rules Against Biden Bid to End Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' Policy - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court ruled against the Biden administration's bid to end the Trump administration's so-called Remain in Mexico program,

which required asylum-seeking migrants to wait in Mexico while their court proceedings process, a court order revealed.

"The application for a stay presented to Justice [Samuel] Alito and by him referred to the Court is denied," the court order said on Tuesday. "The applicants have failed to show a likelihood of success on the claim that the memorandum rescinding the Migrant Protection Protocols was not arbitrary and capricious."

As a result, the Supreme Court refuses to block a lower-court order ruling that requires the Biden administration to reinstate the policy formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said the ruling will end Biden's skirting of immigration laws and will reduce the record number of migrants crossing the US southern border illegally.

Meanwhile, Lindsay Toczykowski, a social justice lawyer who advocates for asylum-seeking migrants and opposes MPP, said the ruling reviving the policy is an actual nightmare that has become real life.

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

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Black went on to say that Abdul Ghani Baradar has arrived in Kabul to form the new government.

"In 2018, the CIA secured his release so that he could serve as chief negotiator for the Taliban in Doha, Qatar," he said. "Baradar spoke directly with President Trump during the peace negotiations. He appears more pragmatic than some, which explains why the CIA had him released."

On August 15, the Taliban entered Kabul. Ghani resigned and fled the country to prevent what he described as bloodshed that would occur if militants stormed the city. Many countries have since started evacuating their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan.

"The fall of Kabul was quite unlike the violent and bloody collapse of Saigon," Black said. "While the South Vietnamese fought desperately, the Afghan army simply dissolved. In one case, six Taliban fighters took control of an entire province of 60,000."

Black believes that atrocities and war crimes have been underreported.

"The worst reported war crime was the execution of 22 surrendering Afghan commandos on June 16th. There are scattered reports of executions, beheadings and forced marriages, and Amnesty International reported horrific murders of nine Hazara men a month before the fall of Kabul," he said. "To date, however, war crimes and reprisals have not been widely reported, though additional reports may surface over time."

The former lawmaker also pointed out that the Taliban granted the United States temporary control of the airport for evacuations and have not attacked those trying to leave.

"However, two dozen panic-stricken Afghans have been trampled to death or fell from departing aircraft, and a few were shot by US troops struggling to maintain order," he stated. "The evacuation of educated Afghans will impose a painful brain drain on the nation. However, it is unclear whether the Taliban will even attempt to prevent Afghanistan's most valuable citizens from leaving."

Overall, Black considers the fall of Afghanistan to be "a damaging blow to the American deep state, which thrives on a continuous state of warfare."

"Before he ordered the withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden could do no wrong; the press suppressed negative news about him. But now, the media are lashing out with a vengeance, causing his popularity to plummet," he added. "War hawks have warned that al-Qaeda [a terror group banned in Russia] may reemerge in Afghanistan. Their claim rings hollow, since the US has been an unwavering supporter of al-Qaeda in Syria throughout the Syrian War. Under CIA Project Timber Sycamore, the US has channeled vast quantities of anti-tank and anti-air missiles to al-Qaeda affiliates there."

"To this day, the US actively supports the largest concentration of al-Qaeda fighters on earth in Syria's Idlib Province," he said. "It is outrageous to suggest that the US is genuinely concerned that al-Qaeda might reconstitute in Afghanistan, when we are their principal sponsors in Syria."

Black believes that although the Taliban are now deemed terrorists by the UN, they will probably achieve recognition in due course.

"If they establish a functional government and prove that they can govern effectively, the UN will respond appropriately," the former lawmaker said.

US PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Black underscored that The Taliban do not want American troops to remain in the country, and the United States does not want to stay.

He also noted that The Taliban's agreement with the US allowed the United States to occupy the airport until August 31st, and they do not intend to extend the deadline.

"European nations were shocked by the 20-year-long mission's abject failure; they have utterly no stomach for prolonging it. Despite the momentary uproar over the chaotic withdrawal, the American public is firmly opposed to remaining in Afghanistan," he said. "The deep state has lost the war, and we will leave."

The former state senator also said Afghanistan is not the center of the universe and "not a goldmine of intellectual talent."

"It is landlocked, and its terrain is difficult to traverse. Its culture is dismal," he added. "Our departure would be welcome, were it not for the great loss of trust and prestige we will suffer. The deep state's Potemkin village has vanished and the price in American credibility will be steep."

Black went on to say that China, Russia, and Iran have vital national interests in Afghanistan, but the U.S. does not. Nonetheless, it occupied the country for a generation, "losing thousands of lives and incurring gigantic debts that have sent shudders through the world economy."

"Foremost responsibility for the Afghan debacle rests with President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, who needlessly committed gallant young troops to a hapless war. Ironically, Bush and Cheney - who both avoided combat during the Vietnam War - were falsely cast as heroes simply for sacrificing the lives of others in Iraq and Afghanistan," Black said. The Obama-Biden administration also bears heavy responsibility for institutionalizing never-ending wars and extending them into Libya, Syria, and Yemen," he added.

"The villainy of all the cowards who have callously sacrificed lives and limbs of braver men should darken the pages of history," Black said.

Black also said the US withdrawal was "inevitably chaotic."

"President Trump recognized the futility of the mission and tried to withdraw; however, he was blocked from doing so. Had he succeeded, the pullout would have still been disorderly. Ending wars is messy, but it must be done," Black concluded.

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Several Hundred US Troops Depart Afghanistan, Will Be No Impact On Mission - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - Several hundred US troops have left Afghanistan but their absence will not impact the evacuation mission on the ground, Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby said in a statement.

"As we have made consistently clear, commanders on the ground are empowered to make any adjustments they see fit, when they see fit. That includes changes to the footprint. To that end, we can confirm reports of the departure from Afghanistan of several hundred U.S. troops," Kirby said on Tuesday. "Their departure represents prudent and efficient force management. It will have no impact on the mission at hand."

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**Pentagon Declines to Comment on COVID-19 Situation in Gitmo Amid Surge of Cases in Cuba**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department declined to comment on Sputnik's request about the coronavirus situation in Guantanamo Bay detention facility amid reports that Cuba is experiencing a surge of new cases.

The authorities in charge of the detention facility, located in Cuba, recently announced they will step up testing of visitors vaccinated for the novel coronavirus. These measures were announced nearly four months after the Defense Department administered the Moderna coronavirus vaccine to 32 Guantanamo detainees. The remaining eight detainees refused to be vaccinated.

"We do not comment on specific detainee medical conditions or medical procedures. Safety is our number one concern, and the health and well-being of detainees continues to be a priority for JTF Guantanamo," the US Defense Department said when asked about an update on the health situation at the detention facility.

The humanitarian situation in Cuba remains difficult due to the US sanctions imposed against the island nation whose effects are made worse by measures to address the coronavirus pandemic. Bolivia, Mexico and Nicaragua have sent humanitarian aid to help Cuba cope with the situation.

Established by President George W. Bush in 2002, the Guantanamo Bay detention facility has long been criticized for mistreatment and abuse of detainees and human rights activists and international organizations have repeatedly called that it be closed. Former President Donald Trump, signed an order to keep the detention facility open indefinitely, while current President Joe Biden promised to close it.

In July, the White House announced that the Biden administration is aiming to close down the detention facility for good and that it works to transfer its remaining detainees out, but it has set no deadline to effectuate its closure.

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**Blinken Speaks With Turkish Counterpart About Afghanistan Withdrawal - US State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu about cooperation in the ongoing evacuation efforts in Afghanistan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to discuss our continuing cooperation in Afghanistan and our efforts to ensure the safe and orderly evacuation of our citizens, allies, and partners," Price said in a readout of the call on Tuesday.

The United States is ramping up its withdrawal from Afghanistan from the Kabul airport in an attempt to meet the August 31 deadline it had agreed on with the Taliban (banned in Russia). The Biden administration said on Tuesday that the deadline is contingent upon the Taliban's cooperation with the evacuation operations.

On Monday, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party spokesperson Omer Celik said Ankara could not accept a single Afghan, saying Turkey is not a refugee camp.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel over the weekend and agreed to work together to help international aid organizations with the evacuation, adding that it is a top priority.

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**New York Imposes Vaccine Mandate on Schools With Weekly Testing Option - Governor**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - Coronavirus vaccinations will be required of all teachers and other school staff, with a weekly testing option initially available, and a universal facemask mandate for all people entering a school building, Governor Kathy Hochul said in an inaugural address on her first day in office.

"We're launching a back-to-school COVID-19 testing program to make testing for students and staff widely and convenient. I'm also immediately directing the department of health to institute universal masking for anyone entering our schools," Hochul said.

Hochul said a vaccine mandate for all teachers and school staff is needed, although educators would initially have the option of weekly testing, presumably for those not yet vaccinated.

Hochul also said residents can expect a new series of vaccine mandates following Monday's approval of the Pfizer jab by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and an FDA recommendation for booster shots eight months after becoming fully vaccinated.

"I'm prepared to whatever is necessary, including reopening mass vac sites so a booster is available to all New Yorkers who meet that timetable," she said.

Hochul, a longtime lieutenant governor, took over the top slot on Tuesday following the resignation of Governor Andrew Cuomo over a report that he sexually harassed 11 women and amid numerous other scandals.

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**Biden Says US on Pace to Finish Evacuation Mission By August 31 if Taliban Cooperate**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the United States is on pace to complete its evacuation mission in Afghanistan by the end of August if the Taliban (banned in Russia) do not disrupt the operation.

"We are currently on a pace to finish by August 31," Biden said during remarks at the White House on Tuesday. "But the completion by August 31 depends upon the Taliban continuing to cooperate and allow access to the airport for those who are transporting out and no disruptions to our operations."

Biden said 19 US military aircraft with 6,400 evacuees and 31 Coalition flights with 5,600 evacuees flew out of Kabul in the past 12 hours. As of August 14, the United States has helped evacuate 70,700 people from Kabul, he noted.

Biden also said that he directed Secretary of State Antony Blinken to provide an update on Wednesday about the number of Americans who are still in Afghanistan.

Biden underscored that US and allied forces at the Kabul airport face a growing risk of a possible attack from the Islamic State terror group (also banned in Russia).

Moreover, Biden said the evacuation operation at the Kabul airport runs a serious risk of breaking down if the mission is prolonged. He mentioned the firefight that broke out earlier this week when an armed person at the airport killed one Afghan security officer and wounded three others.

The evacuation from Afghanistan of foreign nationals, diplomatic missions, and Afghan citizens has been underway since the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, and has been marked by unrest in the airport, where evacuation flights are taking place.

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**US District Judge Rules in Favor of Avenatti Ahead of Embezzlement Trial - Reports**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - A US District Court judge James Selna has granted a mistrial in New York attorney Michael Avenatti's embezzlement case because federal prosecutors did not provide him with relevant financial evidence he requested, Politico reported.

In addition to ruling in favor of the defendant, who has been charged with stealing millions in settlement funds from his clients, Selna also set a new date for the trial for October 12, the report said on Tuesday.

In July, a federal judge sentenced Avenatti to two-and-a-half years in prison for trying to extort more than \$20 million from the Nike Company and for defrauding his own client.

On February 14, 2020, a jury found Avenatti guilty after a three-week trial. He had demanded to be paid between \$15 million and \$25 million by the company as a retainer or get a total payment of \$22.5 million to resolve any claims his client might have and to buy his silence.

Avenatti became known after he represented pornography actress Stormy Daniels in a lawsuit against former US President Donald Trump.

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#### New York Governor Mandates In-Person Ethics Training for All State Employees

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - All New York State employees will be required to attend ethics and sexual harassment classes with a live instructor instead of completing on-line courses, Governor Kathy Hochul said in an inaugural address on her first day in office.

"Today, I'm directing an overhaul of state government policies on sexual harassment and ethics starting with requiring that all training be done live instead of allowing people to click their way through a class," Hochul said on Tuesday.

The governor explained that she plans to sign an executive order requiring ethics training for every New York State government employee.

Hochul, a longtime lieutenant governor, took over from Governor Andrew Cuomo, who resigned nearly two weeks ago following a report by the state Attorney General that he sexually harassed 11 employees.

Cuomo also faced a parallel ethics scandal over allegations his administration manipulated data on COVID-19 deaths to downplay a surge in fatalities following his order for senior care facilities to admit patients infected with the coronavirus.

As the state's first female governor, Hochul said her No. 1 priority is to get the state working again without distractions - a task that she said begins with a dramatic change in culture and no tolerance for individuals who cross the line.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik)

#### AFGHANISTAN

\* The United States has evacuated about 4,000 US citizens and their families from Afghanistan, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

- \* US President Joe Biden asked the Pentagon and State Department to prepare contingency plans for a potential need to extend the August 31 deadline for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
- \* The United States has increasing concerns about threats against the Kabul airport, Psaki said.
- \* The Taliban (terror group, banned in Russia) got a huge amount of weapons after taking over Afghanistan, including more than a 100 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), and this poses a threat, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
- \* Russia is monitoring the situation in Afghanistan but has no plans to interfere in the armed conflict, President Vladimir Putin said.

#### IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

- \* Iran's actions to produce uranium metal and increase uranium-enrichment capacities run counter to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for a settlement around the Iranian nuclear program, but Russia understands that they are due to a lack of progress in restoring the deal, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

#### G7 MEETING

- \* Canada informed G7 allies it is prepared to remain in Afghanistan beyond the August 31 deadline for all US and allied troops to withdraw from the war-torn country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.
- \* US President Joe Biden has made clear to the G7 leaders that each day of operations in Afghanistan boost the risk to US troops with increasing threats from the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the White House said.
- \* Biden said that ending the US mission in Afghanistan will depend on achieving the set objectives, the White House said.
- \* The legitimacy of the future Afghan government is dependent on its approach toward upholding the international obligations on ensuring stability in Afghanistan, G7 leaders said in a joint statement.
- \* The G7 leaders agreed on a roadmap for engagement with the Taliban movement (banned in Russia as a terrorist group), UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said.
- \* During the G7 meeting, the EU called on the new Afghan authorities to allow everyone who wants to get to Kabul airport, European Council President Charles Michel said.

#### UKRAINE'S CRIMEA PLATFORM

- \* Participation of various countries in the Crimean Platform event, held in Kiev on Monday, may affect Moscow's relations with them, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday.
- \* The Crimea Platform summit, which Kiev hosted on Monday, is a Russophobic event that will artificially foment radicalism in Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

#### IRAQ DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Iraq is not discussing imports of Russian S-400 air defense systems, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.
- \* Iraq will host a regional leaders' summit on August 28, Hussein told Sputnik.

\* Parliamentary elections in Iraq will be held on October 10 as there are no reasons to postpone them, Hussein told Sputnik.

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Harris Not Target of 'Havana Syndrome' Attack in Vietnam - White House  
WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The White House does not think Vice President Kamala Harris was a target of a possible "Havana syndrome" attack while visiting in Vietnam, spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"That is not assessment that has been made. It was an individual who was in country [Vietnam] and it had been reported previously," Psaki said when asked whether Harris was targeted in the alleged "Havana syndrome" in Vietnam.

Earlier on Tuesday, Harris' departure from Singapore to Vietnam was delayed due to a report of an "anomalous health incident" in Hanoi. Later in the day, the media reported that at least two US personnel were set to be evacuated from Vietnam after reporting illness suspected related to the Havana incidents.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with the Havana syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. US diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported to have experienced Havana syndrome symptoms, such as nausea and dizziness.

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Pentagon Declines to Comment on Report About Taliban Appointing Ex-Guantanamo Detainee

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense has declined to comment to Sputnik on the recent report that the Taliban (banned in Russia as a terrorist group) appointed Abdul Qayyum Zakir, a former detainee in Guantanamo Bay camp, as an acting defense minister.

Al Jazeera broke the story earlier on Tuesday citing a source from the movement.

"We're not going to comment on Taliban staffing decisions," the Pentagon said in an email to a Sputnik correspondent.

Zakir was released from the Guantanamo prison camp in 2007. He later reportedly directed operations in the Helmand province of Afghanistan. He was reportedly appointed as a Taliban military commander in 2011 but three years later he stepped down due to tensions with other Taliban leaders.

On August 15, the Taliban entered Kabul, claiming de facto control over all of Afghanistan and causing the US-backed government to collapse. Many countries have resorted to evacuating their citizens and diplomatic personnel from the beleaguered nation due to the precarious

security situation, and some have pledged to take in a limited number of Afghan asylum seekers.

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#### US House Approves Rule to Pass \$3.5 Trillion Budget Plan, Advances Infrastructure Bill

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Tuesday approved a rule that passes the \$3.5 trillion budget resolution and sets up the Senate-passed \$1 trillion infrastructure bill for a final vote by September 27.

The House of Representatives approved the measure in a 220-212 vote.

The vote came after Democratic lawmakers reached a deal to break an impasse between moderates and progressives in their party. The centrists had insisted on first passing the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill before taking up the budget measure, while progressives were demanding an immediate vote on the budget resolution before any other legislation.

The US Senate began work on the \$3.5 trillion budget resolution earlier this month.

Senator Majority Leader Chuck Schumer previously said the target date for a resolution on the initiative was September 15.

When the Senate passes a budget plan, it will convene with members of the House of Representatives to work out the differences in their respective budget plans.

Democrats are proposing the package to include \$726 billion to for free community college and to provide universal preschool services for children three and four years old. The package would also provide \$332 billion to support affordable housing and \$198 billion for clean energy projects.

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#### US Lawmakers Query Biden Admin. on Reports Afghan President Fled Country With \$169M in

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – Republicans on the House Oversight Committee want the Biden administration to explain reports that deposed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the nation with \$169 million in cash, the panel's ranking Republican James Comer wrote in letters to senior officials on Tuesday.

"President Ghani may have been self-dealing with U.S. funds intended for the Afghan people, having fled the country with enormous sums of cash totaling well over a hundred million dollars," Comer and fellow Congressman Glenn Grothman wrote in letters to Attorney General Merrick Garland and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The lawmakers requested briefings to "understand how Ghani acquired and transported any ill-gotten funds, plans for recovering the money, and how the US plans to bring President Ghani to justice if he violated criminal statutes."

Media reports quoting Afghanistan Ambassador to Tajikistan Zahir Aghbar said the exiled leader fled the country for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with \$169 million in US \$100 bills stuffed in duffel bags.

Ghani subsequently denied the reports, claiming he arrived in the UAE penniless.

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US Increasingly Concerned About Threats Against Kabul Airport - White House

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has increasing concerns about the threats against Kabul airport, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We have concerns about the threats and that is certainly a part of the president's assessments and decision-making," when asked about any active threats to the Kabul airport.

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Ex-Giuliani Associate Fruman Changing Plea to Guilty in Campaign Finance Case September 10

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - Businessman Igor Fruman, a former associate of Rudy Giuliani, will change his plea to guilty on September 10 for being involved in a campaign finance scheme case, a court filing revealed on Tuesday.

"Notice as to Igor Fruman: at the request of defense counsel, the change of plea hearing is adjourned to September 10, 2021 at 11:00 AM [EDT]," the filing said.

Fruman previously pled not guilty to charges that they funneled \$1 million in donations from foreign nationals to unspecified political campaigns in the United States.

He was initially scheduled to change his plea on Wednesday.

In October 2019, Fruman, businessman Andrey Kukushkin, Ukraine-born businessman Lev Parnas and his colleague David Correia were charged for funneling \$1 million in donations from foreign nationals to unspecified political campaigns in the United States, including making false statements and falsifying records to the Federal Election Commission.

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US Authorizes Transactions With Iran Involving Education Services, Software - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Tuesday issued an updated general license that authorizes the exportation of graduate level educational services and software with respect to Iranian students through September 1, 2022.

The license is aimed at Iranian students who are currently not present in the United States, but have been granted a US visa and require access to online educational services as part of their graduate courses necessary to complete the degree requirements in the humanities, social sciences, law, introductory science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the Treasury Department said.

However, the license does not authorize the exportation or re-exportation of any such services or software for the benefit of the Iranian government or any other entity related to it, the Treasury Department added.

The US government has for decades imposed sanctions against Iran with the situation deteriorating in the early 2000s when Iran began developing its nuclear program. The move resulted in the US government - and the international community - imposing numerous new sanctions against that have significantly affected Iran's economy.

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Texas Refugee Agency Says Has Resettled 75 Afghans, Expects to Help 574 By September 30

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The Refugee Services of Texas said on Tuesday that it has resettled 75 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders and their families this month.

"Between August 1 and August 23, Refugee Services of Texas has welcomed 75 Afghan SIV holders, their spouse and children," the agency said in a press release.

The agency said in the release that it expects to resettle an additional 574 Afghan SIV holders and their families by September 30.

The Afghan refugees have been resettled in the cities of Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston.

Afghan refugees are currently being housed at Fort McCoy, Fort Lee, Fort Bliss and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst while they wait for their SIV applications to process.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in earlier remarks that the US military could evacuate about 100,000 individuals from Afghanistan by the end of the week. Some 21,600 people were evacuated from Kabul in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of evacuees to 58,700 since August 14.

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US Arrests Oklahoma Man for Assaulting Media During January 6 Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US authorities arrested an Oklahoma resident for assaulting media member during the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, the Justice Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Benjamin Scott Burlew, 41, of Miami, Oklahoma, is charged with federal offenses that include assault in special territorial jurisdiction and acts of physical violence on restricted grounds. Burlew made his initial court appearance in the Northern District of Oklahoma on Aug. 20," the statement said.

The Justice Department said Burlew was captured by two cameras assaulting a credentialed photographer for the Associated Press. The photographer was pulled down a set of stairs and Burlew also pushed the photographer once again, the statement said.

The authorities indicted Burlew on August 20 for assaulting a District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Officer during a separate incident, the statement added.

On January 6, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the lawmakers certifying the 2020 election results from several states that Trump said were fraudulent. The authorities shot one protester dead during the incident and charged 500 people for participating in the event.

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US 7-day Average of COVID-19 Deaths Up 23% - CDC

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – A 7-day average of daily COVID-19 related deaths increased 23 percent over the previous week to reach nearly 740 fatalities every day, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Rochelle Walensky told reporters on Tuesday.

"7-day average of daily death increased to 739 per day and increase of 23 percent from the previous 7-day period," Walensky said in a press briefing.

The CDC reported 157,000 new COVID-19 cases last Friday.

"Our 7-day average is about 137,000 cases per day. This represents the increase of nearly 12 percent from the prior 7-day average," she added.

Walensky warned that the number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths are continuing to rise. As White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients noted at the same briefing, more than 200 million Americans got at least the first vaccine shot, and 171 million are Americans fully vaccinated.

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Biden, Zelenskyy Meeting to Improve US-Ukraine Relations - Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – Meeting between US and Ukraine Presidents Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy will improve the close relations between two countries, US envoy to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement on Tuesday.

"We... look forward to welcoming President Zelenskyy to the United States. His meeting with President Biden will further cement the close relationship between our countries and demonstrate our enduring partnership," Thomas-Greenfield said.

Zelenskyy and Joe Biden will meet on August 31, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said last week.

Thomas-Greenfield reiterated Washington's commitment to support sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. She also noted US support of Kiev's idea to establish Crimea Platform.

This forum will allow focus diplomatic efforts on the peninsula to Ukraine, US envoy said in a statement on the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence.

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**US Evacuates Around 4,000 American Nationals From Afghanistan - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has evacuated about 4,000 US passport holders and their families from Afghanistan, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"As of today, August 24, we have evacuated approximately 4,000 American passport holders plus their families. We expect that number to continue to grow in the coming days," Kirby said at a briefing.

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**Delta-Fueled COVID-19 Infects 25% of Fully Vaccinated in 3-Month Study in California**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – One quarter of more than 40,000 COVID-19 infections were in fully vaccinated individuals during a 3-month period when the delta variant became dominant, according to a report published by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on Tuesday.

The data from individuals in Los Angeles County, California, was collected from May 1–July 25, 2021. From 6,752 samples subjected to genome sequencing, researchers estimated that prevalence of the delta variant rose from 8.6 percent of infections at the beginning of the period to 91.2 percent when the three month period ended, the report.

"Among 43,127 reported SARS-CoV-2 infections in Los Angeles County residents aged ≥16 years, 10,895 (25.3%) were in fully vaccinated persons, 1,431 (3.3%) were in partially vaccinated persons, and 30,801 (71.4%) were in unvaccinated persons," the report said.

While the report appears to indicate that so-called breakthrough infections have become increasingly common with the delta variant, the report also reinforced earlier data showing COVID-19 vaccines offer substantial protection from severe infections, especially those requiring hospitalization.

Much lower percentages of fully vaccinated persons infected with SARS-CoV-2 were hospitalized (3.2%), were admitted to an intensive care unit (0.5%), and required mechanical ventilation (0.2%) compared with partially vaccinated persons (6.2%, 1.0%, and 0.3%, respectively) and unvaccinated persons (7.6%, 1.5%, and 0.5%, respectively), the report said. The report concluded with a recommendation that efforts to increase COVID-19 vaccination coverage, in coordination with other prevention strategies, are critical in preventing COVID-19–related hospitalizations and deaths.

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**Biden Tells G7 US Mission in Kabul to End Upon Achieving Objectives - White House**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said during the meeting with the G7 leaders on Tuesday that ending the US mission in Kabul, Afghanistan, will depend on achieving the set objectives, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"During a meeting this morning with the G7 leaders, the President conveyed that our mission in Kabul will end based on the achievement of our objectives," Psaki said in a release on Tuesday. Biden also said the United States is on pace to finish its presence in Afghanistan by August 31, the release said.

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**Biden Asked Pentagon, State to Prepare Contingency Plans to Delay Afghan Exit Date - Psaki**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden asked the Pentagon and Department of State to prepare contingency plans for a potential need to extend the August 31 deadline for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"The President has asked the Pentagon and the State Department for contingency plans to adjust the timeline should that become necessary," Psaki said in a press release.

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**Biden Told G7 Leaders Each Day in Afghanistan Boosts Risk to Troops - White House**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has made clear to G7 leaders in today's meeting that each day of operations in Afghanistan boost the risk to the US troops, with the increasing threats from the Islamic State (terrorist group, banned in Russia), the White House said on Tuesday

"He [Biden] ... made clear that with each day of operations on the ground, we have added risk to our troops with increasing threats from ISIS-K, and that completion of the mission by August 31st depends on continued coordination with the Taliban, including continued access for evacuees to the airport," a White House statement read.

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US Imposes Magnitsky Act Sanctions on Three Individuals in Paraguay – Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – The US government is imposing Magnitsky Act sanctions on three individuals in Paraguay for their role in corruption schemes in the South American country, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The United States is imposing financial sanctions on three Paraguayan individuals for their roles in corruption schemes in Paraguay, as well as on five associated entities connected with those schemes, pursuant to Executive Order 13818," Blinken said in a statement.

The Department of the Treasury identified the individuals as Kassem Mohamad Hijazi, Khalil Ahmad Hijazi, and Liz Paola Doldan Gonza, a separate press release said.

"Taken in coordination with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Homeland Security, these actions represent a whole-of-government effort to combat corruption in the Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay Tri-Border Area," he said.

The United States is committed to supporting Paraguay's efforts to combat corruption and promote accountability for those who undermine government institutions, Blinken added.

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US Returning \$201M In Funds to Victims in FIFA Soccer Corruption Case – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – The US government will begin the process of returning a total of \$201 million in funds to the victims in an international soccer corruption case involving the prosecution of 50 individuals or entities in at least 20 countries, the Department of Justice said on Tuesday.

"The Department of Justice announced today that it will begin the process of remitting forfeited funds to FIFA, the world organizing body of soccer; CONCACAF, the confederation responsible for soccer governance in North and Central America, among other regions," the department said in a press release.

Of the \$201 million, \$32.3 million in forfeited funds has been approved for an initial distribution, the release explained.

"To date, the prosecutions have resulted in charges against more than 50 individual and corporate defendants from more than 20 countries, primarily in connection with the offer and receipt of bribes and kickbacks paid by sports marketing companies to soccer officials in exchange for ... media and marketing," it said.

On May 27, 2015, an indictment was unsealed charging 14 FIFA officials and sports marketing executives with racketeering, honest services wire fraud and money laundering offenses. On December 3, 2015, a superseding indictment was unsealed charging 16 more FIFA officials with similar crimes, the release said.

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US Military Has Started Withdrawing From Afghanistan, Reducing Troop Presence - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US military has started withdrawing its forces and reducing its presence on the ground in Afghanistan, Fox News reporter Lucas Tomlinson said in a tweet, citing US officials.

"The U.S. military has started withdrawing from Afghanistan reducing troop presence: U.S. officials," Tomlinson said.

The decision comes one week prior to the August 31 deadline for withdrawal, which the the Biden administration said is still the plan, contingent upon the Taliban being cooperative in evacuation efforts.

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Blinken, NATO Chief Discuss Situation in Afghanistan - State Department

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg discussed the crisis in Afghanistan caused by the ongoing operation to evacuate thousands of civilians and Afghan allies out of the country by August 31, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today," Price said in a press release. "Secretary Blinken and Secretary General Stoltenberg shared their views on the August 20 NATO Foreign Ministerial and discussed the situation in Afghanistan."

Blinken and Stoltenberg emphasized close coordination among allies and partners is crucial to ensure the safe evacuation of Allied personnel and Afghan allies, Price said.

The United States has told the Taliban that the August 31 withdrawal deadline depends on the cooperation of the Taliban (banned in Russia), according to media reports. In addition, the Biden administration reportedly asked the Pentagon for contingency plans to stay longer if necessary.

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US Forces Support Somali Ground Units Fighting al-Shabaab With Air Strike – AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – US aircraft have carried out an air strike in support of Somali government forces fighting al-Shabaab terrorists, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) announced on Tuesday.

"US Africa Command conducted a collective self-defense strike against al-Shabaab fighters engaged in active combat with our Somali partners in the vicinity of Cammara, Somalia on August 24," the command said in a statement.

the message added that engagements between Somali forces and the terror group are still ongoing but preliminary assessments point to no civilians killed or injured in the airstrike.

In June, al-Shabaab forces seized four towns in Somalia not far from the capital of Mogadishu and a US military base. Al-Shabaab is a Somali-based Islamist insurgent group with links to al-Qaeda (terror group, banned in Russia).

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McConnell Urges Biden to Extend August 31 Deadline for US Withdrawal From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden needs to abandon the August 31 goal of completing the United States' exit from Afghanistan and instead extend the US-controlled perimeter beyond Kabul and the capital's international airport so all Americans and Afghans who cooperated with the US forces can safely leave, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday.

"The president needs to forget about the August 31st deadline. We need to send in enough military personnel to rescue our people... extend the deadline, get outside the perimeter make sure that every single American who wants to leave is able to get out with our assistance and our Afghan allies," McConnell told Fox News.

McConnell called Biden's decision to rapidly end the US military presence in Afghanistan one of the greatest foreign policy disasters in US history.

Before the US withdrawal began it had 2,500 service members in Afghanistan.

"We hadn't lost a single American military personal in a year. Taliban barbarians were not in charge of the country. We were keeping the lid on al Qaeda," he said.

The United States has told the Taliban that the August 31 withdrawal deadline depends on the cooperation of the Taliban (banned in Russia), according to media reports. In addition, the Biden administration reportedly asked the Pentagon for contingency plans to stay longer if necessary.

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North America Cross-Border Freight Tops Pre-Pandemic Levels 12% in June - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - Freight shipped across the US borders with Canada and Mexico surged 41 percent in June from a year earlier, exceeding pre-coronavirus pandemic levels by nearly 12 percent, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Tuesday. "Total Transborder freight: \$116 billion of transborder freight moved by all modes of transportation, up 41 percent compared to June 2020. June 2021 Transborder freight was up 11.8 percent compared to \$103.8 billion in June 2019," BTS said in a press release reporting June shipments.

Truck shipments accounted for 62.3 percent of all transborder freight, with the top three commodities consisting of computer equipment (\$13.4 billion), electrical machinery (10.7 percent) and vehicles including parts (\$8.8 billion).

Rail freight accounted for 14.1 percent of the total, with the top commodities being vehicles (\$6.2 billion), wood and related articles \$1.6 billion, and minerals, including fuels, \$1.3 billion. For other transportation modes, ships moved freight worth \$8.5 billion, pipelines \$8.3 billion and planes \$4.9 billion.

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Canada Tells G7 Allies Its Forces Ready to Stay in Afghanistan Beyond August 31 - Trudeau

TORONTO, August 24 (Sputnik) - Canada informed G7 allies it is prepared to remain in Afghanistan beyond the August 31 deadline for all US and allied troops to withdraw from the war-torn country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

The group of advanced economies convened an urgent virtual meeting to discuss the crisis in Afghanistan after the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) reclaimed control of the country in advance of the pullout of foreign troops.

"I emphasized that Canada is ready to stay beyond the [August 31] deadline, if it's at all possible," Trudeau said during a press briefing at the conclusion of the G7 meeting.

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### New NASA 'Wildfire Program' to Direct Firefighters Using Satellite Data - Administrator

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - NASA plans to develop new wildfire program to expand realtime data available to teams battling blazes now blanketing vast swaths of the Western United States in what has become a yearly seasonal threat, Administrator Bill Nelson told an annual Space Symposium on Tuesday.

"Central to our mission is protecting this planet," Nelson said. "And that's why NASA is planning to establish a new wildfire program. The program will draw from our satellite and airborne observations, our eyes in the sky. The technology will develop data-driven tools to support the heroes who are fighting the fires. And they're trying to prevent the next fire," Nelson said.

Beginning in September, NASA will begin posting its Earth observation data on a new internet application called "Open ET," with the information available to the public, Nelson said.

In addition to wildfires, "Open ET will put NASA Earth satellite data into the hands of farmers, water managers and conservation groups. It has the power to assist with water management in the West. Telling users how much water is being consumed by agricultural crops," Nelson said. The effort marks an expansion of existing measurements from satellites that now help direct firefighters by mapping active and smoldering blazes, according to NASA.

As of Tuesday, more than 2.5 million acres have burned in 92 large fires in 12 states. Residents in communities near 16 blazes remain evacuated amid a deployment of 26,383 firefighters and support personnel, the National Interagency Fire Center said in its latest daily report posted on the internet.

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### Counterterrorism Officials Vet Afghan Evacuees Prior to Entry in US - Official

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - Afghan evacuees undergo a thorough vetting process conducted by US intelligence and counterterrorism officials before they are allowed into the United States, a senior Biden administration official said on Tuesday.

"These individuals are being flown to third-party countries in Europe and Asia that have agreed to serve as transit hubs before these individuals undergo robust security processing and fly onward to the United States," the official said during a conference call with reporters. "That process involves biometric and biographic security screenings conducted by our intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals."

Afghan refugees undergo a medical screening when they arrive to the United States, including a coronavirus test, the official said. The Biden administration is also working on plans to possibly offer Afghan refugees coronavirus vaccines, the official added.

The official also said it is possible the Defense Department may increase the number of military installations housing Afghan refugees in the United States. To date, Afghan refugees are being housed at Fort McCoy, Fort Lee, Fort Bliss and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in earlier remarks that the Defense Department could evacuate about 100,000 individuals from Afghanistan by the end of the week.

Some 21,600 people were evacuated from Kabul in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of evacuees to 58,700 since August 14.

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**Pentagon May Use Additional Military Bases in US to House Afghan Refugees - Spokesperson**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US military may consider using additional domestic military bases to temporarily house Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants while they await more permanent resettlement in the United States, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"It's possible that we might be looking at additional US military installations here in the United States," Kirby said during a press briefing. "It is very well possible that we could need to use additional US military installations here stateside, and as we make those decisions and are able to announce them, we certainly will."

The military has already designated Fort Lee, Fort McCoy, Fort Bliss and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst as temporary housing facilities for the Afghans seeking refuge in the United States.

Maj. Gen. William Taylor said during the briefing that four flights carrying more than 1,000 passengers arrived at Dulles International Airport outside of Washington in the last 24 hours. Taylor added that the arriving Afghans will be sent to one of the four aforementioned processing facilities.

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**At Least 2 US Staff to Be Medevacked From Vietnam Embassy After Havana Syndrome - Reports**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – At least two US personnel will be evacuated from Vietnam after reporting illness suspected related to the Havana incidents, NBC said on Tuesday. The incident with strange sounds took place over the weekend shortly before US Vice President Kamala Harris was set to travel to Vietnam on her Southeast Asian tour, NBC said on Twitter, citing senior US officials.

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**Pentagon Says Daily Communication With Taliban Commanders Will 'Have to Continue'**

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – The daily communication with the Taliban (banned in Russia) commanders will “have to continue” to facilitate the evacuation from Afghanistan of those fleeing the group’s takeover, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

“There is no question that as we work through this [evacuation operation], the daily communication with the Taliban commanders is going to have to continue. That’s just a hard fact,” Kirby said at a press briefing.

Earlier in August, Pentagon informed the media that the US Commanders at the Kabul airport are in communication with the Taliban commanders on the ground outside of the airport about the security issues.

According to the US Defense Department, to date there have been no hostile interactions between the US forces and the Taliban in Afghanistan amid ongoing evacuation efforts at Kabul airport.

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US Told Taliban That August 31 Withdrawal Contingent on Evacuation Cooperation - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US is telling the Taliban (banned in Russia) that the promised August 31 withdrawal deadline is contingent upon them helping to facilitate the ongoing evacuations from Afghanistan, Reuters reported on Tuesday, citing an administration official.

Biden reportedly asked Pentagon officials for contingency plans to stay longer should it be necessary, but agreed with their recommendation to try and meet the August 31 deadline.

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New York Governor Pledges Fresh Start With Collaborative Approach to State Politics

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Kathy Hochul pledged a changed culture in the state capital with a fresh, collaborative approach to politics following a series of scandals that forced her predecessor Andrew Cuomo to resign.

In brief remarks following a ceremonial swearing in, Hochul outlined discussions with aides and officials, including President Joe Biden, on challenges facing the New York State.

“We also talked about how we will be battling COVID-19, getting direct aid to New Yorkers more quickly and changing the culture of Albany and that’s why I’m looking forward to a fresh collaborative approach,” Hochul said in brief remarks after taking the oath of office.

Hochul became the state’s first woman governor shortly after midnight on Tuesday. She replaces outgoing Governor Andrew Cuomo, who resigned amid multiple scandals, including a report by the state attorney general that he sexually harassed 11 women.

Cuomo resigned nearly two weeks earlier, prompting the New York State Assembly to pause an impeachment investigation. But lawmakers later decided to complete a report detailing their probe's findings.

Hochul pledged to let the state legislature proceed and finish its investigation without interfering.

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US Could Evacuate About 100,000 People From Afghanistan By End of Week - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The US military could evacuate approximately 100,000 people from Afghanistan by the end of the week if they are able to maintain the pace of the last several days, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

"That's definitely the plan," Kirby said in response to a question about whether the Defense Department believes it can continue evacuating about 20,000 people a day, totaling roughly 100,000 possible evacuees by the end of the week.

Kirby added that the throughput is a function of many factors including weather, but that the Defense Department plans on continuing this pace as aggressively as it can. Over 21,000 individuals have been evacuated from Afghanistan in the last 24 hours.

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US Facing Biggest Ever Hostage Crisis in Afghanistan, Biden Unprepared – Congressman

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – The United States is facing the biggest mass hostage crisis in its history with thousands of Americans trapped in Afghanistan and at the mercy of the Taliban and President Joe Biden is unprepared to protect or rescue them, Florida Representative Mike Waltz said on Tuesday.

"Thousands of American citizens are facing potential beheadings," Waltz told a press conference of Republican congressmen on Capitol Hill. "We are on the cusp of the biggest mass hostage crisis this country has ever seen: This will make Tehran 1979 look like a sleepover." Furthermore, Waltz predicted that the triumphant Taliban would provide a new safe haven for a far more powerful revival of al-Qaeda (terror group, banned in Russia) in their country, which is the size of the US state of Texas and they would use it to launch more mass terror attacks against the United States.

"We are going to face al-Qaeda 3.0. We are going to have another 9/11 because of that incompetence... That blood will be on Joe Biden's hands and this Congress will hold him accountable," Waltz said.

Fellow Republican Congressman Jake Ellzey told the press conference that so far the emergency airlift from Kabul Airport had evacuated less than 10 percent of US citizens remaining in Afghanistan.

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#### No Change in Timeline of US Evacuation Operation in Afghanistan – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – There has been no change to the US evacuation mission timeline in Afghanistan which is set to end by August 31, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

“There’s been no change to the timeline of the mission, which is to have this completed by the end of the month,” Kirby said at a press briefing.

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#### G7 to Consider Recognizing Taliban Government in Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) countries are planning to discuss the possible recognition of the Taliban (banned in Russia as a designated terror group) government in Afghanistan, CNN reported on Tuesday.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is hosting the G7 meeting, is the main advocate for a unified approach to recognizing the Taliban, the report said. Johnson has said he seeks the leading democracies to make a plan to either recognize the Taliban government or to apply economic sanctions, it added.

The G7 meeting is planned to take place on Tuesday with the participation of the secretaries general of NATO and the United Nations.

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#### Biden Negative Rating Now 11% Higher Than Positive After Afghanistan Collapse – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden’s negative rating is now 55 percent – 11 points higher than his approval standing following the collapse of the US-supported government and army in Afghanistan, the Rasmussen Daily Presidential Tracking Poll showed on Tuesday.

“The Rasmussen Reports daily Presidential Tracking Poll... for Tuesday shows that 44 percent of Likely US voters approve of President Biden’s job performance,” the organization said.

“Fifty-five percent disapprove.”

The latest figures include 26 percent who Strongly Approve of the job Biden is doing and 47 percent who Strongly Disapprove. This gives him a Presidential Approval Index rating of -21, Rasmussen said.

The results are collected via telephone surveys of 500 likely voters per night and reported on a three-day rolling average basis. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 1,500 Likely Voters is +/- 2.5 percent with a 95 percent level of confidence, Rasmussen said.

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Only 23% Americans Satisfied With US Direction, COVID-19 Named Main Problem – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 24 (Sputnik) – The percentage of Americans satisfied with how things are in the country has fallen to 23 percent, the lowest point since Biden took office, while the ongoing coronavirus pandemic is again seen as the top issue, according to a new Gallup poll results published on Tuesday.

Since May, the level of satisfaction with Democrats has fallen from 63 percent to 39 percent, the lowest level since mid-January, the poll found.

The number of US adults who see the coronavirus disease as the main problem has more than doubled to 26 percent and is followed by concerns over the government (16 percent) and immigration (11 percent), according to the poll.

Democrats (41 percent) are far more likely than Republicans (12 percent) inclined to name COVID-19 the top issue, the poll showed.

The poll was conducted between August 2-17 among a randomly selected sample of 1,006 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.