

08/25/21 Wednesday

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'Time's Up': WHO COVID Origins Team Says Tracing Virus' Genesis Getting Harder After Probe 'Stalled'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China has sharply criticized the push by Western nations to portray the country as hiding vital data on COVID-19 from World Health Organization (WHO) scientists, who have said they encountered no such barriers to their study.

The scientists who traveled to Wuhan earlier this year as part of a study into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, have written a new article in which they warn that "the process has stalled," endangering the ability to collect time-sensitive data such as antibodies and placing the entire project in peril.

In an article [published in Nature](#) on Wednesday, the 12-person international team reviewed their lines of inquiry in the March report and the leads they reported, noting that some of those leads are in danger of drying up before long.

"The window of opportunity for conducting this crucial inquiry is closing fast: any delay will render some of the studies biologically impossible," they warned. "Understanding the origins of a devastating pandemic is a global priority, grounded in science."

"Crucially, the window is rapidly closing on the biological feasibility of conducting the critical trace-back of people and animals inside and outside China. SARS-CoV-2 antibodies wane, so collecting further samples and testing people who might have been exposed before December 2019 will yield diminishing returns," they wrote, noting that not only do Chinese wildlife farms employ some 14 million people, many of the farms have been closed due to the pandemic and the animals culled, "making any evidence of early coronavirus spillover increasingly difficult to find."

After they made their recommendations in March, the WHO dragged its feet for months on following up, the scientists said, waiting until July to draw up plans to create a committee to oversee future origins studies.

While the scientists said they were "pleased" by the prospect of a more organized structure for outbreak origins investigations, they warned that applying it to the SARS-CoV-2 probe "runs the risk of adding several months of delay."

"Therefore, we call on the scientific community and country leaders to join forces to expedite the phase 2 studies detailed here, while there is still time," they urged.

Other data they seek is less time-sensitive, such as raw data collected on the 174 COVID-19 cases identified in 2019. The team notes the information wasn't part of their mandate, but that the WHO has subsequently asked for it and that it's necessary for a second phase of their investigation.

The team traveled in January 2021 to Wuhan, the Chinese city where the first recorded outbreak of COVID-19 began in late 2019, to [conduct a joint study](#) with Chinese scientists into

the origins of the virus. They explored four possible vectors, noting that direct or indirect zoonotic introduction were the most plausible pathways - that is, that the virus began in animals and made the jump to humans, either from the reservoir animal population directly into humans or by way of an intermediate host.

One of the primary pathways considered was the Huanan wet market, where a wide array of live animals and frozen meat was sold in Wuhan, and which doctors in the early weeks of the outbreak had quickly identified as the source of many of the cases entering their hospitals. A fourth possibility which they had not initially set out to explore, but which was added later, was whether it had escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. As [Sputnik has reported](#), the suggestion gained currency as a conspiracy in far-right circles in early 2020 before being used by then-US President Donald Trump to shift blame onto China for the pandemic, which he called "the China virus" and "kung flu."

They noted on Wednesday that they "held frank discussions with key scientists in the relevant Wuhan institutions and that "when we reviewed the responses to our questions on this issue, and all other available data, we found no evidence for leads to follow up."

"In the report, and since, we have publicly called for any data supporting the lab-leak hypothesis to be published and submitted to the WHO. None has, so far."

Dissatisfied with their report, US President Joe Biden ordered the US intelligence community to conduct their own COVID-19 origins investigation, noting even the IC was divided about whether or not the virus had escaped the Chinese lab. That report, quietly delivered to the White House on Tuesday, was just as inconclusive, according to a report by [the Washington Post](#) that cited administration insiders.

"It is baffling that while the US accuses China of lacking transparency in origins research and spreading disinformation," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Wang Wenbin told reporters](#) on Tuesday. "[I]t has been reticent and elusive on the origins study and stonewalling and obstructing relevant work itself."

"We have invited WHO experts to China twice for origins research. Together with their Chinese colleagues, they have compiled an authoritative joint report. We urge the US to stop the clumsy trick of shifting blames to smear and denigrate China, disclose and test data of early cases at home as soon as possible and invite WHO experts to conduct origins research in the US as soon as possible so as to give the international community and the American people an explanation based on science and justice," Wang added.

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Video: Helicopter Carrying Secretary of the Government of Mexico's Veracruz State
Crash-Lands
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A helicopter carrying at least 20 people crashed in Sierra de la Huasteca Baja, in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, while attempting to land on Wednesday. On board was Éric Cisneros, Secretary of the Government of Veracruz state.

A video posted on social media showed the Mil Mi-17 helicopter, which is owned by the Secretariat of the Navy, attempting to land before losing control and spiraling into a nearby clearing. As it roughly sets down, the aircraft's rotors get shredded by impacting the ground, sending pieces flying in every direction.

However, Cisneros later tweeted that he was ok and there were "no human losses."

"We continue to help, even with minor injuries," he said. The helicopter was touring areas recently hit by Hurricane Grace, which when it hit the coastal Veracruz over the weekend as a powerful [Category 3 storm](#). At least eight people were killed by the storm, including in mudslides and other disasters caused by its previous impact on [Mexico's Yucatan peninsula](#) to the east. According to [La Jornada](#), the people wounded in the crash were taken to the Regional Hospital of Metepec, Hidalgo. However, the number of injured people was not given.

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UK Foreign Office Warns Against All Travel to Afghanistan, Cites 'High Threat of Terrorist Attack' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The British government has advised its citizens "against all travel" to Afghanistan as the NATO pullout continues, saying the threat of a terrorist attack remains high, particularly at Kabul's main airport.

"The security situation in Afghanistan remains volatile," the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) said in a [Wednesday update](#) to the foreign travel advice section of its website for Afghanistan.

"There is an ongoing and high threat of terrorist attack. Do not travel to Kabul Hamid Karzai International Airport. If you are in the area of the airport, move away to a safe location and await further advice," the notice reads, adding, "Commercial flights are not currently operating. If you can leave Afghanistan safely by other means, you should do so immediately."

"Travel by road throughout the country is extremely dangerous. There have been allegations of people being mistreated on their way to Kabul International Airport," it also notes.

The notice further says the British embassy in Kabul has relocated and suspended all non-essential operations, the remainder of which it is only providing remotely.

The United Kingdom was the number two partner in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, where it participated under the aegis of Operation Herrick from 2002 until 2014 and then under Operation Toral afterward.

US officials have warned that the crowds of people waiting outside the airport, as well as US troops posted at the airport itself, have come under increasing risk of [attack by ISIS-Khorasan](#), a local franchise of Daesh* that is hostile to both the Taliban and the United States. US national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters on Tuesday that the Taliban* is responsible for security in the city and thus for guaranteeing the safety of those trying to get to the airport, to whom the group has guaranteed safe passage.

Like the United States, British authorities have been struggling to extricate their citizens in the aftermath of the lightning-quick capture of the Afghan capital of Kabul by the Taliban, which took

the city on August 15 without a fight. According to the [UK Guardian](#) on Wednesday, advocates for more than 50 people in Kabul with dual UK-Afghan nationality claimed that their clients were being turned away from the airport by Taliban authorities while so-called "mono-nationals," or people with just British citizenship, were being evacuated first.

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab [told Sky News](#) that "Mono-nationals, so single-nationality UK who have got documentation, the lion's share, almost all of them that want to come out have been brought home."

"We will use every last remaining hour and day to get everyone we can back, the British nationals, the Afghans who worked so loyally for us, we are getting the Chevening scholars back, also women's rights defenders and journalists," he said. "The ones that are remaining, and we have done an amazing job, two and a half thousand UK nationals if you go back to April ... what remains are rather complex cases, large family units where one or other may be documented or may be clearly a national, but it's not clear whether the rest of them are."

The UK Ministry of Defence [tweeted on Wednesday](#) that 11,474 British nationals and Afghans who have worked with British troops and diplomats have been evacuated since August 13 in what the ministry has dubbed Operation Pitting, of whom 6,946 are Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy claimants.

In addition to the roughly 6,000 American troops redeployed to Karzai airport to support the evacuation effort, 1,000 British troops have also been sent. However, UK ministers have said that the British presence at the airport cannot be maintained in the American absence, and US President Joe Biden has said that for the moment, Washington is sticking to the August 31 deadline for a final US withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, he has noted the timeline could change if necessary.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters that as of Wednesday, the airlift from Karzai airport has flown more than 82,300 people out of the country since August 14. However, the airlift is winding down within the next 36 hours, as the remaining US military equipment at the airport must also be removed before the end of the month.

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US Evacuated 82,300 From Kabul, Taliban Made 'Commitments' of Airport Access, Blinken Says

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

With roughly 4,000 US troops still in Kabul and the August 31 withdrawal deadline closing fast, the massive civilian airlift has just hours left before transport aircraft will have to start shuttling the troops and their equipment out instead.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that the Taliban had made pledges both publicly and privately to continue to allow safe passage to Kabul's main airport for US citizens, allies, and Afghan partners of the US after the August 31 deadline for total US withdrawal from the country. However, a [Taliban source told Sputnik](#) the militant group was only allowing foreigners to enter the airport.

“The Taliban have made public and private commitments to provide and permit safe passage for Americans, for third-country nationals and Afghans at risk going forward past August 31,” [Blinken told reporters](#).

“The United States, our allies and partners, and more than half of the world’s countries - 114 in all - issued a statement making it clear to the Taliban that they have a responsibility to hold to that commitment and provide safe passage for anyone who wishes to leave the country, not just for the duration of our evacuation and relocation mission, but for every day thereafter,” he added.

The chief diplomat added that since the airlift operation began on August 14, the day before the Taliban captured Kabul, more than 82,300 people have been flown out of the country, many of them going to Doha, Qatar, where US troops stationed there have reported [disastrously inadequate facilities](#) for the arriving refugees. Of those evacuated, between 40-45% have been women, Blinken noted.

However, on Tuesday, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said that after tolerating more than a week of crowds camping outside Hamid Karzai International Airport hoping to leave the country, the de facto government was redirecting people to stay home until summoned to the airport and was only allowing foreigners to leave.

“There is no deadline on our work to help any remaining American citizens who decide they want to leave to do so, along with the many Afghans who have stood by us over these many years and want to leave and have been unable to do so. That effort will continue every day past August 31,” he noted.

Asked why the US cares about what the Taliban says if Washington hasn’t recognized the group as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, Blinken noted the US has been engaged in talks with the group for years in an attempt to organize a peaceful resolution of the conflict and that it will continue to do so now. He noted that recently, the Taliban named [several figures representing](#) the ousted Afghan government to a [transitional governing council](#), including former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, former Afghan reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who wasn’t a government figure but has opposed the Taliban since the civil war of the 1990s at the head of the Hizb-i-Islami militia.

“As a practical matter it advances our interests” to engage with the Taliban, Blinken noted, saying that an Afghan government that keeps its commitments to renouncing terrorism, protecting human rights, and allowing people to leave is “a government we can work with.” If not, the US will use “every appropriate tool at our disposal” to make Afghanistan “a pariah,” he added.

The US negotiated a peace agreement with the Taliban in February 2020 that allowed an American withdrawal from Afghanistan; however, no similar agreement between the Taliban and the US-backed government in Kabul was ever reached, and as US troops pulled out, the talks fell apart and the Taliban launched a new offensive that quickly swept across the country. The US occupation began nearly 20 years ago in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which were carried out by al-Qaeda after being organized at its bases in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of the US invasion, the Taliban reorganized in the countryside as an insurgent force, with the entry into Kabul on August 15 marking the final triumph of that campaign. Prior to

the city's capture, then-President Ashraf Ghani fled, reportedly carrying millions of dollars with him, seeking refuge in the United Arab Emirates.

The [Taliban's promises](#) have come amid increased engagement with external parties, including with Iran, China, and Pakistan, suggesting the group may put a greater emphasis on international recognition than when they were previously in power from 1996 to 2001, when just four nations recognized their government. China has led the charge in [offering infrastructure](#) and other investment in the country if the Taliban denounces its support for Uyghur terrorist groups and proves it can build a stable and politically inclusive government.

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Putin, Xi Agree on Joint Approach to 'Open, Tolerant Interaction' With All Afghan Parties
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Regional powers, including Iran and China, have blamed the US for amplifying the chaos in Afghanistan with a careless exit from a 20-year occupation war. Now they're looking for a new kind of relationship with the Taliban that could stabilize the country after more than 40 years of war.

In a Wednesday phone call, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to cooperate on addressing security threats resulting from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan earlier this month. Both nations have been extensively coordinating a regional response aimed at ensuring a stable government remains in power in Kabul and doesn't pose a threat to its neighbors.

During their talk, which was their first since the US-backed government in Afghanistan was overthrown on August 15, Putin noted Russia and China shared common ground on the issue and could cooperate to "combat terrorism, cut off drug smuggling, prevent the spillover of security risks in Afghanistan, resist interference from external forces, and maintain regional security and stability," as quoted by the [South China Morning Post](#).

The fear expressed by many nations is that the Taliban victory could spell a new period of greater upheaval, as the Islamist militant group has heavily financed its 18-year-long insurgency by [taxing opium exports](#), turning Afghanistan into the world's largest opiate producer, and because it has [supported other terrorist groups](#) including al-Qaeda and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It is also feared that their repressive social policies, which during their previous period of rule from 1996 until 2001 included virtual deprivation of rights for women and the repression of Shiites and ethnic minorities, could also return.

However, the Taliban has made a number of promises that, if kept, could usher in a government that is more tolerant of minority rights and less tolerant of terrorist groups. Leaders in Beijing, [Tehran, and Islamabad](#) have worked tirelessly over the past month to ensure the Taliban understands that its hopes of diplomatic normalization and regional integration hinge upon its ability to keep those promises.

During their phone call, Xi told Putin that China "respects Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, pursues a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's

internal affairs, and has always played a constructive role in the political settlement of the Afghan issue.”

"China is ready to bolster dialogue on Afghanistan with Russia and other members of the international community," Xi said, adding that China intends "to establish a political framework for open and tolerant interaction with all interested parties in Afghanistan.”

On Wednesday, the Taliban [named several figures](#) representing the US-backed former Afghan government to a transitional governing council, including [former Afghan president](#) Hamid Karzai, former Afghan reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who wasn't a government figure, but has opposed the Taliban since the civil war of the 1990s at the head of the Hizb-i-Islami militia.

Xi's and Putin's call followed an emergency meeting of the Group of Seven on Tuesday at which US President Joe Biden said the August 31 withdrawal deadline would not be extended, [despite protests](#) by US allies in Europe that they needed more time to get all their citizens out of Afghanistan.

The group also said they expect the Taliban to live up to its promises, including renouncing terrorism and protecting women's rights, but also guaranteeing safe access to Hamid Karzai International Airport, where the US has airlifted out some 82,000 Americans, third-nation allies, and Afghan collaborators over the past 10 days, according to US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken on Wednesday](#).

Earlier, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi cautioned](#) his British counterpart, Dominic Raab, that being overly aggressive in pressuring the Taliban was likely to backfire.

"The international community should encourage and guide [Afghanistan] in a positive direction instead of exerting more pressure," Wang said. "This is conducive to the early political transition of the Taliban and all parties and factions in Afghanistan, is conducive to stabilizing the domestic situation in Afghanistan, and is conducive to reducing the impact of refugees and immigrants."

On Monday, the Collective Security Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the membership of which includes Russia and Tajikistan, held an extraordinary [meeting via video](#) conference on the challenges created by the Afghanistan situation as well. Tajikistan, an Afghan neighbor, is due to host the next CSTO summit next month in Dushanbe.

Dushanbe will also host a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) next month, with Afghanistan at the top of the agenda. The Eurasian political, economic and military bloc includes almost every country sharing a border with Afghanistan except Turkmenistan, and Kabul has been an observer since 2012 with [ambitions of joining](#).

Its central position virtually ensures that substantial investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure would result, including into China's massive Belt and Road Initiative or the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. According to [the Global Times](#), Chinese entrepreneurs and the heads of state-owned enterprises are eager for new projects in the country, but remain cautious not only because of the Taliban's reputation, but also the threat of US sanctions if Washington's relations with the Taliban turned sour.

More recently, Chinese and Tajik forces conducted [counter-terrorism drills](#) in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover last week. Dushanbe rushed 20,000 troops to its border with Afghanistan last month after thousands of Afghan civilians and soldiers fled across the border ahead of a Taliban advance, emphasizing the danger of a potential spillover of the war into a regional conflict.

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New York Ups State COVID-19 Death Toll by 12,000 as Hochul Vows Transparency After Cuomo Exit
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The newly sworn-in New York governor took up the post at 12 a.m. on Tuesday, two weeks after former Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) announced he would be stepping aside in the wake of the damning independent probe that found he sexually harassed multiple current and former staffers. The new governor has vowed to clean house and ensure transparency.

The newly-minted New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) recently released an updated tally on the state's COVID-19 death toll, revealing that the total was actually 12,000 cases higher than what was initially reported at the end of the Cuomo administration.

As the hours dwindled on former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's term, the outgoing official detailed that about 43,400 COVID-19 deaths had been reported across the Empire State. However, by the time that Hochul took the reins and held her first pandemic update, an additional 12,000 cases were reported, bringing the total to 55,400.

The stark difference in figures is rooted in the fact that Hochul's figures were based on death certificate data submitted to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, whereas Cuomo's tally stemmed from laboratory-confirmed deaths at hospitals, nursing homes and adult care facilities.

Using solely laboratory-confirmed data, the Cuomo administration's tally did not include individuals who had died in hospice, state prisons or those who died at home.

Addressing the differing figures, Hochul [explained](#) during a recent NPR interview that the New York public needed to be aware of both figures as part of her larger effort to ensure that her administration is entirely transparent with the public.

"There are presumed and confirmed deaths. People should know both," Hochul said. "Also, as of yesterday, we're using CDC numbers, which will be consistent, and so there's no opportunity for us to mask those numbers, nor do I want to mask those numbers."

"The public deserves a clear, honest picture of what's happening. That's whether it's good or bad," she added.

However, it's worth noting that Hochul's higher tally is not entirely unheard of. Federal health officials and others tracking the pandemic's effect on the US had been pulling figures with the CDC data to compile their own numbers after gaps in the Cuomo administration's counting had been publicized.

In fact, the Cuomo administration came under fire during the height of the pandemic after reports revealed that his office had been manipulating the number of COVID-19-related figures, especially when it came to the death toll within [nursing homes](#), which had been undercounted by thousands.

In addition to the Hochul administration using different data to compile their death toll figures, the new governor has announced a bevy of new pandemic measures, including directing state

health officials to make masks mandatory for anyone entering public or private school grounds. She has also detailed efforts to push for school staff to be vaccinated or be forced to undergo weekly COVID-19 testing.

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Highway Robbery: Erik Prince Reportedly Charging People \$6,500 to Escape Kabul Chaos by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several weeks, the US and its allies have been coordinating evacuation flights for the many patriots and Afghan nationals who have been cleared to depart from Afghanistan following the Taliban's* takeover of the Central Asian country. Now, as many are desperately waiting to leave, some individuals are trying to profit from the chaos.

Blackwater founder Erik Prince recently prompted public outrage and backlash from the Biden White House after reports detailed that the US defense contractor was reportedly attempting to turn a profit on distressed Afghans looking to leave Afghanistan.

The former US Navy SEAL informed the Wall Street Journal for a [Wednesday article](#) that he was presently offering plane tickets out of Afghanistan for a hefty \$6,500, noting that a higher sum could be charged if interested individuals were trapped inside their homes and required additional assistance.

A costly ticket, according to Prince, ensured paying travelers that they would be safely transported to the Hamid Karzai International Airport. However, it remains unclear whether Prince has the actual ability to deliver on his promise.

The high-priced initiative comes as the Biden administration and US allies have been scrambling to clear visa-carrying Afghan nationals out of Afghanistan and organize evacuation flights. In many cases, there have been instances where scheduled flights have departed without even nearing the respective flight capacities.

Aside from Prince's financial endeavors, free-of-charge evacuation flights have also been offered by many nonprofit organizations such as the Clinton Foundation and No One Left Behind, among other groups.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealed during a Wednesday briefing that American operations have helped to evacuate more than [82,300 people](#) from the Kabul airport, adding that flights have so far been "safely" coordinated out of the region.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Wednesday condemned Prince's latest efforts to maximize potential financial gains, before going on to refer to the contractor as "soulless."

"I don't think any human being who has a heart and soul would support efforts to profit off of people's agony and pain," Psaki told reporters, especially "as they're trying to depart a country and fearing for their lives."

"We are evacuating people free of cost because that is the right step to take, and certainly we wouldn't be supportive of profiting off people who are desperate to get out of a country," she said, cementing her disdain for such efforts.

Prince is most known as the founder of Blackwater USA, whose four contractors were convicted in 2014 of killing Iraqi civilians in 2007 while providing additional security for Americans during the Iraq War. The company has since been renamed Academi after being acquired by private investors.

It's worth noting that ongoing efforts to evacuate individuals have repeatedly hit a wall, as Taliban forces have implemented multiple checkpoints, and in some cases reportedly turned away individuals from the airport. Earlier, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin admitted to US lawmakers that there have also been [reports](#) of Americans being turned away and "beaten" by militant forces at designated checkpoints as chaotic scenes unfolded in the capital city. Most recently, the US Embassy in Afghanistan issued a [security alert](#) urging all American citizens stationed at the Abbey, East and North gates to "immediately" leave the grounds as a result of growing "security threats."

In spite of calls to delay the full US withdrawal from Afghanistan, US President Joe Biden has maintained that troops will be sticking to the August 31 deadline, as threats from Daesh increase the longer American forces remain in the war-torn nation.

Biden has backed his move to continue with the withdrawal procedures by underscoring that the US mission has come to a close, and that - simply put - the US would no longer fight an entity that Afghan security forces did not want to stand against.

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US Porn Star Ron Jeremy Indicted on 30-Plus Counts of Sexual Assault in Los Angeles
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The porn star is considered one of the biggest names in the adult film industry, having appeared in thousands of explicit films that date back to the early 1970s. Sexual misconduct allegations have surfaced against the actor in the past, however, many in the industry have stated that such claims were brushed aside due to his fame.

American porn star Ron Jeremy has been indicted on more than 30 counts of sexual assault after a bevy of accusations were voiced by multiple women in Los Angeles, California, it was revealed on Wednesday.

A [release](#) issued by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office revealed that Jeremy had pleaded not guilty to approximately 34 charges that included 12 counts of forcible rape, seven counts of forcible oral copulation, six counts of sexual battery, four counts of sexual penetration with a foreign object and two counts of sexual penetration of an unconscious or asleep individual.

The wrap sheet also includes single charges of lewd acts against a child under the age of 15, sodomy by force and assault with intent to commit rape. Jeremy's alleged offenses were committed against some 21 women over a 23-year period in the Los Angeles area at nightclubs and bars, among other places. Ages of victims range from 15 to 51.

An attorney representing Jeremy [told Reuters](#) on Wednesday that the 68-year-old adult film star was "innocent of all charges," effectively reiterating [past stances](#) maintained by their client.

Jeremy had initially been [charged](#) with sex crimes in 2020 and had remained in custody ahead of his trial. At the time, the offenses involved just four women and left him facing up to 90 years in prison.

"Far too often, survivors of sexual assault suffer in isolation," George Gascón, who serves as the Los Angeles County district attorney, said in a statement accompanying the release. "We must ensure that survivors have all options available to help with recovery, including trauma-informed services for healing and support to report such crimes."

Jeremy's next court appearance is scheduled for October 12.

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'I Trust His Judgment': Pelosi Defends Biden's Afghan Pullout, Slams GOP Lawmakers' Trip to Kabul

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Reps. Seth Moulton (R-MA) and Peter Meijer (R-MI) revealed earlier this week that they both made a secret trip to Kabul, Afghanistan, to allegedly conduct oversight of evacuation operations from Hamid Kazai International Airport. US President Joe Biden has said the US is on track to meet the August 31 deadline, despite GOP calls for an extension.

As the [US commander-in-chief's foreign policy continues to be questioned](#), House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) reassured Capitol reporters on Wednesday that she trusts Biden's decision to not abandon the August 31 deadline for US troops to leave Afghanistan.

"The judgment about leaving is a judgment that the president has made, and he has to balance the equities of what is the threat to our military and the people at the airport versus the advantage of staying," the House Speaker said.

At the same time, many GOP lawmakers - and even some Democrats - "really want to encourage the president to stay longer, but he has to weigh the equities of the danger versus the advantage, and I trust his judgment," Pelosi added.

Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO), a former US Army Ranger who served three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, argued that the US simply does not possess the capability to evacuate all forces by August 31.

Several GOP heavyweights, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), have called on US President Joe Biden to abandon adherence to the August 31 withdrawal deadline for US forces. The Taliban* has expressed that the date is firm.

"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 said during a [Tuesday interview with Fox News](#). "The Taliban should not be allowed to tell us how long we are there to get our personnel out."

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) renewed his calls for Biden's impeachment over the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

"I think Joe Biden deserves to be impeached because he's abandoned thousands of Afghans who fought with us and he's going to abandon some American citizens because he capitulated to the Taliban to a 31 August deadline," he said during a [Tuesday Newsmax broadcast](#).

During her Wednesday address on Capitol Hill, the House Speaker pushed back against two GOP lawmakers who took their opposition to the pullout deadline to the next level [and organized a secret trip to Kabul](#).

Pelosi argued that she did not believe such a trip was such a wise decision amid the "deadly serious" situation in Afghanistan. Additionally, US lawmakers were previously advised against travel to Kabul.

Reps. Moulton and Meijer argued in a joint letter that they did not take their journey to "grandstand," and did not make a major disruption because they took crew seats, rather than those reserved for evacuees.

"As veterans, we care deeply about the situation on the ground at Hamid Karzai International Airport. America has a moral obligation to our citizens and loyal allies, and we must make sure that obligation is being kept," [they told The Hill](#). "Like many veterans, we have spent the last few weeks working without sleep to try to get as many people as we could through the gates and to safety."

Per the US Department of State, over 82,000 individuals have been flown out of Kabul, Afghanistan, since August 14.

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US Joint Forces Conduct Long-Range Maritime Strikes on Ex-USS Ingraham Near Hawaii Coast

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Commissioned on August 5, 1989, the USS Ingraham (FFG-61) was the last Oliver Hazard Perry-class guided missile frigate to be constructed, and the fourth US Navy vessel named after Captain Duncan Ingraham. Prior to its January 2015 decommission, the frigate was credited with the capture of nine drug trafficking vessels and \$561 million in cocaine.

Earlier this month, the US joint forces took to the Hawaiian Islands Operating Area to conduct a sinking exercise (SINKEX) consisting of coordinated multi-domain, multi-axis, long-range maritime strikes on ex-USS Ingraham.

The SINKEX, which took place on August 15, came as part of the US military's [Large Scale Exercise \(LSE\) 2021](#). The war games took place from August 3 to August 16, and were held to gauge the US' ability to counter Russian and Chinese forces simultaneously in either European or Pacific theaters.

The joint forces' various missiles were seen pummeling the decommissioned frigate toward the end of a video jointly released by the US Navy and US Marine Corps. During the first half of the footage, the USS Carl Vinson launched a number of F-35C Joint Strike Fighters that employed

laser-guided weapons, and a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft was able to test its Harpoon weapon system.

The SINKEX required the target to sink at least 1,000 fathoms (6,000 feet, 1829 meters) of water, and the exercise was prohibited from being performed within 50 nautical miles (58 miles, 93 kilometers) from land.

The long-range maritime strike capabilities displayed in the video are already in use by US forces, or are presently being fielded.

Participants in the joint, live-fire exercise included units from Vinson Carrier Strike Group (VINCSCG), Submarine Forces Pacific, 1 Marine Expeditionary Force/3rd Marine Air Wing, III Marine Expeditionary/3rd Marine Division, and U.S. Army Multi-Domain Task Force.

The event came as the second time a decommissioned USS Ingraham was used in a SINKEX. The other ex-USS Ingraham (DD-694), commissioned from 1944 to 1971, was sold to the Hellenic Navy and renamed Miaoulis before it was used in a 2001 SINKEX.

"Lethal combat power was effectively applied to a variety of maritime threats over the last two weeks in a simulated environment as part of the Navy's Large Scale Exercise and expertly demonstrated Sunday with live ordnance," said [US 3rd Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Steve Koehler in a quoted statement](#).

"The precise and coordinated strikes from the Navy and our Joint teammates resulted in the rapid destruction and sinking of the target ship and exemplify our ability to decisively apply force in the maritime battlespace."

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Biden Briefed on Explosion Outside Kabul Airport - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been briefed on the explosion outside Kabul airport, CNN reported on Thursday, citing the White House officials. Moments earlier, the Pentagon confirmed the explosion outside the airport. Reporters said, citing eyewitnesses, that the suicide explosion was followed by small arms fire.

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Suicide Attack, Small Arms Shooting Outside Kabul Airport – Afghan Journalist via Twitter

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – Suicide attack and arms shooting between fighters and US-led coalition troops happened outside the Kabul airport, Afghan journalist Bilal Sarwary said on Thursday, citing a witness.

"Large suicide attack and small arms shooting between fighter and coalition, eyewitness tells me," Sarwary said on Twitter.

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EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate Wins Backing as Global Standard – Airline Trade Group

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – A digital COVID-19 vaccination certificate developed by the European Union provides a model for other nations to facilitate travel and ensure other benefits such as access to entertainment, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said Thursday.

"The EU Digital COVID Certificate (DCC)... should serve as a blueprint for other nations looking to implement digital vaccination certificates," the IATA said in a press release.

The EU's DCC is accepted in the bloc's 27 member nations, and reciprocal agreements have been agreed with other states' own vaccination certificates, including Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine, the release said.

"In the absence of a single global standard for digital vaccination certificates, up to 60 other countries are looking to use the DCC specification for their own certification," the release added. With the latest pandemic surge fueled by the delta variant, many US jurisdictions now require patrons of restaurants, concert halls and other entertainment venues to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 tests in recent days.

The release included an offer from the IATA to aid any interested nation to integrate the DCC into pandemic-mitigation measures adopted by their airlines.

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Large Explosion Occurs Outside Kabul Airport – Pentagon Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – An explosion has occurred outside the airport in the Afghan capital of Kabul, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday. "We can confirm an explosion outside Kabul airport. Casualties are unclear at this time," Kirby said via Twitter.

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Security Threat Around Kabul Airport 'Regarded as Credible, as Imminent' - US Ambassador

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The United States views the security threat around Kabul airport as credible and imminent, acting US ambassador in Afghanistan Ross Wilson told ABC on Thursday.

"[The threat] was clearly regarded as credible, as imminent, as compelling," he said. "Our intention was to urge Americans and frankly others not to come to the airport."

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Canada's Evacuation Operation from Kabul Finished, Majority of Forces Departed – General

TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) – Canada's evacuation operations in Afghanistan have come to an end and the majority of the country's armed forces have departed the Kabul airport, Army Commander General Wayne Eyre said on Thursday.

"Our evacuation operations have ceased, and the majority of personnel departed the Hamid Karzai International Airport approximately eight hours ago," Eyre said at a virtual press conference. "A small contingent remains on the ground to support and coordinate our airbridge for the retrograde of allied forces, while conditions permit."

The general added that Canadian forces have transported and facilitated the evacuation of approximately 3,700 people in total out of Afghanistan.

According to Eyre, the current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is a crisis of the Taliban (banned in Russia) making.

Canada, among other allies, is in a rush to get as many people out as possible before August 31, the US-imposed deadline to leave Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of power in the country on August 15.

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Over 600 US Troops Have Departed Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – More than 600 US troops have departed Afghanistan as the evacuation continues, Fox News reporter Lucas Tomlinson said in a tweet on Thursday citing unnamed US officials.

On Wednesday, Pentagon said that the US had withdrawn about 400 troops from Afghanistan and brought the total number of personnel on the ground to approximately 5,400 people who have been brought to the country to provide security at the Kabul airport amid the massive evacuation operations.

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US Evacuation Operations Will Not End in 36 Hours - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The evacuation operations led by the United States will not end in 36 hours, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday, adding that Washington will continue to evacuate as many people as possible till the end of its mission.

"Evacuation operations in Kabul will not be wrapping up in 36 hours. We will continue to evacuate as many people as we can until the end of the mission," Kirby tweeted.

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US Q2 GDP Grew By 6.6% Commerce Dept Says in Second Reading For Period

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.6 percent in the second quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said in its second reading for April-June growth that put growth 0.1 percent higher than previously estimated.

In its last reading for Q2 GDP published on July 29, the Commerce Department put growth at 6.5 percent.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.6 percent in the second quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the department said in a statement released Thursday.

The Commerce Department issues three GDP readings for a quarter, and sometimes revises the previous quarter's number when estimating a new quarter.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a second-quarter growth of 6.7 percent on average.

"There were some better signs here on business investment and trade while the consumer data was largely unchanged," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive, commenting on the latest published number.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent GDP growth for all of 2021, although it says it does not expect "full employment" — defined by an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 5.4 percent at the end of July.

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US Treasury Approves Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan Despite Taliban Sanctions - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury has given its consent to aid groups and banks for participation in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan despite the existing anti-terrorism sanctions on the Taliban (banned in Russia), the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday citing people familiar with the matter.

The consent in the form of informal guidance came earlier this week as a response to pressure from aid groups and banks which do not want to get under Treasury's blow for providing humanitarian relief or conducting financial transactions in Taliban-controlled areas, according to the report.

It is unclear whether the Treasury plans to issue a formal document that would provide such waivers, the report said.

Earlier in the day, the World Food Programme warned its supply of food in Afghanistan might end in October, stressing that funding has been dwindling amid escalating demands.

On August 15, the Taliban entered Kabul, prompting the US-supported civilian government to collapse. Ashraf Ghani resigned as president and fled the country to prevent what he described as imminent bloodshed if militants had to storm the city.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Remain Below 400,000, Indicating Recovery - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims for the third week of August came in at 353,000, well below the key 400,000 mark for a fourth week running, according to Labor Department data on Thursday.

"In the week ending August 21, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 353,000, an increase of 4,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "The previous week's level was revised up by 1,000 from 348,000 to 349,000."

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden Set to Host Israeli Prime Minister Bennett for Talks on Iran, Mideast Peace

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, on his first diplomatic trip to Washington, will meet with President Joe Biden at the White House on Thursday where they are expected to focus on addressing Iran's accelerating progress with its nuclear program and other regional issues.

Last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report warning that Iran increased the number of Natanz centrifuge cascades for enriching uranium to 60 percent. Iran's foreign ministry insists that all of the country's actions are fully in line with its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and are supervised by the IAEA.

"We will deal with many fronts, especially the Iranian front, and especially the jump in the Iranian nuclear program over the past two or three years," Bennett told reporters on Tuesday. "In particular, we will discuss the plan to block this program."

Bennett and Biden are scheduled to have two bilateral meetings at the White House on Thursday - the first at 11:30 a.m. EST (3:30 p.m. GMT) and the second at 11:55 a.m.

Bennett's delegation will include the head of the National Security Council, the Cabinet Secretary, the head of the Prime Minister's staff, the Prime Minister's Military Secretary, the diplomatic adviser and other senior Israeli officials.

A senior Biden administration official told reporters this week that the White House expects the leaders to discuss the Middle East peace process, noting that the US president continues to support a two-state solution.

In addition, they hope to discuss expanding the Abraham Accords to other nations in the Middle East, the official said.

However, Bennett recently told The New York Times he is not interested in peace talks with the Palestinians and is opposed to US efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Bennett also previewed that he and his team will discuss opportunities to strengthen Israel's military superiority in the Middle East. Moreover, he will also seek to strengthen cooperation with the United States on trade, high-tech innovation, and on efforts to combat climate change and the coronavirus pandemic.

Bennet was elected as the new head of the Israeli government in June after the parliament voted in favor of swearing in the new coalition government created by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's opponents after years of political turmoil and rounds upon rounds of snap elections. On the same day, Bennett vowed to continue settlement expansion in the West Bank and ensured Israeli control over the zone.

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RPT - US Space Development Agency to Look at Proliferating Satellites to Counter Threats - Chief

COLORADO SPRINGS, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US Space Development Agency plans to look at missile tracking capabilities and proliferated satellite constellations to address the biggest threats America faces, Director Derek Tourneau told Sputnik.

"So we're looking for missile warning, missile tracking capabilities, and low latency com, and we're going to address that with proliferated constellations," Tourneau said on the sidelines of the 36th Space Symposium on Wednesday when asked how his agency would address America's biggest threats.

The Defense Department created the Space Development Agency in 2019 to oversee the development of sensors and weapons to counter advances by Russia and China, then-Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said in a memo.

Shanahan said the agency's mission will be to "define and monitor" future threat-driven space architecture and accelerate development while reducing bureaucratic overlap and inefficiency. The directive mentioned a need for space-based offensive weapons without elaborating, while offering some detail of a sensor and communications network that would form the system's basic architecture.

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Blinken Emphasizes to Israel's Bennett Palestinians Deserve Equal Freedom - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized to Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett during a meeting that Palestinians deserve equal freedom and prosperity, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett today in Washington, DC," Price said on Wednesday. "The Secretary also emphasized that Israelis and Palestinians alike deserve equal measures of freedom, prosperity, and dignity, which is important in its own right and as a means to advance prospects for a two-state solution." Blinken and Bennett also discussed security issues pertaining to Iran and the United States' commitment to Israel's security, Price said.

They also agreed to work on Israel's inclusion in the US Visa Waiver Program.

Bennett is scheduled to meet with US President Joe Biden at the White House on Thursday.

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US Federal Judge Imposes Sanctions Against Ex-Trump Lawyers Over Election Lawsuit - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has imposed sanctions against nine former Trump attorneys, including Sidney Powell and Lin Wood, for pushing false voter fraud claims regarding the 2020 presidential election, court documents revealed.

"Individuals may have a right (within certain bounds) to disseminate allegations of fraud unsupported by law or fact in the public sphere. But attorneys cannot exploit their privilege and access to the judicial process to do the same. And when an attorney has done so, sanctions are in order," US District Judge Linda Parker said in the court ruling on Wednesday.

The other designated attorneys include Julia Haller, Brandon Johnson, Scott Hagerstrom, Howard Kleinhendler, Gregory Rohl, Emily Newman, and Stafanie Lynn Junttila, the court documents showed.

Judge Parker said the attorneys face possible disbarment pending a decision by the appropriate disciplinary authority for the jurisdiction where each attorney is admitted.

Following the 2020 presidential election, former US President Donald Trump declared that his victory was stolen via massive fraud and acts of impropriety. His legal team accused the Smartmatic software company and the Dominion Voting Systems, of participation in a fraudulent scheme to ensure his failure in the election.

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State Dept. Tells US Citizens to Leave Gates at Kabul Airport Immediately Due to Threats

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is warning Americans in Afghanistan to immediately avoid the gates at the Kabul international airport due to security threats in the area.

"Due to threats outside the Kabul airport, US citizens should avoid traveling to the airport and avoid airport gates unless you receive instructions to do so," the State Department said in an advisory on Wednesday. "Those at the Abbey Gate, East Gate, or North Gate now should leave immediately."

The Biden administration is the last several days warned that there is a growing risk that the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) may be planning an attack at the Kabul airport.

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Biden Signs PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act Launching Service Dog Program - White House

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed House Resolution 1448 into law, consequently launching a Department of Veterans Affairs program to provide canine support training to veterans, the White House said.

"On Wednesday, August 25, 2021, the President signed into law: H.R. 1448, the 'Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers for Veterans Therapy Act' or the 'PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act,' which requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy and authorizes the VA to provide service dogs to certain qualifying veterans," the White House said on Wednesday.

The legislation calls on the Veterans Affairs Secretary to launch a pilot program to provide canine training to eligible veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as an element of a "complementary and integrative health program" for them.

The White House thanked Senators Kyrsten Sinema, Thom Tillis, Kevin Cramer and Maggie Hassan for their work on the issue as well as Congressmen Steve Stivers, Kathleen Rice and Elissa Slotkin.

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Austin, Israel's Bennett Discuss Iran Nuclear Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met and discussed Iran's nuclear program, its support backing of militia groups in the Middle East, and its maritime activity, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Today in Washington, DC, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to reaffirm the US commitment to the strategic partnership and addressing regional security challenges together," Kirby said in a press release on Wednesday. "The leaders discussed the wide range of threats posed by Iran's nuclear program, support of terrorism and maritime aggression."

Austin emphasized the United States' commitment to stabilize the Middle East, including through military cooperation, Kirby said.

Austin and Bennett also agreed for the United States and Israel to cooperate in the field air and missile defense, Kirby said. The US Defense Secretary reaffirmed the United States' commitment to maintaining Israel's military edge in the region, he added.

Bennett is scheduled to meet with US President Joe Biden at the White House on Wednesday.

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US Space Development Agency to Look at Proliferating Satellites to Counter Threats - Chief

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Biden, Israel's Bennett to Talk Iran Nuclear Program, Other Regional Issues - US Official

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will meet at the White House on Thursday to discuss the Iran's nuclear program, relations with the Palestinians and the political crisis in Lebanon among other regional issues, a senior Biden administration official told reporters.

"Iran's nuclear program has just dramatically broken out of the box and is accelerating from week to week, it's a very serious problem and the two leaders I think will have the opportunity to sit together and discuss what to do about it," the official said during a conference call on Wednesday.

Prior to meeting with Biden, Bennett will meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday and Iran will be the focus of the discussions, the official said.

Biden and Bennett will also discuss US support to Israel for normalizing relations with the Arab nations, especially with Egypt, and the issue of expanding the Abraham Accord agreements, the official said.

In addition, the two leaders will discuss the Middle East peace process, the official said, noting that Biden continues to support a two-state solution.

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Biden, Israel's Bennett to Talk Expanding Abraham Accords to Other Nations - US Official

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will discuss the opportunity to expand the Abraham Accords to other nations in the Middle East, a senior US administration official told reporters on a conference call.

"In terms of expanding broader normalization agreements, expansion of the Abraham Accords, we've done an awful lot of work behind the scenes in building upon the breakthroughs with UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and we'll be discussing that with the Israeli delegation this week, but also behind the scenes there's an awful lot of work going on to expand those arrangements to other countries, so that'll also be something that will be a topic of discussion," the official said.

Bennett is leading a delegation on a working visit to Washington this week. The Israeli prime minister will meet Biden on Thursday to discuss a wide range of mutual issues in the Middle East, including Iran, the Palestinians, Lebanon, and other topics, the official said.

Last September, Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates signed agreements — known as the Abraham Accords — on normalizing relations.

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Biden Administration Not De-Prioritizing Middle East Allies, Partners - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not de-prioritizing US allies and partners in the Middle East, a senior administration official told reporters.

"I'm often asked, 'Are we de-prioritizing our friends in the Middle East?' Nothing could be further from the truth," the official said during a conference call.

The official said the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan frees up resources that will enable Washington to better support partners like Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is scheduled to meet US President Joe Biden on Thursday to discuss a wide range of mutually important issues in the Middle East, especially Iran, the official said.

Bennett's visit will be an opportunity for Biden to reaffirm his commitment to Israel's security, self defense and defense needs, the official added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) -

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * US Secretary Antony Blinken said on Wednesday there is no deadline for the United States to help any Americans and Afghan allies seeking to leave Afghanistan after August 31.
- * The Taliban movement (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) is interested in a peaceful border with the countries of Central Asia, in the subsequent establishment of trade and economic cooperation, Russian Ambassador to Kabul Dmitry Zhirnov said.
- * The United States will use every diplomatic and economic tool to ensure US citizens and Afghan allies can leave Afghanistan after the agreed-on August 31 deadline, Blinken said.
- * The United States has managed to safely evacuate over 82,300 people out of Kabul airport since August 14, Blinken announced.
- * A Russian plane with Tajik citizens aboard who were evacuated from Afghanistan on Wednesday landed in Tajikistan, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Four Russian Defense Ministry aircraft with citizens of Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) left Kabul for Russia, the ministry said.

PUTIN-XI TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, noted the demand for effort to preserve the truth and prevent attempts to falsify history, the Kremlin said on Wednesday following their phone negotiations.
- * Putin and Xi Jinping discussed the situation in Afghanistan during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.
- * China supports Russia's efforts to protect its sovereignty and security, Xi Jinping said during a phone conversation with Putin.
- * China is ready to strengthen coordination with Russia and the whole international community over the situation in Afghanistan, Xi Jinping said.

US-RUSSIA SPACE COOPERATION

- * NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told Sputnik on Wednesday that the United States is in talks with Russia about securing seats on the Soyuz spacecraft.
- * Nelson said the United States plans to expand space cooperation with Russia at least through 2030 with a possibility to include commercial stations in addition to the International Space Station.
- * Nelson told Sputnik that he wants Russia to collaborate with the United States on the NASA-led Lunar Gateway project, a proposed space station orbiting the Moon, and will discuss it with the head of Russian space agency Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, at their meeting.

RUSSIA'S MILITARY CONTRACTS WITH CHINA, INDIA

- * Contracts with China, India, Myanmar and other countries have been signed during the Army-2021 forum in the Moscow Region, Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Director Dmitry Shugaev said on Wednesday.
- * Russia's contracts with India signed at the Army-2021 military forum are related to land equipment, while contracts with China cover naval equipment, Shugaev told Sputnik.

NORD STREAM 2

* Nord Stream 2 AG can challenge the decision of the Dusseldorf regional court, which declined to grant the pipeline exemptions from the EU Gas Directive, the court said on Wednesday, reaffirming that the waiver was impossible, since the pipeline construction was not completed.
* Pipeline project operator Nord Stream 2 AG told Sputnik that it does not agree with the ruling of the Dusseldorf regional court, which declined to grant the Nord Stream 2 exemptions from the EU Gas Directive.

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Wall Street's S&P500, Nasdaq Hit Record Highs Ahead of Fed Summit

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US stocks rallied for a third day in a row on Wednesday ahead of a key Federal Reserve policy meeting, with the blue-chip S&P500 and technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite indices setting record highs for a third time in a row. The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, hit a record high of 4,502, before closing at 4,497, up 11 points or 0.2 percent on the day. The index has gained 1.2 percent since Friday's close. Nasdaq, which includes tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, hit an all-time high of 15,059 before settling at 15,042, for a gain of 22 points or 0.2 percent on the day. The Nasdaq has gained 2.2 percent over the past three sessions. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange that lists mostly industrial stocks, did not make a historic high, although it rose as well on the day. The Dow gained 39 points, or 0.1 percent, to close at 35,406. The Nasdaq Composite, which includes tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed up 7 points, or also 0.04%, at 14,823. For the week, the Nasdaq fell 0.1 percent. "The US stock market remains excessively bullish, but still ripe for its first 5 percent pullback in almost a year as a potential peak in stimulus is here," Ed Moya, analyst at the New York brokerage OANDA, said. The Federal Reserve will begin on Thursday a three-day annual summit on monetary policy, dubbed the "Jackson Hole Symposium." Investors will closely watch the event for any signs of tapering the monthly stimulus support of \$120 billion that the central bank has provided the economy and markets via bond purchases since the start of the coronavirus outbreak in 2020.

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Pentagon Evacuating Afghans to 8 Sites in Europe That Can Hold 25,000 - EUROCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense is evacuating Afghan refugees to eight sites across Europe that can shelter at least 25,000 people, Commander of the US European Command General Tod Wolters said on Wednesday.

"When you add them all together, it involves eight separate current sites where we can field 25,000 evacuees and it spans through four countries," Wolters said during a press briefing. Wolters noted Ramstein Air Base in Germany can house 12,000 evacuees; Naval Station Rota in Spain can house 2,000 evacuees; and Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy can house 4,000 evacuees.

There are more 7,000 than Afghan refugees in Ramstein Air Base, but up to 1,800 will be transported to the United States in the next two days, Wolters said.

On August 15, the Taliban (designated a terror group by Russia) seized Kabul, causing the Afghan government to collapse. As a result, many countries have evacuated their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some have pledged to take in a number of Afghan refugees who helped US and Coalition forces during the 20-year war.

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Biden Received Contingency Plans Briefing on US Withdrawal from Afghanistan – White House

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has been briefed earlier in the day on possible contingency plans related to the US withdrawal and evacuation operations in Afghanistan, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We are on track to complete our mission by August 31. Obviously, there are discussions, and the President received a briefing just this morning. As I noted, he asked yesterday for contingency plans and he received a briefing on them this morning," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki explained that Biden requested the contingency plans to include maximum optionality given a number of factors, including the ISIS-K (banned in Russia) threat the need to coordinate with the Taliban (banned in Russia), and about staying in Afghanistan beyond August 31.

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.

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US Plans to Approve Coronavirus Vaccine Boosters for Use 6 Months After 2nd Dose - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US authorities are likely to shorten the period for administering a coronavirus vaccine booster by two months, the Wall Street Journal said on Wednesday.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plans to approve a third vaccine shot for "fully vaccinated" people six months after receiving the second dose, the report said. The previously approved period was eight months.

The FDA plans to approve the boosters for the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson vaccines in mid-September, the report added.

The FDA and the Biden administration declined to comment on the issue.

Pfizer and BioNTech expressed confidence that administering a third dose appeared to be safe during the trials, however, they did not share whether the data included how well a booster shot worked against the coronavirus' Delta variant, the report said.

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Afghan Baby Born On US Plane Named 'Reach' After Call Sign of Aircraft - EUROCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - An Afghan baby girl born onboard a US C-17 military aircraft has been named Reach in tribute to the call sign of the plane her parents were aboard, US European Command commander General Tod Wolters said on Wednesday.

"As you probably know, one baby was actually delivered onboard a C-17... we've had further conversations with the mom and the dad of the baby that was born on the C-17 inbound to Ramstein, they named the little girl 'Reach,'" Walter said during a press briefing. "They did so because the call sign of the C-17 aircraft that flew them from Qatar to Ramstein was 'Reach.'" US Air Mobility Command (AMC) said in a statement that the mother gave birth to the baby on Saturday after she went into labor and began experiencing complications due to low blood pressure. The commander of the aircraft decided to descend to a lower altitude to increase air pressure in the cabin, the statement said.

The mother and baby girl were taken to a local hospital in Germany and are in good condition, AMC said.

On August 15, the Taliban (designated a terror group by Russia) seized Kabul, causing the Afghan government to collapse. As a result, many countries have evacuated their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some have pledged to take in a number of Afghan refugees who helped US and Coalition forces during the 20-year war.

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US Approves \$258M In Sale to S. Korea of Precision Bomb Conversion Kits - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a proposed \$258 million sale to South Korea of guidance kits that convert unguided bombs into precision munitions, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Wednesday.

"The Republic of Korea has requested to buy three thousand nine hundred fifty-three (3,953) Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) Guidance Kits, KMU-556 for GBU-31; one thousand nine hundred eighty-one (1,981) JDAM Guidance Kits, KMU-557 for GBU-31, GBU-56; one thousand one hundred seventy-nine (1,179) JDAM Guidance Kits, KMU-572 for GBU-38; and one thousand seven hundred fifty-five (1,755) FMU-139 Fuze Systems," DSCA said in a press release.

The estimated total cost of the sale is \$258 million, the release added.

JDAM is a guidance kit that converts existing unguided bombs into precision-guided "smart" munitions designed to work in any weather condition. The kit adds an inertial navigational system and links to the global positioning system. In its most accurate mode, when global positioning system data is available, the JDAM system will have an error of less than 40 feet, according to the US Navy.

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US Approves \$350M In Contract to Service Australia Interceptor Missiles - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The State Department has signed off on a \$350 million request from Australia to service future purchases of US Standard Missiles, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Wednesday.

"The government of Australia has requested to buy defense services related to the future purchase of Standard Missile 6 Block I (SM-6) and Standard Missile 2 Block III C (SM-2 III C) missiles," the DSCA said in a press release.

The DSCA explained the services include development, engineering, integration and testing as well as engineering required to ensure readiness at an estimated value is \$350 million.

The proposed sale will support the readiness and future sale of vital anti-air warfare capability that can be deployed from Australia's newest Hunter-Class Destroyers equipped with the latest AEGIS Combat Systems, the release said.

Standard Missile is the US Navy's primary surface-to-air air defense weapon and an integral part of the AEGIS weapon system, according to the Navy.

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US to Use Economic Tools to Ensure People Can Leave Afghanistan After Deadline - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The United States will use every diplomatic and economic tool to ensure US citizens and Afghan allies can leave Afghanistan after the agreed-on August 31 deadline, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday. "We will use every diplomatic, economic assistance tool at our disposal, working hand-in-hand with the international community first and foremost to ensure that those that want to leave Afghanistan after the [August] 31st are able to do so," Blinken said during a press briefing.

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Regional Countries Engaged in Efforts to Play Role in Keeping Kabul Airport Open - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - Regional countries are engaged in efforts to play a role in keeping the Kabul airport open, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday. "There are active efforts underway on the part of regional countries to see whether they can play a role to keep [Kabul] airport open or reopen it if it closes for some time and that is happening very actively right now," Blinken said during a briefing.

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US Pharmacist Admits Guilt in \$180Mln Healthcare Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - A pharmacist and co-owner of multiple compounding pharmacies pleaded guilty to charges involving \$180 million in fraudulent billings of government and private healthcare systems, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday. "As part of this scheme, [Mitchell] Barrett adjusted prescription formulas to ensure the highest reimbursement without regard to efficacy. He solicited recruiters to procure prescriptions for high margin compounded medications and paid those recruiters commissions based on the percentage of reimbursements paid by pharmacy benefit managers and health care benefit programs," the Justice Department said in a press release. According to court documents, Barrett participated in a scheme to defraud TRICARE, a healthcare program for the US military, and other health benefit programs by distributing medically unnecessary compounded medications, the release said. The conduct allegedly resulted in more than \$180 million in fraudulent billings, including more than \$50 million paid by federal health care programs, the release added. Barrett pleaded guilty to conspiracy to engage in monetary transactions in criminally derived property. Co-defendant Thomas Shoemaker, who pleaded guilty earlier in the month, was charged with conspiracy to defraud the United States, according to the release.

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Blinken Says No Deadline for US to Help Americans, Afghan Allies Evacuate

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary Antony Blinken said on Wednesday there is no deadline for the United States to help any Americans and Afghan allies seeking to leave Afghanistan after August 31.

"There is no deadline on our work to help any remaining American citizens who decide they want to leave along with the many Afghans who have stood by us over these many years and want to leave and have been unable to do so, that effort will continue every day past August 31," Blinken said during a press briefing.

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Taliban Vow to Ensure Safe Passage for Americans, At Risk Afghans After Deadline - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (banned in Russia as a terror group) has committed to ensuring safe passage for Americans and at-risk Afghans to the Kabul international airport after the August 31 deadline, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"The Taliban have made public and private commitments to provide and permit safe passage for Americans, for third-country nationals, and Afghans at risk going forward past August 31," Blinken said during a press briefing.

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CIA, US Military Operating Outside Kabul Airport to Rescue More Americans - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The CIA and the US military are still carrying out extraction operations outside Kabul Airport using helicopters and ground troops to rescue and evacuate remaining Americans in Afghanistan, US media reports said on Wednesday.

The CIA is carrying out clandestine operations in these rescue efforts and is using military helicopters, US and other officials told the Wall Street Journal. At the same time, other US regular military forces are seeking to rescue Americans still stranded in the Afghan capital Kabul, the report said.

The CIA and the US military have given priority to evacuating all Americans remaining in Afghanistan over native Afghans considered at risk from the Taliban (banned in Russia) forces who have occupied the capital and almost the entire country, the Journal said.

Those Afghans include thousands who worked as interpreters for US forces and officials and their families, the report continued.

The US Department of Defense has said it is cooperating with the Taliban over security issues at Kabul Airport, the report added.

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Number of Americans Trying to Get Out of Afghanistan May Be Lower Than 1,000 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The number of US citizens trying to get out of Afghanistan may be significantly lower than 1,000, US State Secretary Antony Blinken announced on Wednesday at a briefing.

"For the remaining 1,000 contacts that we have who may be Americans seeking to leave Afghanistan, we are aggressively reaching to them multiple times a day through multiple channels of communication to determine whether they still want to leave. Some may no longer be in the country, some claim to be Americans but they are not, some choose to stay. But from this list we believe that the number of Americans actively trying to get out of Afghanistan may be lower, significantly lower than 1,000," he said.

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More Than 82,300 People Safely Flown Out of Kabul Since August 14 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has managed to safely evacuate over 82,300 people out of Kabul airport since August 14, US State Secretary Antony Blinken announced on Wednesday.

"Since August 14, more than 82,300 have been safely flown out of Kabul," Blinken said at a briefing.

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US Believes 4,100 American Citizens Remain in Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – US authorities believe that more than 4,000 Americans remain in Afghanistan, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing a Senate aid.

State Department officials during a briefing to congressional staff said that at least 4,100 American citizens remain in the country, and not all of them are located in Kabul or in its neighborhoods, the source said.

The United States was able to evacuate about 4,400 Americans so far, he added.

US Army Major General William Taylor told in a press briefing earlier on Wednesday that the US and allies were able to evacuate about 88,000 people from Afghanistan since the beginning of operations.

On August 15, the Taliban (designated as a terror group and banned by Russia) seized Kabul, causing the Afghan government to collapse. As a result, many countries have evacuated their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some have pledged to take in a number of Afghan refugees who helped US and Coalition forces during the 20-year war.

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New York Adds 12,000 COVID-19 Deaths Hidden During Ex-Governor Cuomo's Time - Data

NEW YORK CITY, August 25 (Sputnik) - The state of New York has added around 12,000 COVID-19 deaths to its pandemic toll as governor Kathy Hochul pledged in a radio interview on Wednesday not to cover up nursing home fatalities that her predecessor Andrew Cuomo had tried to pass off as unrelated.

New York State's Department of Health updated the COVID-19 death toll on its website to 55,395 from a previous 43,415, as Hochul told National Public Radio she planned to use data from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, "which will be consistent."

"So, there's no opportunity for us to mask those numbers, nor would I want to mask those numbers," Hochul added.

New York Attorney General Letitia James said in January that investigations by her office showed the Cuomo-led state administration undercounted coronavirus-related deaths at nursing homes by as much as 50 percent.

New York was one of the biggest COVID-19 hotspots at the height of the pandemic's breakout in the first half of 2020.

At its peak, the state had about 18,000 people in hospital with roughly 800 people dying a day from complications caused by the virus.

The 63-year-old Cuomo, who was New York governor for a decade, resigned in mid-August after another investigation led by Attorney General James found he had sexually harassed nearly a dozen women colleagues. Cuomo has denied any wrongdoing.

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US Appeals Court Upholds Death Sentence for Dylann Roof for Church Massacre – Ruling

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Court of Appeals on Wednesday upheld the death penalty for Dylann Roof for murdering nine African-Americans attending the Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015.

"They had welcomed him. He slaughtered them," the ruling said. "When apprehended, he frankly confessed, with barely a hint of remorse... His crimes qualify him for the harshest penalty that a just society can impose," the ruling said.

Roof carried out his crime with the express intent of terrorizing not just his immediate victims but as many similar people as would hear of the mass murder. He used the internet to plan his attack and, using his crimes as a catalyst, intended to foment racial division and strife across America.

"He wanted the widest possible publicity for his atrocities, and, to that end, he purposefully left one person alive in the church 'to tell the story.' When apprehended, he frankly confessed, with barely a hint of remorse," the judges said in their ruling.

In July, US Attorney General Merrick Garland issued a moratorium suspending all federal executions and ordered the Department of Justice Department to review execution policies.

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Canada's Foreign Minister Says Situation on Ground in Afghanistan 'Deteriorating Rapidly'

TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) – Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Wednesday the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is worsening by the minute.

"We are racing against the clock. The situation on the ground is deteriorating rapidly and the security risks associated with our efforts are rising as the final departure date approaches," Garneau said during a press briefing.

Canada, among other allies, is in a rush to get as many people out as possible before August 31, the US-imposed deadline to leave Afghanistan.

Ottawa preferred to remain in Afghanistan beyond the August 31 deadline but was ultimately overruled by the United States' reluctance to delay the withdrawal, Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan told reporters at the same briefing.

Sajjan explained that Canada and other foreign troops must pull out ahead of the United States, which is leading the mission to secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, one of the few remaining options out of the country.

To date, Canada has evacuated over 2,700 people out of Afghanistan, including some 1,500 in the past three days, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said during the press briefing.

Ottawa has vowed to relocate some 20,000 Afghan nationals, who are most at risk of Taliban reprisals, to Canada.

Canada's defense chief also rejected suggestions that the ongoing federal election, called by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the day Kabul fell to the Taliban, is having an impact on Ottawa's ability to manage its role in the Afghan crisis.

"I've been focused solely on getting as many Afghans out," Sajjan said, noting that his campaign team is managing the election drive.

Trudeau and his officials have borne the brunt of the criticism for a chaotic campaign to evacuate Canadians and Afghan refugees, with some reports saying those stranded have been told by Canadian officials to wear red articles of clothing and yell "Canada."

During a campaign stop in Vancouver, Trudeau said he is being briefed on Afghanistan on a daily basis, when asked if he would suspend his campaign to deal with the deepening crisis. The Taliban (banned in Russia) militants entered the Afghan capital on August 15, ending a weeks-long offensive and resulting in the collapse of the US-backed government. The seizure of power has forced thousands of Afghans to seek refuge from the country for fear of reprisals from the militants. Thousands of Afghans continue to break into the Kabul airport in hopes of flying out of the country.

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US Invests \$54Mln to Boost Energy Efficiency in Microelectronics Technology - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - Ten projects will receive \$54 million to fund research to design and produce microelectronics devices that require less power to make and operate, the US Energy Department (DOE) said on Wednesday.

"The projects announced today, led by diverse groups of researchers at DOE National Labs and experts in academia and industry, will aim to increase energy efficiency and functionality while stimulating US-based innovation as the foundation for future domestic technology development and manufacturing," the Energy Department said in a press release.

The Energy Department noted in the release that miniaturization of microelectronic devices has spawned a digital revolution, resulting in smaller and more powerful devices, like phones and computers.

But that continual shrinking, commonly known as Moore's Law, now faces technological and economic obstacles, because the energy required for production has not been reduced at the same pace, the release said.

Significant investments in research and development are now required to increase energy efficiency and create more sustainable technology systems that can carry the field into the future, the release added.

Total funding of \$54 million for projects lasting up to three years, includes \$18 million in fiscal 2021 and outyear funding contingent on congressional appropriations, according to the release.

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Trudeau Says Will Raise Corporate Tax on Largest Banks, Insurers if Re-Elected

TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday vowed to raise taxes on the country's largest banks and insurance companies if he is re-elected given that affordability emerges as a key issue in the upcoming national election.

"We will raise the corporate income tax rate for Canada's largest and most profitable banks and insurance companies by 3 percentage points on all earnings over a billion dollars," Trudeau said during a campaign stop in Vancouver.

When asked about how the increased rate would impact seniors, whose pension funds are usually invested in Canadian banks and other financial institutions, Trudeau said financial institutions have made "extraordinary profits" during the coronavirus pandemic and now is time to ask them to share the wealth.

Trudeau also said the elections allow Canadians to make decisions about how they wish to be governed. The statement came in response to a question about why this pledge came during an election and not sooner, while, simultaneously, taking a shot at rival New Democrats, who have called for additional levies on banks for months.

Canada is holding its 44th national election after Governor General Mary Simon accepted Trudeau's request to dissolve parliament and hold a vote on September 20.

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US Appeals Court Upholds Death Sentence for Dylann Roof for Church Massacre - Ruling

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Court of Appeals on Wednesday upheld the death penalty for Dylann Roof for murdering nine African-Americans attending the Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015.

"They had welcomed him. He slaughtered them," the ruling said. "When apprehended, he frankly confessed, with barely a hint of remorse. ... His crimes qualify him for the harshest penalty that a just society can impose," the ruling said.

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Greenhouse Gases, Other Climate Change Indicators Set New Records in 2020 - US Report

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – Multiple indicators of global warming ranging from rising sea levels to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere set new records in 2020, according to the annual "State of the Climate" report by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) on Wednesday.

"Several markers such as sea level, ocean heat content, and permafrost once again broke records set just one year prior. Notably, carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in the atmosphere also reached record highs in 2020, even with an estimated 6%–7% reduction of CO₂ emissions due

to the economic slowdown from the global pandemic," a press release explaining the report said.

Among other indicators of climate change, average global surface temperatures were 0.54°–0.62° Celsius above the 1981-2010 average, placing 2020 among the three warmest years since records began in the mid- to late-1800s, the release said.

Global sea levels rose to a new record high for the ninth consecutive year, to levels about 3.6 inches above the 1993 average. Upper-ocean heat also reached record highs, a development that can stronger hurricanes and increase melting rates of ice in glaciers around Greenland and Antarctica, the release said.

The Arctic also continued to warm, with average surface air temperatures for land areas the highest going back 121 years. On June 20, a temperature of 38°C was observed at Verkhoyansk, Russia, provisionally the highest temperature ever measured within the Arctic Circle, the release added.

When the Arctic minimum sea ice extent was reached in September, it was the second smallest in 42-years of satellite measurements, behind 2012, according to the release.

The report was compiled by NOAA, with contributions from more than 530 scientists from over 60 countries, according to the release.

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Canada Has Airlifted Over 2,700 People Out of Afghanistan – Immigration Minister
TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) – Canada has evacuated over 2,700 people out of Afghanistan, including some 1,500 in the past three days, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said on Wednesday.

"Canada has airlifted over 2,700 people out of Kabul," Mendicino said during a press briefing, noting the figure includes Canadian nationals, refugees and other foreign nationals.

According to Mendicino, there were 436 people evacuated on August 22, 506 on August 23 and 535, the largest number of evacuees on any Canadian flight, yesterday.

Over 1,000 of those evacuated have already arrived in Canada, including 300, who have already completed the mandatory 14-day COVID-19 quarantine period for international arrivals, Mendicino added.

The Taliban (banned in Russia) militants entered the Afghan capital on August 15, ending a weeks-long offensive and resulting in the collapse of the US-backed government. The seizure of power has forced thousands of Afghans to seek refuge from the country for fear of reprisals from the militants. Thousands of Afghans continue to break into the Kabul airport in hopes of flying out of the country.

Ottawa has vowed to relocate some 20,000 Afghan nationals, who are most at risk of Taliban reprisals, to Canada.

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US Oil Consumption Up 2 Weeks in Row as Late Summer Demand Increases - Energy Agency

NEW YORK, August 25 (Sputnik) - Weekly drawdowns in US crude oil and gasoline were higher than expected for a second week in a row, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday, suggesting a late summer season spike in energy demand. US commercial crude oil inventories fell by 2.98 million barrels in the week to August 20, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

Analysts polled by US media had expected a drawdown of 2 million barrels instead. In the previous week to August 13, crude stockpiles fell by 3.23 million barrels versus a forecast drop of 1.06 million.

Gasoline stockpiles also fell more than expected last week, drawing down 2.24 million barrels against an expected decline of 1.5 million, the EIA data showed.

Distillate inventories bucked the trend, rising by 645,000 barrels versus an expected slide of 900,000.

US oil demand was overwhelmingly strong in the first two months of summer, with almost 50 million barrels of crude being drawn down at one point over nine straight weeks by refiners to produce gasoline - the main motor fuel during the peak of the driving season.

Since, a resurgence of coronavirus cases have put a damper on oil demand, causing spotty demand trends. US oil prices have also been volatile lately, falling from around \$70 a barrel three weeks ago to just above \$62 at the start of this week, before recovering to above \$67 now.

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US House Panel Asks Pentagon, Other Agencies to Provide Records on Capitol Riot - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives panel investigating the January 6 Capitol riot sent a letter on Wednesday to the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice and four other agencies, requesting records related to the attack.

"Pursuant to the purposes and functions set forth in House Resolution 503, the Select Committee requests that you produce the documents described in the attached schedule in your custody, control, or possession," the letter said. Please produce this information to the Select Committee no later than September 9, 2021."

The House panel demands the agencies provide the requested documents and communications between November 3, 2020 and January 20, 2021.

The panel said it especially wants any records concerning possible attempts by former President Donald Trump to remain in office despite losing the 2020 presidential election to then Democratic-nominee Joe Biden.

In addition, the House panel also wants all records concerning Trump's efforts to push voter fraud claims.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the lawmakers certifying the 2020 election results. Trump has claimed the election results in several

US states were invalid due to election and voter fraud and robbed him of election victory. The authorities shot one protester dead during the incident and charged 500 people for participating in the event.

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NASA Chief Says US in Space Race With China, Wants Beijing as Partner

COLORADO SPRINGS, August (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson believes that the United States is now in space race with China, however, wants to see China as a partner. "Unfortunately, I believe we are in the space race with China," Nelson said at the 36th Space Symposium on Wednesday. "I would like, speaking on behalf of the United States, for China to be a partner."

The NASA administrator added that China is "very secretive and part of the civilian space program is that you've got to be transparent."

Since April this year, China began constructing its own space station, dubbed Tiangong, in low-earth orbit. In June, three Chinese astronauts became the first inhabitants on the spacecraft.

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Canada's Foreign Minister Says Situation on Ground in Afghanistan 'Deteriorating Rapidly'

TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) – Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Monday the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is worsening by the minute. "We are racing against the clock. The situation on the ground is deteriorating rapidly and the security risks associated with our efforts are rising as the final departure date approaches," Garneau said during a press briefing.

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US, Allies Evacuated 88,000 People From Afghanistan Since July - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The total number of people evacuated from Afghanistan by the United States and allied countries since the beginning of the evacuation operation in July has reached 88,000, US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Wednesday. "To date, approximately 88,000 have safely departed from Afghanistan," Taylor said during a Defense Department press briefing.

Taylor noted that the United States alone has evacuated between 58,000 and 60,000 individuals while the rest of the evacuees were transported out of Afghanistan by NATO allies and partners.

On August 15, the Taliban (designated as a terror group and banned by Russia) seized Kabul, causing the Afghan government to collapse. As a result, many countries have evacuated their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some have pledged to take in a number of Afghan refugees who helped US and Coalition forces during the 20-year war.

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Pentagon Says Cannot Confirm Reports of ISIS Affiliate Boarding Afghan Evacuation Flight

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby was unable to confirm reports during a press briefing on Wednesday that an individual affiliated with the Islamic State terror group (ISIS, banned in Russia) may have boarded one of the evacuation flights departing from Afghanistan.

"I've seen similar press reporting on this, I just don't have anything to update you on that, I don't have any information," Kirby said in response to a question about reports of an ISIS affiliate boarding one of the flights. "It's really a better question put to the Department of Homeland Security."

Kirby said that even though the goal is to get people to safety as quickly as possible, they are still being screened by intelligence and security services such as the Department of Homeland security.

Sources told CNN earlier on Wednesday that the US is concerned about a threat stream from ISIS-Khorasan, the group's Afghan branch, after over 100 prisoners loyal to them escaped from two prisons near Kabul.

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Canada Wanted to Stay in Afghanistan Beyond August 31 Withdrawal Deadline - Officials

TORONTO, August 25 (Sputnik) - Canada preferred to stay in Afghanistan beyond the US-agreed August 31 deadline to withdraw but was ultimately overruled by the United States' reluctance to delay the withdrawal, Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan said on Wednesday.

"We would have like to have stayed beyond the [August 31] deadline but, as you know, this decision has been made by the American," Sajjan said during a press briefing.

Canada's top diplomat, Marc Garneau, noted that the situation on the ground in the war-torn country is "rapidly deteriorating."

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US Plans to Expand Space Cooperation With Russia Through 2030 - NASA Chief

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Wednesday that the United States plans to expand space cooperation with Russia at least through 2030 with a possibility to include commercial stations in addition to the International Space Station. "We expect our Russian partners to continue with us and... to expand the space station as a government project all the way to 2030 and we hope it will be followed by the commercial stations," Nelson said on the sidelines of the 36th Space Symposium underway in Colorado.

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US Military Evacuated Over 4,400 Americans From Kabul to Date - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US military has evacuated 4,400 Americans from the Kabul international airport to date, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Right now today, north of 4,400," Kirby said during a press briefing in response to a request to provide an update on the total number of Americans who have been evacuated from Kabul. Kirby added he does not have the total number of Americans still waiting to be evacuated. US Army Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor, a logistics specialist on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said during the briefing that the United States and its allies have evacuated about 88,000 people from Kabul since the end of July.

On August 15, the Taliban (designated as a terror group and banned by Russia) seized Kabul, causing the Afghan government to collapse. As a result, many countries have evacuated their citizens and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan due to the precarious security situation, and some have pledged to take in a number of Afghan refugees who helped US and Coalition forces during the 20-year war.

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US Defense Secretary Issues Memo Making COVID-19 Vaccination Mandatory For All Personnel

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin issued on Wednesday a memorandum for mandatory vaccinations against COVID-19 for the defense ministry personnel, the Pentagon announced on Wednesday.

"The memo directs the Secretaries of the Military Departments to immediately begin full vaccination of all members of the Armed Forces under DoD authority on active duty or in the Ready Reserve, including the National Guard, who are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19," the statement said.

The vaccination will include only COVID-19 vaccines that have received full licensure from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Earlier in August, Austin released a memo saying that the Defense Department intends to make the vaccinations mandatory for service members by mid-September or when the FDA officially approves it, whichever comes first. Austin's initiative was hailed by US President Joe Biden.

On Monday, the FDA granted its full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine making it the first vaccine that has been fully licensed for use in individuals 16 years and older in the United States. Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it was working on guidance that will require all service members to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus following the issuance of full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by the FDA.

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US Conducts Overnight Helicopter Operation to Bring People to Kabul Airport - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US military conducted another helicopter operation on Tuesday night to bring individuals seeking to evacuate Afghanistan to the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Wednesday.

"Last night, during the period of darkness, there was an operation to be able to go out and safely evacuate evacuees back into Kabul. They are at HKIA, and they are safely there preparing to be evacuated," Taylor said during a press briefing.

Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby added that it was a helicopter operation involving less than 20 individuals.

Kirby said that the US has done a total of three helicopter evacuations to transport evacuees to the airport.

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Delta Air to Impose Insurance Surcharge for Unvaccinated Workers After Biden Call - CEO

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - Delta Air Lines said on Wednesday that it will impose an insurance surcharge on employees who have not received a coronavirus vaccine in response to

President Joe Biden's urging companies in the United States to mandate inoculation against the virus.

Delta did not refer specifically to Biden's call, saying its decision was financially-driven, although it was clear that only vaccinated employees would enjoy full job protection from the company.

"Beginning Nov. 1, unvaccinated employees enrolled in Delta's account-based healthcare plan will be subject to a \$200 monthly surcharge," Delta Chief Executive Ed Bastian said in a message posted on the company website.

Bastian said the change was necessary to address the financial risk that Delta faced on behalf of unvaccinated employees.

"The average hospital stay for COVID-19 has cost Delta \$40,000 per person," he said, noting that all employees hospitalized in recent weeks were unvaccinated amid the resurgence of the virus via the B.1.617.2 variant - also known as the "Delta variant."

Bastian also said that effective September 30, COVID-19 pay protection will only be provided to fully vaccinated individuals who are experiencing a breakthrough infection.

On Monday, Biden called on US companies to mandate coronavirus vaccines for their employees, voicing strong support for such requirements following the Food and Drug Administration's approval for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

"We can be confident that the Pfizer vaccine is safe and effective, and has undergone the same rigorous review for other approved medications to treat cancer and heart disease, as well as other vaccines," Bastian said.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a study published on Wednesday that the vaccine effectiveness appears to have dropped from 91 percent to 66 percent with the Delta variant accounting for the majority of new infections.

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US Has 5,400 Troops On Ground In Afghanistan, Down From 5,800 Peak - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US has withdrawn about 400 troops from Afghanistan and brought the total number of personnel on the ground to approximately 5,400 people, Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We still have on the ground about 5,400 of the 5,800 that we reached at the maximum," Kirby said during a press briefing.

He said that some of the withdrawn troops had already been at Hamid Karzai International Airport prior to the recent surge, while others were headquarters staff and other support personnel whose missions were deemed completed.

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US Charges Arsonist Who Burned 4 Churches With Civil Rights Violations - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – The US charged a 28-year-old man in the state of Tennessee, who allegedly set four churches on fire, with violating civil rights laws, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

“Alan Douglas Fox, 28, of Nashville, was charged by criminal information with setting fire to the Crieewood United Methodist Church on June 17, 2019; the Crieewood Baptist Church on June 25, 2019; the Saint Ignatius of Antioch Catholic Church on June 25, 2019; and the Priest Lake Community Baptist Church on June 26, 2019,” Justice said in a press release.

The release alleged that Fox intentionally set the fires because of the “religious character of the churches.”

Fox was charged with civil rights violations and with using a firearm during the arson of Crieewood Baptist Church, the release added.

If convicted, Fox faces up to 20 years in prison for each fire, and a five-year sentence for the firearms violation, according to the release.

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US Conducted Overnight Helicopter Operation to Bring People to Kabul Airport - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The US military conducted another helicopter operation on Tuesday night to bring individuals seeking to evacuate Afghanistan to the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, US Army Major General William Taylor said on Wednesday.

“Last night, during the period of darkness, there was an operation to be able to go out and safely evacuate evacuees back into Kabul. They are at HKIA, and they are safely there preparing to be evacuated,” Taylor said during a press briefing.

Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby added that it was a helicopter operation involving less than 20 individuals.

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Kabul Airport Will Not Be US Responsibility After Withdrawal – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – The United States will not be responsible for the Kabul airport after the withdrawal from Afghanistan as the Taliban (banned in Russia) will be managing it along with the United Nations, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

“When we are leaving the airport, the [Kabul] airport will not be the United States’ responsibility anymore. So how it gets managed going forward will be something the Taliban, who are now in Kabul, will have to manage them on their own with the UN,” Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US to Prioritize Military Evacuation Out of Afghanistan During Last 2 Days – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – The US will prioritize evacuating military resources out of Afghanistan in the final two days before the full withdrawal deadline on August 31, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We are going to try to preserve as much capability as we can at the airport, so in those last couple of days, we will begin to prioritize military capabilities and military resources to move out," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby clarified that such prioritizing does not mean that those people who will be willing to evacuate in the last days will be barred from doing so.

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US Evacuated 88,000 People From Afghanistan Since August 14 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - The total number of people evacuated from Afghanistan since the beginning of the evacuation operation on August 14 has reached 88,000, US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Wednesday.

"To date, approximately 88,000 have safely departed from Afghanistan," Taylor said during a Defense Department press briefing.

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Over 400 US Troops Departed Kabul Ahead of Withdrawal Deadline - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - More than 400 US troops have departed Kabul, Afghanistan, ahead of the August 31 withdrawal deadline, Fox News reported on Wednesday. Some 10,000 people remain inside the Kabul airport awaiting to be evacuated, the report said citing US officials.

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Over 3 in 4 Vaccinated Americans Plan to Get Booster Jab If Recommended – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – US adults vaccinated against COVID-19 are largely on board with plans to introduce booster shots, with more than three-quarters saying they will get the jab if health authorities approve, a Morning Consult poll said on Wednesday.

“New Morning Consult polling indicates the U.S. public is largely on board, with 77 percent of vaccinated adults saying they’d get an extra dose if it’s recommended for them,” a press release explaining the survey said.

Twelve percent said they were unsure while 5 percent said they would not get the booster jab, the release added.

Plans to provide booster shots reflect data suggesting that vaccine immunity fades over time, prompting the Biden administration to begin offering the jabs beginning in September to individuals eight months after being vaccinated.

At the same time, the Food and Drug Administration had yet to recommend booster shots. The jabs are already available for vaccinated people with compromised immune systems.

The survey was conducted August 19-22 among 2,200 US adults, with a 2-point margin of error for the overall sample and a 3 percentage point error margin for vaccinated adults, according to the release.

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US Defense Contractor Eric Prince Charges \$6,500 for Flights Out of Kabul - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) - US defense contractor Erik Prince - founder of the security services firm Blackwater - is charging \$6,500 per seat for flights out of Kabul, Afghanistan, servicing stranded US citizens and foreign nationals, the Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday.

The evacuation of diplomatic missions, foreign nationals and Afghans has been underway since the takeover of the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) on August 15, but has become particularly urgent as the Biden administration decided to pull US troops out by August 31, leaving chaotic scenes of people scrambling to get to the Kabul airport to leave Afghanistan. The Taliban has encircled the airport and is trying to prevent individuals from reaching the facility.

The report said Prince announced the price will be higher for services involving extricating people who have not been able to reach the Kabul airport and are trapped in their homes or elsewhere.

Blackwater, which has since been renamed to Academi, gained notoriety in 2007 after its employees gunned down 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad while under contract by the US government.

The US authorities have investigated Prince for sending mercenaries to foreign governments after he went into business with China’s largest state-owned investment firm in 2014 and founded the Hong Kong-based Frontier Services Group. Prince has denied the charges.

In early, 2021 Prince was accused of allegedly violating the UN arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2019, by delivering weapons to the Libyan National Army when it attempted to overthrow the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord.

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Moderna Completes FDA Process For Vaccine License – Release

WASHINGTON, August 25 (Sputnik) – Moderna has completed its submission procedure to apply for a full Food and Drug Administration (FDA) biologics license for its COVID-19 vaccine, the biotechnology company said on Monday.

"Moderna, a biotechnology company pioneering messenger RNA therapeutics and vaccines, today announced it has completed the rolling submission process for its Biologics License Application (BLA) to the FDA for the full licensure of the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine," the company said in a press release.

The vaccine is used for active immunization to prevent COVID-19 in individuals 18 years of age and older and as part of the completed BLA submission, Moderna has requested Priority Review designation, the release explained.

"This BLA submission for our COVID-19 vaccine... is an important milestone in our battle against COVID-19 and for Moderna," Chief Executive Officer Stéphane Bancel said. "We are pleased that our COVID-19 vaccine is showing durable efficacy of 93 percent through six months after dose 2."

The Moderna vaccine is currently available in the United States for individuals 18 years of age and older under an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) granted by the FDA on December 18, 2020. Since then, Moderna has released more than 300 million doses of the vaccine to the US government, the company said