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What is the 'Shadow Docket' the US Supreme Court Uses to Fast-Forward Through Cases?
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration was handed two stinging defeats this week by lightning-fast US Supreme Court rulings on the eviction moratorium and the "wait in Mexico" immigration policy. Now, one of the court's justices is speaking out about the mechanism behind such quick and increasingly consequential rulings: the shadow docket.

"I can't say never decide a shadow-docket thing," Associate Justice Stephen Breyer told the [New York Times](#) on Friday. "Not 'never.' But be careful. And I've said that in print. I'll probably say it more."

According to the [American Bar](#) Association, the term "shadow docket" was only coined in 2015, but as a practice goes back to the creation of the court in 1789, when the US Constitution was adopted. Essentially, the shadow docket is a mechanism by which the court can hand down decisions quickly, without going through the process of hearing oral arguments, receiving amici curiae filings, or having to write out lengthy philosophical tracts explaining the jurisprudence underpinning their decision.

According to the Bar, the court only sparsely used the power before the 21st century, reserving it for "typically unremarkable scenarios" such as denying uncontroversial petitions for certiorari or emergency relief applications that clearly weren't emergencies, or to grant parties more time to file briefs. The rare and exceptional cases that made it through were those that proved the applicant would suffer "irreparable harm" if their request wasn't immediately granted.

Between 2001 and 2017, the court only granted eight such applications, according to a count by [The Atlantic](#), but after Donald Trump assumed the presidency in 2017, the pace accelerated rapidly, with 41 applications accepted during his four-year tenure.

Moreover, the cases began to assume greater and greater importance, addressing contentious topics in American political discourse, such as the US-Mexico border wall and federal executions.

In the second half of 2020 alone, shadow docket orders allowed the federal government to execute six people, vacating stays and injunctions to clear the way for their executions as the Trump administration rushed to revive the practice in its final months in power for the first time in 17 years.

In February 2021, the House Judiciary Committee launched a probe into the spike in shadow docket cases, holding a hearing at which legal experts brought lawmakers up to speed on the practice.

The hearing around broad support among both Republicans and Democrats for reforming the way the judiciary functions - a power the legislature holds but which, [according to Slate](#), it has often been reluctant to wield.

A major problem is that while the nation's high court is supposed to guide lower courts with their jurisprudence, shadow docket rulings rarely supply adequate fodder for judges to interpret their own cases with. This problem arose recently in the US District Court for the District of Columbia when [earlier this month](#), District Judge Dabney Friedrich found herself unable to interpret the Supreme Court's [June 29 ruling](#) on the federal eviction moratorium because she didn't know what the justices' thinking was behind it.

On Thursday, the Supreme Court again issued a shadow docket ruling on the moratorium, striking it down with an [eight-page ruling](#) less than a week after it was appealed to the court. The same process was used just two days earlier in a ruling forcing the Biden administration to [reverse course and reinstate](#) the Migrant Protection Protocol, better known as the "remain in Mexico" rule, which the Department of Homeland Security formally abolished in June. The ruling [had just 101 words](#) and fit on a single sheet of paper.

Congress has the power to force the court to hear certain cases, and can also regulate its conduct in some capacity. According to Slate, the problem with the shadow docket isn't that it exists, but that the Supreme Court's [six-judge conservative majority](#) has decided to stop following the rules about only using the shadow docket to avoid irreparable harm. Congress could force the court to follow those rules once again.

However, the likelihood of federal lawmakers taking on such a fight seems slim when Democrats cannot even take action [against the filibuster](#), a Senate rule with even less staying power than the shadow docket and which can be erased outright if the Democrats had the willpower.

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Pakistan's NatSec Chief Urges US to 'Move Forward as Partners' With Taliban Instead of Disengaging
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Presiding over a country ruined by decades of war and treatment as an international pariah, the Afghan Taliban* have shown an increased interest in winning international recognition and investment, in contrast to their rule 20 years ago. However, most nations seem to be taking a "wait and see" approach to their promises.

Pakistan's national security adviser has urged the US not to pull away from Afghanistan diplomatically and economically as its final troops withdraw, saying Western nations have much more weight than Islamabad to ensure that a stable government forms under Taliban rule. "Now that the Taliban has the whole country, they don't really need Islamabad as much anymore," Pakistani national security adviser Moeed Yusuf told [the Washington Post](#) on Wednesday.

"Assistance and recognition is the leverage. Who has that? It's the Western countries that have much more leverage in Afghanistan than Pakistan."

After the US-backed Afghan government quickly collapsed before a Taliban offensive earlier this month, the Islamist militant group gave wide assurances that their new government would not allow terrorist groups to operate in the country and that they would respect the rights of women

and minorities, within the scope of their understanding of Sharia, which in the past has been both strict and brutal.

The promises, which could go a long way toward stabilizing the country after more than four decades of war, are highly sought by both the US and [Afghanistan's neighbors](#), which have coordinated among themselves a united front of non-interference, but made clear that recognition, investment and economic integration can only come about under a stable Afghan government.

"We need to work out how to move forward as partners, because neither side can do without the other in terms of stability in the region," Yusuf urged. "If a security vacuum is left in Afghanistan by abandoning it, you will see that these terrorist organizations take root again. Let's not kid ourselves."

The Afghan Taliban has promised Islamabad that it won't allow Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TPP), a loosely aligned group of terrorist cells on Pakistan's side of the border, to operate on the Afghan side any longer. Likewise, they have promised the US not to allow al-Qaeda to use their ground, and promised China not to allow the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) shelter in Afghanistan, either.

Massive infrastructure investment is sure to flow from Afghanistan's neighbors via projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or the wider regional integration if the country is invited to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

If their method is honey, the method used by the US and UK to urge creating an inclusive and stable Afghan government has so far been vinegar. [Washington has frozen](#) the Afghan central bank's \$9.4 billion in assets and up to 80% of the country's [budget has dried up](#) in the last month, as US direct financial assistance to access to foreign credit and investment by international agencies are withheld.

"As a practical matter it advances our interests" to engage with the Taliban, US Secretary of State Antony [Blinken told reporters](#) earlier this week. He added 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.

Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi urged](#) his British counterpart not to be so aggressive in trying to influence the Taliban's policies. On Thursday, Yusuf echoed those words when speaking with a group of British political leaders.

According to the [Associated Press of Pakistan](#), Yusuf urged them not to "repeat the mistakes of the 1990s, when Afghanistan and Pakistan were abandoned, and Pakistan was sanctioned after having been a frontline ally for a decade," adding that "the need of the hour was for the international community to remain constructively engaged and use its leverage in a coordinated manner to influence Taliban's policy."

On Friday, [Al Jazeera reported](#), citing Taliban inside sources, that the group was forming an "inclusive caretaker government" that would have tribal leaders from all of the nation's different ethnicities.

According to the report, women will be allowed to work in various government bodies "as they did in the previous government," although under that government, which lasted from 1996 to

2001, women all but disappeared from public life. Still, this time around they have pledged to allow women and girls to [attend school](#), which wasn't allowed before.

The report didn't give a timeframe for how long the caretaker government would be in place, only saying it would last long enough to decide on a permanent government layout.

The US withdrawal, scheduled to be completed by August 31, spells the final end to almost 20 years of occupation and a war that has killed perhaps [as many as 500,000 Afghans](#), via direct and indirect means, and sent millions more seeking refuge far from their homes. The US invasion came just weeks after al-Qaeda carried out September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Virginia from its bases in Afghanistan, although the hijackers themselves weren't Afghans.

The Taliban, which had sheltered al-Qaeda, was quickly thrown out of power, but soon launched an insurgency in the countryside that the US and its allies couldn't uproot. By February 2020, the US had signed a ceasefire with the Taliban and agreed to withdraw all its troops by May 2021, although that was later extended to August 31 by Washington.

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US Intelligence Releases Report on COVID-19 Origins, Says Outbreak Was Natural, Not a Bioweapon

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US intelligence community (IC) has released a brief, unclassified summary of its probe into the origins of COVID-19, saying the virus was unknown to the Chinese government prior to the outbreak in Hubei in late 2019.

"The IC assesses that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, probably emerged and infected humans through an initial small-scale exposure that occurred no later than November 2019 with the first known cluster of COVID-19 cases arising in Wuhan, China, in December 2019," the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in the [report released on Friday](#).

"In addition, the IC was able to reach broad agreement on several other key issues. We judge the virus was not developed as a biological weapon. Most agencies also assess with low confidence that SARS-CoV-2 probably was not genetically engineered; however, two agencies believe there was not sufficient evidence to make an assessment either way. Finally, the IC assesses China's officials did not have foreknowledge of the virus before the initial outbreak of COVID-19 emerged," the report continues.

Turning to the various hypotheses about how that initial exposure happened, the ODNI noted that both natural exposure and a laboratory-associated incident "are plausible."

Four IC elements and the National Intelligence Council assessed with low confidence that the virus made the jump to humans by natural exposure to an animal infected with either SARS-CoV-2 or a virus almost identical to it.

One IC element assessed with moderate confidence that exposure "was the result of a laboratory-associated incident, probably involving experimentation, animal handling, or sampling by the Wuhan Institute of Virology."

The report also notes that three IC elements said they lacked the necessary information to draw any type of conclusion.

"China's cooperation most likely would be needed to reach a conclusive assessment of the origins of COVID-19," the report concludes. "Beijing, however, continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information and blame other countries, including the United States. These actions reflect, in part, China's government's own uncertainty about where an investigation could lead as well as its frustration the international community is using the issue to exert political pressure on China."

In a statement accompanying release of the report, the White House said that China has "critical information" it has "worked to prevent international investigators and members of the global public health community" from accessing from the beginning. "To this day, the PRC continues to reject calls for transparency and withhold information, even as the toll of this pandemic continue to rise," it adds.

"The world deserves answers, and I will not rest until we get them. Responsible nations do not shirk these kinds of responsibilities to the rest of the world," the statement said.

WHO's Wuhan Team Says No Data Barriers in China

Earlier this week, the 12-person team assembled by the World Health Organization (WHO) to travel to Wuhan and explore the origins of SARS-CoV-2 by sharing information with Chinese colleagues [published an article](#) in Nature that, in part, aimed to set the record straight about their report. They note that, in contrast to the widely reported claim that their Chinese counterparts had withheld information from them, "much new information was shared by the Chinese team as a result of the agreed studies, and that even more was shared as part of the iterative process between the international and Chinese teams."

The WHO [scientists further noted](#) that in exploring the lab leak theory, which was not part of their original mandate, their Chinese colleagues refused to share raw data on 174 cases due to legal barriers associated with patient confidentiality that "could not be addressed in the short time frame of our visit."

"By then, it was clear that the 174 cases were not likely to be the earliest ones, so we considered them less urgent for understanding origins," they noted. "It was therefore agreed that a second phase of studies would address these concerns and review these data."

Their report, [published in March 2021](#), found high likelihood of either a direct or indirect zoonotic transfer of the virus from animals into humans, and a very low likelihood it had been a leak from the Wuhan virology lab. They also highlighted the possibility that a massive international military sports competition in October 2019 was worth exploring as an additional vector.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), the suggestion that an outbreak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology caused the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, and thus the global pandemic, began as a conspiracy theory in far-right circles in early 2020. Pushed by former Donald Trump chief ideologue Steve Bannon, the [New York Times dismissed](#) it at the time as a "fringe theory" pushed by "those who see China as a threat."

However, after the outbreak spread to the US, killed more than 100,000 Americans and gutted the US economy in the span of a few weeks, then-President [Trump began repeating](#) the theory as a way to deflect blame from his administration's failures, calling it the "China Virus" and "Kung Flu" - attitudes blamed in part for a stark rise in racist [attacks against Asians](#) and Asian-Americans in 2020 and 2021.

The heinous nature of Trump's statement prompted the ODNI to issue a [rare public comment](#), saying on April 30, 2020, that "the Intelligence Community also concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not man-made or genetically modified."

By the time the WHO team arrived in China for its study in January 2021, the [Associated Press](#) had reintroduced the lab leak theory in an attempt to craft a new [narrative of Chinese coyness](#) on sharing early COVID-19 data. With new air under its wings, the theory soon began to be pushed on the front page of the [Wall Street Journal](#), and Biden in late May ordered US intelligence to take 90 days and draw up the report released on Friday about the outbreak's origins. At that time, the many US intelligence agencies were broadly split as to whether it came to humans via animal contact or from a lab leak of some type.

In response to the persistent demands for China to open the Wuhan biolab to a total investigation of the virus' origins, [Chinese media began](#) arguing that if Chinese biolabs are going to be investigated, so should American biolabs, starting with Maryland's Fort Detrick, home of the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, holder of some of the world's deadliest pathogens, where several prominent leaks have occurred in the past.

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'Probably Going to Have to Go Back': Ex-Pentagon Chief Predicts New Afghan War Against Al-Qaeda

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US war in Afghanistan is nearly 20 years old, although US meddling in the country has lasted twice as long and is in large part responsible for the rise to power of radical Islamist groups like the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Daesh*. Washington once found their hatred of secular communism useful and hailed their righteous fight as their own.

Former US Defense Secretary and CIA chief Leon Panetta told CNN on Friday that al-Qaeda will regain its former strength in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, necessitating a new US war in the future.

"We're going to have to go back in to get ISIS [Daesh]. We're probably going to have to go back in when al Qaeda resurrects itself, as they will, with this Taliban," [Panetta told CNN's](#) Erin Burnett on Friday. "They gave safe haven to al Qaeda before, they'll probably do it again."

"I understand that we're trying to get our troops out of there, but the bottom line is, we can leave a battlefield, but we can't leave the War on Terrorism, which still is a threat to our security," he added.

His comments come a day after a series of [deadly terrorist attacks](#) in Kabul that killed 13 US service members and at least 180 Afghan civilians, with another 1,300 people wounded. The bombs, which targeted crowds attempting to get out of the country via Hamid Karzai International Airport in the wake of the Taliban's seizure of power, were claimed by Daesh-K, a branch of the terrorist group that was founded in 2015 in Afghanistan - with American help, [according to former](#) Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

US President Joe [Biden said afterward](#) "we will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay." On Friday, he gave US commanders "[all authorities they need](#)" to strike Daesh-K targets in retaliation for the bombings.

Panetta warned Friday that the Taliban are "terrorists, and certainly supporters of terrorists, operating checkpoints for terrorists." During their first period of rule from 1996 until the US invasion in 2001, the Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to set up bases in Afghanistan - bases they used to carry out the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States. During the period of insurgency from 2002 until earlier this month, the Taliban also allowed sympathetic terrorist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to seek shelter in a territory they controlled.

While Panetta was head of the US Central Intelligence Agency in 2011, he oversaw the operation in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader who planned the September 11 attacks. Panetta later became Pentagon chief and oversaw the withdrawal of 90% of US troops from Afghanistan, reducing their numbers from 90,000 to about 8,400 by the time he and then-US President Barack Obama left office in early 2017.

This time around, the Taliban have made numerous pledges not to give harbor to terrorist groups, part of a larger push to win their government international recognition and the financial and economic benefits that would yield. China, the US, Pakistan, and other nations have united in their [urging the Taliban](#) to keep to that promise, although regional powers have done so with the lure of regional integration for Afghanistan, while the US has only offered to remove sanctions in place freezing the country's assets.

When Biden spoke the day after the Taliban captured Kabul, he said the withdrawal was continuing as scheduled, but noted the possibility that the US would [continue to operate](#) in Afghanistan as it presently does in Yemen, Somalia, and other so-called "undeclared war zones," where drone strikes are ordered with little thought for civilian casualties and often without the permission of the country in question.

"We conduct effective counterterrorism missions against terrorist groups in multiple countries where we don't have a permanent military presence. If necessary, we'll do the same in Afghanistan," Biden said at the time. "We've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on the direct threats to the United States in the region, and act quickly and decisively if needed."

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'Extremely Dangerous' Ida Set to Make Landfall in Louisiana on 16th Anniversary of Katrina Disaster

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought nothing but destruction and death across much of the US Gulf Coast, especially after its second landfall over Louisiana and Mississippi. Becoming the third major storm of the 2005 Atlantic season, Katrina claimed the lives of nearly 2,000 individuals and was one of the most costliest cyclones to strike the US.

Rapidly intensifying over the Caribbean Sea, tropical storm Ida has been upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane and is forecast to make landfall in Louisiana on Sunday, which will mark the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

The [latest advisory](#) released by the US National Hurricane Center states that the cyclone has reached maximum sustained wind speeds of 80 miles per hour, and is moving at a pace of 15 miles per hour in a northwestern direction.

Forecasts indicate that the cyclone may make its landfall on the US Gulf Coast as a Category 4 storm. "Ida is expected to be an extremely dangerous major hurricane when it approaches the northern Gulf coast on Sunday," the bulletin states.

Ida made its first landfall on the Isle of Youth just before 2 p.m. local time on Friday. A second landfall on mainland Cuba is due for later Friday before the storm spends the next several hours crossing much of Western Cuba, and eventually moving into the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

At present, Ida's hurricane-force winds are extending up to 25 miles from the center of the storm, with tropical storm-force winds stretching about 90 miles from the hurricane's eye. A wind gust of 46 miles per hour were recorded on Cayo Largo, Cuba.

Forecasters have warned that Ida will be bringing with it a "dangerous storm surge" that could raise normal tide levels by up to 6 feet. Should the storm surge arrive at high tide, officials have indicated that some areas along the Mississippi-Louisiana border could see water levels rise up to 7 feet.

"The deepest water will occur along the immediate coast near and to the east of the landfall location, where the surge will be accompanied by large and dangerous waves," the agency noted in its advisory.

It was also underscored that there is a possibility that local levees outside of Louisiana's Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System could be "overtopped" if inundation values are higher than predicted.

Ida is forecasted to bring as much as 20 inches to the Gulf region through the weekend until early Monday, as well as "life-threatening surf and rip current conditions."

Ida to Strike 16 Years After Katrina

When Hurricane Katrina washed ashore in 2005, it quickly overpowered the US Gulf Coast and devastated the New Orleans area after breaches in the city's levee system and floodwalls left about 80% of the city underwater.

The storm had initially been registered as a Category 5 cyclone before making landfall as a Category 3 hurricane. Still considered a major hurricane, Katrina did not hold back on Louisiana. The death toll for the storm reached nearly 2,000 and displaced thousands of families.

While many had left New Orleans ahead of the landfall, not all had the resources to make such a trip - an estimated tens of thousands of people stayed behind as the storm drew closer. With roads flooded, many were forced to wait for days on roofs before first responders could carry out rescue missions.

Now, New Orleanians are keeping vigilant as Hurricane Ida prepares to land on the 16th anniversary of Katrina.

Collin Arnold, who serves as the director of the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, [told](#) local station WESH that locals are seeing Katrina as a lesson learned, and are upping preparations.

"Obviously, it is a significant date in our history as New Orleanians," Arnold admitted. "It also is something we have learned from. I know folks are out right now preparing for this Sunday because they have the memory of Katrina."

"The latest I saw - 10 to 15 inches of rain expected over the entire event in the New Orleans area, which is a lot. Right now, the work is getting prepared. We are asking the public to do the same," he added.

As an added precaution, New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell on Friday ordered residents who live or work outside of the city's levee protection system to evacuate the area. Although she did not specify the number of residents the order affects, she urged that "now is the time" to hightail it.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki revealed during the Friday briefing that US President Joe Biden would be following developments surrounding the storm and that the administration would be dispatching a response team of medical officials to the area.

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CR7, La Pulga & El Capitano: 2021 Silly Season Sees Football Players Make Grand Returns, Start Anew
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 2021 summer transfer window runs from approximately June 9 to August 31 and has so far been filled with multiple doses of shock and awe. However, the open season also left many wanting more, as it remains unclear just where some players may land.

With the futures of some heavy hitters cemented for the upcoming football seasons, the jury is still out on what may happen with a few star players, especially when it comes to football sensation Kylian Mbappe.

From football greats Lionel Messi to Cristiano Ronaldo, the open season has had a good serving of epic transfers to keep the football world on its toes. But now, with speculation rising that Mbappe [may leave](#) France's Paris-Saint Germain, it's anyone's guess what developments may emerge over the next four days of the 2021 'silly season'.

Let's take a look at one of the more hair-raising, electric transfers to date for this year's transfer window.

Cristiano Ronaldo

After weeks of speculation running high, it was [confirmed](#) on Friday that famed Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo would officially be suiting up with Manchester United again after having spent years with Real Madrid and Juventus.

In a statement released by the English club, officials recalled CR7's accolades and how Ronaldo scored some 118 goals over 292 games during his initial six-year run with Man U. "Everyone at the club looks forward to welcoming Cristiano back to Manchester," reads the statement, which notes that the transfer agreement made with Juventus is subject to "personal terms, visa and medical."

The somewhat surprising announcement came exactly 10 days after Ronaldo took to social media as part of an effort to silence chatter surrounding his potential shift away from the Turin-based Italian football club.

"There have been frequent news and stories associating me with a number of clubs in many different leagues, with nobody ever being concerned about trying to find out the actual truth," he stated in an [Instagram post](#).

"I'm breaking my silence now to say that I can't allow people to keep playing around with my name. I remain focused on my career and in my work, committed and prepared for all the challenges that I have to face. Everything else? Everything else is just talk."

At the time, the hype consuming the Ronaldo name was reaching an all-time high as his contract with Juventus was inching closer to its mid-2022 expiration date. Speculation also suggested that the Portuguese player could go back to Real Madrid, but those claims were quickly [shot down](#) by Carlo Ancelotti, the manager of Los Merengues.

Lionel Messi

The most shocking transfer of the 2021 silly season was by the GOAT of football - Argentine star Lionel Messi, affectionately nicknamed "La Pulga" by Spanish-speaking fans.

Messi's heart-stopping, eyebrow-raising jump to France's Paris-Saint Germain football club took many by surprise, as it also meant that he would no longer be with FC Barcelona, the iconic team he has captained and played for almost two decades since his 2003 debut.

After the [shock announcement](#) that he would not be renewing his contract with Barca as a result of "financial and structural obstacles," the rumor mill went crazy speculating where the world-class forward player would hang his cleats.

At the time, it was said that Messi could only either go to Manchester City or PSG, as the pair of clubs were the only to have enough funds to afford the player. After Man City announced that they would not be pursuing Messi, all signs pointed to PSG, which [eventually confirmed](#) the move on August 10.

While a multitude of tears were shed at Messi's farewell presser in Barca - some of which were dried away with a tissue that later hit the [auction block](#), the Argentine has remained positive of his future.

"I know how talented the squad and the coaching staff are here," Messi said in an [earlier statement](#). "I am determined to help build something special for the club and the fans, and I am looking forward to stepping out onto the pitch at the Parc des Princes."

Talk of Messi parting ways from Barcelona initially surfaced in August 2020 but was held off after it was revealed that La Pulga had passed the grace period in which he was allowed to break his contract. His contract with PSG is said to be worth tens of millions of euros.

Sergio Ramos

Real Madrid fan favorite Sergio Ramos hopped off the Merengues roster in early July in favor of Paris-Saint Germain, after his 16th season with the Spanish club ended without obtaining the two-year contract he had requested.

It's worth noting that Real Madrid's unwritten rule is to only issue one-year contract extensions for any player over 30 years of age. Ramos, who helped the team win a bevy of awards - including four UEFA Champions League trophies, is 35 years old. He had been with the team since 2005.

“This is a big change in my life, a new challenge and it is a day I will never forget,” Ramos said in a [July statement](#). “I am very proud to be a part of this ambitious project, to be a part of this squad with so many great players.”

“PSG is a club that has already proven itself at the highest level. I want to continue to grow and improve at Paris and help the team to win as many trophies as possible,” he added.

Completing a two-year contract on a free transfer to PSG, the versatile defender will be staying with the Princes until at least 2023. It was previously reported that Ramos was first approached about jumping to PSG in January, just seven months before the agreement was signed.

Unlike Messi, who had to give up his no.10 jersey in favor of no.30, Ramos will continue to rock his no.4 shirt with PSG.

Jack Grealish

Ahead of both the Messi and Ronaldo announcements came to the revelation that Aston Villa’s Jack Grealish [would sign](#) with Manchester City, a move that went on to cement one of the more expensive transfers in the Premier League to date.

To obtain Grealish, who had become an even more well-known player on the global stage after representing England in the Euro 2021 final, Manchester City submitted a costly offer that activated a £100 million release clause listed under the player’s Aston Villa contract.

“I am incredibly happy to have joined Manchester City,” Grealish said in a [statement](#) accompanying a club release. “City are the best team in the country with a manager considered to be the best in the world – it’s a dream come true to be part of this club.”

Prior to the early August transfer payout, the highest fee in the Premier League was £93.25 million, paid by Manchester United to Juventus in 2016 for French midfielder Paul Pogba.

Grealish’s contract is set to last for approximately six years. Interestingly, he made his debut with Aston Villa in 2014 in a game against Man City.

Romelu Lukaku

After spending 10 years away, Belgian player Romelu Lukaku made his own shock return to the Premier League’s Chelsea organization, to the tune of a tear-inducing £97.5 million.

While the switch from Italy’s Inter Milan to Chelsea has [not been warmly received](#) by fans of either team, Lukaku’s jump to the Blues is sure to see the English club add some new trophies to its shelves. The 28-year-old Belgian helped Inter Milan gain its latest Serie A title.

Lukaku’s contract with Chelsea is expected to last at least five years. The payout for Lukaku’s transfer marks him as one of the top 10 most expensive players in the history of the sport.

The decorated player’s previous stint with Chelsea ranged from 2011 to 2014, and saw him make at least 10 appearances during that time period. He was later forfeited to Everton for a paltry £28 million, before eventually being forked over to Manchester United in 2017 and later to Inter Milan in 2019.

Gianluigi Buffon

And then there was Gianluigi Buffon, the veteran Italian goalkeeper who has defied goalie standards and trash talk of retiring, now that he is a mere 43 years young.

While many believed that he would throw in the towel after wrapping with Juventus, he made the head-spinning announcement that he would retrace his steps and return to the Parma Calcio 1913 club.

Returning to his boyhood club, Parma announced the homecoming of their “superman” with a video that depicted Gigi digging what appears to be a time capsule buried underneath one of the nets at the Stadio Ennio Tardini.

Buffon made his debut with the club in November 1995, just 17. He had been one of many players to come out of the Ducali youth academy.

Ahead of the announcement, rumors emerged that Buffon could retire, go to FC Barcelona, or even head over to Brazil’s Flamengo club after he called it quits with Juventus.

The contract is expected to last for a period of two years. Currently listed as a Serie B team, officials are hoping to bump up the club with the treasured goalie’s grand return.

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Florida Judge Overturns Gov. DeSantis' Prohibition on Mask Mandates in Schools
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' ban on school mask mandates was placed in legal limbo this week amid a three-day virtual hearing in which a group of Florida parents argued that the governor's order puts the health and safety of their children at risk. DeSantis vowed on Thursday to appeal any decision not ruled in his favor.

Leon County Circuit Judge John C. Cooper overturned the Florida Governor's mask mandate ban in a Friday decision that ruled DeSantis overstepped his authority with the Executive Order. Declaring the prohibition "without legal authority" the judge cited two Florida Supreme Court cases from 1914 and 1939, which both laid out that an individual's rights are open to limitation when they impact the rights of others.

"We don't have that right because exercising the right in that way is harmful or potentially harmful to other people," Cooper wrote, adding that the law "is full of examples of rights that are limited [when] the good of others ... would be adversely affected by those rights."

During the virtual hearing on Tuesday, [pediatric pulmonologist Dr. Tony Kriseman testified](#) that there was sufficient data supporting the effectiveness and need to implement mask mandates.

"If this were a noncontagious disease, like tetanus, you could say to a parent you're free not to get a shot for your child," he noted. "But the parents' choice doesn't only impact the child— it's a global decision."

Ashley Benton, a mother of four students attending Leon County Schools, took the stand a day later to testify in defense of the governor's order. She argued that her "fifth grader has childhood apraxia," and may have to be pulled out of school if the parents cannot secure a medical opt-out for the order.

According to Benton, the medical waivers have been hard to come by.

The ruling comes alongside state-wide defiance of the Executive Order, with at least 10 Florida school boards voting to move ahead with mask mandates. Among those school districts is Miami-Dade County, the largest district in the state.

While DeSantis has dismissed masking guidance set forth by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona issued a memo

to Florida school districts last Friday pledging to use federal funds to cover financial penalties associated with the governor's prohibition on mask mandates.

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T-Mobile Issues Apology Amid Fallout From Cyber Attack Impacting 50 Million Customers
by [Evan Craighead](#)

T-Mobile's recent data breach comes as the telecommunication company's third major leak disclosed within the past few years. While authorities have yet to pin the cyber crime on anyone, one 21-year-old from Turkey has claimed responsibility for the data breach.

T-Mobile CEO Mike Sievert announced on Friday that the telecommunication company is coordinating with law enforcement to conduct an investigation into a data breach involving a bad actor who "used brute force attacks and other methods" to access IT servers that included customer data.

"In short, this individual's intent was to break in and steal data, and they succeeded,"

The data breach, first made public on August 17, is said to have compromised the information of some 50 million individuals.

Financial information, such as a credit card number stored payment information, were not accessed by the "bad actor" amid the breach, but some users may have had their social security number, name, address, date of birth and/or driver's license/ID information compromised.

"To say we are disappointed and frustrated that this happened is an understatement," Sievert's statement read. "Keeping our customers' data safe is a responsibility we take incredibly seriously and preventing this type of event from happening has always been a top priority of ours. Unfortunately, this time we were not successful."

FireEye's Mandiant, a US-based cybersecurity firm, has been a part of the telecommunication company's forensic investigation team, but will now assume a larger role as part of a long-term partnership.

Consulting firm KPMG LLP has also entered into a partnership with T-Mobile, and the two will work in tandem to protect customers from future malicious cyber activity.

While a suspect has yet to be named by the telecommunications company, the Wall Street Journal published an article earlier this week reporting that John Binns, a 21-year-old American who relocated to Turkey, was behind the attack.

Binns told the publication very matter-of-factly that T-Mobile's "security is awful."

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Greek Church Rebuilt After 9/11 Terror Attacks to Hold First Service in 20 Years - Vicar

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in New York City, which was demolished during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, will hold service for the first time in 20 years, Vicar General of Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Alex Karloutsos told Sputnik.

"On September 10, the vespers will begin with the memorial service by the Archbishop. That is our contribution to the September 11 story," Karloutsos said.

The following day, Saturday, the church will be lit in blue along with other buildings in the area to commemorate victims of the terrorist attacks, he added.

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda (banned in Russia) terrorists crashed two hijacked commercial planes in the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York, while another one hit the Pentagon near Washington, DC. The fourth hijacked plane fell down in the state of Pennsylvania.

The St. Nicholas church was completely buried after the World Trade Center's south tower collapsed following the attack. The rebuilding process took 20 years and is not quite yet completed.

Soon after the attacks, the New York authorities committed to restoring the church, but the entire efforts met with significant delays because many matters of a political nature needed to be worked through, Vice Chairman of the Friends of St. Nicholas Michael Psaros said.

"It is important to understand that this is the National Shrine, not just the Greek Orthodox Church," Psaros said.

More than 20 architects presented their project prior to the selection of the renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava.

Karloutsos said fundraising and re-building started in the 2009-10 period. However, Psaros pointed out that the Greek Diocese in charge of construction approved a large number of expensive change orders so the process was stopped for about two years.

"I think it is important to know that PriceWaterHouse [PricewaterhouseCoopers] along with BakerHostetler did an extensive, forensic two-year audit of every single dollar we raised from September 11, 2001, and every single dollar we spent from that time. You can find these audits online, they were published by the Archdiocese," Psaros said.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese handed the project over to the Friends of St. Nicholas, an entity responsible for fundraising, building and finishing of the church, which has now become a National Shrine. The new cathedral is three times bigger than the previous one and has a special center for people of all faiths and denominations to pray and commemorate their loved ones and those fallen in terrorist attacks.

Psaros said he expects the St. Nicholas church to be the most visited Orthodox cathedral in the United States and probably in the world.

"Millions and millions of people go to Ground Zero every year, and our doors will be opened at St. Nicholas. This will be the most visited Orthodox church in the world by non-Orthodox and even people who are not Christians," he said.

The Friends of St. Nicholas was able to raise some \$60 million between January 2020 and August 2021, Psaros also said.

"Over \$100 million have been raised for the National Shrine since the inception," he added.

Karloutsos noted that the first steel beam they received for the construction was from the state of Pennsylvania and had a Russian Cross on it.

"I found all this very moving," he said.

Because the re-construction is not finished, church services will not resume on a daily basis in the coming months. The exterior of the structure is expected to be completed by November 2, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I will officiate the opening up of the church doors. Psaros said work will then continue on the interior of the church until April 2022 with the hope of having it completed by Holy Week and Easter.

"The church will be consecrated on July 4, 2022, which will coincide with 100th anniversary of the establishment of the [Greek] Archdiocese of America," he said.

Karloutsos said the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese plans to invite all Orthodox Christian denominations in the United States to co-serve with Patriarch Bartholomew I at St. Nicholas on November 2.

"We are inviting all of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America. The Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are members of the Assembly, and they will be invited as well," he added.

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Greek Church in New York Seeks Evidence Nicholas II's Gifts Disappeared After 9/11 Attacks

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in New York City seeks evidence to back testimonies that the relics of three saints, which disappeared during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, were gifts from Russian Emperor Nicholas II, Vicar General of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Alex Karloutsos told Sputnik.

"The church had relics of St. Nicholas, St. Sava and St. Catherine. Unfortunately, we do not have a record and evidence, although there have been stories for years that these relics were a gift from Nicholas II," Karloutsos said. "Perhaps, there might be a connection through the [Russian] St. Nicholas cathedral in New York, which was of course built by Tsar Nicholas II." On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda (banned in Russia) terrorists crashed two hijacked commercial airplanes into the World Trade Center twin towers in New York, while another aircraft hit the Pentagon building near Washington, DC. A fourth hijacked plane crashed in the state of Pennsylvania without reaching its intended target. About 3,000 people were killed in the attacks and more than 6,000 injured.

The St. Nicholas church was completely buried after the World Trade Center south tower collapsed following the attack.

"The safe with the relics has never been recovered, we never found it after the September 11 attacks," Karloutsos said. "We do not know where are they now."

Karloutsos emphasized that if the relics were completely destroyed and mixed with soil, they are now holy and sacred.

"If that is the case, then, as many people say that means they are part of the Holy ground with the rest of the thousands of victims that were murdered," Karloutsos said.

The church, which has been turned into a national shrine and scheduled to gradually reopen in September, hopes to acquire the relics of those saints once again, he added.

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RPT - US, Taliban Likely to Boost Intelligence Cooperation Against IS-K - Ex-UK Diplomat

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The US government is likely to expand its intelligence ties with the Taliban (terrorist group outlawed in Russia) after completing its withdrawal from Afghanistan next week, former UK ambassador Peter Ford told Sputnik.

On Friday, the White House admitted there was clearly a breakdown in the security process that failed to prevent this week's suicide bombing at the Kabul airport, which reportedly left 170 dead, including thirteen US troops. The attack, claimed by the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) terrorist group (banned in Russia), comes amid a chaotic US evacuation from Afghanistan that President Joe Biden claims the US will complete by the end of the month.

"After August 31, I expect US anti-ISIS [IS] intelligence cooperation with the Taliban to be discreetly stepped up, possibly resulting in an operation similar to that which saw [IS leader Abu Bakr] Baghdadi eliminated on the Syrian Turkish border, with the ISIS [IS]-in-Afghanistan leadership its target," Ford said.

The United States, Ford added, was caught off guard because of the rushed nature of the evacuation.

"And that happened because of the colossal error of US intelligence and military in assessing the likelihood of collapse on the part of the US-trained Afghan army as US forces withdrew," Ford said.

Once it became clear that the Afghan army would not fight it was clear the final rush for the exits would be a shambles, opening up opportunities for IS-K to strike, he added.

"Those who wish to distract attention away from the huge strategic errors of earlier years will want to dwell on the shambles of the immediate moment," Ford said. "The focus should be on calling to account the security establishment's crass complacent handling of Afghanistan over 20 years."

Ford doubts that Biden will be deflected from the final departure on 31 August, whatever happens now.

"To do so would only hand victory to ISIS [IS], allowing them to go on posing as the only pure resistance to occupation," the former ambassador said.

The Taliban after the attacks said the group warned that the large gatherings at the Kabul airport could attract the attention of terrorists.

On Friday, the White House confirmed that Biden gave the US military all the authorities needed to carry out attacks against the IS-K without congressional approval.

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Hurricane Ida Projected to Become Category 4 on Sunday - US National Weather Service

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Hurricane Ida is expected to become a Category 4 hurricane when it makes landfall in the state of Louisiana on Sunday, US National Weather Service official Benjamin Scott said during a press conference.

"Hurricane Ida has quickly developed into a hurricane way ahead of schedule," Scott said on Friday. "Right now, all forecasts tend to look that it will be a pretty strong category four when it makes landfall in the coast of Louisiana sometime on Sunday afternoon or evening."

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards said President Joe Biden approved an emergency declaration for the state to help response efforts.

The National Hurricane Center registered Ida's maximum sustained winds of 75 mph on Friday afternoon.

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US, Coalition Forces Airlift 4,200 Evacuees from Kabul in Last 12 Hours - White House

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US and Coalition forces evacuated 4,200 individuals from Kabul airport in the last 12 hours, the White House said in a press release.

"From August 27 at 3:00 AM EDT [7:00 a.m. GMT] to August 27 at 3:00 PM EDT, a total of approximately 4,200 people were evacuated from Kabul," the White House said on Friday. "This is the result of 12 US military flights (9 C-17s and 3 C-130s) which carried approximately 2,100 evacuees, and 29 coalition flights which carried approximately 2,100 people."

Since August 14, the United States has helped evacuate 109,200 people out of Kabul, the release said.

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US Arrests 2 More Men for January 6 US Capitol Breach - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Two more men have been arrested for crimes regarding the January 6 breach of the US Capitol complex, the Justice Department said.

"A Maryland man was arrested yesterday and a Florida man was arrested today for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on Jan. 6, which disrupted a joint session of the US Congress that was in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election," the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

Uliyah Hayah of Maryland has been charged with assault and civil disorder after he pushed an officer into a crowd of people shortly following the another US Capitol Police officer shot dead unarmed protester Ashli Babbitt.

Robert Fairchild Jr. of Florida has been charged for assaulting an officer and disorderly conduct. Fairchild was seen grabbing a security gate and attempting to take it away from an officer, pushing against barriers with a crowd of other protesters into a group of officers and helping the crowd carry away police barriers.

Both men made their initial court appearances on Friday afternoon. The Justice Department said more than 570 individuals have been arrested for crimes during the January 6 events at the US Capitol and investigations are ongoing.

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Florida Governor Blasts Court for Blocking Ban on Mask Mandates, Will Appeal Ruling

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' office issued a statement slamming a judge's ruling to block the governor's ban on mask mandates and announced that they will immediately appeal the ruling.

"This ruling was made with incoherent justifications, not based in science and facts - frankly not even remotely focused on the merits of the case presented," the governor's office said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, a judge ruled that Florida's mask mandate ban is unconstitutional.

Florida reported 151,760 new coronavirus infections this week, up from the 150,740 reported last week. The state also reported 1,727 COVID-19-related deaths this week, up from 1,486 deaths reported last week.

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Canada's Conservatives Lead Trudeau's Liberal Party in Election Race - Polls

TORONTO, August 27 (Sputnik) - Canada's Conservative Party is leading Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals in the country's election race, polls revealed.

The Conservative Party of Canada holds a 33.6 percent to 33.4 percent lead over the governing Liberal Party, a Nanos Research-CTV News-The Globe and Mail poll revealed on Friday.

The Tories also hold a lead over the Liberals, according to a Mainstreet Research poll released the same day, albeit reporting an even wider 6 percent margin.

The Liberals held a lead as large as 12 percent in advance of the election call on August 15.

However, two weeks into the campaign, only the Angus Reid Institute and Abacus Data still has the Liberal Party clinging to a slight lead over the surging Conservatives.

The Liberals maintain a 33 to 31 percent lead over the Conservatives, according to the Angus Reid Institute poll unveiled also on Friday.

Overall, most major pollsters now place the Conservatives in the driver's seat of an election most analysts believe Trudeau called to reclaim his majority mandate lost during the 2019 federal election.

EKOS Politics on Thursday had the Conservatives in front with 32.8 percent, up 3.4 percent over the Liberals.

All polls place the New Democrat Party (NDP) in third place, with support for the left-wing party ranging between 19 and 21 percent.

The People's Party of Canada (PPC) and the Greens remain in distant third and fourth places, commanding an average of 4 to 5 percent support.

Projections currently show the most likely election result to be either a Liberal or Conservative minority government.

The national election in Canada is scheduled for September 20.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON August 27 (Sputnik) -

AFGHANISTAN

* The United States will engage with the Taliban to ensure the safe evacuation of people from Afghanistan following the August 31 withdrawal deadline, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

* US President Joe Biden directed Secretary of State Antony Blinken to engage with the international community to decide on the path forward on Afghanistan, Psaki said.

* Thousands of inmates, including members of the Islamic State-Khorasan terror group (banned in Russia) were released from two Afghan prisons taken over by the Taliban, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

* Approximately 5,400 people remain at Kabul airport awaiting flights to leave Afghanistan, US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said.

* Several people have been detained in connection with the terror attacks at the Kabul airport, Taliban (banned in Russia) spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told Sputnik.

* The Taliban ordered individuals still keeping guns, ammunition and government vehicles in Kabul to hand them over within a week or face punishment.

BIDEN-BENNETT MEETING

* US President Joe Biden said on Friday that the United States is prepared to use other measures to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons if diplomacy fails.

* Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said that the United States and Israel have developed a comprehensive strategy to halt Iran's aggressive behavior in the Middle East and to permanently prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

* The United States and Israel strengthened their partnership during a meeting between Biden and Bennett at the White House, Biden said.

LAVROV-DI MAIO MEETING

* Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio on Friday emphasized the need for dialogue with Russia on Afghanistan.

* Italy's mission to evacuate people from the Kabul airport will end in "the next few hours," Di Maio said.

* Russia condemns the series of terrorist attacks in Kabul and expresses condolences to the victims, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* It is vitally important for Russia to ensure the security of its southern borders in light of the developments in Afghanistan, Lavrov said.

US-UKRAINE RELATIONS

* US President Joe Biden has made Secretary of State Anthony Blinken responsible to direct Defense Department funds of up to \$60 million in assistance to Ukraine, including defense products and services, White House said on Friday.

CORONAVIRUS

* Chinese authorities did not know about the novel coronavirus before the outbreak, the US Intelligence Community said on Friday in its unclassified summary of the assessment on the novel coronavirus origins.

* The cooperation of China will be needed to reach a conclusive assessment on the origins of the novel coronavirus, the US Intelligence Community said on Friday.

* The United States will continue working with international partners to press China to cooperate with investigations into the origins of the novel coronavirus, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

* Half of all the teenagers in the United States have received at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said.

* More than 44 million people in Russia received the first shot of a coronavirus vaccine, more than 37 million Russians are fully vaccinated, Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova told reporters.

AMMUNITION DEPOT BLASTS IN KAZAKHSTAN

* The death toll from a series of explosions at an ammunition warehouse in Kazakhstan's southern Jambyl region reached 12 on Friday, the country's Emergencies Ministry said.

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US Blue-Chip, Tech Stocks Hit Record Highs as Fed Evades Stimulus Taper Timetable

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Blue-chip and tech stocks on Wall Street hit record highs on Friday, notching their best in five weeks, as investors celebrated the lack of a clear deadline set by the Federal Reserve for tapering the stimulus it has been providing the US economy.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, hit a record high of 4,513 before closing at 4,509, up 40 points, or 0.9 percent on the day. For the week, the blue-chip index rose 1.5 percent.

Nasdaq, which includes technology giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, raced to an all-time high of 15,145 before settling at 15,130 for a gain of 184 points or 1.2 percent. For the week, the tech bellwether gained 2.8 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the NYSE that lists mostly industrial stocks, finished up 243 points or 0.7 percent at 35,456. For the week, the Dow climbed 1.0 percent.

Friday's rally on Wall Street came after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell resisted setting a timetable for the taper of the central bank's asset purchases that had indirectly boosted stock prices over the past 18 months.

Powell, who spoke at the Fed's closely-watched Jackson Hole Symposium on monetary policy, had been anticipated to lay out a schedule for the taper, but left markets guessing instead.

Pro-risk investors seized on the occasion to send stocks higher.

The Fed has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury securities and \$40 billion in agency mortgage-backed securities each month since March 2020 to insulate the US economy from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. It has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

Risk assets from stocks to commodities, including oil, have rallied in that time, responding to the higher inflationary pressure caused by the Fed's actions and trillions of more dollars in COVID-relief spending by the Biden administration.

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Biden Orders State Department to Direct \$60Mln in Pentagon Funds to Ukraine – White House

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has made the Secretary of State responsible to direct Pentagon funds of up to \$60 million in assistance to Ukraine, including defense articles and services, White House said on Friday.

"I hereby delegate to the Secretary of State the ... to direct the drawdown of up to \$60 million in defense articles and services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training, to provide assistance to Ukraine and to make the determinations required under such section to direct such a drawdown," White House said in a release.

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US Intel Community Assesses COVID-19 Origins May Never Be Definitively Known - Report

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – The US Intelligence Community (IC) assesses that the origins of the novel coronavirus disease may never be definitively identified without additional information, the declassified summary of a report commissioned by US President Joe Biden revealed on Friday.

The origin of the deadly virus has been the subject of intense global scrutiny, with speculation swirling that the global pandemic may have been triggered by a leak at the Wuhan virology lab, which China has vocally denied. In May, Biden issued a directive to the 17 main US intelligence agencies, which make up the IC, to deliver a report on the origins of COVID-19 within 90 days. "The IC judges they will be unable to provide a more definitive explanation for the origin of COVID-19 unless new information allows them to determine the specific pathway for initial natural contact with an animal or to determine that a laboratory in Wuhan was handling SARS-CoV-2 or a close progenitor virus before COVID-19 emerged," the IC concluded, according to the summary.

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Chinese Authorities Were Not Aware of COVID-19 Before Outbreak – US Intelligence

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Chinese authorities did not know about COVID-19 before the outbreak, the US Intelligence Community (IC) said on Friday in its unclassified summary of assessment on the novel coronavirus origins.

"The IC assesses China's officials did not have foreknowledge of the virus before the initial outbreak of COVID-19 emerged," the IC said

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China's Cooperation Needed to Reach Conclusion on Coronavirus Origins - US Intelligence

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The cooperation of China will be needed to reach a conclusive assessment on the origins of the novel coronavirus, the US Intelligence Community said on Friday.

"China's cooperation most likely would be needed to reach a conclusive assessment of the origins of COVID-19. Beijing, however, continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information and blame other countries, including the United States," the US Intelligence Community said in its unclassified summary of assessment on the novel coronavirus origins. The US Intelligence Community has concluded that China's unwillingness to participate in the investigation reflects its own uncertainty about the possible consequences of the probe as well as Beijing's frustration with the international community that uses the issue to exert political pressure on China.

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One US Intel Agency Believes COVID-19 Result of Lab Leak, 4 Others Say It Was Natural

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - One US intelligence agency assess the first novel coronavirus infection may have as a result of a leak at the Wuhan virology lab, but four other agencies believe the disease may have emerged through natural exposure to an infected animal, the US intelligence community (IC) said on Friday in a declassified report about its probe into the origins of COVID-19.

"Four IC elements and the National Intelligence Council assess with low confidence that the initial SARS-CoV-2 infection was most likely caused by natural exposure to an animal infected with it or a close progenitor virus—a virus that probably would be more than 99 percent similar to SARS-CoV-2," the report said. "One IC element assesses with moderate confidence that the first human infection with SARS-CoV-2 most likely was the result of a laboratory-associated incident, probably involving experimentation, animal handling, or sampling by the Wuhan Institute of Virology."

The US intelligence community also assesses that COVID-19 was not developed as a biological weapon and not genetically engineered, the report said.

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Biden Says US to Continue Working With Partners to Press China on Coronavirus Origins

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue working with international partners to press China to cooperate with investigations into the origins of the novel coronavirus, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"The United States will continue working with like-minded partners around the world to press the PRC to fully share information and to cooperate with the World Health Organization's Phase II evidence-based, expert-led determination into the origins of COVID-19 - including by providing access to all relevant data and evidence," Biden said in a statement.

Biden's statement came shortly after the release of an unclassified summary of the US intelligence community's assessment on the novel coronavirus origins that was largely indeterminate apart from the determination that it was likely not a bioweapon.

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Blinken to Work With Global Partners on Path Forward Regarding Afghanistan - White House

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden directed Secretary of State Antony Blinken to engage with the international community to decide on the path forward on Afghanistan, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"One of the steps that the President directed the Secretary of State to take was to engage with our international partners to determine what the path forward looks like," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki said the international community has enormous amount of economic leverage to use against the Taliban (banned in Russia), which will be a key component once the US and Coalition forces leave Afghanistan on Tuesday.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in later remarks that the United States is in discussions with its international partners about maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, but a final decision has not been made yet.

Earlier on Friday, US media reported that the United States and its allies have been discussing the possibility of recognizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

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State Dept. Confirms Taliban Asked US to Keep Diplomatic Presence in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (banned in Russia) are interested in seeing a US diplomatic presence in Afghanistan after Washington's withdrawal of August 31, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We have heard the same thing from the Taliban privately that they have been saying publicly that they want embassies to remain open," Price said during a press conference. "They [Taliban] have made very clear to us in our communication, they would like to see an American diplomatic presence remain."

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US Discussing With Partners Continuing Diplomatic Presence in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – The United States is in discussion with its international partners about maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, but a final decision has not been made, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"It is something we are actively discussing with both with our partners and thinking about here as well," Price said during a press briefing, addressing questions about the future of US diplomatic presence in the war-torn country, noting that no definitive decision has been reached.

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White House Says Biden, US Military Have All The Authorities to Attack ISIS-K

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday that US President Joe Biden and the US military have all the authorities to carry out attacks against the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K terror group, banned in Russia) without congressional approval.

"I can just assure you the President and the military feel they have all the authorities they need to attack ISIS-K," Psaki told reporters during a press briefing.

IS-K claimed responsibility for attacks outside Kabul international airport that killed 13 US service members.

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US Strengthened Enduring Partnership With Israel During Talks with Prime Minister - Biden

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The US and Israel strengthened their partnership during a meeting between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at the White House, Biden said on Friday.

"It was an honor to welcome Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to the White House today. We strengthened the enduring partnership between our two nations and underscored the United States' unwavering commitment to Israel's security," Biden said on the official presidential Twitter account.

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Engagement With Taliban Will Be Needed to Evacuate People After August 31 - White House

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The US will be engaging with the Taliban as a means to ensure the safe evacuation of people from Afghanistan following the August 31 deadline for withdrawal, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The President did direct the Secretary of State to continue diplomatic efforts with international partners to secure means for third-country nationals and Afghans with visas to leave the country even after the US military presence ends," Psaki said. "A part of that would certainly be having a coordinated approach and engagement with the Taliban."

Psaki said President Joe Biden has directed Secretary of State Antony Blinken to engage with global partners to determine what the path forward in Afghanistan will look like, adding that the international community has leverage against the Taliban.

The Washington Post earlier in the day reported that the Taliban have asked the US to keep a diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan following the August 31 withdrawal. Psaki refused to confirm or deny the report.

The report cited a source familiar with the matter who said the Taliban have requested that the United States retain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan past the August 31 deadline for withdrawal from the country.

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RPT - Engagement With Taliban Will Be Needed to Evacuate People After August 31 - White House

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Two US Warships Lawfully Transit Taiwan Strait - Navy

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Two US warships conducted routine transits through the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the US 7th Fleet said in a statement on Friday.

"The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd (DDG 100) and legend-class US Coast Guard National Security Cutter Munro (WMSL 755) conducted routine Taiwan Strait transits Aug. 27 (local time) through international waters in accordance with international law," the statement said.

Both ships transited the strait lawfully demonstrating the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, the statement added.

China has repeatedly stated that the Taiwan issue is the most sensitive in bilateral relations between Washington and Beijing. China considers Taiwan to be a renegade province and routinely protests whenever US warships transit the strait.

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UN Urges Taliban to Ensure Security at Kabul Airport - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement (banned in Russia) has a responsibility to ensure that security is maintained at the Kabul airport since that facility remains critical for delivering humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"The situation in Kabul airport after August 31 remains to be seen and will be in competence of the authorities in charge, the Taliban, to ensure that there is security in place for Kabul to have a functioning airport, which is obviously critical not only to us, but to the Afghan people," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric said the United Nations at present avoids using the airport for the purposes of delivering humanitarian aid in Afghanistan given the change of circumstances in Kabul. Some humanitarian aid convoys are coming from Pakistan by land, but those supplies are running slow, Dujarric he said.

"That is why it is critical that we have a functioning airport in Kabul," Dujarric added.

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Engagement with Taliban Will Be Needed to Evacuate People After August 31 - White House

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"The President did direct the Secretary of State to continue diplomatic efforts with international partners to secure means for third-country nationals and Afghans with visas to leave the country even after the US military presence ends," Psaki said. "A part of that would certainly be having a coordinated approach and engagement with the Taliban."

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Taliban Hope US Keeps Diplomats in Afghanistan After August 31 Withdrawal - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) have requested the United States keep a diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan following the August 31 withdrawal, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

The report cited a source familiar with the matter who said the Taliban have requested that the United States retain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan past the August 31 deadline for withdrawal from the country.

US officials have been considering the option of retaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, but no final order has been issued, the report added.

The United States and its allies have been discussing the possibility of recognizing the Taliban government after the terror group took over the Afghanistan.

However, US lawmakers Mike Waltz and Lindsey Graham called on the Biden administration earlier on Friday to recognize Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh as the legitimate government representative, saying the already recognized Afghan Constitution remains intact.

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Two Republican Lawmakers Urge Biden to Back Afghan Resistance in Panjshir - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Mike Waltz said on Friday that he and Senator Lindsey Graham - both Republicans - have urged President Joe Biden to support the resistance efforts in the Panjshir province in Afghanistan and to establish a humanitarian safe zone in the country.

"After speaking with Afghan VP Amrullah Saleh and Reps. of Ahmad Massoud, Lindsey Graham and I are calling on Pres. Biden to support a humanitarian safe zone in Afghanistan and Congressional efforts to stand with opposition forces in the Panjshir Valley," Waltz said via Twitter.

Massoud is the son of the former leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who fought a war against the Taliban government in the early 2000s.

Pakistan broadcaster GeoTV reported on Thursday that the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) and the Northern Alliance in the Afghan province of Panjshir have reached an agreement not to attack one another.

Panjshir, located northeast of Kabul, remains the only Afghan province that has not fallen to the Taliban. The resistance forces are led by Ahmad Massoud.

On Sunday, the Taliban gave Massoud a 4-hour ultimatum to capitulate. The 32-year-old responded that his forces and Panjshir residents would not surrender.

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NASA Says Probe Found No Structural Issues With ISS After Nauka Module Thruster Firing

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The investigation by NASA has not discovered any structural issues in the International Space Station (ISS) following the unplanned thruster firing by Russia's new multi-functional laboratory module (MLM) Nauka in July, ISS program manager Joel Montalbano said on Friday.

"As far as the MLM, we've taken a look from a structural standpoint of what happened when we did those, those rotations from the jet firing, and we're not tracking any structural issues," Montalbano said at a press conference ahead of the August 28 SpaceX rocket launch. Montalbano explained that from an engineering standpoint there is nothing that would prevent the ISS's life to be extended beyond 2024 - when the space station is set to expire - to as late as 2030.

On July 31, MLM Nauka was integrated into the ISS but soon after docking the onboard team detected unplanned firing of MLM thrusters causing the station to change its orientation. The ground control teams managed to return control over the ISS movement and stabilize its motion. The development of the Nauka module started in 1995 as a backup for the first ISS module, Zarya. In 2004, a decision was made to lower the costs of making a new module for the Russian part of the station by repurposing the backup. The module was originally scheduled to go into orbit in 2007, but the launch was postponed multiple times for various reasons.

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Bennett Says US, Israel Developed Strategy to Stop Iranian Aggression, Nuclear Program

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Friday that the United States and Israel have developed a comprehensive strategy to halt Iran's aggressive behavior in the Middle East and to permanently prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

"We've developed a comprehensive strategy that we're going to be talk about with two goals: the first goal is to stop Iran on its regional aggression and start rolling them back into the box and the second is to permanently keep Iran from every being able to break out a nuclear weapon," Bennett said during remarks with President Joe Biden at the White House. Bennett also said the United States and Iran have other options available to constrain Iran's nuclear program if diplomacy fails this endeavor.

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UPDATE - Federal Reserve Chairman Gives No Clear Timetable on Tapering of US Stimulus

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve gave no clear timetable on Friday for tapering its stimulus program that has been blamed for fueling inflation, with Chairman Jerome Powell saying the US economy was on good footing but still vulnerable from risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Powell used his opening speech at the Jackson Hole Symposium on monetary policy to say that although he was recently of the view that the tapering could begin by the end of the year, a further spread of the pandemic from the Delta variant had tempered that stance.

"My view is that the 'substantial further progress' test has been met for inflation. There has also been clear progress toward maximum employment," he said, referring to the Federal Reserve's twin mandates.

But Powell also hedged the US central bank's position on the taper by saying it will be "carefully assessing incoming data and the evolving risks."

"Even after our asset purchases end, our elevated holdings of longer-term securities will continue to support accommodative financial conditions," he added.

The Federal Reserve has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury securities and \$40 billion in agency mortgage-backed securities each month since March 2020 to insulate the US economy from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures. The central bank has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The central bank's stimulus program is being blamed for aggravating price pressures in the United States, where economic growth for the second quarter of 2021 was estimated at 6.6 percent on Thursday - above the 3.5 percent decline noted for all of 2020. The Federal Reserve has projected economic growth at 6.5 percent for all of 2021.

The Federal Reserve's preferred gauge for inflation - the core Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices - increased 3.6 percent in the year through July, its most since 1991. The PCE Index including energy and food rose 4.2 percent year-on-year.

The Federal Reserve's own target for inflation is 2 percent per year.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has passed \$1.2 trillion in COVID-19-related spending since the president took office in January. Democrat lawmakers aligned to Biden this week advanced a further spending plan for \$3.5 trillion to advance his economic agenda.

The question of when the Federal Reserve ought to taper its stimulus and raise interest rates has been debated in recent months as economic recovery conflicted with a resurgence of the novel coronavirus Delta variant.

On Thursday, three regional Federal Reserve chiefs - Robert Kaplan, James Bullard and Esther George - pushed for a prompt taper, saying the US economy was unlikely to be greatly impaired by the coronavirus Delta variant as it was by the original variant a year ago.

On Friday, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker voiced similar views, saying the central bank should taper asset purchases "sooner rather than later." Unlike his three colleagues, Harker is a voting member of the Federal Reserve's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), which makes his comments more influential.

Not all Federal Reserve members, however, are in favor of a quick taper. Raphael Bostic, who heads the central bank's Atlanta division and is also a voting member on the FOMC, said on Friday the coronavirus Delta variant could profoundly impact economic growth and needs to be watched closely before any withdrawal of monetary support is implemented.

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Ottawa Unaware of Canadians, Afghan Visa Holders Injured in Kabul Terror Attacks - Garneau

TORONTO, August 27 (Sputnik) - Ottawa is unaware that any Canadians and Afghan nationals approved for relocation to have been injured in the deadly terror attack outside of the Kabul airport, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Friday.

"Based on the information we have, at this point, the answer is: no," Garneau told reporters when asked whether any Canadians or Afghans holding visas to relocate to Canada have been injured in the terrorist attacks.

However, Garneau pointed out that the final assessment of the deadly attacks in Kabul is incomplete.

On Thursday, several explosions targeted Kabul airport and its outskirts. The Islamic State-Khorasan terror group (banned in Russia) claimed responsibility for the attacks. A source in the Afghan Ministry of Health told Sputnik that at least 110 people died and 1,300 people were wounded. At least 13 US service members were killed in the attack, according to the US Defense Department.

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White House Says Biden Gave US Military Commanders Full Authority to Target IS-K

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden gave military commanders all necessary approvals to target the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K terror group, banned in Russia) in Afghanistan after a suicide attack by the group left 13 US servicemembers dead, the White House said on Friday.

"Our commanders also updated the President and Vice President on plans to develop ISIS-K targets. The next few days of the mission will be the most dangerous period to date. The President reaffirmed with the commanders his approval of all authorities they need to conduct the operation and protect our troops, and all reported back that they have the resources they believe they need to do so effectively," the White House said.

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Canada Unsure of Canadians, Visa Holders Left Behind in Afghanistan - Foreign Minister

TORONTO, August 27 (Sputnik) - Ottawa cannot confirm how many Canadians and Afghan nationals approved for relocation have been left behind after the Canadian government wrapped up its evacuation operations in Afghanistan, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Friday. Canada's acting top soldier Gen. Wayne Eyre announced on Thursday that the country's evacuation operations in Afghanistan have concluded and the majority of the country's armed forces have departed the Kabul airport.

"We don't have those exact numbers," Garneau told reporters when asked about how many people eligible for travel to Canada remain in Afghanistan.

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

power has forced thousands of Afghans to seek refuge abroad for fear of reprisals and many continue to reach the Kabul airport in hopes of flying out Afghanistan. Ottawa has vowed to relocate some 20,000 Afghan nationals to Canada who face the greatest risk of Taliban reprisals.

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Biden Says US Ready to Use 'Other Options' if Diplomacy Fails in Dealing With Iran

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that the United States is prepared to use other measures to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons if diplomacy fails.

"We're also going to discuss the threat from Iran and our commitment to ensure Iran never develops a nuclear weapon," Biden said during remarks at the White House with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. "If diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options."

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Canada Appoints Former Ambassador Sproule as Special Envoy for Afghanistan - Top Diplomat

TORONTO, August 27 (Sputnik) - Canada's former ambassador to Afghanistan has been appointed as Ottawa's special envoy for the war-torn country, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Friday.

"To strengthen our commitment to Afghanistan, I have appointed David Sproule, former ambassador to Afghanistan, as our new Senior official for Afghanistan," Garneau said in a statement via Twitter.

Sproule, who served as Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2007, is already participating in discussions regarding the crisis in Afghanistan with Canadian allies and regional partners in Doha, Qatar, Garneau added during a press briefing.

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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Half of All US Teens Have Received at Least 1 Coronavirus Vaccine Dose - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Half of all the teenagers in the United States have received at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"Half of teens [aged] twelve to 17) have had at least one vaccine dose," Walensky told a White House briefing. "We know how to protect our kids at school: We have the tools. ... Vaccine inoculations give a shield of protection that helps keep COVID-19 out of [the] schools." However, a large number of coronavirus cases are still occurring because many schools and educational authorities across the United States are not following CDC guidelines, Walensky warned.

"I want to appeal to those districts who have not implemented multi-layered mitigation strategies: We know these strategies work," Walensky said.

Serious adverse effects from the vaccines in use are rare in adolescents, Dr. Anthony Fauci told the briefing. In every study, the benefit of teenagers taking the vaccine has always very much outweighed the risk, he added.

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COVID-19-Related Deaths in US Increased 11% in Past 7 Days - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The number of COVID-19-related deaths in the United States rose to an average of 864 per day in the most recent seven day period, an increase of almost 11 percent on the previous period, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"The seven day average of daily deaths has increased to nearly 864 per day, an increase of nearly 11 percent on the previous seven day period," Walensky told a White House press briefing.

The CDC also reported an average of 142,000 new coronavirus cases per day over the same seven day reporting period, Walensky said. This represented an increase of nearly three percent, she added.

The CDC reported in the same seven day period, a total of "12,000 hospital admissions, an increase of nearly six percent on the previous seven day period," Walensky said.

The CDC now projected 651,000 to 680,000 total deaths from the coronavirus pandemic by September 18, she added.

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Some 7,000 Afghan SIV Visa Applicants Arrived in US After Evacuation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - There are now just under 7,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants in the United States currently undergoing processing, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We looked at the number just before coming out, we have just under 7,000 [Afghan SIV applicants] now that are in the states and being processed," Kirby said during a press briefing. The US government has authorized seven domestic military bases to house up to 50,000 Afghan evacuees as of Friday. The facilities are planned to be used as temporary housing locations while the evacuees are screened and processed.

The evacuation of US citizens, vulnerable Afghans, and SIV applicants who helped the United States' war effort continues at the Kabul airport despite the suicide bombing attacks on Thursday that killed 13 US service members and numerous Afghan civilians.

US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said during the Friday briefing that there are currently 5,400 people at the Kabul airport awaiting flights to be evacuated from Afghanistan.

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Federal Reserve Chairman Gives No Clear Timetable on Tapering of US Stimulus

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve gave no clear timetable on Friday for tapering its stimulus program that has been blamed for fueling inflation, with Chairman Jerome Powell saying the US economy was on good footing but still vulnerable from risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Powell used his opening speech at the Jackson Hole Symposium on monetary policy to say that although he was recently of the view that the tapering could begin by the end of the year, a further spread of the pandemic from the Delta variant had tempered that stance.

"My view is that the 'substantial further progress' test has been met for inflation. There has also been clear progress toward maximum employment," he said, referring to the Federal Reserve's twin mandates.

But Powell also hedged the central bank's position on the taper by saying it will be "carefully assessing incoming data and the evolving risks."

"Even after our asset purchases end, our elevated holdings of longer-term securities will continue to support accommodative financial conditions," he added.

The Federal Reserve has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury securities and \$40 billion in agency mortgage-backed securities each month since March 2020 to insulate the US economy from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures. The central bank has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The Federal Reserve's stimulus program is being blamed for aggravating price pressures in the United States, where economic growth for the second quarter of 2021 was estimated at 6.6 percent on Thursday - above the 3.5 percent decline noted for all of 2020. The central bank itself has projected economic growth at 6.5 percent for all of 2021.

The Fed's preferred gauge for inflation - the core Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices - rose 3.6 percent in the year through

July, its most since 1991. The PCE Index including energy and food rose 4.2 percent year-on-year.

The Federal Reserve's own target for inflation is a 2 percent per annum.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has passed \$1.2 trillion in COVID-19-related spending since the president took office in January. Democrat lawmakers aligned to Biden this week advanced a further spending plan for \$3.5 trillion to advance his economic agenda.

The question of when the Federal reserve ought to taper its stimulus and raise interest rates has been hotly debated in recent months as economic recovery conflicted with a resurgence of the coronavirus Delta variant.

On Thursday, three regional Federal Reserve chiefs - Robert Kaplan, James Bullard and Esther George - pushed for a prompt taper, saying the US economy was unlikely to be greatly impaired by the coronavirus Delta variant as it was by the original variant a year ago.

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Pentagon Says Thousands of Inmates Including ISIS-K Members Released from Afghan Prisons

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Thousands of inmates, including members of the Islamic State-Khorasan terror group (ISIS-K, banned in Russia) were released from two Afghan prisons taken over by the Taliban, US Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"I don't know the exact number [of prisoners released]. Clearly, it's in the thousands when you consider both prisons, because both of them were taken over by the Taliban and emptied, but I couldn't give you a precise figure," Kirby said in response to a question about how many ISIS-K prisoners are believed to have been released.

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US Authorizes 3 More Military Bases to House Up to 50,000 Afghan Evacuees - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The US has authorized three more domestic military bases to be used as temporary housing for up to 50,000 Afghan evacuees, Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Friday.

"Today the Department of Defense can announce that it has authorized Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, Fort Pickett, Virginia, and Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico to provide additional support to the US mission to evacuate Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, their families, and other at-risk individuals," Kirby said.

US Northern Command said on Friday that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed them to provide the State Department with temporary housing and sustainment for up to 50,000. The

three aforementioned bases will join four others that have already been authorized in providing this support.

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Some 5,400 People Awaiting Evacuation at Kabul Airport - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Approximately 5,400 people remain at Kabul airport awaiting flights to leave Afghanistan, US Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor said on Friday. "There are still approximately 5400 individuals on the airport. As of this report, awaiting for flights out of Afghanistan," Taylor said during a press briefing. Taylor also said that over past 24 hours, the United States and its allies evacuated 12,500 people on 80 flights out of Afghanistan.

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US Does Not Believe There Was Second Explosion Near Kabul Airport – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – The initial reports about a second suicide explosion attack at the Baron hotel near Kabul airport on Thursday have not been confirmed meaning there was only one suicide bomber attack at the Abbey gate leading to the airport, Army Major General William Taylor said on Friday.

"I can confirm for you that we do not believe that there was a second explosion at or near the Baron hotel, that it was one suicide bomber. We are not sure how that report was provided incorrect," Taylor said at a press briefing.

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UN Security Council Urges All States to Hold Kabul Attackers Accountable - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Friday issued a statement urging all states to cooperate actively with the relevant authorities to hold accountable the attackers, organizers and sponsors of the Kabul airport bombings.

"The members of the Security Council underlined the need to hold perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice. They urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with all relevant authorities in this regard," the statement said.

The UN Security Council also calls upon all states to combat threats to international peace and security caused by terrorism, including such threats emanating from Afghanistan to ensure that country's territory is not used to attack any other country.

On Thursday, several explosions targeted Kabul airport and its outskirts. The Islamic State-Khorasan terror group (banned in Russia) claimed responsibility for the attacks. A source in the Afghan Ministry of Health told Sputnik that at least 110 people died and 1,300 people were wounded. At least 13 US service members were killed in the attack, according to the Defense Department.

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US Consumer Spending Down But Fed Inflation Indicator Up Most in 30 Years - Data

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US consumer spending slowed in July but a key inflation gauge monitored by the Federal Reserve grew its most in three decades from a year ago, putting heat on the central bank to act against ramping price pressures.

Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US gross domestic product, increased by 0.3 percent last month versus 1.1 percent in June, data from the Commerce Department showed.

The core Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, stripped of volatile food and energy components, however, rose 3.6 percent in the 12 months through July, its most since 1991. The PCE Index including energy and food rose 4.2 percent year on year.

The Fed's own target for inflation is a mere 2 percent per annum.

The central bank has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury securities and \$40 billion in agency mortgage-backed securities each month since March 2020 to insulate the economy from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. It has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The Fed's stimulus program is being blamed for aggravating price pressures in the United States, where economic growth for the second quarter of 2021 was estimated at 6.6 percent on Thursday — way above the 3.5 percent decline noted for all of 2020. The central bank itself has projected economic growth at 6.5 percent for all of 2021.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell is scheduled to address the closely-watched Jackson Hole Symposium on monetary policy on Friday, where he could announce a timetable for tapering the central bank's monthly asset purchases.

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Sixty Percent of Americans Say US Economy Getting Worse - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The majority of adults in the United States say the economy is moving in the wrong direction, while about a third say the economy is getting better, a new Gallup revealed on Friday.

"In the latest survey, 37 percent of US adults say the economy is getting better and 60 percent say it is getting worse, yielding a net -23 score for the 'economic outlook' component of the index. In July, 41 percent believed the economy was getting better and 54 percent worse, for a -13 economic outlook score," Gallup said.

An almost equal percentage of respondents - 28 and 29 percent - consider the economic conditions in the United States to be excellent and poor, respectively, while 42 percent assess the economic conditions as fair, Gallup also said.

"The decline in confidence appears likely tied to the recent increase in coronavirus infections," it added.

The survey was conducted among 1,006 adult Americans in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia from August 2-17.

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UN Security Council Urges All States to Hold Kabul Attackers Accountable – Statement

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) – United Nations Security Council in a statement on Friday has urged all states to cooperate actively with relevant authorities to hold the attackers, organizers and sponsors of Thursday's Kabul airport bombings accountable.

"The members of the Security Council underlined the need to hold perpetrators, organizers, financiers, and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice. They urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with all relevant authorities in this regard," the statement said.