

9/15/21 Wednesday

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Australia to Gain Nuclear-Powered Submarine From Joint Defense Effort With US, UK
By - Evan Craighead

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden held a virtual news conference on Wednesday to unveil their new joint partnership on advanced defense-tech sharing.

Morrison revealed in his address that the first major initiative of the new trilateral security partnership - dubbed AUKUS - will be to deliver Australia its first nuclear-powered submarine fleet.

The Australian Prime Minister detailed that the trio will take the next 18 months to decide the "best way to achieve this."

"We intend to build these submarines in Adelaide, Australia, in close cooperation with the United Kingdom and the United States," Morrison added.

"But let me be clear," he said. "Australia is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons [nor] establish nuclear capability. And we will continue to meet all our nuclear non-proliferation obligations."

Later in the joint, virtual news conference, Johnson proclaimed that the UK has chosen to embark on the trilateral security partnership with the US and Australia to make the world safer and generate more jobs in the UK.

Biden closed out the event, touting the strength of ally bonds across the globe. He noted that when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, France already has a "substantial" presence and plays a key role in strengthening the security and prosperity of the region.

The US president highlighted that the overarching goal of AUKUS is to ensure allies have modern capabilities to properly defend against "rapidly evolving threats."

He also emphasized that Australia's future nuclear submarine fleet will not be armed with nuclear weapons.

"We're not talking about nuclear-armed submarines, these are conventionally-armed submarines that are powered by nuclear reactors," Biden asserted.

AUKUS Mission

Australia, UK and US governments will move to strengthen each other's ability to support security and defense interests

Countries will promote deeper sharing of information and technology

Countries will foster a deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases and supply chains

Countries will deepen cooperation on a range of defense and security capabilities

Countries will focus on bolstering cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities

Naval Group, New Zealand and China Respond to AUKUS

France's Naval Group voiced "deep disappointment" in response to the Wednesday AUKUS announcement, as the news torpedoed Australia's \$90 billion submarine contract with the defense contractor.

The deal would have been Australia's largest defense contract to date.

Meanwhile, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern applauded the trio's new mission, revealing that Morrison discussed the partnership with her on Wednesday.

"We welcome the increased engagement of the UK and US in the region and reiterate our collective objective needs to be the delivery of peace and stability and the preservation of the international rules based system," the New Zealand Prime Minister said on Thursday, noting that the endeavor "in no way changes our security and intelligence ties" with the three countries. "New Zealand's position in relation to the prohibition of nuclear powered vessels in our waters remains unchanged," she added.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington panned the trilateral partnership, calling on the US and its allies to "shake off their Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice." "Exchanges and cooperation between countries should help expand mutual understanding and trust," the spokesperson declared, [as reported by the WSJ](#). "They should not build exclusionary blocs targeting or [harm] the interests of third parties."

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At Least Two of Biden's 19th-Century Ancestors Were Enslavers, New Book Claims
By - Evan Craighead

Throughout his political career of more than 40 years, US President Joe Biden has proudly embraced his Irish roots -- which can be traced back to the great famine, per US genealogist Megan Smolenyak. While Biden may be quick to quote an Irish poet and pay respects to his maternal ancestry, less has been said about his paternal lineage and heritage.

A new publication citing West Virginia-based genealogist Alexander Bannerman and lineage expert Gary Boyd Roberts has concluded that at least two of Biden's paternal ancestors enslaved multiple people in the 19th century.

The experts' findings are highlighted in Politico correspondent Ben Schreckinger's upcoming book, "The Bidens: Inside the First Family's Fifty-Year Rise to Power," and have been regarded as the [first full, authoritative genealogy of Biden to be published](#).

[According to an excerpt from the forthcoming work](#), Bannerman was able to confirm via the 1800 Census that Biden's great-great-great-grandfather, Jesse Robinett, was listed as the owner of two enslaved people in Alleghany County, Maryland, at the time.

Thomas Randle, another 3rd-great-grandfather of the US president, enslaved a 14-year-old boy in Baltimore County, Maryland, according to 1850 Census records and slave schedules cited by the genealogist. Randle remained listed as an enslaver of a single person during the 1860 Census.

The West Virginia genealogist noted that while enslavement was practiced by Biden's ancestors, their overall ties to slavery were on the lower end of the spectrum - especially for those with colonial ancestry.

"Not a lot of ancestors, and not a lot of slaves," Bannerman said.

It was also revealed that Biden has extended familial ties to Varina Anne Banks Howell, the wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

The experts' findings on Biden's paternal ancestry come months after the viral dissemination of a photo that showed a Confederate soldier, and claimed: "Joe Biden's great grandfather Joseph J. Biden (1828-1880) was a slave-owner and fought for the Confederate States of America."

While the Biden family does have ties to 19th-century enslavement in the US, the man depicted in the image was [later identified as Richard Young Bennett](#).

It is worth noting that Biden is not the only descendant of enslavers, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and former US President Barack Obama both have ancestors who engaged in the practice.

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US Judge Denies Trump's Request to Delay Defamation Suit Filed by E. Jean Carroll
By - Evan Craighead

Back in 2019, then-Elle columnist E. Jean Carroll accused US President Donald Trump of sexually assaulting her in a department store dressing room in the mid-1990s. Trump, who slammed Carroll's sexual assault allegations as "totally false," was later sued by the columnist for "smearing her integrity, honesty, and dignity."

US District Judge Lewis Kaplan of the Southern District of New York has denied a request from Trump's legal team to halt proceedings in E. Jean Carroll's ongoing defamation lawsuit against the former US president.

Kaplan's order - [entered on Wednesday](#) - denied the request without prejudice, dashing Trump's attempt to receive a "stay" on the federal judge's December 2020 ruling.

[At the time, Kaplan rejected](#) the then-US president's attempt to [substitute the US Department of Justice](#) as the defendant in the lawsuit. The federal judge argued that Trump must remain the defendant, as he was not acting in his official capacity when he rebutted Carroll's allegations. "His comments concerned an alleged sexual assault that took place several decades before he took office, and the allegations have no relationship to the official business of the United States," Kaplan wrote in a December 2020 statement.

The DoJ, of both the Trump [and Biden administrations](#), has asserted that 45 was acting within the scope of his employment when he [responded to press questions about Carroll's accusations](#) in June 2019.

However, Kaplan declared in his December ruling that even if Trump was in office at the time of the alleged incident, his statements toward Carroll would be outside the scope of his employment.

The Wednesday order allows the defamation suit to resume normal proceedings, following several months of delays by Trump and the federal government. At the same time, Trump's legal team is permitted to request another stay, due to the judge's order being issued "without prejudice."

"We're looking forward to oral argument in our case before the Second Circuit during the week of November 29," Roberta Kaplan, Carroll's attorney, said in a [Wednesday statement to The Hill](#). "In the meantime, we are reviewing Judge Kaplan's order," she added.

Carroll, a longtime columnist for lifestyle magazine Elle, made mainstream US headlines after she alleged that Trump threw her against the wall of a Bergdorf Goodman dressing room in either 1995 or early 1996.

"The next moment, still wearing correct business attire, shirt, tie, suit jacket, overcoat, he opens the overcoat, unzips his pants, and, forcing his fingers around my private area, thrusts his penis halfway — or completely, I'm not certain — inside me," Carroll wrote in a book excerpt [published by New York Magazine](#) in June 2019.

After a "colossal struggle," the columnist was able to escape from the famed real estate mogul, according to her account.

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Morrison Touts Tomahawk Missile Procurement, Says Nuclear Subs Will Be 'in the Water' in 10 Years

By - Evan Craighead

As leaders from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States unveiled their new trilateral security partnership for advanced defense-tech sharing on Wednesday, it was also revealed that the first initiative of the endeavor would be the delivery of Australia's first nuclear-powered submarine fleet.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison returned to his Canberra podium Thursday afternoon to divulge that the country should expect more than just a costly nuclear submarine fleet within the next several years.

"[W]e will be enhancing our long-range strike capability including hawk and tomahawk cruise missiles and extended missile range for our capabilities," [Morrison said](#), highlighting the goal of a "stable and secure region."

The acquisition of Australia's new capabilities will come as part of the country's 2024 structure plan, and the missiles will be fitted on Australia's Collins-class submarine fleet.

As for the nuclear submarine fleet, Morrison projected that the country should have a portion of the submarines "in the water" before 2030.

"When it comes to the delivery of this program, I indicated that we anticipate being able to commence build this year and the first of those submarines would be in the water, we believe, before the end of next decade and all partners will be working to ensure that that is achieved at a date as soon as is possible to achieve," he said.

Morrison rejected claims that Australia "wasted" some \$2.4 billion that was already funneled to France's Naval Group as part of a \$90 billion submarine contract -- a deal that was rendered defunct following Wednesday's announcement.

"We've invested \$2.4 billion in the attack class program and I say all of that investment, I believe, has further built our capability," he proclaimed, "and that is consistent with the decision that was taken back in 2016 for all the right reasons to protect Australia's national security interests and has served that purpose."

The French defense contractor [notably expressed "deep disappointment"](#) in response to the AUKUS nuclear submarine initiative on Wednesday.

The Australian prime minister went on to issue a public apology to Naval Group, the French government and French President Emmanuel Macron.

"There is few if any other country around the world that understands the importance of the Pacific and has been as committed to the Pacific as France," he said.

"We share a deep passion for our Pacific family and a deep commitment to them, and I look forward and I hope to see us continue once we move past what is obviously a very difficult and disappointing decision for France."

China also took issue with the AUKUS announcement, which was viewed as another example of the participating nations' "Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice," according to a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington.

"There's an open invitation for President Xi to discuss other matters," Morrison said to a reporter asking about potential economic trade sanctions from China. "That has always been there. Australia is open to discuss issues important to the Indo-Pacific."

Morrison also stressed to the global community that Australia is not looking to become a nuclear power, or superpower, through AUKUS.

"This is about propulsion. This is not about acquiring nuclear weapons," he said, pledging continued adherence to obligations under the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

US President Joe Biden previously clarified that Australia's submarine fleet would be powered by nuclear reactors, but "conventionally-armed" when it comes to weaponry.

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It Wasn't Us: Twitter Rejects Claims That Nicki Minaj Was Blocked Amid Vaccine Tweet Backlash

By - Gaby Arancibia

Over the last several days, American rapper Nicki Minaj has faced public backlash over a recent tweet in which she claimed via Twitter that an acquaintance had become impotent after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. The claims were detailed as Minaj discussed not attending this year's Met Gala.

Social media giant Twitter rejected claims that it had blocked American rapper Nicki Minaj from its platform after the musician took to Instagram to declare that she had been placed in "Twitter jail."

In a statement issued to the Los Angeles Times, a spokesperson for the social media platform declared that the company had in no way, shape or form taken on efforts to block the artist from accessing her account.

"Twitter did not take any enforcement action on the account referenced," an unidentified spokesperson [informed](#) the outlet on Wednesday.

The response from Twitter came shortly after Minaj took to Instagram to reveal that she had wound up blocked from tweeting because officials at the company "didn't like what I was saying over there on that block."

"I guess my poll was gonna be asking questions is OK. I like being fking dumb then boom. Can't tweet," Minaj wrote in an Instagram story post.

Incidentally, the Twitter jail allegations surfaced just moments after Minaj had also indicated via Twitter that she had been invited to the White House in light of the uproar over her tweets.

However, it's worth noting that the Biden White House has clarified that the rapper was simply offered a call to address any question she may have about COVID-19 vaccines.

A tsunami of backlash enveloped the musician earlier this week after she tweeted to her more than 22 million followers that she wouldn't attend the 2021 Met Gala because of the required vaccination status. Minaj stated that while she was willing to get the jab, she would not do so until she's "done enough research."

But that wasn't all she told her followers. In fact, Minaj went on to recall the experience of a friend of a cousin in Trinidad who had received the COVID-19 vaccine, and had ended up impotent, left with swollen testicles and bride-less after his partner ditched him at the altar over his condition.

Within seconds, Minaj's tweet set off a Twitter explosion like none other, with many blasting the musician for spreading misinformation. The story gained such traction that the US' top COVID-19 doctor - Anthony Fauci - weighed in on the matter.

The government of Trinidad and Tobago even got into the debate, noting that "there is absolutely no reported such side effect or adverse event of testicular swelling in Trinidad." The Caribbean nation's Health Minister Dr. Terrence Deyalsingh [said](#) early Wednesday that officials had "wasted so much time" in trying to determine the truth in the case.

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'Risk Situation' in Germany Prompts Heavily Armed Police Forces to Surround Hagen
By - Gaby Arancibia

Local German law enforcement officials have not detailed the alert that was raised in the area, but underscored that forces were on the scene as a result of a "threat" to the building.

Dozens of police officers were deployed to the western German city of Hagen late Wednesday after officials were tipped off to a threat to a synagogue in the area.

The alarming situation, which emerged amid the start of the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, was described by the police as a "risk situation" that prompted a police operation near the Hagen Jewish community.

Photos that emerged from the scene showed heavily armed police forces appearing to cordon off the area. It was later detailed by the authorities that sections of the local roads would be blocked until further notice.

A [release](#) later issued by the Dortmund police states the operation was completed without issue, and that investigators uncovered no hazardous materials. However, officials did not offer details on the specific threat that was made against the building.

"There is close coordination with the other Jewish communities in North Rhine-Westphalia," a translation of the release reads. "The aim of the police is to ensure the safety of all these facilities. We currently have no indications that other facilities are at risk."

The release further noted that officials remain in "constant contact with the affected Jewish community."

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CDC Research Sees Spike in US Obesity Rate From 2018 to 2020

By - Nevin Brown

New research from CDC shows that the number of US states with an obesity rate over 35% has nearly doubled since 2018.

The CDC reports that in 2018 only nine states reported an obesity rate over 35%, with that number jumping to 12 in 2019, and hitting 16 in 2020. Delaware, Iowa, Ohio and Texas joined Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia on that list in 2020.

The ballooning of America's obesity rate is a recent development. According to a [news release from Trust for America's Health](#), as recently as 2012 no state had an obesity rate that eclipsed 35%. Every state now has an [adult obesity rate that eclipses 20%](#).

The results of the study show serious demographic differences in the nation's obesity rate, as well.

Thirty-five states reported an obesity rate among African American adults above 35%, 22 states reported an obesity rate among Hispanic adults above 35%, with another seven states having an obesity rate among non-Hispanic white adults above 35%. Zero states reported an obesity rate among Asian adults above 35%.

Education also plays a key factor in obesity rates.

"Obesity prevalence decreased by level of education. Adults without a high school degree or equivalent had the highest self-reported obesity (38.8%), followed by adults with some college (34.1%) or high school graduates (34.0%), and then by college graduates (25.0%)," the report added.

There is also evidence that the pandemic has fueled the growth in obesity. A Harris poll discovered that 42% of Americans reported weight gain since the pandemic started.

Of the respondents, the average weight gained was 29 pounds. A body mass index [over 3.0 is considered obese](#) by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. A gain of 29 pounds for a 5'9, 150-pound person takes an individual from a [healthy BMI of 22.1](#) to an [overweight BMI of 26.4](#).

BMI is a useful tool for quickly and cheaply determining someone's health based upon weight. It provides insights when aggregated in large datasets, but on an individual level can be misleading.

The results of the CDC's findings pose a serious problem for the United States healthcare systems. Research has shown that obesity can lead to [serious adverse health effects](#) and increases [the risk of serious complications from Covid](#). With [healthcare and Covid polling highly](#) on voter priorities, how public health officials combat America's growing obesity crisis could become a heated political debate.

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General Mark Milley Facing Increased Scrutiny From Lawmakers Over Secret Calls to China

Nevin Brown

[All materials](#)

General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest-ranking military official in the United States, reportedly usurped the chain of command during the Trump presidency. The fallout from Bob Woodward and Bob Costa's upcoming book, "Peril," chronicling the end of the Trump presidency, has already sparked controversy. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) called for General Mark Milley to resign or be court-martialed if reports of his secret calls with China are true.

On an appearance on "Fox and Friends," Paul had this to say about the reports: "It should be investigated immediately, today, he should be questioned under oath, if not with a polygraph test, on whether it happened. If it happened, he should be immediately relieved of his duties and court-martialed. You have to find out if it's true. This is innuendo and rumor and propaganda perhaps. But, if it is true he absolutely immediately needs to be removed."

"Peril" documents two instances in which Milley made secret calls to his Chinese counterpart to ease concerns over a US attack and the stability of then-President Donald Trump. [The first call allegedly occurred](#) on October 30, 2020, and was prompted by Milley receiving intelligence that China believed a US attack was on the horizon.

The book claims Milley told General Li Zuocheng of the People's Liberation Army, "I want to assure you that the American government is stable and everything is going to be OK."

"We are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you," he added.

Milley's next phone call with General Li took place in the wake of the January 6 Capitol riots as the general likely either sensed or had intelligence that Chinese officials were worried about the political stability of the US and its president.

Milley reassured Li that "if we're going to attack, I'm going to call you ahead of time," and that "we are 100% steady. Everything's fine. But democracy can be sloppy sometimes."

Milley's spokesman, Colonel Dave Butler, [in a written statement](#), claims the general was well within his authority and "were in keeping with these duties and responsibilities...to maintain strategic stability" in regard to the phone calls with his Chinese counterpart.

However, the two phone calls may not be his most egregious break in command. The January 6 riots appeared to have a profound effect on Milley. In its wake, [he mobilized America's national security state](#), without the American people's knowledge, to effectively monitor the president. The book portrays Milley's rationale as "a good faith precaution to ensure there was no historic rupture in the international order, no accidental war with China or others, and no use of nuclear weapons."

"Peril" is set to be released on September 21st, and the calls for Milley to explain himself will surely mount. Regardless if Milley resigns, is fired, or court-martialed for his behavior, he likely believes he did the right thing for the American people. However, the law may say otherwise. US President Joe Biden, regardless of the backlash, has made his feelings over Milley very clear. When asked by a reporter if the general had done the right thing, [Biden responded](#), "I have great confidence in General Milley." [White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki](#) later added that Biden backs Milley's, "leadership, his patriotism, and his fidelity to our Constitution."

Powerful Earthquake Shakes China's Sichuan Region, Leaves Several Dead - State Media
By -Nevin Brown

A magnitude 5.4 earthquake has been detected in China's Sichuan region.

The quake was initially detected as a 5.7 magnitude earthquake at [20:33:37.4 UTC in the Sichuan-Chong Qing](#) border region before being upgraded to 6.0, and then being confirmed as a 5.4 magnitude quake.

The quake struck 75 miles from Chongqing a city of nearly 7.5 million people and from a depth of 31 miles.

Chinese state media has indicated that at least three individuals were killed as a result of the quake, with dozens of other left with injuries. Approximately 35 houses had collapsed after the earthquake struck the region, according to the [Global Times](#), which also reported that a local train station was shuttered after the quake..

However, the area where the quake was directly detected is a sparsely populated area in Lu County along the Jiuqu River.

The Times reports that earthquake relief headquarters of Sichuan activated a level II response, which happens to be the second-highest level in a four tier system. Rescue efforts are ongoing in the area.

[One witness](#), 31 miles from the epicenter, was woken by "a lengthy and quite violent shake."

Another witness, 128 miles from the epicenter, "felt mild shaking."

Earthquakes can produce aftershocks that can occur months after an initial shock.

In 2008 Sichuan experienced an 8.0 magnitude earthquake that caused the largest number of geohazards ever recorded. The depth of and magnitude of this earthquake present a serious risk for those near the epicenter.

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'Major Traffic Collision' in California Sees Vehicle Drive Over Cliff

By - Nevin Brown

A car went off of a cliff in San Mateo County, California prompting authorities to close the southbound side of the highway indefinitely.

The California Highway Patrol blocked off the southbound side of the Highway 1 to allow emergence personnel to attend to the vehicle. It has yet to be reported what caused the vehicle to veer off the cliff and there is no timetable for its retrieval.

"[CHP say](#) the car went off the road, flew 100 feet in the air before landing on the beach."

The status of the driver is uncertain but officials have not seen anyone get out or attempt to get out from the crash. The coroner is on the scene.

The accident occurred in the [Pacifica area on Wednesday afternoon](#). Pacifica is a costal town on the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Half Moon Bay.

Highway 1 is the main traffic artery that connects Pacifica to the rest of California.

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Head of Islamic State in Greater Sahara 'Neutralized' by French Forces, Macron Reveals

By - Nevin Brown

Emmanuel Macron reveals that French forces have neutralized Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, leader of the terrorist group Islamic State* in the Greater Sahara.

Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui was France's [most wanted jihadist in the Sahel](#). His branch of the Islamic State is highly active in the border region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The incredibly arid region is sparsely populated and difficult for local and international forces to police. Emmanuel Macron, in a tweet, expressed his pleasure over the successful operation. "Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, leader of the terrorist group Islamic State in the Greater Sahara was neutralized by French forces. This is another major success in our fight against terrorist groups in the Sahel."

In October of 2017, al-Sahraoui led the [Tongo Tongo ambush of American and Nigerian forces](#).

The death of four US soldiers sparked debate and investigation over the US's presence in Africa. Reports found that US troops were inadequately prepared for the attack. The ambush remains the largest loss of American troops in Africa of the 21st century.

In 2010, al-Sahraoui joined Katiba Tarik ibn Zayd, a branch of al-Qaeda, which aims to overthrow the Algerian government and install an Islamic state. In 2011, he was one of the founding members of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

It wasn't until 2015 that al-Sahraoui pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State. His militia has been highly active in the region and has been blamed for a [series of attacks since 2019](#).

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US Weekly Jobless at 332,000 in Continued Recovery From Pandemic - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose by 20,000 to reach 332,000 last week but remained below the key 400,000 level for a seventh week in a row amid continued recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the Labor Department said on Thursday.

"In the week ending September 11, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 332,000, an increase of 20,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release. The last time jobless claims crossed the 400,000 level was at the end of July. Economists polled by US media forecast 321,500 unemployment claims for the latest week on file, putting what the department's reported data slightly above target.

"The data was more or less in line with expectations," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive.

Continuing claims for the week ended Sept. 4 — reported with a one-week lag — were at 2.67 million, versus 2.85 million for the week to Aug. 28. That brought the weekly unemployment rate down by 0.2% to 1.9%.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

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

The Federal Reserve thinks growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell also says it may take a while for "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.2 percent in August.

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US Retail Sales Up 0.7% Aug, After July Decline of 1.1% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US retail sales, a bellwether of consumer sentiment, rose by 0.7% in August, after a 1.1% decline in July, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for August 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$618.7 billion, an increase of 0.7% from the previous month," a Commerce Department statement said.

Compared with a year ago, the growth in retail sales was 15.1%.

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RPT - Syrian Kurdish Leader Discussed Turkish Attacks During Moscow Visit - SDC to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) head Ilham Ehmed raised the issue of Turkish attacks in northern Syria during a visit to Russia, as well as asked Moscow to facilitate a meeting with the Syrian leadership, SDC representative in the US, Bassam Saker, told Sputnik.

"Ehmed has visited Moscow and held meetings with Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian special presidential representative for the Middle East and Africa, as well as other senior Russian officials. The meetings were good," Saker said. "She complained about Ankara's violation of an agreement with Russia by launching attacks in northern Syria. Russia has promised to address the issue."

Saker, who is also a member of the Presidential Committee at the SDC, said that Ehmed brought up the issue of Kurdish participation in the Syrian political process.

"Ehmed raised the issue of including the Syrian Kurds to be part of the political process," Saker said.

Moreover, Ehmed discussed Russia's role in arranging a meeting between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus.

"Russia has promised to help facilitate a meeting between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus," he added.

The two sides also agreed to have meetings and talks in the near future, Saker said.

Earlier in September, Saker told Sputnik that Ehmed would visit Washington in the near future for meetings with US officials to discuss continued support for the region.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Canada's Populist Surge Could Spell Trouble for Establishment Conservative Party at Polls

TORONTO, September 15 (Sputnik) - The rise of the populist People's Party of Canada (PPC) could hinder the establishment Conservative Party's bid to unseat Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals come election day on September 20, political strategists told Sputnik. Most Canadian polls have the race in a virtual tie between the governing liberals and conservatives while the PPC, a populist party founded by Maxime Bernier three years ago, is projected to garner around 5% of the tally.

"If things were to happen [now], I think the Liberals would win the election," political strategist and columnist Clinton Desveaux told Sputnik. "The PPC is going to create vote splits and its essentially going to prevent the Conservatives from winning."

Desveaux said the PPC's poll numbers correlate to the percentage of unvaccinated individuals across the country, and even more closely with those opposing COVID-19 measures.

The PPC has vehemently opposed mandatory vaccination measures, including those for all federal government employees and inter-provincial travelers as well as plans to introduce proof of immunization documents, better known as "vaccine passports."

Desveaux believes that in Conservative strongholds such as Alberta, where the People's Party commands as much as 19 percent support, there may be enough of a vote split in closely contested areas - usually in the cities of Calgary and Edmonton - to see the Tories lose important seats to rival Liberals and New Democrats.

Aurora Strategy Group Principal Consultant Jacqueline Biollo said O'Toole's camp has apparently looked to pivot its message to the center with the PPC gaining momentum with the ultra-right. However, because these efforts have seemed disingenuous, undecided voters may not step up to the plate to support the Conservatives in numbers that would substantially help the party win the election, Biollo told Sputnik.

Biollo also highlighted the situation in Alberta, saying that the PPC may carry enough support to pick up a few seats. She also said the Conservatives are far from the only party concerned by potential vote splits.

"The reality of vote-splitting on the left is more crucial for the Liberals to consider their messaging to their base and differentiate themselves from the NDP [New Democrat Party] if they want to secure a majority, or even minority government win at this point," Biollo said.

The split on the left will see the Liberals increasingly "lump" all right-of-center voters together to scare NDP voters into casting a ballot for Trudeau's party in order to prevent a Conservative government from forming, Desveaux said.

On the campaign trail, Desveaux's words are already coming to fruition with Trudeau, during a stop in the Vancouver area, telling voters, "Despite what Jagmeet Singh and the NDP say, it does make a difference whether or not there's a Conservative or a Liberal government."

However, the Conservative Party is fighting back against assertions that the PPC surge is eating into Conservative support.

"The PPC surge is overblown," a CPC source told Sputnik.

The source also said the Party is confident in its internal polling and sure to "come out ahead" if PPC sticks to its messaging.

Conservative Party affiliates are also downplaying the People's Party rise, with some saying that the populist party is also absorbing fleeing Green Party voters, while others say that some of the Conservative defectors are slowly returning into the fold.

Desveaux, meanwhile, predicts that in the final days Canadians are likely to see O'Toole taking direct aim at Bernier, saying that the Tories have to cut the PPC's momentum off "at the knee" to have a chance at defeating Trudeau and the Liberals.

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ROCOR Bishops Plan to Attend Russian Church Council in Moscow - First Hierarch

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - All bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) are planning to participate in Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Moscow in mid-November, ROCOR's First Hierarch Metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral) told Sputnik.

"All ROCOR bishops, myself included, are planning to go," Metropolitan Hilarion said, adding that the schedule for the meeting has not yet been finalized.

Hilarion explained the schedule remains tentative because of the fluid situation with respect to the coronavirus pandemic. However, he expressed hope the Bishops' Council will take place in mid-November as planned.

With respect to the topics planned to be discussed during the meeting, Hilarion said the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill, usually makes statements on the state of the Church from the time of the last meeting to the present.

"The Patriarch usually outlines plans for the future and the importance of being together for those who are inside and outside of Russia," Hilarion added.

The ROC Holy Synod has decided that the Bishops' Council will convene in Moscow on November 15-18. The previous meeting of the Bishops' Council took place in 2017.

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People Should Not Fear Vaccines But ROCOR Neutral on This Issue - Hierarch

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) does not provide recommendations to believers on receiving coronavirus vaccines, but people should not be afraid to get immunized, ROCOR First Hierarch Metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral) told Sputnik.

"People should not be afraid of vaccination," Metropolitan Hilarion said, adding that he had received a coronavirus vaccine.

However, the Hilarion noted that ROCOR does not encourage its flock to get vaccinated or to avoid vaccination.

"It is a matter of freedom for the people," he said.

Speaking of how the coronavirus pandemic changed church life, Hilarion said it did affect in-person services and activities due to the imposed restrictive measures.

"In the beginning, a lot of people did not go to church, but now they have started coming," he said.

ROCOR has dozens of parishes in various countries, mostly in the United States.

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RPT - Lawyer of Russian National Grichishkin Anticipates Sentencing Hearing in October

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The lawyer of the Russian citizen Aleksandr Grichishkin, charged in the US for cybercrimes, expressed anticipation on Wednesday that the court will schedule sentencing in October.

"We do not yet have a date for the final sentencing but I am anticipating a time in October," Grichishkin's lawyer Matthew Kerry told Sputnik.

US Judge Denise Page Hood from District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan originally scheduled sentencing for August 20, but postponed it until a later date.

The defense provided plenty of information during the hearing on August 18, so the judge required more time before making a decision, Kerry said.

"However, it is my understanding that at least one member of the judge's staff was diagnosed with COVID-19, which essentially put the proceedings at a standstill," he added.

Grichishkin remains in the Bureau of Prisons custody and hopes to return to his family sooner rather than later, the lawyer noted.

Grichishkin was found guilty of two counts, including conspiracy to engage in racketeering influence or corrupt organization, and bank fraud conspiracy. He has reached a plea agreement with the US government in March.

In a sentencing memorandum, issued in August, the government described Grichishkin as an "everyday leader" of organization that helped criminals deploy malware and steal money from others for approximately seven years. He operated under a variety of online aliases and instructed other members of the group on how to change IP-addresses and what to do in order to "clean" their history.

During a hearing on August 18, Grichishkin expressed remorse for his crimes. He also asked the court to allow him early deportation in order to reunite with the family as soon as possible. Grichishkin and Andrei Skvortsov from Russia, Aleksandr Skorodumov from Lithuania, and Pavel Stassi from Estonia were members of a hosting organization that allegedly helped a number of cybercriminals evade detection by US law enforcement after they caused millions of dollars in losses to victims in the United States, the Justice Department had claimed.

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Pan-Orthodox Council 'Good Thing' But Constantinople Attitude Problematic - ROCOR Hierarchy

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The behavior of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople represents a big problem for holding an Pan-Orthodox Council that would include all Orthodox churches throughout the world, First Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) Metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral) told Sputnik.

"Holding such council is a good thing, but the Constantinople Patriarchate has its own idea about what does Orthodox unity mean. That is the big problem for all Orthodox churches," Metropolitan Hilarion said.

The Greek Orthodox Church holds the idea that the Constantinople patriarch is in charge of the Orthodoxy, Hilarion noted.

Ten out of fourteen generally acknowledged local Orthodox churches participated in the previous Pan-Orthodox Council organized in Greece in 2016. The Russian, Antioch, Georgian and Bulgarian churches refrained from participating in the meeting.

Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Constantinople Patriarchate deteriorated after the creation of so-called Ukrainian Orthodox Church initiated by Ukraine's then-President Petro Poroshenko and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople.

The new church was granted autocephaly, the status of an autonomous Christian church.

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China Warns Against Exclusionary Blocs After AUKUS Launched

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - China opposes the creation of exclusionary blocs that may harm the interests of third parties, Embassy in Washington spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in a statement to Sputnik when asked to respond to the newly-launched Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) defense pact.

Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden and the leaders of the UK and Australia launched a trilateral alliance that will allegedly focus on Indo-Pacific stability.

"They [countries] should not build exclusionary blocs targeting or harming the interests of third parties," Liu said on Wednesday. "In particular, they should shake off their Cold-War mentality and ideological prejudice."

Liu said countries should do more things that are conducive to solidarity and cooperation among countries, including for regional stability.

The AUKUS initiative launches an 18-month effort to deepen cooperation and defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

The first major initiative of the trilateral pact will be to deliver a nuclear-powered submarine fleet to Australia. However, the submarines will not be nuclear-armed, but conventionally armed and run by nuclear reactors.

Earlier on Wednesday, a senior Biden administration official told reporters that the defense pact is not aimed at any specific country, but is about advancing the partners' strategic interests and promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific. The official repeatedly refrained from conveying that the AUKUS pact is aimed at China when pressed on the matter by reporters.

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Student Activists Criticize Biden Over Afghanistan Withdrawal, COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is using the situation in Afghanistan and the COVID-19 pandemic to score political points rather than solve those crisis, the student activist organization Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) said in a statement.

"YAL believes that the Taliban is holding over 100 Americans hostage in order to gain recognition from the outside world," the statement said on Wednesday. "YAL also accuses the President Biden of not only covering up the hostage crisis to boost his re-election chances, but actively using the COVID-19 vaccine mandate as a means to distract the American people from the devolving situation on the ground."

The student group said it blames the Biden administration for completely mishandling the situation in Afghanistan, adding that the Taliban uses Americans as leverage in its talks with the State Department.

"While the American people deserve leadership and accountability, the White House instead has chosen to distract from its failures abroad by instituting sweeping, unconstitutional vaccine mandates at home," YAL senior spokesperson Eric Barkey said.

YAL was founded in 2008 at the end of Congressman Ron Paul's first presidential campaign. The organization's chapters operate in many high schools and colleges across the United States with the goal of mobilizing youth activists to support liberty.

Earlier on Wednesday, Quinnipiac University released the results of a new poll revealing that every second American disapproves of how Biden is handling his job as president after the United States withdrew from Afghanistan.

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Biden to Host Johnson at White House Next Week - Axios

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is expected to host UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the White House early next week, Axios reported citing people familiar with the preparations.

The report on Wednesday did not disclose the day the prime minister is expected to arrive in Washington.

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ANALYSIS - Canada's Populist Surge Could Spell Trouble for Establishment Conservative Party at Polls

TORONTO, September 15 (Sputnik) - The rise of the populist People's Party of Canada (PPC) could hinder the establishment Conservative Party's bid to unseat Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals come election day on September 20, political strategists told Sputnik. Most Canadian polls have the race in a virtual tie between the governing liberals and conservatives while the PPC, a populist party founded by Maxime Bernier three years ago, is projected to garner around 5% of the tally.

"If things were to happen [now], I think the Liberals would win the election," political strategist and columnist Clinton Desveaux told Sputnik. "The PPC is going to create vote splits and its essentially going to prevent the Conservatives from winning."

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The PPC has vehemently opposed mandatory vaccination measures, including those for all federal government employees and inter-provincial travelers as well as plans to introduce proof of immunization documents, better known as "vaccine passports."

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Aurora Strategy Group Principal Consultant Jacqueline Biollo said O'Toole's camp has apparently looked to pivot its message to the center with the PPC gaining momentum with the ultra-right. However, because these efforts have seemed disingenuous, undecided voters may not step up to the plate to support the Conservatives in numbers that would substantially help the party win the election, Biollo told Sputnik.

Biollo also highlighted the situation in Alberta, saying that the PPC may carry enough support to pick up a few seats. She also said the Conservatives are far from the only party concerned by potential vote splits.

"The reality of vote-splitting on the left is more crucial for the Liberals to consider their messaging to their base and differentiate themselves from the NDP [New Democrat Party] if they want to secure a majority, or even minority government win at this point," Biollo said.

The split on the left will see the Liberals increasingly "lump" all right-of-center voters together to scare NDP voters into casting a ballot for Trudeau's party in order to prevent a Conservative government from forming, Desveaux said.

On the campaign trail, Desveaux's words are already coming to fruition with Trudeau, during a stop in the Vancouver area, telling voters, "Despite what Jagmeet Singh and the NDP say, it does make a difference whether or not there's a Conservative or a Liberal government." However, the Conservative Party is fighting back against assertions that the PPC surge is eating into Conservative support.

"The PPC surge is overblown," a CPC source told Sputnik.

The source also said the Party is confident in its internal polling and sure to "come out ahead" if PPC sticks to its messaging.

Conservative Party affiliates are also downplaying the People's Party rise, with some saying that the populist party is also absorbing fleeing Green Party voters, while others say that some of the Conservative defectors are slowly returning into the fold.

Desveaux, meanwhile, predicts that in the final days Canadians are likely to see O'Toole taking direct aim at Bernier, saying that the Tories have to cut the PPC's momentum off "at the knee" to have a chance at defeating Trudeau and the Liberals.

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US Monthly Encounters on Southern Border Exceed 200,000 for Second Straight Month - CBP

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The monthly number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended on the US southern border in August reached more than 200,000 for a second consecutive month, but the total was slightly lower compared to July, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) revealed.

CBP data showed on Wednesday that 208,887 migrants were apprehended on the US southern border in August, slightly lower compared to the 213,534 migrants apprehended in July.

Most of the migrants apprehended in August were single adults and family units. A majority of the 97,270 single adult migrants apprehended in August were mostly from Mexico or from another country that is not Honduras, Guatemala or El Salvador, CBP found.

The 79,754 migrant families apprehended on the southern border were mostly from Guatemala, Honduras, or another country that is not from the Northern Triangle region, CBP showed.

More than 1.5 million migrants have been apprehended on the US southern border since October, according to CBP.

The United States has apprehended more than 1.5 million illegal migrants at the southern border with Mexico in 1986, 1996, 1998-2000, according to CBP data.

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New US-UK-Australian Security Group to Back Canberra's Nuclear Sub Ambitions - Washington

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - A newly announced security working group comprising the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS) will back Canberra's ambition to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, a senior Biden administration official announced.

"Our first initiative as part of AUKUS is the three countries will announce later today the shared ambition to support Australia's desire to acquire nuclear-powered submarines," the official said on Wednesday.

The official explained that AUCUS will also announce efforts to spur cooperation across many new and emerging arenas - cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technologies and some undersea capabilities.

"We will also work to sustain and deepen information and technology sharing, and I think you are going to see a much more dedicated effort to pursue integration of security and defense related science technology and industrial basis, and supply chains," the official said.

The official emphasized that there will be a much more dedicated effort to pursue integration of security and defense related science technology and industrial basis, and supply chains.

Later this month, the White House will host its first Quad leaders meeting, bringing together the leaders of Australia, India and Japan in an alliance similarly contrived to counter China.

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US, UK, Australia Announce Defense Pact to Deepen Cooperation in Indo-Pacific

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United States, United Kingdom and Australia entered a newly-created defense pact designed to strengthen their cooperation against mutual challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, US President Joe Biden said.

"We need to be able to address both the current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve," Biden said on Wednesday during a joint press conference with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

The Australia-UK-US partnership (AUKUS) launches an 18-months initiative to deepen cooperation and defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Morrison said the first major initiative of the trilateral pact will be to deliver a nuclear-powered submarine fleet to Australia. However, Morrison emphasized that Australia is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons or to establish a civil nuclear capability.

Biden clarified that the fleet of submarines for Australia will not be nuclear-armed, but conventionally armed and run by nuclear reactors.

The United States will continue to work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) to build a free and open Indo-Pacific region, Biden noted.

Earlier on Wednesday, a senior Biden administration official told reporters that the defense pact is not aimed at any specific country, but is about advancing the partners' strategic interests and promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific.

"I think it will be an opportunity for each of them to lay out their vision for the future and indicate the launch of this 18-months effort," the official said.

The official repeatedly refrained from conveying that the AUKUS pact is aimed at China.

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US Govt. Considering Requiring Vaccination for Foreign Visitors - White House Official

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering vaccination requirements for foreign nationals traveling to the United States, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said.

"We are exploring and considering vaccination requirements for foreign nationals traveling to the United States," Zients said on Wednesday.

Zients explained that the new system includes strengthening the mitigation efforts to the greatest extent possible and the approach to testing and surveillance.

"Our interagency working group is working to develop a plan for a consistent and safe international travel policy so that we have a new system ready to press 'Go' on when we can reopen travel so we don't suffer any significant lag time between the decision and implementation," he said.

The Biden administration will also be putting in place contact-tracing to enable the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to follow up without in-bound international travelers and those around them if someone has potentially been exposed to the novel coronavirus, Zients also said.

Some 179 million Americans have been fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, he added.

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Russia Concerned WFP Aid Stored in Idlib May Be Stolen, Sold to Syrians - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is concerned a World Food Program (WFP) aid convoy that crossed into Syria's Idlib might be stolen or sold to the Syrians in need, Russian Deputy Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Chumakov said during a UN Security Council meeting.

On August 30, a WFP convoy consisting of 15 trucks carrying food baskets crossed from Aleppo into Idlib. The aid has not been distributed yet and is believed to be stored in a warehouse in the town of Sarmada.

"We welcome the first successful humanitarian action of the WFP in Idlib carried out cross-line... At the same time, we call on all involved parties not to be satisfied with the results, which are

modest. In the absence of a mechanism to distribute the assistance, the task has not been completed," Chumakov said on Wednesday.

The Russian diplomats explained that the aid has not reached those that needed it and it continues to be stored in the warehouse under the supervision of unnamed but so-called reliable partners.

"So how can we be sure that the humanitarian assistance will not be stolen, or actually sold to those who need it?" Chumakov added.

In July, the UN Security Council voted to unanimously adopt a resolution, jointly drafted by Russia, the United States, Norway and Ireland, extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism through the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Turkey for six months, with a possible extension until July 10, 2022.

In the resolution, the UN Security Council also requested the expansion of cross-line aid deliveries from within the country that can be directly overseen by Damascus.

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RPT - Biden Administration Pushes Congress to Slash Child Care Costs to Grow Women Workforce

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen pressed Congress to increase investment in child care so that families could better afford this and more women could come into the workforce.

"Some estimates suggest our GDP would be five points higher if women participated in the workforce at the same rate as men," Harris said on Wednesday in a live-streamed speech at the Treasury Department, where she joined Yellen for an event on child care.

Harris added that in order for the US economy to fully recover from the coronavirus pandemic, "we need to bring child care costs down with a significant public investment."

According to the Treasury Department, the average family with a child under 5 years of age has to spend at least 13 percent of its income toward child care, often at the beginning of the parents' career when their earnings are lower.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 2.2 million fewer women in the labor force in October 2020 than there were in October 2019. The decrease was partly due to the pandemic's toll on working mothers that added to other challenges such as pay disparity and expensive childcare is an economic downturn that hit women employees harder than men. President Joe Biden's ambitious \$3.5 trillion "Build Back Better" agenda for the United States includes overhauls to federal health care, education and safety net programs. The Biden administration has said it plans to raise tax rates for companies and the richest Americans to fund the spending plan.

"It's past time that we treat child care as what it is - an element whose contribution to economic growth is as essential as infrastructure or energy," Yellen said in a statement released ahead of Wednesday's event.

Yellen also lamented that child care workers in the United States were underpaid.

"It doesn't work at all," she said later when appearing at the event with Harris. "Those who provide child care aren't paid well and those who need it can't afford it."

US child care workers are paid on average \$12.88 per hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

An estimated 40 percent of day care centers in the United States had to permanently close during the measures taken to address the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the workers there quit during the pandemic and are averse to returning due to risks associated with the new variant of the COVID-19. Moreover, service industry jobs offering \$15 an hour are having trouble attracting workers, labor market analysts say.

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Syrian Kurdish Leader Discussed Turkish Attacks During Moscow Visit - SDC to Sputnik

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"Ehmed has visited Moscow and held meetings with Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian special presidential representative for the Middle East and Africa, as well as other senior Russian officials. The meetings were good," Saker said. "She complained about Ankara's violation of an agreement with Russia by launching attacks in northern Syria. Russia has promised to address the issue."

Saker, who is also a member of the Presidential Committee at the SDC, said that Ehmed brought up the issue of Kurdish participation in the Syrian political process.

"Ehmed raised the issue of including the Syrian Kurds to be part of the political process," Saker said.

Moreover, Ehmed discussed Russia's role in arranging a meeting between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus.

"Russia has promised to help facilitate a meeting between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus," he added.

The two sides also agreed to have meetings and talks in the near future, Saker said.

Earlier in September, Saker told Sputnik that Ehmed would visit Washington in the near future for meetings with US officials to discuss continued support for the region.

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US Continues to Work With ASEAN, Quad to Build Free Indo-Pacific - Biden

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) to build a free and open Indo-Pacific region, President Joe Biden said.

"The United States will also continue to work ASEAN and the Quad as we stated earlier, our five treaty allies and other close partners in the Indo-Pacific, as well as allies and partners in Europe

and around the world to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and build a future of peace and opportunity for all the people of the region," Biden said during remarks on Wednesday about the forming of the trilateral Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) group.

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Biden Says AUKUS Needs to Address Region's Strategic Environment, How It May Evolve

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden upon the creation of a new security partnership between the UK, US and Australia (AUKUS) said that it is necessary to address both the present strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region and how it may develop.

"We need to be able to address both the current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve," Biden said.

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US Supports All Modalities to Deliver Aid to Syria - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United States supports all options of bringing humanitarian aid to Syria, including through cross-line and cross border modalities, Senior Adviser for Special Political Affairs at the US Mission to the United Nations Jeffrey DeLaurentis said.

"The United States supports all modalities that bring aid to Syrians in need. All of them," DeLaurentis told a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday. "We are committed to facilitating more cross-border and cross-line assistance and early recovery projects that respond to the overwhelming humanitarian needs in Syria."

DeLaurentis added that the single remaining cross-border point from Turkey to bring aid into Syria, even when complemented by cross-line assistance, cannot meet all the needs in the Arab Republic.

"We must reauthorize the Bab al-Salam and Yaroubiyah crossings to meet the dire needs of the Syrian people," he said.

In July, the UN Security Council voted to unanimously adopt a resolution, jointly drafted by Russia, the United States, Norway and Ireland, extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism through the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Turkey for six months, with a possible extension until July 10, 2022.

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US Fines Auto Parts Maker \$1.12Mln for Sales of Emission Cheating Devices - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - A US auto parts manufacturer agreed to stop making and selling parts for diesel pickup trucks to bypass emissions controls and pay a \$1.12 million penalty, the Justice Department said.

"Defeat devices do an end run around decades-old Clean Air Act emissions requirements that protect public health and the environment," Assistant Attorney General for the Environment and Natural Resources Todd Kim said in a press release on Wednesday. "This settlement ensures that XDP [Xtreme Diesel Performance] will eliminate defeat devices from its product line."

The Justice Department said in the release that the XDP manufactured and sold more than 27,000 aftermarket defeat devices between January 2015 and May 2017. The company suspended sales of the defeat devices in September 2019 in an effort to resolve this matter, the release added.

The settlement also requires XDP to destroy any devices remaining in inventory and cease providing technical support or honoring warranty claims for thousands of customers who purchased the equipment, according to the release.

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AUUKUS' First Goal to Get Australia Nuclear Subs, Not Nuclear Weapons - Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The first major initiative of the new trilateral US-UK-Australia (AUUKUS) partnership will be to get Australia a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, but not nuclear weapons, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on.

"The first major initiative of AUUKUS will be to deliver a nuclear-powered submarine fleet for Australia," Morrison said on Wednesday. "But let me be clear, Australia is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons or establish a civil nuclear capability."

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Biden Says Australian Submarines Will Be Conventionally Armed

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a press conference that Australia will acquire conventionally-armed submarines powered by nuclear reactors.

"We're not talking about nuclear-armed submarines, these are conventionally-armed submarines that are powered by nuclear reactors," Biden said alongside the leaders of the UK and Australia on Wednesday.

9/15/2021 5:15:43 PM -04:00

RPT - Us to continue to work with asean, quad as well as partners in Europe to build free and open indo-pacific - biden
Sputnik

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Wall Street's Big Tech Up First Time in 6 Days on Broad Stocks Rally

NEW YORK, September 15 (Sputnik) - US technology stocks posted their first daily gain in six days on Wednesday, joining blue chips and industrial stocks in a broad rally, as economic recovery appeared on track while moderating inflation signaled the Federal Reserve will not be in a rush to taper its generous stimulus programs.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, led by Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed at 15,162, up 124 points, or 0.8 percent. The tech-heavy index lost a cumulative 2.1% over five previous sessions.

The blue-chip S&P 500 and broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average indexes also rallied as oil prices to bond yields rose on optimism that the Delta variant of the coronavirus might not blight recovery.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stocks Exchange, rose 39 points, or 0.9%, to settle at 4,482.

The Dow Jones, comprising mostly industrial stocks, gained 237 points, or 0.7%, to finish at 34,814.

Stocks rallied after the Empire State manufacturing survey's general business conditions index for New York posted a reading of 34.3 in September, sharply higher than the 18.3 for August. Economists polled by US media had expected a reading of 18.1 for September.

"The Empire manufacturing index is telling a new story about the direction of the economy," Ed Moya, head of Americas research at the online trading platform OANDA, said. "One report does not make a trend, but if this positive theme spreads across all the other regional surveys, Wall Street could rush to upgrade forecasts for how the US economy will finish the year."

The Federal Reserve, meanwhile, reported that US industrial production grew by a slower 0.4% in August after a 0.8% expansion in July as factory outages forced by Hurricane Ida held up output.

The industrial production report is important to the Federal Reserve because it could influence its decision on when to tighten its rather accommodative stance on US monetary policy.

The Federal Reserve has been buying \$120 billion in bonds and other assets since the COVID-19 outbreak of March 2020 to support the economy. It has also been keeping interest rates at virtually zero levels over the past 18 months.

Subject: Wall Street's Big Tech up First Time in 6 Days on Broad Stocks Rally

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US, UK, Australia to Discuss Goals Regarding China - Senior Biden Admin. Official

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the United States, United Kingdom and Australia will hold a virtual meeting to discuss their aims with respect to China following the creation of a new trilateral security partnership in the Indo-Pacific, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"There will be a virtual session that will be live between the three leaders," the official said during a press briefing when asked what message the new partnership would send to China. The official said each of the three leaders will lay out specifically what they want to accomplish and what their ambitions are.

"I think it will be an opportunity for each of them to lay out their vision for the future and indicate the launch of this 18-month efforts," the official added.

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US, UK, Australia to Show That Pact Not Aimed at Any Specific Country - Official

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia will indicate that their newly minted working group is not aimed at any specific country, but rather at promising peace and security, a senior US administration official announced on Wednesday.

"I want to underscore very clearly [that] this partnership is not aimed at any one country, it's about advancing our strategic interests... and promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific," the official said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) -

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

* The Afghan Central Bank said on Wednesday that it has received \$12.3 million previously owned by ex-officials, including former Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh, and mentioned that the Taliban (banned in Russia) transferred the money.

* The European Union will increase its humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, providing an extra \$118 million, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

* UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan Deborah Lyons met on Wednesday with the Afghan Minister of Interior, Siraj Haqqani, appointed by the Taliban (banned

in Russia), to discuss the safety of humanitarian staff working in the country, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a statement.

NORD STREAM 2

* The launch of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will balance the price parameters on the European gas market, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday, as gas futures prices keep surging to record highs.

* In the coming days, the Russian Energy Ministry will present to the cabinet a report on allowing Rosneft to export gas via the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

* Deliveries of gas via the Nord Stream 2 pipeline will not start on October 1, Gazprom Head Alexey Miller said.

NORTH KOREAN MISSILE LAUNCHES

* UN Security Council President Nations Geraldine Byrne Nason confirmed that the body will discuss in closed consultations on Wednesday the recent developments on the Korean Peninsula.

* North Korea's recent missile launches violate UN Security Council resolutions and present a threat to international security, French Ambassador to the United Nations Nicolas de Riviere said.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry urges partners to show restraint and is going to tune the involved states to implement the Russian-Chinese roadmap for the Korean settlement, spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* North Korean missile launches are "normal and defensive" activities, Kim Yo Jong, the deputy department director of the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee and North Korean leader's sister, said on Wednesday, adding that South Korean President Moon Jae-in's reaction to the event was "immature," according to the Korean Central News Agency.

COVID-19

* Iran authorized Russia's Sputnik Light single-component vaccine against the coronavirus, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) announced on Wednesday.

* The Russian authorities are not considering a new COVID-19 lockdown or some other restrictions at the moment, since virology experts have different opinions about the possibility of a new coronavirus wave, Peskov said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is currently self-isolating because of COVID-19 cases detected among his acquaintances, is feeling good, he is perfectly healthy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Putin was invited to the US-led virtual summit on the COVID-19 response, Peskov said.

PROTEST IN WASHINGTON

* US Capitol Police have requested Pentagon's assistance with security for a protest scheduled this weekend in support of individuals arrested in connection with the January 6 events at the Capitol, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

* US House of Representatives' Sergeant at Arms William Walker has recommended that members of Congress and their staff refrain from visiting the Capitol complex on Saturday when the "Justice for J6" will stage a rally, Forbes reported.

9/15/2021 5:00:15 PM -04:00

Australian Submarines to Maintain Peace in Indo-Pacific - Senior Biden Admin. Official
WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The main goal of the United States in assisting Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines lies in promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"This allows Australia to play at a much higher level, and to augment American capabilities [in the region]," the official said during a press briefing. "This is about maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific."

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New US-UK-Australian Security Group to Back Canberra's Nuclear Sub Ambitions - Washington

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - A newly announced security working group comprising the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia will back Canberra's ambition to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, a senior US administration official announced on Wednesday.

"Our first initiative as part of AUUKUS is the three countries will announce later today the shared ambition to support Australia's desire to acquire nuclear-powered submarines," the official said.

"We will also announce efforts to spur cooperation across many new and emerging arenas - cyber, AI [artificial intelligence], particularly applied AI, quantum technologies and some undersea capabilities as well. We will also work to sustain and deepen information and technology sharing, and I think you are going to see a much more dedicated effort to pursue integration of security and defense related science technology and industrial basis, and supply chains," the official added.

9/15/2021 5:00:00 PM -04:00

US ASSISTANCE TO AUSTRALIA ON NUCLEAR POWERED SUBS AIMS TO MAINTAIN
PEACE, STABILITY IN INDO-PACIFIC - SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
Sputnik

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US Extends Post 9/11 Declaration of Terrorism National Emergency – White House

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden renewed a national emergency declaration issued by President George W. Bush shortly after the September 11 attacks on the United States, the White House said on Wednesday.

"I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency with respect to persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism declared in Executive Order 13224," President Joe Biden said, as quoted in a White House press release.

Bush first declared the emergency with executive order 13224 on September 23, 2001, less than two weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Tuesday's notice will be published in the US Federal Register and transmitted to Congress, according to the release.

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Twenty-Four US States Back Justice Dept. in Texas Abortion Ban Lawsuit - James

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Twenty-four US states have joined the Justice Department in its law suit against the new law banning abortion, the office of New York State Attorney General Letitia James announced on Wednesday.

"As part of a coalition of 24 attorneys general, Attorney General James today filed an amicus brief in support of the US Department of Justice's challenge to Texas' new, unconstitutional six-week ban on abortions," the Office of the New York Attorney General said in a press release. The brief, which was filed in a US federal district court, specifically supports the Justice Department's motion for a preliminary injunction of the law, which went into effect earlier this month, the release said.

"To be clear, under Texas' draconian law, most women seeking an abortion will not even know they are pregnant by the time the clock runs out," James said in the release.

James also said Texas' new law further promotes vigilantism by enticing bounty hunting against those helping women access constitutionally protected health care.

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Senior US, Libyan Officials Discuss Elections, Ceasefire Agreement - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US special Envoy for Libya Richard Norland and State Department Counselor Derek Chollet visited Libya on Wednesday to meet with interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba and other senior officials, the State Department said in a statement.

"In the meetings, they emphasized the urgent need for Libyan leaders to ensure agreement on an electoral framework for national elections on December 24 and also underscored US support for full implementation of the October 23 ceasefire agreement," the statement said.

The United States also supports the withdrawal of all foreign fighters and forces from Libya, the statement added.

Libya's new unity government, headed by Dbeibeh, and the new Presidential Council, led by Khaled al-Menfi, was selected on March 16 and tasked to prepare the general elections in Libya before the end of 2021, as prescribed by the United Nations.

The forming of the interim government ended a protracted civil war between rival Libyan political factions - the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli and a parallel cabinet in the east of the country under the control of the Libya National Army (LNA). On July 26, 2014, the US government evacuated its embassy personnel from Libya amid heavy militia violence raging in Tripoli.

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Trudeau's Liberals, Conservative Rivals in Virtual Tie 5 Days Before Canada Votes - Polls

TORONTO, September 15 (Sputnik) – Incumbent Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party and rival Conservatives are locked in a virtual tie with just five days to go before Canadians go to the polls, the latest poll numbers show.

The governing Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) holds a slight 31.2 percent to 30.5 percent lead over the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), which is within the margin of error, a Nanos Research-CTV News-The Globe and Mail poll revealed on Wednesday.

However, Trudeau's governing Liberals are trending downward, Nik Nanos, Chief Data Scientist of Nanos Research, noted in the report.

Likewise, Mainstreet Research has the Liberals and Conservatives in a statistical tie, sharing 31 percent of support, according to numbers unveiled on Wednesday.

Other pollsters, however, have the Conservatives with a slight advantage.

The Conservatives hold a 2-percent edge over the Liberals, with 32 percent support among leaning and decided voters, an Angus Reid Institute poll showed.

Similarly, the Tories, led by Erin O'Toole, have the upper hand on the Liberals by a 1-point margin, according to the findings of Ekos Research.

All polls place the New Democrat Party (NDP) in third place, with support for the left-wing party ranging between 17 and 21 percent.

The surging People's Party of Canada (PPC) and the Bloc Quebecois are in a statistical tie for fourth place according to most polls. Support for the populist conservative PPC ranges between 4 and 9 percent, while the Bloc Quebecois, who do not field candidates outside of the province of Quebec, command 6 to 8 percent backing, nationally.

However, the Bloc Quebecois are locked in a tight battle with the Liberals in Quebec, with the Liberals holding a slight edge. Trudeau's Liberals and the Bloc often fight for the same voters in Quebec, and it is widely believed that the Prime Minister's path to re-election runs through the province.

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

Trudeau could remain Prime Minister even in the event of an election loss, should his Liberals and another party, such as the NDP, agree to form a coalition government.

The national election in Canada is scheduled for September 20.

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US Whistleblower Awards Top \$1Bln With Two Disbursements Totaling \$114Mln - Regulator

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Insider reports of corporate malfeasance resulted in rewards of \$110 million and \$4 million to so called whistleblowers, bringing total disbursements in the nine-year program to more than \$1 billion, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Wednesday.

"With these awards, the SEC's whistleblower program has now paid more than \$1 billion in awards to 207 whistleblowers, including over \$500 million in fiscal year 2021 alone, the SEC said in a press release.

The first whistleblower's \$110 million award consists of an approximately \$40 million award in connection with an SEC case and an approximately \$70 million award arising out of related actions by another agency, the release said.

The program established in 2012 pays rewards from an investor protection fund that is financed entirely from monetary penalties paid by corporations, the release added.

Insiders who report corporate wrongdoing get to keep from 10-to-30 percent of money recovered in a successful enforcement action when monetary sanctions exceed \$1 million, according to the release.

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Biden to Host Meeting of Major Economies on Energy, Climate September 17 - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will convene a virtual meeting of the Major Economies on Energy and Climate on September 17, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"President Biden will reconvene the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) on September 17 to galvanize efforts to confront the global climate crisis. The virtual meeting builds on the Leaders Summit on Climate the President hosted in April and comes six weeks before the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, which will set the course for global climate efforts over the coming decade," the official said.

At the meeting, Biden will emphasize the urgency and the economic benefits of stronger climate action, the official also said.

"He will call on leaders to strengthen their climate ambition heading into COP 26 and in the years beyond. The President also will outline plans to leverage the MEF post-Glasgow as a launch pad for collective, concrete efforts scaling up climate action through this decisive decade," the official added.

COP26, also known as Climate Change Conference will be held between October 31 and November 12 in Glasgow, Scotland.

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UPDATE - Lawyer of Russian National Grichishkin Anticipates Sentencing Hearing in October

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – The lawyer of the Russian citizen Aleksandr Grichishkin, charged in the US for cybercrimes, expressed anticipation on Wednesday that the court will schedule sentencing in October.

“We do not yet have a date for the final sentencing but I am anticipating a time in October,” Grichishkin’s lawyer Matthew Kerry told Sputnik.

US Judge Denise Page Hood from District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan originally scheduled sentencing for August 20, but postponed it until a later date.

The defense provided plenty of information during the hearing on August 18, so the judge required more time before making a decision, Kerry said.

“However, it is my understanding that at least one member of the judge’s staff was diagnosed with COVID-19, which essentially put the proceedings at a standstill,” he added.

Grichishkin remains in the Bureau of Prisons custody and hopes to return to his family sooner rather than later, the lawyer noted.

Grichishkin was found guilty of two counts, including conspiracy to engage in racketeering influence or corrupt organization, and bank fraud conspiracy. He has reached a plea agreement with the US government in March.

In a sentencing memorandum, issued in August, the government described Grichishkin as an “everyday leader” of organization that helped criminals deploy malware and steal money from others for approximately seven years. He operated under a variety of online aliases and instructed other members of the group on how to change IP-addresses and what to do in order to “clean” their history.

During a hearing on August 18, Grichishkin expressed remorse for his crimes. He also asked the court to allow him early deportation in order to reunite with the family as soon as possible. Grichishkin and Andrei Skvortsov from Russia, Aleksandr Skorodumov from Lithuania, and Pavel Stassi from Estonia were members of a hosting organization that allegedly helped a number of cybercriminals evade detection by US law enforcement after they caused millions of dollars in losses to victims in the United States, the Justice Department had claimed.

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Nearly 70% of Americans Believe Rise in COVID-19 Deaths Preventable - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Nearly seven in ten Americans believe the recent rise in deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic was preventable, a new Quinnipiac University poll revealed on Wednesday.

"With the number of COVID-19 deaths in the United States now topping 650,000, an overwhelmingly majority of Americans say 68-24 percent that the recent rise in COVID-19 deaths in the US was preventable, according to a Quinnipiac University national poll of adults released today," the organization said in a release explaining the poll.

Democrats believed by 89% to 7% that the rise was preventable, independents felt the same way by 69% to 22% and only among Republicans was the margin of different views quite narrow with 48% agreeing the death toll was preventable and 43% saying it was not, the release said.

"'It didn't have to be this bad,' say voters. The nearly three to one margin of Americans who feel the country should have by now turned the corner on COVID underscores deep, lingering concern over the still menacing virus," Quinnipiac University polling analyst Tim Malloy said in the release.

A slight majority of Americans - 51% to 48% - disapprove of President Joe Biden's plan to mandate COVID-19 vaccines for millions. Republicans disapproved by 84% to 13% while Democrats approved by 89% to 10%, the release said.

Some 1,210 US adults were surveyed from September 10 to September 13 with a margin of error of plus/minus 2.8%, the release added.

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US Capitol Police Requested Pentagon's Assistance With Upcoming Protest - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police have requested the Pentagon's assistance with security for a protest scheduled this weekend in support of individuals arrested in connection with the January 6 Capitol riot, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We have received a request from the Capitol Police for some assistance for this weekend's scheduled protests," Kirby said. "My understanding is it is not an exorbitant ask, it is not of a particularly large size or major capability. I think it's really more in the form of some manpower support."

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RPT - North Korea's Missile Launches Violate UN Security Council Resolutions - French Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - North Korea's recent missile launches violate UN Security Council resolutions and present a threat to international security, French Ambassador to the UN Nicolas de Riviere said on Wednesday.

"Clear violations of security council resolutions, they present a threat to international peace and security, a major threat to international peace and security," Riviere said when asked about North Korea's missile launches. "It's absolutely needed that we have an exchange of view in the Security Council because we all want full compliance with the resolution and we all want resumption of talks, dialogue on the issue."

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North Korea's Latest Missile Launch Violate UN Security Council Resolutions - French Envoy

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Republicans Say Plan Massive Lawsuit Against Biden 'Authoritarian Vaccine Mandate'

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The headquarters of the Republican Party launched a fundraising drive on Wednesday that it said will fund a lawsuit against President Joe Biden's order requiring large- and mid-size business to require COVID-19 vaccinations for employees.

"Despite strong opposition from millions of Americans, tyrant Joe Biden has launched an authoritarian vaccine mandate!" an email attributed to Republican National Committee Headquarters said. "That's because we plan to launch a massive lawsuit to stop forced vaccination."

President Biden's announcement last week that companies with at least 100 employees must require them to be vaccinated or tested for COVID-19 regularly prompted some Republican governors to threaten lawsuits.

In addition, the state of Arizona became the first to actually file a lawsuit.

Legal experts anticipate multiple court challenges, especially after the Labor Department codifies the Biden mandate in a legally binding set of regulations.

Court challenges are expected to claim that Biden exceeded his constitutional authority and that such a mandate requires a law approved by Congress, analysts said.

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UNSC President Confirms Will Convene Meeting On Situation on Korean Peninsula Wednesday

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - UN Security Council President, Irish Ambassador to the United Nations Geraldine Byrne Nason, confirmed the council will on Wednesday discuss in closed consultations the recent developments on the Korean Peninsula.

"And we'll also have an 'Any Other Business' item today. The recent missile tests of the DPRK [North Korea]," Byrne Nason told reporters.

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Nebenzia Urges UNGA Meeting Thursday to Address NYC Vaccination Proof Requirement - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia in a letter, seen by Sputnik, requested to convene an urgent meeting to discuss the requirement by New York City to show proof of vaccination to enter the UN General Assembly Hall during the high-level event.

The Office of the Mayor of New York City earlier in the week requested that all individuals entering the Hall during the General Assembly demonstrate proof of vaccination against COVID-19.

In a letter sent on Wednesday to the new UN General Assembly President, Abdulla Shahid, Nebenzia said that the measure is "clearly discriminatory," and preventing delegates from accessing the Hall will violate the UN Charter.

"In view of the sensitivity of this matter for each member states, we request to convene an urgent meeting of the General Assembly on Thursday, September 16 in order to discuss the situation," Nebenzia said in the letter.

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Biden Says Bolivia, Venezuela Have Failed to Adhere to Counternarcotics Agreements

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden issued a memorandum to Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday in which he said that Bolivia and Venezuela have failed to make efforts to comply with international counternarcotics agreements such as the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA).

"I hereby designate Bolivia and Venezuela as having failed demonstrably to make substantial efforts during the previous 12 months to both adhere to their obligations under international counternarcotics agreements and to take the measures required by section 489(a)(1) of the FAA," Biden said.

Washington declared that major drug trafficking or production countries were Afghanistan, The Bahamas, Belize, Bolivia, Burma, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Laos, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela.

These countries' designation is not necessarily a reflection of their government's counterdrug efforts, but of geographic, commercial, and economic factors that allow drugs to be transported or produced despite the actions of law enforcement, Biden added.

Biden also said that combating drug addiction is one of his administration's foremost health priorities, and that the US is committed to working with global partners to address the shared challenges of drug trafficking and use.

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African-American Adults Accept COVID-19 Vaccines At Rate Nearly Equal to Whites – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – Black communities in the US, who early in the pandemic expressed significantly lower willingness to get vaccinated than White citizens, are now as likely as them to have received a COVID-19 jab, a Pew Research Center poll said on Wednesday.

"Comparable majorities of Black (70%) and White (72%) adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine," a press release explaining the poll said.

Among Hispanic adults, 76% say they have received a vaccine, as do an overwhelming majority of English-speaking Asian adults (94%), the release said.

Nearly three-fourths of those surveyed said they personally know someone who has been hospitalized or died from COVID-19, the release added.

But as has been the case throughout the outbreak, larger shares of Black (82%) and Hispanic (78%) adults than White (70%) and English-speaking Asian adults (64%) say they personally know someone who has been hospitalized or died as a result of the coronavirus, according to the release.

In another finding, the poll revealed that a 62% majority of Americans say the public health benefits from pandemic mitigation restrictions have been worth the costs.

Pew said it conducted the survey of 10,348 US adults from August 23 to 29, before President Joe Biden's announced vaccine mandates for employers.

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Blinken, NATO Head Stoltenberg Discuss Afghanistan, Future NATO Strategy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed Afghanistan and future NATO strategy in a telephone conversation with the organization's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and Secretary General Stoltenberg shared their views on the way ahead for NATO's Strategic Concept and discussed the situation in Afghanistan, as well as our collective support for the people of Afghanistan."

On Tuesday, Blinken also held phone talks with Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Price said in another readout.

The two diplomatic leaders discussed Afghanistan and other regional priorities, this readout said.

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Estonia, France Request UNSC Meeting Wednesday to Address North Korea - Source to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - Estonia and France asked for a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday to discuss the latest ballistic missile launches on the Korean Peninsula, a diplomatic source in the United Nations told Sputnik.

"Estonia and France requested a meeting at the UN Security Council under the 'Any Other Business' agenda to address the situation with the missile launches," the source said.

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EXC. Grichishkin's Lawyer Anticipates Sentencing in October

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – The lawyer of the Russian citizen Aleksandr Grichishkin, charged in the US for cybercrimes, expressed anticipation on Wednesday that the court will schedule sentencing in October.

"We do not yet have a date for the final sentencing but I am anticipating a time in October," Grichishkin's lawyer Matthew Kerry told Sputnik.

US Judge Denise Page Hood from District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan originally scheduled sentencing for August 20, but postponed it until a later date.

The defense provided plenty of information during the hearing on August 18, so the judge required more time before making a decision, Kerry said.

"However, it is my understanding that at least one member of the judge's staff was diagnosed with COVID-19, which essentially put the proceedings at a standstill," he added.

Grichishkin remains in the Bureau of Prisons custody and hopes to return to his family sooner rather than later, the lawyer noted.

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

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US Crude Draw Almost Double to Expectations on Post-Hurricane Adjustments - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil fell almost double to expectations last week, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) revealed on Wednesday, as disruptions from Hurricane Ida continued to force adjustments in the marketplace.

Crude stockpiles dropped by 6.422 million barrels in the week to September 10, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

Analysts polled by US media had forecast a drop of 3.544 million barrels. In the previous week to September 3, crude draws hit four-week lows from Hurricane Ida-related disruptions.

The hurricane shut down more than 90 percent of gas production facilities on the US Gulf of Mexico prior to making landfall on August 29. In the aftermath of the hurricane, some production remained shut down and could take time to resume due to flooding and other damage caused by the storm, analysts said.

"Lots of adjustments are needed in the marketplace, with refiners likely compensating one week's smaller draws with a bigger one the following week," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

Crude oil prices rallied sharply in response to the uptick in draws. New York-traded West Texas Intermediate crude, the benchmark for US oil, was up \$2.12, or 3 percent, at \$72.58 per barrel by 1:55 p.m. ET (17:55 GMT).

London's Brent, the global benchmark for crude, was up \$1.91, or 2.6 percent, at \$75.51 per barrel.

"Risks to the upside for crude prices are not going away," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Oil's rally is nowhere near over as both demand and supply drivers are still mostly bullish: further delays in making progress with the Iran nuclear deal, a cold winter, and further production disruptions from a very active hurricane season."

Distillate stockpiles, which include diesel and heating oil, fell by 1.688 million barrels in the week against expectations for a draw of 1.612 million barrels, the EIA data showed.

Gasoline inventories declined by 1.848 million barrels last week the EIA said, compared with expectations for a draw of 1.957 million barrels.

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Biden Congratulates California Governor Newsom on Victory in Recall Vote - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has congratulated California Governor Gavin Newsom, a fellow Democrat, on his victory in the recall vote, a statement from the White House said on Wednesday.

Over 63 percent of residents of California voted against recalling Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom on Tuesday after 70 percent of the ballots counted, according to the recent projection from the CNN Decision Desk.

"Congratulations to Governor Gavin Newsom on defeating the recall vote. This vote is a resounding win for the approach that he and I share to beating the pandemic: strong vaccine requirements, strong steps to reopen schools safely, and strong plans to distribute real medicines—not fake treatments—to help those who get sick," Biden said.

According to the US leader, the fact that both Democratic and Republican voters rejected the recall shows that the US people "are unifying behind taking these steps to get the pandemic" behind.

In April, California residents gathered 1.6 million petition signatures to oust Newsom over what they saw as "draconian" measures to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, poor economic policies and other issues. The state's Elections Office set September 14 as the date for the gubernatorial recall election.

California is the only US state that has ever succeeded in recalling its governor — in 2003, Gray Davis was replaced by actor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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UN to Withdraw All Gabonese Peacekeepers From Mission in CAR - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will repatriate all Gabonese peacekeepers from its mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) following credible reports of alleged sexual exploitation, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The UN Mission in the Central African Republic [MINUSCA] announced a decision by the Secretariat to repatriate all Gabonese military units from the Central African Republic, effective immediately," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric explained the decision follows credible reports received by the mission of sexual abuse by the Gabonese military contingent deployed to the peacekeeping mission and a history of pending allegations involving Gabonese contingents in CAR.

The United Nations has received a total of 32 allegations of sexual misconduct concerning 81 alleged perpetrators from Gabon since 2015 and out of the 32 allegations, six have been substantiated through an investigation, Dujarric noted.

"The decision taken by the Secretary-General comes after what we feel is demonstrated failure to respond effectively to a history of allegations and sexual exploitation in the Central African Republic by the Gabonese," Dujarric said.

The UN spokesperson also said that MINUSCA had dispatched an immediate response team to the location to assess the situation, establish prevention measures and inform communities how to report sexual exploitation and abuse.

In addition, the victims had been referred to humanitarian partners to receive medical support and social protection, Dujarric said.

The Gabonese contingent in the MINUSCA numbers about 450 personnel. To fill the void left by the Gabonese in the mission, consisting of 10,990 troops, the United Nations is currently working with the host government and contingents already present in the country, Dujarric added.

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US-Australia Partnership Has Never Been Stronger or More Important - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The partnership between the US and Australia has neither been stronger nor more important than it is right now, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during remarks alongside Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne in Washington, DC on Wednesday.

"If we look at what the United States and Australia are doing together bilaterally, regionally, globally, this partnership has never been stronger, it's never been more important, I think, to the wellbeing of our people," Blinken said

Later in the day, US President Joe Biden is set to announce a new working group with the UK and Australia to deliver Canberra their first nuclear submarine.

The group, which will be known by the AUUKUS acronym, will also share information about artificial intelligence, cyber, underwater systems, long-range strike capabilities, and other advanced defense technologies.

Both Payne and Blinken noted the significance of the two meeting near the 70th anniversary of the signing of the ANZUS treaty between the US, Australia, and for some time New Zealand, which advanced defense cooperation and communication between the nations in the Indo-Pacific region.

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US, Chinese Officials in Ongoing Discussion About Possible Biden-Xi Meeting - White House

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US and Chinese officials are in communication about holding a possible meeting between presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"There is an ongoing discussion with the Chinese leaders about what the next step should be about engagement on a leader-to-leader level, but I don't have anything more to preview for you at this point in time," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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White House Refrains From Commenting on Possible Delivery of Iron Dome System to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Wednesday refrained from answering a question on the possible United States delivery of the Iron Dome air defense system to Ukraine.

"I'd have to check on that with our team. I know we announced we were providing additional assistance when we had that [Biden-Zelensky] meeting, but in terms of the specific, I'd have to check with our team," Psaki said during a press briefing in response to a question whether Ukraine may receive the Iron Dome air defense system.

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New York City Requires All Delegates Attending UNGA to Show Proof of Vaccination - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - New York City has ordered that all individuals entering the UN General Assembly Hall must show proof of COVID-19 vaccination during the annual high-level event, according to a letter sent by the Office of the Mayor to the UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid.

The letter, dated September 9, says the spread of the COVID-19 Delta variant represents a significant concern in the city, where new cases have "increased significantly" over the last two months.

It says under New York City's vaccination requirement for indoor activities, "all persons entering the UN premises for the purpose of entering the General Assembly Hall would be required to show proof of vaccination in order to gain entry to the Hall."

Individuals coming to the General Assembly must also show proof of vaccination to dine, drink, or exercise indoors at the UN headquarters complex and in the city in general.

In addition, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said that the city of New York had offered to set up a vaccination tent outside the UN building during the General Assembly which kicked off Tuesday and will be taking place until September 27.

Before the new requirement, the United Nations did not mandate delegates coming to the compound in Midtown Manhattan for the event to be vaccinated.

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Milley's Calls to China During End of Trump Era Ensured Strategic Stability - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley's calls to his Chinese counterpart during former President Donald Trump's final months in office were coordinated at an interagency level and assured strategic stability, the general's spokesperson Dave Butler said on Wednesday.

US media reported on Tuesday that Milley feared Trump might start a war with China at the end of his tenure that he called his Chinese counterpart in October and January to assure Beijing that an attack from the United States was not imminent.

"His calls with the Chinese and others in October and January were in keeping with these duties and responsibilities conveying reassurance in order to maintain strategic stability," Butler said in a press release. "All calls from the Chairman to his counterparts, including those reported, are staffed, coordinated and communicated with the Department of Defense and the interagency."

Butler said the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman regularly communicates with counterparts across the world, including China and Russia, to improve mutual understanding of US national security interests, reducing tensions and avoiding unintended consequences or conflict.

The accusations against Milley are revealed in the upcoming book "Peril" by Washington Post's Associate Editor Bob Woodward and reporter Robert Costa. The book is based on more than 200 interviews with officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

According to the book, the US intelligence community determined Beijing was nervous the United States was preparing an attack following rising tensions over military exercises in the South China Sea and Trump's hostile talk toward China.

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White House Says Biden Knows General Milley, Has Complete Confidence in His Leadership

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has worked with the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley for eight months and has complete confidence in his leadership, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"The President [Biden] knows General Milley. He has been Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for almost eight months of his presidency. They have worked side by side through a range of international events, and the President has complete confidence in his leadership, his patriotism, and his fidelity to our Constitution," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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US Airlines Report Profits First Time Since Onset of Pandemic - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US passenger airlines reported a \$1 billion after tax profit in the April-June quarter, despite a pre-tax operating loss of \$3.6 billion, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Wednesday.

"The second-quarter results represent the first quarterly profit since the fourth quarter of 2019, the last quarter before the COVID-19 pandemic began," BTS said in a press release.

Domestic operations for 24 US airlines yielded an after tax profit of \$1.8 billion in the second quarter compared with a \$9 billion loss in the same quarter of 2020.

International operations, which includes 19 US airlines, produced a \$773.8 million second quarter loss, an improvement from a \$2.1 shortfall in the second quarter of 2020.

The report predated the summer spike in COVID-19 cases due to the Delta variant, and subsequent industry warnings of losses from a subsequent plunge in bookings.

In a regulatory filing cited by US media earlier this month, United Airlines said that it no longer expects to turn a profit in the third quarter and announced reductions to its flight capacity following weak August bookings.

Other industry giants, including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and Southwest Airlines, also lowered their revenue expectations, according to media reports.

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UN Says Concerned by Latest Developments on Korean Peninsula, Urges Diplomatic Engagement

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned by the reports of both North and South Korea testing ballistic missiles on Wednesday and calls for diplomatic engagement, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"We're very much aware of the media reports and are concerned by the latest developments that we've seen, Dujarric said. "Diplomatic engagement remains the only pathway to sustainable peace and complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

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UN to Withdraw All Gabonese Peacekeepers From Mission in CAR - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will repatriate all Gabonese peacekeepers from the mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) following credible reports of alleged sexual exploitation, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The UN Mission in the Central African Republic announced a decision by the Secretariat to repatriate all Gabonese military units from the Central African Republic, effective immediately. This decision follows credible reports received by the mission of sexual abuse by the Gabonese military contingent deployed to the peacekeeping mission, and history of pending allegations involving Gabonese contingents in the country," Dujarric said.

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US Senators Introduce Bill to Designate Taliban as Foreign Terrorist Entity

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican US senators have introduced a bill that designates the Taliban (banned in Russia) as a foreign terrorist entity, Senator Marco Rubio said on Wednesday.

"There is no doubt that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan poses a direct threat to our national security interests and that of our allies and partners both in the Middle East and in Central Asia," Rubio said in a statement.

The bill would sanction foreign individuals for providing support to the Taliban and requires the State Department to prepare a report within six months to determine whether the Taliban represents a significant threat with respect to narcotics trafficking.

Rubio accused President Joe Biden of conducting a disastrous military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"Unfortunately, there is no reason to think President Biden will treat the Taliban like the terrorists they are," Rubio said.

Congress should act decisively to deal with the situation and protect US national security, he added.

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US Launches Half-Billion Dollar Study of Long-Term Effects of COVID-19 – Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – The US earmarked \$470 million for a nationwide study of the long-term effects of COVID-19, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Wednesday.

The main grant will go to New York University (NYU) Langone Health, a leading US research facility with a medical school and multiple hospitals. Langone will make multiple sub-awards to more than 100 researchers at more than 30 institutions for the study, NIH said in a press release.

"This major new award to NYU Langone supports new studies of COVID-19 survivors and leverages existing long-running large cohort studies with an expansion of their research focus," the release said.

NIH launched the project to learn why some people have prolonged symptoms (referred to as long COVID) or develop new or returning symptoms after the acute phase of infection from the coronavirus, the release added.

Sometimes called long COVID, its most common symptoms include pain, headaches, fatigue, so-called brain fog, shortness of breath, anxiety, depression, fever, chronic cough, and sleep problems.

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UN Envoy for Afghanistan Discusses Safety of Aid Workers with Taliban - UNAMA

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan Deborah Lyons met on Wednesday with the Afghan Minister of Interior, Siraj Haqqani, appointed by the Taliban (banned in Russia), to discuss the safety of humanitarian staff working in the country, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a statement.

"UN envoy Deborah Lyons [and] the Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security today met Siraj Haqqani, stressing the absolute necessity for all UN [and] humanitarian personnel in Afghanistan to be able to work without intimidation or obstruction to deliver vital aid [and] conduct work for Afghan people," UNAMA said via Twitter.

In the meeting, the officials also addressed the issue of mutual trust to improve the situation in Afghanistan, especially in restarting the economy, ensuring that civil servants and health workers are paid and that medicines and food are reaching Afghans in need.

Before heading back to Kabul, Lyons met in Doha, Qatar, with Afghan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai. The officials discussed the urgent need for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, the importance of an inclusive government and the country's ability to respond to the economic challenges, UNAMA said.

In early August, the Taliban stepped up their offensive against the Afghan government forces and entered the capital city of Kabul on August 15. The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed on August 31, ending the nearly twenty-year American military presence in the country.

On September 6, the Taliban announced that the last resisting province, Panjshir, had come under their control. Shortly after, the movement announced the composition of the new interim government of Afghanistan, led by Mohammad Hasan Akhund, who has been on the UN sanctions list since 2001.

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Minnesota Top Court Overturns Murder Verdict on Cop Killer of Australian Lady - Ruling

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The Minnesota Supreme Court has overturned the third degree murder conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Mohamed Mohamed Noor who shot dead an Australian woman four years ago, a ruling stated on Wednesday.

"The only reasonable inference that can be drawn from the circumstances proved is that appellant's conduct was directed with particularity at the person who was killed, and the evidence is therefore insufficient to sustain his conviction under Minnesota Statute Number 609.195(a), for depraved-mind murder," Chief Justice Lorie Gildea said.

The Minnesota top court ordered Noor to be re-sentenced on a lesser charge of manslaughter. Justine Ruszczuk Damond telephoned the police on the night of July 15, 2017, after hearing a woman screaming but as she approached a police car, Noor, who was still sitting in the passenger seat, shot her dead.

A jury found him innocent of second-degree murder, but convicted him of third-degree "depraved mind" murder and second-degree manslaughter.

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New Pfizer Data Shows Vaccine Needs Booster Shot After 6 Months to Stay Robust - FDA

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - New data on the Pfizer vaccine for COVID-19 shows that its recipients need a booster shot after half a year to maintain its effectiveness against the virus, including the Delta variant, according to company documents released by the Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday.

"The totality of the available data supports the public health need for a booster (third) dose of BNT162b2 at approximately six months after the second dose of BNT162b2 for individuals 16 years of age and older," Pfizer's executive summary of the documents as released by the FDA said.

A retrospective cohort study conducted at Kaiser Permanente Southern California suggested that the observed erosion in vaccine effectiveness was primarily due to waning effectiveness rather than due to Delta increased transmissibility, the study revealed.

"Recent data from Israel and the United States in the context of the Delta Variant of Concern (VOC) predominant circulation suggest that vaccine protection against COVID-19 infection wanes approximately six to eight months following the second dose," the Pfizer study concluded.

On Friday, the FDA's independent Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee is scheduled to review the latest data on potential booster doses of the Pfizer vaccine. It will then vote on whether a booster dose is safe enough for widespread use and whether it is necessary and effective at boosting levels of protection against the virus.

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Blinken Says US and Lithuania Working Together on Democracy in Belarus

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The US and Lithuania are working together as partners to advance democracy in Belarus, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday during remarks alongside Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. "Lithuania and the United States are very strong partners in NATO. We stand together for collective defense and security. We stand against economic coercion, including that being exerted by China. And we stand strongly for democracy, including in Belarus where we're very much working together," Blinken said.

The two leaders met in Washington, DC on International Day of Democracy, which Landsbergis said was a symbolic day to reaffirm the countries' commitments to democracy and liberty across the globe.

Lithuania has been dealing with a migration crisis from Belarus that their Defense Minister, Arvydas Anusauskas, called part of a joint Russia-Belarus hybrid attack.

A group of US lawmakers on Friday wrote an open letter condemning the sentencing of Belarussian opposition activists Marya Kalesnikava and Maksym Znak and demanding that the Lukashenko regime release them.

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Americans' Approval of Broadcast Media, Internet Hits Record Low - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Americans' trust in four pillars of the nation's information sector - the internet, publishing, television and radio, and computers - received record-low ratings in an annual Gallup poll released on Wednesday.

"In the past year... the internet's positive image tumbled 14 percentage points to 35%, while radio and television fell eight points to 33%. Meanwhile, the computer and publishing industries saw minor dips, but enough to push them to record lows of 51% and 32%, respectively, in Gallup's two-decade trend," a press release explaining the poll said.

In yearly surveys dating back to 2001, Gallup asked for opinions of 24 business and industry sectors, giving respondents five options: very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative or very negative, the release also said.

Results of Gallup's August 2-17 national survey showed that nine US business sectors suffered significant image declines. In some cases, such as with healthcare and farming, results simply reflected a return to 2019 levels after public support peaked during the pandemic, the release added.

The four information sectors are the only industries that reached new lows in 2021, according to the release.

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Actress Angelina Jolie Meets With Psaki About Reauthorizing Violence Against Women Act

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that she met with actress and activist Angelina Jolie to discuss the importance of reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

"Met briefly this morning with the tireless and committed Angelina Jolie this morning to talk about the importance of reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act and the importance of continuing to fight for women, children and families around the world," Psaki said via Twitter.

The US House of Representatives passed the reauthorization of VAWA in March. The US Senate is yet to consider and pass their own version of the reauthorization.

The legislation funds the investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against women, imposes automatic and mandatory restitution on those convicted of such crimes. VAWA also establishes federal programs and offices to address crimes against women.

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Prince Harry, Megan Top Annual Time Magazine List of 100 Most Influential People

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Time Magazine feted Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in its annual list of the 100 most influential people, with a glowing profile by celebrity chef Jose Andres and a glossy image of the royal couple on one of seven different covers presumably chosen for global distribution.

"In a world where everyone has an opinion about people they don't know, the duke and duchess have compassion for the people they don't know. They don't just opine. They run toward the struggle," chef and founder of World Central Kitchen Jose Andres wrote of the celebrity duo.

As in past years, the list featured prominent athletes such as tennis star Naomi Osaka, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles and record breaking quarterback Tom Brady. Actors Kate Winslet and Scarlett Johansson represented the fantasy world of Hollywood, although they were chosen, in part due to their activism. In contrast President Joe Biden, his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and Afghanistan's Taliban chief Abdul Ghani Baradar represented the real world of global gamesmanship.

From the business world, SpaceX and Tesla head Elon Musk won billing as a top entrepreneur while Apple CEO Tim Cook represented the world of mega-corporations.

The 18th annual Time 100 list of the world's most influential people features "extraordinary leaders from around the world working to build a better future, from entertainers striving to make Hollywood more inclusive to activists fighting for sustainability and human rights," the magazine's CEO Edward Felsenthal wrote.

While many if not most names were readily recognizable such as former President Donald Trump and entertainer Britney Spears, images of more obscure celebrities were often accompanied by essays from celebrities who likely made the list in past years.

For example, former Vice President Al Gore introduced Dutch climate activist Roger Cox as winner of a David vs. Goliath court battle with Royal Dutch Shell, in which the global energy giant was ordered to cut emissions 45 percent by 2030.

Harry and Meghan graced one of seven different covers for the Time 100 issue, while others included lesser known celebrities such as Taiwanese-American billionaire Jensen Huang, Korean-American poet Cathy Park Hong and Nigerian-American economist Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who serves as director general of the World Trade Organization.

Time characterized those on its list as disrupters, fixers, doers, iconoclasts, and problem solvers - people who in a year of crisis have leaped into the fray.

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UNGA President Aims to Make Vaccines Available to Everyone Across Globe by End of 2022

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The President of the UN General Assembly, Maldivian diplomat Abdulla Shahid, said he will do his utmost during his time in office to achieve the goal of bringing COVID-19 vaccines to every individual in the world by the end of next year. Shahid delivered the claim shortly after taking an oath of office to assume the role of president of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly.

"I'm going to do everything possible to make sure that we are able to reach the target to get every single person vaccinated by the end of 2022," Shahid said.

Shahid stated that combating the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing the unequal access to vaccines worldwide would be the top priorities during his tenure in office.

The president said earlier that in early 2022, he will convene a high-level emergency debate on vaccine equity.

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North Korea Missile Tests Pose Threat to Neighbors, Int'l Community- US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – The United States considers the recent North Korean missile launch to be a threat to the country's neighbors and the international community, and urges Pyongyang to return to dialogue on denuclearization, a US State Department spokesperson said on Wednesday.

"The United States condemns the DPRK's [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] missile launch. This launch is in violation of multiple UN Security Council Resolutions and poses a threat to the DPRK's neighbors and other members of the international community. We remain committed to a diplomatic approach to the DPRK and call on them to engage in dialogue," the spokesperson said in a statement.

The statement reiterated that the United States remains committed to the defense of South Korea and Japan.

In the early hours of Monday, the Korean Central News Agency reported that North Korea had successfully tested a new type of long-range cruise missile over the weekend. The launched long-range cruise missiles flew 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) before hitting their targets.

On Tuesday, high-ranking diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States held a trilateral meeting on North Korea in Tokyo. One of the key topics of discussion was a possible response to the North Korean missile tests. The parties agreed to continue cooperation on the denuclearization of North Korea by combining dialogue with Pyongyang and sanctions pressure.

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UPDATE - Biden to Announce New Defense-Tech Sharing Deal with UK, Australia - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is set to announce later on Wednesday a new working group with the UK and Australia that will deliver Canberra's first nuclear submarine and enable the three countries to share advanced defense technologies in a thinly-veiled bid to counter China, media reported.

The group, to be known by the AUUKUS acronym representing the three countries, will share information and know-how in key technological areas like artificial intelligence, cyber, underwater systems and long-range strike capabilities, US news outlet Politico reported, citing a White House official and a Congressional staffer.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, meanwhile, reported that Canberra's next submarine fleet will be nuclear-powered under the deal that will scrap a controversial \$90 billion program to build up to 12 French-designed submarines.

Australia's embrace of nuclear-powered submarines will, however, have political and technological challenges, given that it has no existing domestic nuclear industry, the broadcaster said.

Politico said the pact will also allow the United States and the United Kingdom to share their knowledge of how to maintain nuclear-defense infrastructure.

While there was nothing explicitly mentioning China in the deal, the subtext of the announcement was that this was another move by Western allies to push back on China's rise in the military and technology arenas, Politico observed.

Biden is to announce the deal in a 5:00 PM ET (21:00 GMT) address on Wednesday.

Later this month, the White House will host its first Quad leaders meeting, bringing Biden together with the prime ministers of Australia, India and Japan in an alliance similarly contrived to counter China.

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UN Security Council Renews Libya's Mission Mandate Until September 30 - Resolution

UNITED NATIONS, September 15 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Wednesday decided to extend the mandate of the Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) until September 30.

The council unanimously voted in favor of a UK-drafted resolution, following a one-day delay in its adoption which saw the revision of the original text to extend the mission until September 15, 2022.

"The Security Council... decides to extend until 30 September 2021 the mandate of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, as an integrated special political mission to carry out its mandate," the text of the resolution said.

Libya's new unity government, headed by Dbeibeh, and the new Presidential Council, led by al-Menfi, selected on March 16 to prepare the general elections in Libya before the end of 2021, as prescribed by the United Nations.

The formation of the interim government ended a protracted civil war between rival Libyan political factions — mainly, the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, and a parallel cabinet in the east under the control of Haftar's forces.

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Canada Inflation Spikes to 4.1% in August, Fastest Rise Since 2003 – Statistics Agency

TORONTO, September 15 (Sputnik) - Canada's annual inflation rate rose to 4.1% in August, representing the fastest pace of growth since March 2003, the state statistics agency said on Wednesday.

"The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 4.1% on a year-over-year basis in August, the fastest pace since March 2003, up from a 3.7% gain in July," Statistics Canada said in its monthly CPI report.

The price of durable goods, including automotive vehicles, furniture, and household appliances, rose the most in August, the report said.

Additionally, the homeowners' replacement cost index, which Statistics Canada says is interconnected with the price of new homes, rose by 14.3% compared to August 2020 – the highest yearly increase since September 1987.

The CPI increase means Canada's inflation rate is now more than double the country's central bank target rate of 2%.

Last week, the Bank of Canada acknowledged the inflation spike, citing base-year effects, gasoline prices, and pandemic-related supply bottlenecks.

The Bank of Canada, in its Monetary Policy Report released earlier this year, projected that the inflation rate will remain "will likely remain at or above 3 percent" for the remainder of 2021.

Canada's central banker Tiff Macklem has said that the CPI will dip its target rate of 2% sometime in 2022.

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Four US Senators Urge Blinken to List Taliban as Foreign Terror Organization - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Four Republican US senators have sent a letter to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken urging him to designate the Taliban, (banned in Russia), as a foreign terrorist organization and to act against it to the full extent of the law, Iowa Senator Joni Ernst announced on Wednesday.

"We... urge you to consider designating the Taliban as a foreign terrorist organization and treating them as such to the maximum extent of the law," the letter, which was also signed by Ernst's fellow Republican senators Tommy Tuberville, Rick Scott and Dan Sullivan, said.

The Taliban movement said on September 9 that the presence of members of the new Afghan government in the United States blacklist was a violation of the 2020 Doha Agreement.

However, the senators noted that the organization had appointed a figure already on the FBI's most wanted list for many years to the key post of interior minister.

"The Taliban appointed Sirijuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani network and a known terrorist wanted by the FBI for the murder of American citizens as Interior Minister and allowed their organization to join the government," the senators wrote.

The Department of State Rewards for Justice Program has offered a \$1 million reward for information leading to the capture of Haqqani, who is wanted for questioning in connection with the January 2008 attack on a hotel in Kabul that killed six people, including a US citizen. He is believed to have coordinated and participated in cross-border attacks against US and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan Requests Pakistan to Open For Commercial Flights on Two National Airlines

MOSCOW, September 15 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan's Aviation and Transport Ministry has sent a request letter to the Pakistani Civil Aviation Authority to open the country for commercial flights from Kabul operated by two Afghan airlines, the Dawn newspaper reported on Wednesday.

The request dates back to Monday and names the Ariana Afghan Airlines and Kam Air carriers as potential operators of flights to Pakistan, according to the Pakistani newspaper.

The letter cited Doha's role in the reparation efforts of the Kabul airport, damaged during the foreign withdrawal and evacuation efforts in August. The Qatari authorities, which deployed specialists to restore the airport, announced the completion of works last Thursday. The facility has been open for international and domestic planes ever since.

Pakistan was among the first nations to launch air operations to Afghanistan along with Qatar, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Taliban (a terrorist group, banned in Russia) seized Kabul on August 15 and completed the takeover of Afghanistan several weeks later by taking control over the Panjshir province. On September 7, the movement announced the composition of the interim government of Afghanistan, led by Mohammad Hasan Akhund, who served as a foreign minister during the first Taliban rule and has been under UN sanctions since 2001.

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US Industrial Production Slows in August After Hurricane Ida - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US industrial production grew by a slower 0.4% in August after a 0.8% expansion in July as factory outages forced by Hurricane Ida held up output, the Federal Reserve said on Wednesday.

"Industrial production increased 0.4 percent in August after moving up 0.8 percent in July," the central bank said in a statement. "Late-month shutdowns related to Hurricane Ida held down the gain in industrial production by an estimated 0.3 percentage point."

Ida shut down more than 90% of gas production facilities on the US Gulf of Mexico prior to making its landfall on August 29. Some energy production remains shut in the aftermath of the storm, impacting the schedule of factories.

The Fed acknowledged this, saying mining production particularly fell 0.6%, reflecting hurricane-induced disruptions to oil and gas extraction in the Gulf.

But while industrial production slowed overall for August, manufacturing output itself did better, the central bank said.

"Although the hurricane forced plant closures for petrochemicals, plastic resins, and petroleum refining, overall manufacturing output rose 0.2%," the Fed said.

Output of utilities also increased 3.3%, as unseasonably warm temperatures boosted demand for air conditioning, it added.

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Ex-Head of US Forces in Afghanistan Opposed Full Pullout From Country - Senator

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Former Commander of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan General Scott Miller has informed the Pentagon he was against a complete withdrawal of coalition troops from the country, Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Chair James Inhofe said after briefing with the ex-commander.

The SASC had held a classified in-depth meeting with the former commander, Inhofe said in a statement late on Tuesday, adding that a similar meeting open to the public might take place on September 28.

"I'll let you know we had quite an event with General Miller, and he did say... that he opposed the effort that took place [US withdrawal] and he did not tell the president that because the president wasn't there, but he did talk to [Defense Secretary Lloyd] Austin, [Commander of Central Command General Kenneth] McKenzie, and [Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark] Milley and told them that he had been opposed to the total withdrawal," the statement read. The secret meeting's agenda also included "inconsistencies between what the administration has said and the truth," the Republican Senator from Oklahoma said, noting President Joe Biden "clearly" did not listen to all the military advice.

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Biden to Announce New Defense-Tech Sharing Deal with UK, Australia - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is set to announce later on Wednesday a new working group with the UK and Australia to share advanced technologies in a thinly veiled bid to counter China, the Politico news outlet reported citing sources.

The group, to be known by the AUUKUS acronym representing the three countries, will make it easier for three-way sharing of information and know-how in key technological areas like artificial intelligence, cyber, underwater systems and long-range strike capabilities, a White House official and a Congressional staffer told Politico.

There will be a nuclear element to the pact in which the United States and the United Kingdom share their knowledge of how to maintain nuclear-defense infrastructure, one of the sources said.

While there was nothing explicitly mentioning China in the deal, the subtext of the announcement was that this was another move by Western allies to push back on China's rise in the military and technology arenas, Politico observed.

Biden is to announce the deal in a 5:00 PM ET (21:00 GMT) address on Wednesday.

Later this month, the White House will host its first Quad leaders meeting, bringing Biden together with the prime ministers of Australia, India and Japan in an alliance similarly contrived to counter China.