

09/22/21 Wednesday

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'Difficult Decision': Facebook Chief Technology Officer to Step Down From Post
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Facebook Chief Technology Officer Mike Schroepfer said Wednesday he intended to transition to a minor, part-time role in the social media giant.

[According to a filing](#) with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Schroepfer made Facebook aware of his decision on Monday. However, he announced it publicly on [Wednesday on his profile](#) on the social media site.

Saying he would become the company's first Senior Fellow sometime next year, Schroepfer said the move would give him more time to spend with his family, as well as focus on philanthropic efforts. Schroepfer has been with Facebook for 13 years.

Andrew "Boz" Bosworth, currently head of Facebook's technology division, will replace him in the role. Bosworth has overseen the creation of its augmented reality program, the AR/VR organization, which was renamed Facebook Reality Labs (FRL) in 2020 and which he will continue to head as CTO. He joined the company 15 years ago.

"As our next CTO, Boz will continue leading Facebook Reality Labs and overseeing our work in augmented reality, virtual reality and more, and as part of this transition a few other groups will join Boz's team as well," Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg said [in a statement](#).

"This is all foundational to our broader efforts helping to build the metaverse, and I'm excited about the future of this work under Boz's leadership."

The mixup comes as Facebook has been put under the spotlight by an investigative series launched by the Wall Street Journal dubbed ["The Facebook Files."](#) The series has called attention to some of the company's failings, particularly its ignoring the mental health impacts of teenagers using Instagram, which the company also owns, and how drug cartels in Mexico have used the site to recruit hitmen, among other issues.

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'World's Coolest Dictator': El Salvador's Bukele Changes Branding on Twitter Amid Protests
By - Morgan Artyukhina

El Salvador's millennial ruler, President Nayib Bukele, is trying to parry growing criticism of his administration's authoritarianism with a bit of snark by changing his Twitter bio to the "coolest dictator in the world" after protests rocked the capital earlier this month.

Bukele made the change on Tuesday after thousands demonstrated in the capital of San Salvador over the weekend, apparently deciding his first snarky change - which simply read "dictator" - on Saturday wasn't the best thing for his image.

The maneuver calls to mind teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg's response to then-US President Donald Trump speaking dismissively of her in 2019, which prompted her to [change her Twitter bio](#) to match Trump's tweet. However, there is a much darker prognosis for the Central American nation than there was in the autistic Swedish woman's playfulness. Protests have rocked the capital for much of September, provoked in part by the country's haphazard [adoption of bitcoin](#) as a legal tender and investment of national funds into the cryptocurrency, as well as recent moves by Bukele to consolidate power. Demonstrators last week carried signs that read "we were defrauded by Bitcoin" and "no to dictatorship," the latter of which likely provoked his Twitter bio.

Bukele's rise to power in the 2019 elections came after a prolonged obstruction campaign by opposition parties to the rule of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), a left-wing party that Bukele was once a member of before leaving and basing his presidential campaign on criticizing his former party's failure to accomplish its policy goals.

Since taking office, Bukele, 40, has overseen a right-wing shift supported by the United States that has included diverting funding for health care toward expanding the police force instead, and has used the COVID-19 pandemic to vastly [increase his power](#) and that of the police.

After his New Ideas party won a supermajority in March elections, Bukele carried out what the [Washington Post](#) called a "self-coup," comparing his sacking of all top judicial officials and their replacement with party loyalists to a near-identical move by Peruvian dictator Alberto Fujimori in 1992, which heralded a new period of [authoritarian rule](#) and state terror.

His latest move came late last month after he [announced on Twitter](#) it was time to "purge the judicial branch and remove the corrupt," eliminating one-third of the country's judges and [squeezing a ruling](#) from the Constitutional Chamber that would allow him to seek another five years in office.

The US embassy in San Salvador [criticized the move](#) on Sunday, saying in a statement that the new justices "undermined democratic processes or institutions by approving a controversial interpretation of the Constitution authorizing re-election of the President despite an express prohibition in the Constitution forbidding consecutive terms of the Presidency."

Ironically, Bukele has tried to cast the US response as a form of foreign meddling, telling the [Associated Press](#) it was "pure politics and the lowest form of interventionism," and had "nothing to do with corruption."

"We are not [in] anyone's backyard," Bukele tweeted on Monday. "Have a little bit of dignity."

The quote originally comes from slain Grenadian revolutionary leader [Maurice Bishop](#), who was killed in a power struggle provoked by US intelligence immediately prior to the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Then-US President Ronald Reagan claimed Grenada was seeking an alliance with socialist Cuba and the USSR, and that a new airport under construction was intended to become a Cuban military base.

"No country has the right to tell us what to do or how to run our country or who to be friendly with. We certainly would not attempt to tell any other country what to do," Bishop said in 1979, a month after the New Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education, and Liberation (New JEWEL)

movement came to power in the former British plantation colony. "We are not in anybody's backyard, and we are definitely not for sale."

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Moroccan Liberal Parties Form Coalition Government, Ousting Islamists After Decade of Rule
By - Morgan Artyukhina

After Morocco's ruling Justice and Development Party (PJD) was dealt a stinging defeat in elections earlier this month, several liberal parties have come together to form a coalition government with billionaire Aziz Akhannouch at the helm.

Akhannouch, who was assigned by Moroccan King Mohammed VI to form a government after his party, the National Rally of Independents (RNI), won a plurality of seats in parliament, announced the new coalition on Wednesday. It will include the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), another liberal party, and the Istiqlal Party (IP), a center-right nationalist party that supports the monarchy and helped lead the country to independence from France in 1956, but has a long reputation of working with centrist and left-wing parties.

RNI won 102 of the 395 seats in the Moroccan House of Representatives, while PAM took 87 seats and Istiqlal 81 seats. By contrast, the PJD, who had held power for a decade, saw their base of support totally collapse, winning just 13 seats in the lower house. [Turnout was reportedly](#) 7% higher than in 2016, with 50.3% of the electorate casting ballots.

"This choice is based on the will of the people, since the three parties managed to convince the voters by obtaining a large majority," Akhannouch said in a speech at RNI headquarters in Rabat, as quoted by [Agence France-Presse](#). Speaking alongside PAM chief Abdellatif Ouahbi and Istiqlal head Nizar Baraka, Akhannouch said their alliance was based on "our programs that largely intersect and adopt the same social and economic priorities."

Akhannouch [promised to create](#) one million jobs, expand health insurance coverage to all Moroccans, increase the salaries of teachers and to provide a pension program for the elderly. The new [coalition pledged](#) to "work united and strong" toward implementing the New Development Model, a social and economic renewal program commissioned by the monarchy. A panel formed to draw up recommendations [presented its report](#) to King Mohammed VI in April.

Istiqlal secretary-general Baraka also said the coalition "will give a new impetus" to reform the ailing economy, which has been "severely marked by the health crisis caused by the pandemic and which "limits the room for manoeuvre."

However, the PJD has alleged there were "many violations and imbalances witnessed" during the vote, saying after results were announced that they "do not reflect the reality of the political map and the free will of the voters." [According to Reuters](#), rules changes made it harder for bigger parties to win as many seats as before, necessitating the creation of political coalitions. The PJD will now join the political opposition, alongside several smaller left-wing parties.

Akhannouch, who has previously headed the respective ministries of finance and agriculture, is CEO of the Moroccan conglomerate Akwa Group, which is heavily invested in gas and

petroleum. He is worth an estimated \$2 billion, making him Africa's 12th-richest man, [according to a count](#) by Forbes.

The new government will take power amid an ongoing crisis with Morocco's chief regional rival of Algeria, which [cut ties with Rabat](#) last month after claiming it was responsible for stirring up dissent and causing wildfires to break out in the country. On Wednesday, Algiers announced it was closing its airspace to Moroccan aircraft.

The government also inherits a war in Western Sahara, where hostilities with the pro-independence Polisario Front reignited last November after 30 years of peace. Claiming to represent a Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in the territory, Polisario accused Rabat of breaking their ceasefire by forcibly dispersing an occupation protest at the Guerguerat border crossing led by Saharawi women. Morocco claims the territory is a historic part of Morocco - a claim the [US backed in December](#) as part of a deal orchestrated by the Trump administration to convince Rabat to normalize [relations with Israel](#).

On Tuesday, Moroccan Foreign Minister [Nasser Bourita met](#) with Alexander Ivanko, the United Nations' newly appointed Special Representative for Western Sahara and head of its peacekeeping mission there, MINURSO. Rabat has proposed an autonomy scheme for Western Sahara, but the UN has promised since 1991 to facilitate an independence referendum in the territory.

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Leaks Reveal UK Equalities Minister Dismissed Colonialism, Mocked Trans People
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A series of leaks have revealed that Kemi Badenoch, the UK's parliamentary under-secretary of state for equalities, made disparaging comments about transgender people and was dismissive of the effects of British rule on its colonies.

According to [VICE World News](#), which viewed messages sent by Badenoch on WhatsApp in 2018, the equalities minister mocked many high-profile Black political figures in the UK and flatly said "I don't care about colonialism."

The messages were either sent privately or posted on a chat called Conservative Friends of Nigeria. The person who leaked the messages, Funmi Adebayo, said they felt compelled to bring Badenoch's comments to public attention after she was given a portfolio at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in a [cabinet reshuffle](#) by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "I don't care about colonialism because [I] know what we were doing before colonialism got there. They came in and just made a different bunch of winners and losers," Badenoch said in one message. "There was never any concept of 'rights,' so [the] people who lost out were old elites, not everyday people."

Born in Wimbledon, Badenoch's family returned to Nigeria for much of her youth before moving back to the UK when she was 16. She said in other messages that she had a "mini-identity crisis" in her twenties after speaking with a colleague "who would just be sacked for racism"

today. She said, “he was very aggressive in challenging my view of what African achievement actually was.”

Adebayo, a Conservative supporter who was an investment banker when they first met Badenoch, told Vice they “looked up” to her as one of the party’s few Black women. Now, however, they said Badenoch’s comments are “dangerous and ignorant.”

“These messages show Kemi Badenoch’s deep lack of understanding – and ignorance – when it comes to the impact of British colonialism, especially on the Commonwealth nations,” Adebayo told the outlet.

“I think she’s absolutely the wrong person to be sitting in this office that she has now been given,” Adewayo said Badenoch’s foreign office appointment. “As great as it is to see a Black woman in her position of power, and as great as that is for representation, she is not equipped, she does not have the knowledge, she does not have the experience, nor does she have the empathy to be in such a role. I hope that it is strongly understood that just because she is a Black woman, does not mean that she can be the spokesperson for all Black people.”

British colonization of Nigeria began in the 17th century with the African slave trade, which saw up to 20,000 slaves transported west across the Atlantic every year by the end of the century and up to 76,000 people per year by the late 18th century, with ports like Lagos becoming important hubs for the slave trade. The slave trade was abolished in 1807, and military conquest of the interior of the continent came later in the 19th century. The colony exported tin, cotton, cocoa, groundnuts, and palm oil. It gained independence in 1960.

Other messages leaked to Vice included dismissals of leading Black politicians, academics and public figures, including boasting about bringing Kimberle Crenshaw, a professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School who is credited with coining the term “intersectionality,” to tears.

“She was practically in tears by the end of it [because] she literally had never heard the arguments I was making and could not respond,” Badenoch said of the critical race theorist.

“And then she started shouting that I had no right to be on [the] panel...because I hadn’t read her book ●.”

Some other targets included Tory MP and government minister Sam Gyimah, who she dismissed as a potential leader of the Conservative Party, and Diane Abbott, who at the time of her comments was shadow home secretary.

Badenoch is well-known as a critic of critical race theory. Last year, she [blasted teachings](#) about “white privilege” in schools and the idea that history education in the country is distorted by its colonial legacy.

‘Men Using Women’s Restrooms’

The leak comes just days after a recording surfaced in which Badenoch, whose post at the Government Equalities Office has her overseeing the advancement of women and fighting against all forms of discrimination, was wholly [dismissive of transgender](#) people’s campaign for equality, calling trans women “men.”

“It’s not even about sexuality now. It’s now like the whole transgender movement, where, OK well we’ve got gay marriage, and civil partnerships, so what are transsexuals looking for?” she said in audio also given to Vice World News. They were also recorded in 2018, prior to her being posted to the equalities ministry in 2020.

“Even when, you know, so, people hear about, you know like the whole bathroom thing, it’s actually more of an American thing, but they have a similar problem, that, right so now it’s not just about being free to marry who you want, you now want to have men using women’s bathrooms.”

According to Vice, which did not post the leaked audio, in the recording, Badenoch “also appears to mock gay marriage, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which was spearheaded by several of her predecessors as equalities minister.”

Stonewall, a British LGBTQ rights charity named after the 1969 trans-led riot in New York credited with sparking the modern LGBTQ equality movement, [called the minister’s](#) comments “hurtful and harmful to LGBTQ+ communities.” Vice also noted her misgendering of trans women may violate British anti-harassment laws.

Badenoch has also aroused fury after [admitting in 2018](#) to having hacked a Labour MP’s website in 2008 to post pro-Conservative messages on it. She apologized for the incident, calling it a “foolish prank.”

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Bannon Admits He Spoke With Trump About 'Killing' Biden Presidency Ahead of Deadly Capitol Riot

By - Gaby Arancibia

The former Trump-era White House strategist served as one of many national security advisers under the former US president; however, his time came to end just seven months into the post, shortly after he gave a shockingly candid interview that saw him openly blast others working within the administration.

Steve Bannon, who once served as chief White House strategist at the beginning of the Trump presidency, openly admitted on Wednesday that he discussed with the former US president, Donald Trump, the possibility of “killing” the Biden presidency ahead of the deadly Capitol riot. Bannon’s admission came during the latest episode of the former adviser’s War Room podcast, which saw the strategist-turned-podcaster state that he spoke with Trump about kicking things up a notch, as congressional lawmakers were getting ready to confirm the results of the 2020 election.

“Yeah, because of his legitimacy. Forty-two percent of the American people — 4-2 — think that [US President Joe] Biden did not win the presidency legitimately. It killed itself,” Bannon told his viewers.

“Just let this go with what this illegitimate regime is doing. It killed itself. We told you from the very beginning. Just expose it. Just expose it. Never back down. Never give up. This thing will implode.”

The remarks were in response to a video showing Bob Woodward and Robert Costa - the writers of the Peril book tell-all - discussing how their sources informed them that Bannon spoke with the former commander-in-chief about “kill[ing] the Biden presidency in its crib.”

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Bannon's stance on the Capitol riot is not new; however, the extent of his talks with Trump on the matter was not previously clear.

The day before the deadly 6 Capitol riot, Bannon informed listeners on his podcast that "all hell was going to break loose" the next day, and that his followers on social media needed to "take action." Bannon, similar to many Trump administration officials, was touting baseless voter fraud claims at the time.

While the Capitol riot temporarily halted the certification proceedings, the process was not stopped. US lawmakers returned with a vengeance after peace was restored on the federal grounds and quickly certified Biden's electoral win.

In the days after the event, lawmakers took up impeachment articles against Trump for inciting the riot; however, while the articles cleared the US House of Representatives, the effort died in the US Senate, which was, at the time, held by the GOP.

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US Man Pleads Not Guilty to Capitol Bomb Threat After Livestreaming Police Standoff
By - Evan Craighead

Floyd Ray Roseberry, 49, was charged last month with attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction, and attempted use of an explosive device, following a five-hour standoff with authorities near the Library of Congress. The bomb threat suspect, who expressed anti-government sentiment online, has since been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Appearing before US Magistrate Judge Zia M. Faruqui on Wednesday, Roseberry pleaded not guilty to [charges associated with an August bomb threat](#) that triggered an evacuation on Capitol Hill and an hours-long standoff with authorities.

The North Carolina resident's plea came after Faruqui issued a same-day decision deeming him mentally competent to stand trial.

In late August, court-appointed psychiatrist Teresa Grant diagnosed the ardent Trump supporter with bipolar disorder and, with Faruqui's approval, prescribed the suspect new medication to treat his condition.

Grant, who described Roseberry as "amenable to treatment," was tapped by the federal court after the suspect told the judge that it had been days since he had been administered what he referred to as his "mind medicine."

"Not having my medication is going to make things difficult," he said during a virtual hearing in August. "I don't know what today is."

The psychiatrist later determined that Roseberry's original medication was not treating his condition.

According to US Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger, Roseberry parked his vehicle outside the Library of Congress at around 9:15 a.m. local time on August 19. When approached by an officer, the suspect reportedly warned that he had an explosive device in his possession.

The man, who was livestreaming himself on Facebook, was overheard making a number of demands, including repeated calls for US President Joe Biden's resignation.

"I'm up here in Washington DC, there's a Capitol or something. There's another Capitol. The police are coming. I'm trying to get Joe Biden on the phone," Roseberry said in a now-deleted stream.

"You step down out of office, I'll step down out of this truck," the suspect said, suggesting that he was attempting to speak directly to the US president.

Roseberry's Facebook page, prior to its deletion, was littered with videos in which he not only repeated far-right conspiracy theories regarding Afghanistan migrants, but declared that the "South" will experience an uprising and that former US President Donald Trump would be reinstated to the Oval Office.

The suspect was a follower of Trump's presidential campaign page, as well as a White Lives Matter page, [ABC News reported](#).

[USCP authorities ultimately retrieved what are suspected to have been bomb-making materials](#) from his pickup truck. However, no fully-assembled explosive device was found, according to a police statement.

Roseberry is facing life imprisonment, and will remain in pretrial custody until his 8 October court appearance.

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DHS Looks to Staff Gitmo Migrant Facility With Guards Who Speak Haitian Creole Amid US
By - Evan Craighead

In the early 90s, US Coast Guard cutters transported thousands of Haitians fleeing the coup-hit country to refugee camps based at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. At one point, the detention facility came under human rights scrutiny, and was branded an "HIV prison camp" for its quarantining of HIV+ refugees and their relatives.

A recent government contract listing shows the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency is preparing to move some 20 individuals to Guantanamo Bay's Migrant Operations Center (MOC) - a facility that has the capacity to properly house up to 120 people. [Per the contract](#) listing, first reported by NBC News, ICE is seeking to obtain services from a company that can maintain a roster of at least 50 unarmed custody and security personnel for the MOC.

The Department of Homeland Security agency also calls for specific language requirements amongst the ranks.

"At least 10% of the augmented personnel must be fluent in Spanish and Haitian Creole," the listing read.

ICE detailed that a possible "surge event" could bring the facility's total population to up to 400 migrants.

"The service provider shall be responsible to maintain on site the necessary equipment to erect temporary housing facilities for populations that exceed 120 and up to 400 migrants in a surge event," the listing read.

While there is a specified language requirement for security personnel, no information was provided on the migrants expected to be transferred to the MOC.

The listing, published on September 17, came days before the widespread circulation of images and videos showing Haitians being chased down by US Border Patrol agents.

The move has brought a bipartisan wave of condemnation and questions, ranging from US border security to possible human rights violations.

Democrats with the House Oversight and Reform Committee have requested a briefing on the matter from officials with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

"In the words of the late Chairman Elijah E. Cummings, 'We're better than this,'" [the committee wrote in a Wednesday statement](#). "We expect CBP to take immediate action to ensure that all migrants are treated humanely and with respect."

Marsha Espinosa, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, weighed in on the development and asserted on Wednesday evening that the department "is not and will not send Haitian nationals being encountered at the southwest border to the Migrant Operations Center (MOC) in Guantanamo Bay."

"The MOC has been used for decades to process migrants interdicted at sea for third-country resettlement," the DHS spokesperson added. "The request for information (RFI) recently posted is a typical, routine first step in a contract renewal, and unrelated to the Southwest Border."

Estimates suggest that some 14,000 Haitian migrants had converged along the US-Mexico border community of Del Rio, Texas, in search of a better life, with some seeking to escape violence, discrimination and find work opportunities. However, while many have opted to return to Mexico over deportation fears, reports indicate that others have chosen to stay put.

The rise in Haitian migration began to bubble up shortly after US President Joe Biden undertook efforts to reverse many of his predecessors strictest immigration policies at the start of his administration.

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Photo: Armored Vehicles, National Guard Appear on Texas Border Amid Abbott's 'Steel Wall' Deployment

By - Evan Craighead

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told US senators that he was "horrified to see" viral videos depicting horseback Border Patrol agents chasing down Haitian migrants at the US-Mexico border. Mayorkas also acknowledged that the US would be increasing the frequency and number of repatriation flights for detainees.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott took to social media on Wednesday to announce that Texas Department of Safety personnel and the National Guard have been working to secure southern border cities such as Del Rio, Texas.

Additional photos published by the Texas Governor on Wednesday showed armed US personnel monitoring an area along the Rio Grande River.

A varied collection of armoured vehicles and trucks were seen along the border as well.

Abbott argued to Fox News on Tuesday that his state government was covering tasks that should be left to the administration of US President Joe Biden.

"What we did, we put hundreds of Texas Department of Public Safety cars and created a steel wall — a steel wall of [Texas] DPS vehicles — that prevented anybody from crossing that dam that you've seen people walk across", he said, adding that authorities had "effectively" regained control of the border.

The deployment to the Del Rio area comes on the heels of [reports](#) that indicated thousands of Haitian migrants were arriving with the hopes of being allowed to gain refugee status within the US as many were leaving their homes over violence and racial discrimination.

A spike in US immigration was recorded shortly after the start of the Biden administration once the new president began striking down many Trump-era immigration policies. Skyrocketing figures and traffic at border crossings even prompted American officials to urge them to not make the dangerous journey to the US-Mexico border.

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Croatian Police Partially Solve Mystery of Lone Woman Found on Island With No Memory
By - Nevin Brown

Croatian police have solved the first half of the mystery surrounding a woman who was found with no memory along ragged rocks on the island of Krk.

[A woman was found over the weekend](#) in a remote area on the Croatian island of Krk with no memory of who she was and how she had gotten there. Local police on Wednesday solved the first half of the mystery once they successfully managed to identify her moments after posting a picture of her.

Officials subsequently learned that the woman is a Slovakian named Daniela Adamcova, [The Guardian reported](#).

In 1984, Adamcova left Slovakia, her friends, and her family [to come to the United States](#). She had wanted to go to Australia or New Zealand, but ended up settling in Los Angeles, California. Through the help of an emigrant agency, she settled and began on her own American dream. Adamcova would eventually enroll in design school and become a jewelry designer. Some of her jewelry would be worn by stars such as Diana Ross, Brigitte Bardot, Barbara Streisand, and cast members from the shows "Friends" and "Melrose Place."

Following a divorce, Adamcova came back to Slovakia in 2000; however, she returned to the states before later opting to live in Ireland from 2015 to 2018.

Although the mystery of who the woman on the rocks of Krk has been solved, it only leads to another mystery: how did she get there?

Adamcova was discovered when a fisherman saw her laying on a jagged outcrop of rock near Krk. The fisherman alerted the police who had to take 4x4s and walk nearly two miles to reach her. The locals say the area she was found in only has bears and wild boars.

When the police finally got to her, she was dehydrated and confused. The authorities believe Adamcova had spent more than a night on the rocks, and was so weak she couldn't drink water

without assistance. She had no phone or ID on her, which, coupled with her amnesia, made it impossible for the police to identify her.

Had Adamcova experienced a horrible accident or had a crime been committed? Details, and perhaps even memories, could surface in the days to follow. The mystery of the woman on the rocks of Krk is only halfway solved.

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FDA Authorizes Pfizer Booster Shots for Elderly, At-Risk Americans

By - Nevin Brown

The US Food and Drug Administration has authorized the use of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine to allow for a single booster dose.

The booster is [to be administered at least six months](#) after the completion of the primary series of vaccination. The authorization extends to individuals who are; 65 years of age and older, 18 through 64 years of age at high risk of severe COVID-19, and 18 through 64 years of age whose frequent institutional or occupational exposure to SARS-CoV-2 puts them at high risk of serious complications of COVID-19 including severe COVID-19.

The FDA held a public meeting on September 17, to collect input from independent scientific and public health experts on the data submitted in Pfizer's application.

"The FDA considered the data that the vaccine manufacturer submitted, information presented at the VRBPAC meeting, and the committee's discussion, and has determined that based on the totality of the available scientific evidence, a booster dose of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine may be effective in preventing COVID-19 and that the known and potential benefits of a booster dose outweigh the known and potential risks."

The FDA concluded that over time, the vaccine experienced "a modest decrease in the efficacy." The boosters were shown to generate an antibody response against SARS-CoV-2 similar to the one experienced directly following an individual's initial two-dose vaccination.

The CDC has opened a meeting to create further guidelines over when and who will receive booster shots. While the FDA has approved the Pfizer booster, experts at the CDC meeting were confused by the rationale for booster shots and they suggested waiting a month for more evidence to make a decision.

The two agencies being at odds over this decision is not surprising. The FDA approves the efficacy and safety of drugs, while the CDC is tasked, in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, with figuring out the supply and distribution of the vaccine. Those that have been vaccinated still show tremendous resistance to Covid and it's not entirely known if booster shots are necessary to maintain that.

The CDC and FDA agree that seniors and health care workers are in most need of booster shots. Data provided by Pfizer and the Israeli government showed strong evidence for their efficacy in seniors, but less conclusive data for younger individuals without underlying health conditions.

Keeping healthcare workers safe from the virus remains a priority. In some areas of the country, the healthcare system is overwhelmed, and losing a worker to mild covid symptoms could leave healthcare providers understaffed.

The World Health Organization has voiced its opposition to the US's plan for booster shots. They argue that wealthy nations shouldn't splurge on a third round of vaccinations, while poorer nations wait for their first.

The FDA and CDC will decide at a later date if those that received the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccinations are in need of boosters. At this time, they don't recommend individuals get a different brand of booster to their original vaccine.

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Grandmothers Know Best: Cristiano Ronaldo's Mother Believes Her Grandson is a Star in the Making

By - Nevin Brown

In episode 37 of ADN de Leao, Sporting Lisbon's official podcast, Cristiano Ronaldo's mother, Dolores Aveiro, talked about her famous son, her love for Sporting Lisbon, and how her grandson, Cristiano Ronaldo Jr, might be an even greater footballer than his father.

Aveiro explained that her grandson, 'Cristianinho,' is a better player at age eleven than his father was at the same age. She believes that having the elder Ronaldo as a coach has been instrumental in his rapid development.

The younger Cristiano, now a member of Manchester United's youth academy, posted big numbers while playing with Juventus' youth team. With the club's under-nine side he scored 56 goals to go along with 26 assists in only 35 matches. With over two goal contributions a game, it's not hard to see why his grandmother has high hopes for Cristianinho.

Aveiro's great expectations for her grandson are not without merit, but it's important to remember the humble beginnings that the elder Ronaldo came from. Before he was five-time Ballon d'Or winner, he was just a poor kid living in Funchal on the Portuguese island of Madeira. [Ronaldo got his start with the youth team for Andorinha](#). The club, at the time, was in the fifth tier of Portuguese football. While his talent was obvious, the facilities and coaching available to Ronaldo were far inferior to the ones his son has grown up with. The story of Ronaldo becoming one of the greatest players in history is, in large part, owed to his burning desire to be the best, overcoming less than hospitable environments.

After starring in Andorinha's youth ranks, he moved to C.D. Nacional, the largest club on the island, but still a team languishing in Portugal's second division. Ronaldo quickly established himself as the best young talent on the island. However, predicting he would become one of the best players in the world was still fantasy, as no one from Madeira had even made an international appearance for Portugal.

It wasn't long before Ronaldo caught the eye of Sporting Lisbon, one of Portugal's three great clubs, along with Benfica and Porto. At age 12, Ronaldo moved to Lisbon and quickly moved up the ranks at Sporting. In 2002, at seventeen years old, Ronaldo made his first senior

appearance with Lisbon and the rest is history. One season later he was playing for Manchester United and on his way to one of the greatest careers in the sport's history.

Ronaldo's youth career, in many respects, is the polar opposite of his son's. Cristianinho has spent his youth career in the academies of Juventus and Manchester United to go along with the tutelage from one of the world's greatest players. His grandmother may be right that Cristianinho is better than his father was at the same age, but the hard work has only just begun for the talented youngster. Dolores Aveiro hopes that her son and grandson may one day play together with Sporting Lisbon. If she's right about her precocious grandson's talent, United fans will hope they can keep him in Manchester for good.

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Fellow 'Van Life' Camper Helped Authorities Locate Gabby Petito's Body
By - Nevin Brown

Jessica Schultz's tip to the FBI proved instrumental in the discovery of Gabby Petito's body. On August 26th, the graphic designer, who has spent the last four years living the "van life," [noticed a White Ford Transit van driving slowly](#) around Grand Teton national park. As she explains in a TikTok video, seeing another camper sparked her curiosity and she took note as she passed the van.

The "van life" community is known to be [incredibly welcoming and open](#), and it isn't unusual for those in it to socialize while on their journeys. But when she peered into the white Ford Transit van, all she saw was a single man, who she now believes was Brian Laundrie. She noted as she passed that he pulled over, got out of the car, and began to look around.

Schultz would see the van two other times over the next two days. She only ever saw one person and described his behavior as "very awkward and confused." At the time she had no idea what was happening or had happened in that Ford Transit van. It wasn't until a friend sent a text with a picture that showed a hat on the van's dashboard that she suddenly realized what she had seen. The hat looked exactly like the one she had seen back on August 26th as she passed a man in an almost identical white Ford Transit van.

The tip proved to be crucial in locating the remains of Gabby Petito. She told the FBI to search near Spread Creek, which is the [exact area where her remains were found](#). The coroner's office ruled her death a homicide and the only suspect remains Brian Laundrie, who has gone missing after returning home to Florida.

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'This Moment Demands Action': Biden Eyes Executive Actions After Fruitless Police Reform Talks
By - Adriana Montes

US President Joe Biden says he will review executive actions after bipartisan police reform talks between Democrats and Republicans - sparked by the death of Minnesota man George Floyd - are officially over without a deal.

In a statement released Wednesday on police reform investigations, Biden acknowledged his support for the US House-passed George Floyd Justice Policing Act and his urge to the US Senate to enact “meaningful” federal police reforms that “includes accountability to when law enforcement officers violate their oaths.”

Biden criticized Senate Republicans for rejecting [modest reforms](#) that were supported by the previous president in office, noting that lawmakers refused “to take action on key issues that many in law enforcement were willing to address.”

“This moment demands action, and we cannot allow those who stand in the way of progress to prevent us from answering the call.”

The bipartisan negotiating team led by US Rep. [Karen Bass](#) (D-CA), [Sens. Cory Booker](#) (D-NJ) and [Tim Scott](#) (R-SC), could not reach an agreement on the Democratic proposal to reform [qualified immunity](#), which protects police officers from civil liability for misconduct.

“We made it clear from the beginning of our negotiations that a bill must ensure true accountability, transparency and the policing standards necessary to bring an end to horrific incidents of violence Americans are routinely seeing – like the murder of George Floyd,” Booker said in a [statement](#) on Wednesday.

“After months of exhausting every possible pathway to a bipartisan deal, it remains out of reach right now.”

Biden has indicated that he still hopes to sign into law a “comprehensive and meaningful change,” with the administration already taking important steps with the US Justice Department in announcing new policies that will be implemented toward police officers.

“The White House will continue to consult with the civil rights and law enforcement communities, as well as victims’ families to define a path forward, including through potential further executive actions,” added Biden, in hopes to advance their efforts to “live up to the American ideal of equal justice under law.”

Negotiations over police reform gained steam among lawmakers after nationwide protests after fired Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder in April. Chauvin was seen on cellphone footage kneeling on Floyd’s neck in spite of pleas that the Minnesota man was unable to breathe.

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‘Earth Looks Fragile from Space.’ Jeff Bezos Pledges \$1 Billion to Tackle Climate Crisis
By - Adriana Montes

The 57-year-old former Amazon CEO said that his recent trip to space further inspired him to protect 30% of Earth’s land and sea.

In a statement on Monday, the Bezos Earth Fund said the \$1 billion will play a key role in carrying out the Biden administration’s 30X30 commitment — “a goal to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 to prevent mass extinctions and bolster resilience to climate change.”

[Jeff Bezos](#), the founder of Amazon and owner of The Washington Post, pledged \$1 billion to global conservation efforts, principally targeting key areas for biodiversity and carbon stocks. Currently ranked as the world's second-wealthiest man on the planet, with a net worth of about \$194 billion, according to [Bloomberg's Billionaires Index](#), Bezos plans to spend the \$10 billion he invested in the Bezos Earth Fund last year by 2030.

The grants that are expected to be released this year by the fund will have an initial focus on the Congo Basin, the tropical Pacific Ocean, and the tropical Andes.

The Bezos Earth Fund, founded in 2020, is a commitment from Jeff Bezos to "invest in scientists, NGOs, activists, and the private sector to help drive new technologies, investments, policy change and behavior," Dr. Andrew Steer wrote in a [Twitter post](#) when appointed as president and CEO of the Bezos Earth Fund in early March.

Bezos's plan compared the natural world to the glamorizing metrics of "poverty rates being lower, infant mortality and life expectancies getting better, and education rates being higher," but with a notable exception — the "natural world."

"The loss of nature and the changing climate aren't really two separate problems. They are two sides of the same coin. We simply cannot address climate change without reversing the loss of nature."

Jeff realized the "Earth looked fragile from space," after experiencing the '[Overview Effect](#)' during his 10-minute spaceflight on July 20.

"Nature is our life support system. And it's fragile."

Bezos Earth Fund [announced](#) pledges of \$203.7 million in grants by the end of the year to organizations combating climate change, among other causes.

"The aid will be prioritized in areas where local communities and Indigenous people are a main focus," the Bezos Earth Fund said. It is not yet known which organizations the grants will be distributed to.

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'We're Done With Fear': Florida Appoints Joseph Ladapo as State's New Surgeon General
By - Adriana Montes

Dr. Ladapo emphasized during a Tuesday news conference that Florida will be completely "done with fear" stemming from the pandemic. The physician has advocated for Americans to adopt healthier lifestyles as part of an effort to combat the spread of COVID.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has appointed Dr. Joseph Ladapo - a UCLA medical professor who opposed COVID-19 lockdown policies and mask mandates - to become the state's new surgeon general and secretary of the Florida Department of Health.

According to [UCLA Health](#), Ladapo's "primary research interests include assessing the cost-effectiveness of diagnostic technologies and reducing the population burden of cardiovascular disease."

"I am pleased to announce that Dr. Joseph Ladapo will lead the Florida Department of Health as our state's next surgeon general," DeSantis said at a Tuesday [news conference](#).

“Dr. Ladapo will bring great leadership to the Department of Health. I would also like to thank both Dr. Scott Rivkees and Dr. Shamarial Roberson for their hard work on behalf of all Floridians.”

Like DeSantis, Ladapo opposes evidence-based mask mandates, vaccine mandates, and lockdowns, as well as advocating for the controversial idea of achieving [herd immunity](#). Ladapo said after being announced as the new surgeon general, that vaccines aren't the only way to combat COVID-19 and getting one is a personal choice.

"The state should be promoting good health, and vaccination isn't the only path to that," Ladapo [said](#). "It's been treated almost like a religion, and that's just senseless. There are lots of good pathways to health, and vaccination isn't the only one."

In addition to vaccines, people should be encouraged to lose weight, exercise more and eat healthier, Ladapo added.

“We're done with fear, it's been something that's been unfortunately a centerpiece of health policy in the United States ever since the beginning of the pandemic, and it's over here – expiration date it's done,” he continued.

Ladapo, who is known for publishing controversial [articles](#) about “covid mania,” spoke out against lockdown, arguing that “those who are not vulnerable should immediately be allowed to resume life as normal.”

“After lockdowns, overall mortality increased. Lockdowns are bad. Lots of reasons why they're bad, that's just one really good one,” he underscored.

DeSantis took the opportunity to stress how important telling the truth is. “I think that's what Dr. Ladapo understands. ... You've got to tell people the truth, and you've got to let them make decisions,” the governor said.

Florida recently became the fourth state to surpass 50,000 novel coronavirus deaths since the start of the pandemic, according to the state's [latest weekly pandemic data report](#). Health officials reported Thursday that the fierce surge in COVID-19 cases was fueled by the new Delta variant.

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Blinken Discuss Afghanistan, Iran With UN Security Council Permanent Members – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Foreign Ministers of permanent members of the UN Security Council, including Russia, China, France and the UK, to discuss issues related to Afghanistan and Iran, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

“On Afghanistan, the Secretary called for P5 coordination to mitigate the emerging humanitarian crisis and prevent an economic collapse,” Price said in a statement about the traditional meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on Wednesday.

Blinken urged his counterparts to maintain unity on Afghanistan and to hold the Taliban (banned in Russia as a terror group) accountable to its commitments. He also called on for cooperation to ensure humanitarian access to those in need, Price added.

Speaking of Iran, Blinken reiterated the United States' intent to pursue a path of meaningful diplomacy to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the statement read.

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US Jobless Claims at 351,000, Below Key 400,000 Mark for 8th Week Running - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims were at 351,000 last week, remaining below the key 400,000 level for an eight week in a row in continued recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, data from the Labor Department showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending September 18, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 351,000," the department said in a news release.

While claims in the latest week rose by 16,000 from the previous week's revised level of 335,000, they have not crossed the 400,000 bar since the week ended July 31.

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US Special Envoy for Haiti Resigns to Protest "Inhumane" Deportation of Haitians - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Haiti Daniel Foote has resigned in protest of the deportation of thousands of Haitians apprehended at the southern US border, according to his resignation letter, distributed on social media.

"I will not be associated with the United States inhumane, counterproductive, decision to deport thousands of Haitian refugees and illegal immigrants to Haiti, a country where American officials are confined to secure compounds because of the danger posed by armed gangs in control for daily life," Foote said.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - No Winners in Canada's 'Unnecessary' Election But Trudeau Brand Takes Hit

TORONTO, September 22 (Sputnik) - Canada's national election, which upheld the status quo, produced no winners although Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's brand took quite a blow for calling the vote in the first place, political analysts told Sputnik.

Canadians went to the polls on Monday to choose their next government, putting an end to an election campaign that many saw as "unnecessary" amid a range of domestic and international

challenges, including the fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic and the messy evacuation from Afghanistan.

Canada's governing Liberal Party led by Trudeau is leading in 158 out of 338 federal ridings with over 99 percent of polls reporting, according to official results, well short of the 170 needed to secure a majority. The Conservative Party is on pace to retain official opposition party status with 119 seats, followed by the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democrat Party (NDP) with 34 and 25 seats, respectively.

The election result, should it hold with many mail-in ballots still outstanding, represents a near identical result to the 2019 election in which the Liberals took home 158 seats, the Tories – 121, while the Bloc and NDP settled for 32 and 24 seats, respectively.

The country's 44th election campaign will be remembered as the campaign that "changed nothing" and where there were no winners, Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, said.

"The legacy [of the campaign] is that nothing changed," Wiseman told Sputnik.

Wiseman and other experts struggled to identify any parties that met their objectives in an election marked by voter apathy, with the voter turnout plummeting by approximately 8 percent to 59.2 percent - second lowest in the country's history.

Wiseman said the Liberals, despite holding onto power, failed to attain the majority mandate desperately sought by Trudeau, while the Conservatives made no gains and appear to be on track to lose two seats in the House of Commons.

LIBERALS HOLD SERVE, WILL NEED IMPROVED TIES WITH OPPOSITION

While Trudeau and his Liberal Party failed to meet their objectives, they hung onto power and will now need improved cooperation with opposition parties, analysts said.

"A win is a win - and although not the desired outcome - a minority mandate means the Liberal Party of Canada will continue to build relationships across the party lines to ensure they address the priorities Canadians want and focus on achievable goals now and in the future," Jacqueline Biollo, a Principal Consultant with Aurora Strategy Group, told Sputnik.

Allan Tupper, a political science professor at the University of British Columbia, likewise, says closer ties with opposition will be key in an altered dynamic in Ottawa.

"The Liberals will approach governing with a clear agenda and they will work better with the opposition parties, particularly the New Democrats and the Bloc," Tupper told Sputnik, noting that improved cooperation does not extend to the Conservatives.

Tupper added that Trudeau will be expected to deliver on a number of domestic promises, such as climate change initiatives, childcare and a pledge to resettle Afghan refugees.

"This time around he is going to have to go forward with a substantial legislative agenda that requires cooperation and I think he will modify legislation and deal with those opposition parties accordingly. I think he learned that lesson from this experience," Tupper said.

Wiseman, however, disputes Trudeau's assertion that he was given a "clear mandate."

"Not at all," Wiseman said. "There's no mandate here, he's just going to continue doing what [the Liberals] have been doing."

'TRUDEAU BRAND' BRUISED

Trudeau's personal "brand," which was a key factor in his rise to world leader status, has since taken a beating and came into question on the campaign trail.

Trudeau, who after six years in office and a myriad of scandals is no longer the fresh-faced, charismatic media darling, was dogged by protests throughout the campaign, including some wild scenes of the Canadian prime minister being subjected to obscenities and in one instance pelted with gravel.

Cory Morgan, a political analyst and columnist with the *Western Standard*, says that Trudeau rode the coattails of his famous family name and a personal appeal into office but is increasingly becoming a burden to the Liberal Party.

"While the Trudeau brand may be losing its shine right now, the Liberal brand itself is as strong as ever. People are supporting the party rather than the leader," Morgan told Sputnik.

"Trudeau's tougher task will be convincing the party to keep him after the election even if he maintains his minority government."

However, other analysts say that Trudeau's job remains safe, despite his failure to regain a majority mandate. The current edition of the Liberals is believed to be a party strongly influenced by the Prime Minister.

CONSERVATIVES, CAUGHT OFF GUARD, 'UNHAPPY' WITH ELECTION RESULTS

Meanwhile, inside the Conservative camp, members are displeased by the results, Clinton Desveaux, a political strategist and columnist, told Sputnik.

"People are unhappy," Desveaux said, explaining that the Conservatives have lost parliamentary seats and the party brass is worried that more seats could flip as mail-in ballots are counted.

The disappointment was on full display on Tuesday, when Tory leader Erin O'Toole announced a campaign review, saying that no one is more disappointed than him.

The Conservative Party was caught off guard by the election result, Desveaux said, taking notice of a concession speech that critics panned as overly enthusiastic in light of defeat.

"[The Conservatives] were completely isolated as to what was happening on the ground," the political strategist and columnist said, surmising that the speech was a hastily rewritten victory speech after the election outcome became apparent.

Desveaux blames the Tory defeat on a lack of clear messaging - O'Toole was often criticized on the campaign trail for flip-flopping on key issues, including gun control and the party's stance on vaccination mandates - and the increased support for the populist conservative People's Party of Canada (PPC).

The PPC, which failed to win a single seat but nearly tripled its vote count, won 5 percent of the popular vote eating enough into Conservative support to sink the Tories in several ridings, according to analysts.

Wiseman cites the uptick in PPC support and the pandemic surge in Western Canada, which is governed by conservative governments and which O'Toole - until recently - lauded, as reasons for the Conservative defeat.

The PPC's gains cost the establishment Conservatives as much 10 seats, Wiseman estimates, adding that the NDP's lackluster performance didn't create enough of a split vote on the left, especially in vote-rich metropolitan areas such as Toronto, to help the Tories.

Additionally, Desveaux admits it was the Liberals' who were best able to leverage the "get out the vote" push in their victory.

Wiseman purports that, as in previous election disappointments, there will be an immediate push by some within the party to remove O'Toole as leader. However, he also said the Tory leader will be safe for "a while."

Meanwhile, Desveaux says media reports of "mutiny" within the party are accurate and that O'Toole has until Christmas to right the ship or face dismissal.

PPC HAPPY WITH GAINS, BUT LAMENT LACK OF PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

The PPC appears to be happiest with the increased support but also laments the missed opportunity to pick up representation in Canada's parliament.

PPC leader Maxime Bernier, who was the party's best chance at a House of Commons seat, lost by a wide margin in the riding of Beauce, which he carried four times as a member of the Conservative Party.

"Disappointed that we didn't get any seats in parliament, but the increased number of votes is very promising," Bill Tufts, a PPC strategist told Sputnik, highlighting the Party's performance in traditionally conservative Alberta, where the populist party garnered 7.5 percent of the popular vote.

Tufts also pushed back against allegations that his party torpedoed the Conservatives' bid to oust Trudeau, saying that the PPC appropriated voters from all parties and, most importantly, tapped into the pool of abstainers.

While analysts, including Desveaux and Wiseman, say the PPC is a one-issue party – the People's Party support closely mirrors the opposition to vaccination mandates – Tufts says the global populist movement is here to stay, including in Canada.

Tufts adds that as COVID-19 fades into the background attention will turn towards issues such as interprovincial relations, the economy and immigration, which, in his view, did not get the due attention during the 2021 federal campaign.

Bernier's job, despite now falling short in two straight elections, is safe at the present, according to Tufts.

CANADIANS SAY ELECTION 'COULD HAVE WAITED'

In Montreal, voters were not impressed with the Prime Minister's election call, telling Sputnik that the election was a "waste of time and money" and dubbing the campaign a "promotional" tour for Trudeau.

Voters in Mississauga Center, a Toronto-area voting district where Liberal Omar Alghabra coasted to victory, struck a more conciliatory tone, emphasizing their civic duty to vote, but noted that the election could have been delayed.

"I think we maybe could have waited a year, but it is what it is," Kamlesh, a voter from the riding of Mississauga Center, told Sputnik, emphasizing that it is his civic duty to vote.

Kamlesh's sentiment was echoed by other voters in the riding Sputnik spoke with, including Carol Li and Samira Munawar.

BRINGING TOGETHER A DIVIDED COUNTRY

While voters were split on the need for change or maintaining the status quo, all stressed the need for the country to unite after a campaign where emotions boiled over on several occasions, including unruly protests at Trudeau's campaign stops.

"I think people should make peace," Munawar said.

"We don't want to be like our neighbors down south," Kamlesh added, emphasizing the need for Canada's political parties to work together when the next government forms. Li said bringing the country together comes down to "reinforcing what [Canadians'] common ground is."

Voters in Montreal, meanwhile, were less enthusiastic about the prospects of uniting the nation, saying that division along partisan and identity lines, including language and culture, will endure beyond the election.

While fault lines emerged during the campaign, Wiseman says they are par for the course in an election, noting that the country has seen deeper splits.

"Canada may in fact be sprained, not fractured, in a sense - so the Prime Minister will have to work on healing and relieving the pain Canadians are feeling," Biollo says.

The political consultant says that Trudeau will have to strike a humbler tone and acknowledge his government's shortcoming, while staying firm on other issues, to begin healing the divisions among Canadians.

THIRD INSTALLMENT WITHIN 24 MONTHS?

There is strong speculation that the country could be plunged into another election in the next 18 to 24 months, the average tenure for a minority government. Trudeau himself referenced the mean lifespan of a minority government, when asked about subsequent elections during one of the country's debates.

Wiseman says that it is entirely conceivable that Canadians go to the polls for the third time in four years 18 to 24 months from now but notes that the timing will depend on political quakes, such as scandals, or opportunism.

Desveaux disagrees, saying that the NDP appears to be interested in working more closely with the Liberal government, which entails political stability until the next election, officially set for October 20, 2025.

Meanwhile, Biollo says talk of deeper integration between the Liberals and NDP is "speculation at best," emphasizing that the Liberals will "choose the relationships carefully" and attempts at integration will be met with pushback.

Biollo, however, notes that internal pressures may prevent the Prime Minister from pressing the button on another snap election.

"Anything is possible - but there is much at stake, including a leadership review or similar should Trudeau seem too eager to head back to the polls," Biollo said, noting that the Liberals will likely take time to reflect on this election.

"I think we will not see another snap election," Tupper said.

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RPT - US Court Sentences Russia's Oleg Nikitin to 28 Months, Nearly Equivalent to Time Served

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia sentenced Russian national Oleg Nikitin to 28 months in prison for violating US export regulations, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

"Today in Savannah, Georgia, a federal judge imposed the sentence of 28 months on Oleg Nikitin from St. Petersburg, Russia, which essentially amounts to the sentence that Mr. Nikitin has already served," Tarasov said on Wednesday. "The judge also signed an order for judicial removal, which entails Nikitin's deportation from the United States as soon as he completes his sentence, which should be very, very soon."

Tarasov expressed hope his client will be able to return to Russia very soon.

"I imagine that we are talking about a few weeks - just to make the arrangements for his travel," he said.

Tarasov added that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will facilitate the travel arrangements.

In addition to the imposing a prison term, the judge also imposed on Nikitin a fine of \$5,000 and a monetary assessment of \$100, Tarasov noted.

During the sentencing, Nikitin expressed regrets about the actions he took.

"I apologize for my actions. I have enough time to think about what was happened to me," he said in English.

Nikitin has pleaded guilty to charges of violating US export regulations in March. He faced up to five years in prison and a significant financial penalty.

The US Justice Department said earlier that Nikitin was a general director of the St.

Petersburg-based energy company KS Engineering (KSE) and conspired with his business partner Anton Cheremukhin as well three foreign nationals to purchase a US-made power turbine worth \$17.3 million in violation of US trade regulations. The turbine was to be employed on a Russian Arctic deep water drilling platform, the Justice Department said.

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RPT - Russian Crew Leaves Boat Pilgrim in Alaska, Will Renew World Trip Next Spring - Captain

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian and US voyagers who are traveling around the world onboard the Pilgrim, a replica of the 18th century wooden boat Pomor, left their vessel for the winter in Homer, Alaska, and plan to renew sailing toward Chukotka next spring, the boat's captain Sergey Sinelnik told Sputnik.

"We plan to come back onboard in late April or early May to prepare the vessel and re-start navigation in the end of May or early June," Sinelnik said.

The Pilgrim will sail from Homer to the island of Kodiak, then to Aleutian Islands and along the North-West shore of Alaska, probably to the city of Nom to end at Russia's Chukotka, he said.

"We will have to spend almost a month on the way and cover about 1,300 nautical miles," Sinelnik said.

After Chukotka, Sinelnik said he plans to obtain a license for sailing toward the Arctic town of Tiksi and along Russia's Northern coast.

Sinelnik noted that he is seeking crew members who want to navigate through the Northern route and is open to any suggestions.

This year, the Pilgrim was able to cover a distance from the US city of Duluth on the Great Lakes to Seattle by land on truck, and then to Alaska through Canada.

"We covered almost 1,800 nautical miles from Seattle to Homer in 37 days," Sinelnik said.

"Thank God, navigation is over, all crew members are healthy and came back home."

Sinelnik characterized the experience along the Canadian and Alaskan coasts as leaving "a good and deep trace" in his soul.

"No one tropical island can compare to uninhabited islands and the shore of Alaska, sublime beauty of the North surprises even despite rains and strong winds," he said.

The Pilgrim, a 40-foot sailboat, started the voyage around the world four years ago from the city of Petrazavodsk in Russia's Karelia region. On the way to the United States, the vessel visited multiple countries in Europe, the Canary and Caribbean islands as well as Cape Verde.

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US Sanctions Suffocate Syrian People, International Community Must Act - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The international community should step up with its assistance to Syria as the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate under the US-imposed sanctions which are suffocating the people in the country, Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Sputnik.

"Absolutely, yes, because the sanctions imposed by the United States are suffocating the Syrian people," Mekdad told Sputnik on Wednesday when asked whether the international community should step up humanitarian aid to Syria. "The level of poverty has increased, the lack of medicine has increased. Remarkably, we don't find even main medicine to treat the people who are suffering of cancer, of other diseases, even of coronavirus [COVID-19]."

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Syria's Top Diplomat Says Will Meet Guterres to Discuss Damascus' Relations With UN System

NEW YORK, September 22 (Sputnik) - Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Sputnik he will hold a meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on the sidelines of the General Assembly and will convey that Damascus is anticipating better relations with the UN system.

"Of course, we shall have a very good meeting," Mekdad said when asked if he would meet the UN chief. "We shall ask for the preservation of the [UN] Charter and its main principles and we shall tell him [Guterres] how much we look forward [to] good and better relations with the UN system."

Mekdad said there are no plans yet for a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

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Syria's Top Diplomat Says He Will Meet Lavrov at UNGA to Discuss Coordination Efforts

NEW YORK, September 22 (Sputnik) - Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Sputnik he is planning to meet with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session to discuss relations and coordination between the two countries.

"We [Mekdad and Lavrov] will discuss the excellent relations between Russia and Syria. We will discuss coordination between the two countries. We will discuss the overall situation in the region," Mekdad said on Wednesday.

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Biden Admin. Seeks Contractor to Operate Migrant Detention Center on Guantanamo Bay

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is looking for a contractor to operate a federal migrant detention center at Guantanamo Bay in the coming months, the Department of Homeland Security said in a description of the job post.

"US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has a continuing need to contract for services to provide unarmed custody and security officers to provide guard/security services at the Migrant Operations Center (MOC) at the Naval Station Guantanamo Bay (NSGB), Cuba," DHS said in the job post last week.

The US migrant detention center can currently house 120 people, but the administration wants a contractor that would be able to immediately erect temporary housing facilities to accommodate up to 400 migrants, according to the job post.

At least 50 individuals must operate the migrant detention facility and at least 10 percent of the staff must be fluent in Spanish and Haitian Creole.

DHS posted the requirement as the Biden administration was forced to deal with up to 16,000 migrants, mostly Haitians, that arrived in the Texas border town of Del Rio last week.

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US Approves Pfizer Covid Vaccine Booster Shot for Certain Populations - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration said in a press release it has approved an emergency use authorization for eligible individuals to receive a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine for the novel coronavirus.

"Today, the US Food and Drug Administration amended the emergency use authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine to allow for use of a single booster dose, to be administered at least six months after completion of the primary series in: individuals 65 years of age and older; individuals 18 through 64 years of age at high risk of severe COVID-19; and individuals 18 through 64 years of age whose frequent institutional or occupational exposure to SARS-CoV-2 puts them at high risk of serious complications of COVID-19 including severe COVID-19," the release said on Wednesday.

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Russian Crew Leaves Boat Pilgrim in Alaska, Will Renew World Trip Next Spring - Captain

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian and US voyagers who are traveling around the world onboard the Pilgrim, a replica of the 18th century wooden boat Pomor, left their vessel for the winter in Homer, Alaska, and plan to renew sailing toward Chukotka next spring, the boat's captain Sergey Sinelnik told Sputnik.

"We plan to come back onboard in late April or early May to prepare the vessel and re-start navigation in the end of May or early June," Sinelnik said.

The Pilgrim will sail from Homer to the island of Kodiak, then to Aleutian Islands and along the North-West shore of Alaska, probably to the city of Nome to end at Russia's Chukotka, he said.

"We will have to spend almost a month on the way and cover about 1,300 nautical miles," Sinelnik said.

After Chukotka, Sinelnik said he plans to obtain a license for sailing toward the Arctic town of Tiksi and along Russia's Northern coast.

Sinelnik noted that he is seeking crew members who want to navigate through the Northern route and is open to any suggestions.

This year, the Pilgrim was able to cover a distance from the US city of Duluth on the Great Lakes to Seattle by land on truck, and then to Alaska through Canada.

"We covered almost 1,800 nautical miles from Seattle to Homer in 37 days," Sinelnik said.

"Thank God, navigation is over, all crew members are healthy and came back home."

Sinelnik characterized the experience along the Canadian and Alaskan coasts as leaving "a good and deep trace" in his soul.

"No one tropical island can compare to uninhabited islands and the shore of Alaska, sublime beauty of the North surprises even despite rains and strong winds," he said.

The Pilgrim, a 40-foot sailboat, started the voyage around the world four years ago from the city of Petrazavodsk in Russia's Karelia region. On the way to the United States, the vessel visited multiple countries in Europe, the Canary and Caribbean islands as well as Cape Verde.

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US Trade Chief Discusses With WTO Director Need for Reforms, COVID-19 Pandemic Response

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai and World Trade Organization (WTO) head Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala met in-person for the first time and discussed the parameters for the upcoming WTO Ministerial Conference, including the organization reform and pandemic response, the USTR Press Office said.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met with the World Trade Organization's Director-General Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala... Ambassador Tai noted that a successful WTO Ministerial Conference needs to deliver a meaningful agreement in the fisheries subsidies negotiations and on WTO members' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of WTO reform," the USTR Press Office said on Wednesday.

The 12th WTO Ministerial Conference is scheduled to take place from November 30 to December 3, 2021.

The issue of fishery subsidies has led to an ongoing discussion for the WTO for two decades, but officials have been discussing the matter frequently in recent months, having undertaken an intensified set of meetings starting on September 1.

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US Sees China as Critical to Climate Security - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States acknowledges China's critical role in maintaining climate security, but hopes Beijing will take additional steps on the issue of climate, a US State Department official told reporters.

"We do hope the PRC [People Republic of China] will do more, and we look forward to hear more about additional steps that they can take in this decisive decade," the official said during a telephonic press briefing on Wednesday. "The PRC is a critical player."

Washington welcomes the recent Beijing's decision to stop funding the building of coal-powered plants across the world, the official said.

The United States regularly raises the climate issue in talks with Chinese authorities, including the recent conversation between presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping, the official added.

During his UN General Assembly address on Wednesday, Xi said China will not pursue new coal-fired power projects in developing countries around the world.

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Turkey Should Withdraw from Syria, End Occupation of Territories - Syrian Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Sputnik that Damascus considers Turkey's presence in Syria an act of occupation and wants to see Ankara immediately withdraw its forces.

"The main reason for this [escalation in the Idlib region] is Turkish occupation and the support given by Turkey to the terrorist groups there," Mekdad told Sputnik on Wednesday. "Turkey should immediately withdraw and the international community should support Syrian efforts in the liberation of the occupied territories in the north of the country."

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ANALYSIS - No Winners in Canada's 'Unnecessary' Election But Trudeau Brand Takes Hit

TORONTO, September 22 (Sputnik) - Canada's national election, which upheld the status quo, produced no winners although Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's brand took quite a blow for calling the vote in the first place, political analysts told Sputnik.

Canadians went to the polls on Monday to choose their next government, putting an end to an election campaign that many saw as "unnecessary" amid a range of domestic and international challenges, including the fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic and the messy evacuation from Afghanistan.

Canada's governing Liberal Party led by Trudeau is leading in 158 out of 338 federal ridings with over 99 percent of polls reporting, according to official results, well short of the 170 needed to secure a majority. The Conservative Party is on pace to retain official opposition party status with 119 seats, followed by the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democrat Party (NDP) with 34 and 25 seats, respectively.

The election result, should it hold with many mail-in ballots still outstanding, represents a near identical result to the 2019 election in which the Liberals took home 158 seats, the Tories – 121, while the Bloc and NDP settled for 32 and 24 seats, respectively.

The country's 44th election campaign will be remembered as the campaign that "changed nothing" and where there were no winners, Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, said.

"The legacy [of the campaign] is that nothing changed," Wiseman told Sputnik.

Wiseman and other experts struggled to identify any parties that met their objectives in an election marked by voter apathy, with the voter turnout plummeting by approximately 8 percent to 59.2 percent - second lowest in the country's history.

Wiseman said the Liberals, despite holding onto power, failed to attain the majority mandate desperately sought by Trudeau, while the Conservatives made no gains and appear to be on track to lose two seats in the House of Commons.

LIBERALS HOLD SERVE, WILL NEED IMPROVED TIES WITH OPPOSITION

While Trudeau and his Liberal Party failed to meet their objectives, they hung onto power and will now need improved cooperation with opposition parties, analysts said.

"A win is a win - and although not the desired outcome - a minority mandate means the Liberal Party of Canada will continue to build relationships across the party lines to ensure they address

the priorities Canadians want and focus on achievable goals now and in the future," Jacqueline Biollo, a Principal Consultant with Aurora Strategy Group, told Sputnik.

Allan Tupper, a political science professor at the University of British Columbia, likewise, says closer ties with opposition will be key in an altered dynamic in Ottawa.

"The Liberals will approach governing with a clear agenda and they will work better with the opposition parties, particularly the New Democrats and the Bloc," Tupper told Sputnik, noting that improved cooperation does not extend to the Conservatives.

Tupper added that Trudeau will be expected to deliver on a number of domestic promises, such as climate change initiatives, childcare and a pledge to resettle Afghan refugees.

"This time around he is going to have to go forward with a substantial legislative agenda that requires cooperation and I think he will modify legislation and deal with those opposition parties accordingly. I think he learned that lesson from this experience," Tupper said.

Wiseman, however, disputes Trudeau's assertion that he was given a "clear mandate."

"Not at all," Wiseman said. "There's no mandate here, he's just going to continue doing what [the Liberals] have been doing."

'TRUDEAU BRAND' BRUISED

Trudeau's personal "brand," which was a key factor in his rise to world leader status, has since taken a beating and came into question on the campaign trail.

Trudeau, who after six years in office and a myriad of scandals is no longer the fresh-faced, charismatic media darling, was dogged by protests throughout the campaign, including some wild scenes of the Canadian prime minister being subjected to obscenities and in one instance pelted with gravel.

Cory Morgan, a political analyst and columnist with the Western Standard, says that Trudeau rode the coattails of his famous family name and a personal appeal into office but is increasingly becoming a burden to the Liberal Party.

"While the Trudeau brand may be losing its shine right now, the Liberal brand itself is as strong as ever. People are supporting the party rather than the leader," Morgan told Sputnik.

"Trudeau's tougher task will be convincing the party to keep him after the election even if he maintains his minority government."

However, other analysts say that Trudeau's job remains safe, despite his failure to regain a majority mandate. The current edition of the Liberals is believed to be a party strongly influenced by the Prime Minister.

CONSERVATIVES, CAUGHT OFF GUARD, 'UNHAPPY' WITH ELECTION RESULTS

Meanwhile, inside the Conservative camp, members are displeased by the results, Clinton Desveaux, a political strategist and columnist, told Sputnik.

"People are unhappy," Desveaux said, explaining that the Conservatives have lost parliamentary seats and the party brass is worried that more seats could flip as mail-in ballots are counted.

The disappointment was on full display on Tuesday, when Tory leader Erin O'Toole announced a campaign review, saying that no one is more disappointed than him.

The Conservative Party was caught off guard by the election result, Desveaux said, taking notice of a concession speech that critics panned as overly enthusiastic in light of defeat.

"[The Conservatives] were completely isolated as to what was happening on the ground," the political strategist and columnist said, surmising that the speech was a hastily rewritten victory speech after the election outcome became apparent.

Desveaux blames the Tory defeat on a lack of clear messaging - O'Toole was often criticized on the campaign trail for flip-flopping on key issues, including gun control and the party's stance on vaccination mandates - and the increased support for the populist conservative People's Party of Canada (PPC).

The PPC, which failed to win a single seat but nearly tripled its vote count, won 5 percent of the popular vote eating enough into Conservative support to sink the Tories in several ridings, according to analysts.

Wiseman cites the uptick in PPC support and the pandemic surge in Western Canada, which is governed by conservative governments and which O'Toole - until recently - lauded, as reasons for the Conservative defeat.

The PPC's gains cost the establishment Conservatives as much 10 seats, Wiseman estimates, adding that the NDP's lackluster performance didn't create enough of a split vote on the left, especially in vote-rich metropolitan areas such as Toronto, to help the Tories.

Additionally, Desveaux admits it was the Liberals' who were best able to leverage the "get out the vote" push in their victory.

Wiseman purports that, as in previous election disappointments, there will be an immediate push by some within the party to remove O'Toole as leader. However, he also said the Tory leader will be safe for "a while."

Meanwhile, Desveaux says media reports of "mutiny" within the party are accurate and that O'Toole has until Christmas to right the ship or face dismissal.

PPC HAPPY WITH GAINS, BUT LAMENT LACK OF PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION
The PPC appears to be happiest with the increased support but also laments the missed opportunity to pick up representation in Canada's parliament.

PPC leader Maxime Bernier, who was the party's best chance at a House of Commons seat, lost by a wide margin in the riding of Beauce, which he carried four times as a member of the Conservative Party.

"Disappointed that we didn't get any seats in parliament, but the increased number of votes is very promising," Bill Tufts, a PPC strategist told Sputnik, highlighting the Party's performance in traditionally conservative Alberta, where the populist party garnered 7.5 percent of the popular vote.

Tufts also pushed back against allegations that his party torpedoed the Conservatives' bid to oust Trudeau, saying that the PPC appropriated voters from all parties and, most importantly, tapped into the pool of abstainers.

While analysts, including Desveaux and Wiseman, say the PPC is a one-issue party - the People's Party support closely mirrors the opposition to vaccination mandates - Tufts says the global populist movement is here to stay, including in Canada.

Tufts adds that as COVID-19 fades into the background attention will turn towards issues such as interprovincial relations, the economy and immigration, which, in his view, did not get the due attention during the 2021 federal campaign.

Bernier's job, despite now falling short in two straight elections, is safe at the present, according to Tufts.

CANADIANS SAY ELECTION 'COULD HAVE WAITED'

In Montreal, voters were not impressed with the Prime Minister's election call, telling Sputnik that the election was a "waste of time and money" and dubbing the campaign a "promotional" tour for Trudeau.

Voters in Mississauga Center, a Toronto-area voting district where Liberal Omar Alghabra coasted to victory, struck a more conciliatory tone, emphasizing their civic duty to vote, but noted that the election could have been delayed.

"I think we maybe could have waited a year, but it is what it is," Kamlesh, a voter from the riding of Mississauga Center, told Sputnik, emphasizing that it is his civic duty to vote.

Kamlesh's sentiment was echoed by other voters in the riding Sputnik spoke with, including Carol Li and Samira Munawar.

BRINGING TOGETHER A DIVIDED COUNTRY

While voters were split on the need for change or maintaining the status quo, all stressed the need for the country to unite after a campaign where emotions boiled over on several occasions, including unruly protests at Trudeau's campaign stops.

"I think people should make peace," Munawar said.

"We don't want to be like our neighbors down south," Kamlesh added, emphasizing the need for Canada's political parties to work together when the next government forms. Li said bringing the country together comes down to "reinforcing what [Canadians'] common ground is."

Voters in Montreal, meanwhile, were less enthusiastic about the prospects of uniting the nation, saying that division along partisan and identity lines, including language and culture, will endure beyond the election.

While fault lines emerged during the campaign, Wiseman says they are par for the course in an election, noting that the country has seen deeper splits.

"Canada may in fact be sprained, not fractured, in a sense - so the Prime Minister will have to work on healing and relieving the pain Canadians are feeling," Biollo says.

The political consultant says that Trudeau will have to strike a humbler tone and acknowledge his government's shortcoming, while staying firm on other issues, to begin healing the divisions among Canadians.

THIRD INSTALLMENT WITHIN 24 MONTHS?

There is strong speculation that the country could be plunged into another election in the next 18 to 24 months, the average tenure for a minority government. Trudeau himself referenced the mean lifespan of a minority government, when asked about subsequent elections during one of the country's debates.

Wiseman says that it is entirely conceivable that Canadians go to the polls for the third time in four years 18 to 24 months from now but notes that the timing will depend on political quakes, such as scandals, or opportunism.

Desveaux disagrees, saying that the NDP appears to be interested in working more closely with the Liberal government, which entails political stability until the next election, officially set for October 20, 2025.

Meanwhile, Biollo says talk of deeper integration between the Liberals and NDP is "speculation at best," emphasizing that the Liberals will "choose the relationships carefully" and attempts at integration will be met with pushback.

Biollo, however, notes that internal pressures may prevent the Prime Minister from pressing the button on another snap election.

"Anything is possible - but there is much at stake, including a leadership review or similar should Trudeau seem too eager to head back to the polls," Biollo said, noting that the Liberals will likely take time to reflect on this election.

"I think we will not see another snap election," Tupper said.

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US Budgets \$180M In Humanitarian Aid for Rohingya Refugees From Myanmar - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States earmarked an additional \$180 million to aid more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"With this new funding, our total humanitarian assistance for this response reaches more than \$1.5 billion since August 2017, when more than 740,000 Rohingya were forced to flee ethnic cleansing and other horrific atrocities and abuses in Burma's [Myanmar's] Rakhine State to safety in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh," Price said in a press release on Wednesday.

The total includes more than \$1.2 billion for programs that allow US humanitarian partners to provide life-saving assistance to the nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It also provides support to more than 472,000 affected members of the local host community in Bangladesh, the release said.

US aid covers multiple realms, including education, food security, health, nutrition, protection, shelter, disaster response, water, sanitation and hygiene, the release added.

An 2017 offensive by Myanmar's military and affiliated militias forced more than 700,000 mainly Muslim Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

Price said many of those who led a February 2021 military coup in Myanmar are the same individuals responsible for the atrocities against Rohingya, as well as atrocities and other human rights abuses against members of other ethnic and religious minority groups.

The release included a US demand that Myanmar allow unfettered access to Rohingya and other ethnic groups that are displaced inside the country.

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US House Committee Approves Amendment Recommending Sanctions Against Russian Officials

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives' Rules Committee on Tuesday approved an amendment bill to the draft defense budget legislation that would recommend sanctions against a broad array of Russian officials.

The sanctions, which are based on accusations of human rights violations, would target Russian officials including Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov and others.

The amendment, offered by Representative Tom Malinowski, would give Biden up to 180 days to submit to Congress a determination about whether the list of officials meet the criteria for the imposition of sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The full draft defense budget legislation has yet to pass the full Congress and the decision to impose sanctions still ultimately rests with the Biden administration if the measure is passed.

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Zelenskyy Says He Will Meet With Putin 'When Russian President Is Ready'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told reporters that he would meet with President Vladimir Putin when the Russian leader is ready. "When he [Putin] is ready," Zelenskyy said after his speech to the UN General Assembly, when asked by Sputnik when he would meet with the Russian president.

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Wall Street Up Broadly as Fed Signals Caution With US Stimulus Taper, Rate Hike

NEW YORK, September 22 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street rose broadly on Wednesday after the Federal Reserve said it will extend its stimulus support for the US economy beyond the targeted mid-2022 finish if necessary, and take even more care in raising interest rates from the near zero levels.

The blue-chip S&P 500 and the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average indexes ended a four-day decline on the assurance of the central bank, overturning a weak market suppressed earlier by negative speculation over the stimulus taper and rate hike. US stocks also saw one of the worst trading days of the year on Monday on concerns about contagion from the debt crisis at China's biggest property developer Evergrande.

"US stocks rallied as investors believe the Fed will be in no hurry to raise interest as they still think inflation will be transitory in 2022," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "The biggest risk to the stock market is (an) accelerated pace of tightening and the Fed is showing that is something they will avoid unless they were dead wrong about inflation."

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stocks Exchange, settled up 41.45 points, or almost 1%, at 4,395.

The Dow, comprising mostly industrial stocks, rose 338 points, or 1%, to close at 34,258.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, led by Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished up 150 points, or 1%, at 14,897.

Earlier on Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said the central bank foresees ending its monthly stimulus support of \$120 billion for the US economy by mid-2022. Powell said the central bank will likely take longer to raise interest rates which have yet to pass its employment criteria. He also hedged the Federal Reserve's position on the deadline for the stimulus taper by saying the central bank can speed up or slow down the taper if it becomes appropriate.

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"With this new funding, our total humanitarian assistance for this response reaches more than \$1.5 billion since August 2017, when more than 740,000 Rohingya were forced to flee ethnic cleansing and other horrific atrocities and abuses in Burma's [Myanmar's] Rakhine State to safety in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh," Price said in a press release on Wednesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) -

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

* The United Nations has confirmed that the Brazilian delegation at the UN General Assembly was isolated after a delegate tested positive for COVID-19, but the delegate did not meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

* US Climate Envoy John Kerry told Sputnik that he will not be meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the margins of the UN General Assembly high-level week.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told Sputnik that he will meet with Lavrov on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss a range of issues.

US-FRANCE RELATIONS

* US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron have agreed to meet in person next month to continue working out tensions between France and the United States, a joint statement released following a call between the two leaders said on Wednesday.

* Macron has decided to return the French ambassador to Washington after discussions with Biden on the implications of the US-Australia submarine deal announced earlier, the White House said.

ZELENSKYY-STOLTENBERG MEETING

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg about the importance of increasing the presence of the fleets of the alliance's member states in the Black Sea, Zelenskyy's office said on Wednesday.

* Ukraine has always been a valued partner of NATO and the alliance will continue to back the territorial integrity of the country, Stoltenberg told journalists after meeting with Zelenskyy.

RUSSIAN PRISONERS IN US

* Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko said on Wednesday that he does not plan to file new petitions to US courts about his case because the courts ignore serious arguments.

* The US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia sentenced Russian national Oleg Nikitin to 28 months for violating US export regulations, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

GLOBAL COVID-19 SUMMIT

* US President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday during remarks at the Global COVID-19 Summit on the margins of the UN General Assembly that the US will be giving more than \$370 million to help deliver and administer vaccines around the globe.

* Biden proposed holding a second virtual summit on the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2022 to monitor the progress made maintain the international response efforts aligned.

* The US and EU are launching a joint vaccine partnership to work more closely with one another on expanding vaccination efforts around the world, Biden said.

ATTACK ON ZELENSKYY AIDE

* Investigators are considering three key lines of inquiry into the assassination attempt on Ukrainian First Presidential Assistant Serhiy Shefir, including engagement of foreign intelligence and a bid to provoke destabilization, National Police chief Ihor Klymenko said on Wednesday.

* Shefir's driver who sustained a gunshot injury during the assassination attempt on his boss underwent surgery and was interviewed by investigators, Internal Affairs Minister Denys Monastyrsky said.

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims that there is a "Russian trace" in the assassination attempt on Shefir.

RUSSIA GAS SUPPLY OBLIGATIONS

* Russia is fulfilling all of its contractual obligations on supplying gas to Europe, with volumes set to reach a historical maximum soon, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* Peskov commented on the US State Department call on Gazprom to increase gas supplies to Europe through Ukraine by saying that it was impossible to transit gas without selling it.

* Russia is complying with its obligations under the contracts for gas supplies to Europe and the price spike is associated with many factors, German Energy Ministry spokeswoman Susanne Ungrad said amid claims that Moscow is putting influence on the market to speed up the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

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US Border Abuse of Haitian Migrants Shows Need to End Mass Deportations – Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – Scenes of horse-mounted US border agents accosting Haitian migrants this week illustrate Biden administration abuses of a pandemic-related health measure to justify mass deportations, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said on Wednesday.

“The horrifying videos of US horse-mounted Border Patrol agents charging toward Haitian migrants in Del Rio, Texas is the latest in a line of human rights abuses resulting from the Biden administration’s continuation of Trump-era border policies,” the ACLU said in a press release. Since March 2020, the US government has turned people away at the border using Title 42, a purported public health policy to stem the spread of communicable diseases from abroad, as a tool to justify mass deportations, the release said.

Moreover, the Department of Homeland Security is now carrying out its announced plans to escalate rapid deportation flights to Haiti, the release added.

However, media reports indicate the US is resettling a large number of Haitian migrants in the United States.

In August, the US used Title 42 to expel more than 91,000 migrants of more than 208,000 border-crossers stopped by Border Patrol agents, according to the Customs and Border Patrol (CPB) agency.

The ACLU reiterated its call for the Biden administration to immediately stop using the health measure to mitigate a surge of border crossings.

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Federal Reserve Says Likely to End US Stimulus By Mid-2022, Raising Rates to Take Longer

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve foresees ending its monthly stimulus of \$120 billion to the US economy by mid-2022 but will likely take longer to raise interest rates which have yet to pass its employment criteria, Chairman Jay Powell said on Wednesday.

“I believe we will have finished tapering by the middle of next year,” Powell said, using a popular reference for the easing of the Federal Reserve’s monthly purchase of \$80 billion of bonds and

\$40 billion of mortgage-backed securities that the central bank has carried out since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

But Powell also said a different bar was needed for raising interest rates, which the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee has kept at between zero and a quarter percent over the past 18 months.

"We are still a long way from passing the liftoff test," Powell said, referring to the criteria set for employment and inflation. "Many on the committee feel that the substantial further progress test for employment has been met. Others feel it's close. They want to see a little more progress. Inflation is above 2% and is expected to moderate. If inflation remains higher during the course of 2022 we may have already met that test by the time we reach lift off."

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

The Federal Reserve's stimulus program and other monetary accommodation have been blamed for aggravating price pressures in the United States. The central bank itself has spent an estimated \$2.2 trillion in propping up the US economy with its stimulus program since the COVID-19 outbreak.

Besides the Federal Reserve's spending, the US federal government aid for the pandemic, which began under the Trump administration, has reached at least \$4.5 trillion to date. And the Biden administration is asking Congress to approve almost \$4 trillion more for its so-called "Build Back Better" plan.

After declining 3.5% in 2020 from business shutdowns owing to COVID-19, the US economy expanded robustly this year, expanding 6.5% in the second quarter, in line with the Federal Reserve's forecast.

The central bank's problem, however, is overwhelming inflation and an underperforming job market.

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

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

On the employment front, 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.

Powell also says it may take a while for "full employment" - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4% or lower - to occur. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.2% in August.

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Pentagon Says Aware of Reports of Poor Conditions at Military Base Housing Afghans

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday that they are aware of reports of poor conditions and lack of supplies at US Army base Fort McCoy, which is one of several locations temporarily housing evacuated Afghans.

Media reports and lawmakers over the last several days have alleged poor conditions including lack of food, harassment by the Afghan men on the base, and inadequate shelter for the upcoming winter months.

"We're certainly aware of these reports, and we take it very seriously... I know of no specific request today to conduct an investigation, but the Secretary [Lloyd Austin] is certainly mindful of the reports, and he's comfortable that General [Glen] VanHerck, the Northern Command Commander, also is mindful of these issues and will continue to work closely with our interagency partners to alleviate any concerns there might be," Kirby said.

Kirby added that it is the Department of Defense's responsibility to provide the Afghan evacuees with safe and secure housing as well as adequate food, water, and recreational resources.

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US Allots \$247Mln in Humanitarian, \$89Mln in Development Aid for 'Vulnerable Venezuelans'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – The United States has allotted \$247 million in humanitarian aid and \$89 million in economic and development assistance for vulnerable Venezuelans, the State Department announced on Wednesday.

"On behalf of the United States, Senior Advisor for Special Political Affairs, Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis, announced \$247 million in humanitarian assistance and \$89 million in economic and development assistance to respond to the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

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US Open to End-of-War Declaration Between North, South Korea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US is open to the possibility of an end-of-war declaration between North and South Korea such as that proposed by South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the United Nations General Assembly, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The United States remains committed to achieving lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and diplomacy with North Korea. We continue to seek engagement with [North Korea] to address a variety of issues, and we're open to discussing the possibility of an end-of-war declaration," Kirby said.

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RPT - US Abuse of Haitian Migrants Driven by Biden Administration's Racist Policies - Activists

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - The Biden administration's racist immigration policies must be reversed to prevent migrants from Haiti and other countries from being abused at the US border, human rights activists and former officials told Sputnik. Nearly 13,000 migrants, mostly from Haiti, arrived to the Texas town of Del Rio along the US-Mexico border over the last week, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and deploy border agents on horseback, video clips of which went viral. Images of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers on horseback running down, whipping and seeking to subdue Haitian migrants has angered people like Monique Clesca, a Haitian writer, journalist and activist who has likened the corralling of those seeking asylum and refuge to a lynching.

Clesca told Sputnik she is angered and heartbroken by the callous manner in which the thousands of migrants have been treated. Videos and pictures show aggressive CBP officers roughing up, cursing and denigrating the Black men, women and children at encampments under and around the Del Rio International Bridge in Texas.

"This country has a right to decide its immigration policy but there's a certain level of expectation as to why they're coming," said Clesca, an international development consultant and a retired United Nations official. "A lot of them aren't coming directly from Haiti. They may have residency elsewhere, like Brazil or Chile and may have been pushed out or left. If someone is coming from Brazil, for example, they should be spoken to."

The Biden administration has kicked into high gear a deportation process that has removed and repatriated almost 6,000 of migrants in the encampments.

Clesca pointed out that many of the Haitians who massed at the US-Mexico border came after the July 7 catastrophic earthquake that killed more than 2,000 people and left thousands of others homeless.

UnDocuBlack's Patrice Lawrence said the "savages" on horseback who were whipping people should be fired immediately.

Lawrence, co-director of the immigrant rights organization founded in 2016, said the CPB attackers should be "replaced with people able to offer medical and healthcare, test for COVID and resettle them."

"Fifteen thousand migrants is not a crisis and it is something that the United States government can handle," Lawrence told Sputnik.

RACISM AND DOUBLE STANDARDS PREVAIL

Biden administration officials have said they are deeply troubled by the videos and pictures but not enough to stop the deportations. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas reiterated his message to migrants not to come to the US earlier this week.

Lawrence, born in Jamaica, who has lived in the United States as an undocumented immigrant, said the Biden administration needs to get rid of Title 42, a health statute instituted by former President Donald Trump which prevents migrants from gaining entry into the US for public

health reasons and allows officials to deport those who illegally cross the border using the coronavirus outbreak as a reason.

She said Haitians should also be given humanitarian parole and any policy that hinders that from happening should be removed.

Lawrence pointed to anti-Black racism and bias in the US immigration agenda for the way Haitians are and have been treated.

"They have criminalized Black people and are willing to do whatever it takes to remove them," Lawrence said.

The US ramped up deportations, she noted, in advance of a District Judge Emmet Sullivan's order to stop expelling migrant families with children under Title 42, a ruling which is expected next week.

Kweku Lumumba, external relations coordinator for KOSSA and Green Party chair for Georgia, said the Biden administration's actions are indicative of the US policy towards immigrants in general and Haitians in particular.

"This is seen as standard even as people are seeking asylum, fleeing violence, corruption and poverty," Lumumba told Sputnik. "They want to be able to provide for their families. We've seen this before with the boat people."

Lumumba said a number of people, companies and other elements are capitalizing on migrants' plight and desperation.

"There are people who passed through 11 countries in three months. Stop buying the idea that Haiti is poor. They weren't poor because it cost \$17,000 per person or \$170 million or more," he said of the price Haitians seeking asylum in the US pay. "Airlines going to Brazil were making \$324,000 daily on a single plane. That's \$115 million annually going to the airlines."

US AND FOREIGN MEDDLING SOW CHAOS

Black Alliance for Peace's Haiti/Americas Coordinator, Jemima Pierre, told Sputnik all too often the true reasons for the steady stream of migrants from Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala and elsewhere are lost in conversation and debates. US foreign policy, American embrace and support of repressive governments, and in Haiti's case, the occupation of the island nation since 2004, are critical reasons for the people fleeing and trying to escape gangs, poverty and circumstances offering limited or few options.

"What is often lost is how did they get to the US border, why and how long?" Pierre asked. "It's a long story. This was not a sudden increase in the numbers of people. It's an increase in draconian conditions. The US closed the borders which is illegal and does not allow people the opportunity to seek asylum or refuge. It's terrorism that is bringing Black people, Colombians and others. Biden is a racist. The US policy is racist."

The Haitian-born Pierre, who emigrated to the US as a child, said US imperialism and white supremacy have governed the way that successive American governments have treated the Haitian people. She said the intervention of a US/UN/Canada/France/OAS coalition into Haiti's affairs has been fueling the Haiti crisis.

"The terrible actions of the US include the removal of [former President Jean-Bertrand] Aristide in 2004 and US support of horrible, corrupt governments... Biden picked the latest prime minister. This is the story," Pierre said. "They know they can get away with treating Black immigrants this way without people making a lot of noise and pushing back. And they think that we're a bunch of negroes who can't take care of ourselves."

Clesca said the assassination of President Jovenel Moise and the earthquake caused widespread devastation in the south of the island.

"They have been devastating for the economy, for human rights, in terms of opportunities. Home is no longer home or welcoming for many Haitians. People have been selling their clothes, land and other possessions to be able to go elsewhere," said Clesca, who was in Haiti when Moise was assassinated on July 7 and when the earthquake hit.

The rulers in the last 10 years have overseen misrule, misgovernment and corruption, she added.

"People have left to find schooling for their children, jobs and opportunities. This is pretty much the situation. A Human Rights organization said recently that almost half of the country is gang territory, controlled by gangs," Clesca said. "There are also kidnappings. It's not possible to go to the bank or the supermarket without your heart in your mouth. It's a dire situation."

THE BEST FUTURE IS A HAITIAN FUTURE

Clesca echoed Pierre's comments, saying Haitian sovereignty and control of their own affairs has been choked off by US and western countries in league with a small clique of the Haitian elite.

"There is lack of opportunity or investment in human rights or Haitian education. Regimes have broken human rights records, yet all have been supported by the US, Canada, the United Nations and France, and money has been misappropriated, all under the watchful eye of the US, France and Canada," Clesca said.

Clesca said she has been active for the past seven months working with representatives of political parties, civil society organizations, Haitians in the Diaspora and others developing a political framework that would produce a participatory, democratic, transparent mechanism to choose a prime minister and president of a transition government.

"We're working on a social justice agenda, healthcare and economic measures. We're in the phase of designating candidates for prime minister and president," Clesca said. "We hope that the syndicate of foreign nations will see the light that Haiti should be sovereign, that we should make our own choices and be responsible for our own solutions, not solutions coming from abroad."

A recent case - the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban - illustrates that US and western solutions are not infallible, she said.

"Their solutions aren't working. They should look at the solutions we're offering. Let's try to see if we can implement them and if they'll work. They need to help us build schools, hospitals, [offer] job training," Clesca said. "We hope the US will value Haitians actually standing up for themselves."

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Pentagon Names Retired General Randy Kee as Senior Adviser for Arctic Security Affairs

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense announced in a statement on Wednesday that it has named Randy "Church" Kee, a retired major general, as Senior Adviser for Arctic Security Affairs.

"Randy "Church" Kee, a retired US Air Force major general, assumes duties as Senior Adviser for Arctic Security Affairs to assist with establishing the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies, the Department of Defense's sixth and newest regional center," the statement said. Kee, who had a 30-year military career, is due to collaborate with US partners "to ensure a stable, rules-based order in the Arctic that will benefit the United States and all Arctic nations," the statement said.

Before his assignment, Kee served as Commissioner to the US Arctic Research Commission as well as the Executive Director of the Arctic Domain Awareness Center.

The United States has been boosting its resources in the Arctic and has repeatedly voiced concerns about the risk of militarization of the Arctic by Russia. Moscow has repeatedly emphasized that it rejects claims about the growth of its military potential in the Arctic since it is only restoring the Soviet Union's infrastructure.

Last week, Nikolai Korchunov, a senior official of the Arctic Council, told Sputnik that Russia and the United States are interested in cooperation and predictability in the Arctic and will eventually start discussing military and political aspects of the situation in the region even if they have some disagreement over it at the moment.

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RPT - US Should Not Default on Debt, Limit Must Be Raised in Timely Fashion - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States should not be allowed to default on its debt and Congress must raise the ceiling on US borrowings appropriately, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said on Wednesday, adding that it was wrong to think the central bank could come to the country's rescue otherwise.

"I think we can agree the United States shouldn't default on any of its obligations and should pay them when due," Powell told a news conference. "No one should assume that the fed or anyone else can protect the markets or the economy in the event of a failure to make sure we do pay those."

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US Yellen Stresses Need of Withdrawing Digital Services Taxes in Call With UK Counterpart

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen highlighted the need for a compromise on withdrawal of digital services taxes during her call with UK Finance Minister Rishi Sunak, the Treasury said on Wednesday.

"Earlier today, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen spoke with United Kingdom Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak. Secretary Yellen stressed the importance of ongoing efforts to improve the international tax system. She also emphasized the importance of reaching a compromise on the withdrawal of digital services taxes," the statement said.

Yellen also thanked Sunak for his leadership of the G7 and in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Inclusive Framework.

"[Yellen] expressed gratitude for the close cooperation between the U.S. and UK to level and playing field and end the race to the bottom on international corporate taxes," she said.

The UK government has been long negotiating with other EU member states and the OECD the introduction of an international digital revenue levy, which will tackle the issue of tax avoidance of big technology firms.

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Harris Says US Prepared to Contribute \$250M In to World Bank Pandemic Preparedness Fund

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Wednesday during remarks at the Virtual Global COVID-19 Summit that the US is prepared to give at least \$250 million to a pandemic preparedness fund through the World Bank to strengthen the global response to future biological threats.

"The work to end this pandemic and prepare for the next is a strategic imperative. It is essential to our security and to our shared prosperity, and it will save countless lives. However, at this moment, we must also agree that our world is not fully prepared to prevent, to detect, and to respond to future biological threats," Harris said. "And so, the United States joins the call for a new Financial Intermediary Fund at the World Bank, which will help us bring together new resources for pandemic preparedness. And today, I am proud to announce that we – the United States – are prepared to contribute at least \$250 million to help get this fund started."

The announcement at the summit, which took place amid other high-level meetings on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly, is one of several pandemic-related commitments recently announced by the Biden administration.

President Joe Biden announced during remarks earlier in the summit on Wednesday that the US is committed to providing \$1.4 billion for bulk oxygen support, testing and strengthening healthcare systems, \$380 million for the Global Vaccine Alliance, and \$370 for global vaccine administration efforts.

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FIFA President Infantino Tells Sputnik He 'Absolutely' Believes in Russian Football

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - FIFA President Gianni Infantino told Sputnik on Wednesday that he fully believes in Russian football.

"Of course, I believe. Absolutely," he said when asked about his stance on football in the country. "Russia is a great football country and we hosted the best World Cup ever. We just have to continue playing and training and Russia is a world champion in beach soccer."

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Fed Says End to US Stimulus Tapering Likely Appropriate Middle of Next Year

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve expects to conclude the tapering of its monthly stimulus of \$120 billion by the middle of 2022, when the economic situation is likely to make that appropriate, Chairman Jay Powell said on Wednesday.

"We discussed the appropriate pace of tapering asset purchases once economic conditions satisfy the criterion laid out in the committee's guidance," Powell told a news conference after the September policy meeting of the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee. "While no decisions were made, participants generally view that so long as the recovery remains on track, a gradual tapering process that concludes around the middle of next year is likely to be appropriate."

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Blinken Says US to Convene World Leaders in Coming Months About COVID-19 Commitments

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during remarks at the Virtual COVID-19 Summit that he and President Joe Biden will both be

convening foreign leaders in the coming months to hold follow-up meetings about recent COVID-19 commitments.

"I plan to personally convene foreign ministers before the end of the year to make sure we're following up the commitments made at this summit as well as the G20, and President Biden will convene heads of state on this issue in the first quarter of 2022," Blinken said.

Biden proposed such a meeting during his own remarks earlier in the day at the Virtual COVID-19 Summit, which is being held on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) High-Level Week.

Recent US commitments include providing \$370 million for global vaccine administration efforts, more than \$380 million for the Global Vaccine Alliance, and nearly \$1.4 billion for bulk oxygen support, expanded testing, and health care system resilience efforts worldwide.

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Biden Hopeful Call With Macron Step to Return US-French Relations to Normal – White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden hopes that a call with the French President Emmanuel Macron earlier in the day will return the bilateral relations between the two countries to normal following the announcement of the US-Australia deal last week, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"The President [Biden] is hopeful this [call] is a step in returning to normal and a long important abiding relationship that the United States has with France," Psaki said at a press briefing. "The President reaffirmed the strategic importance of French and European engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, as something that we look forward to continuing to work with them on."

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Call Between France's Macron, US Biden Was 'Friendly,' Lasted 30 Minutes – White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – A telephone call between the leaders of the United States and France, Presidents Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron, that took place earlier in the day was "friendly" and lasted for 30 minutes, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"In terms of the tone of the call [between Biden and Macron], it was friendly," Psaki said at a press briefing. "It was about 30 minutes long."

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US Climate Envoy Kerry Tells Sputnik Will Not Meet Lavrov During UN General Assembly

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Climate Envoy John Kerry told Sputnik on Wednesday he will not be meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the margins of the UN General Assembly high-level week.

"No, I will be leaving for Washington," Kerry said when asked whether planned to hold a meeting with the Russian top diplomat.

Lavrov will be arriving in New York later on Wednesday. The Russian Foreign Minister is scheduled to deliver his remarks at the UN General Assembly Hall on September 25.

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US-EU Task Force to Beat COVID-19 Pandemic Meets in Washington - White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The task force set by the United States and the European Union this summer to beat the global COVID-19 pandemic by vaccinating the world population met this week in Washington to finalize its mission statement, the White House said on Wednesday.

"This week, the task force met in Washington, DC to finalize the mission statement of this task force," the statement said.

The mission will focus on three priority work strands: monitoring global supply chains for COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics, addressing "critical supply chain bottlenecks and other disruptive factors for global vaccine production and coordinating initiatives to boost global production of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and their production and ancillary supplies, the statement explained.

"Ending the COVID-19 pandemic through global cooperation remains our first priority. That cooperation includes efforts toward smooth manufacturing and supply chains for COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics," the statement said.

In June, the European Union and the United States agreed to establish a joint vaccine task force to aid the goal of vaccinating at least two-thirds of the global population by the end of next year. According to European Council President Charles Michel, the initiative will help achieve this goal by boosting global vaccine production and keeping supply chains open.

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Fed Keeps US Rates Unchanged, Says Will Taper Stimulus Based on Employment, Inflation

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it has left US interest rates at near-zero but will taper its monthly stimulus of \$120 billion if US employment and inflation continued toward its targets.

"The Committee decided to keep the target range for the federal funds rate at zero to 0.25%," the Fed said in a statement, referring to the decision by its Federal Open Market Committee at its September policy meeting that ended on Wednesday. "If progress continues broadly as expected, the Committee judges that a moderation in the pace of asset purchases may soon be warranted. These asset purchases help foster smooth market functioning and accommodative financial conditions, thereby supporting the flow of credit to households and businesses."

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UN Confirms Brazil Delegation at UNGA Isolated After Delegate Tests Positive for COVID-19
UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has confirmed that the Brazilian delegation at the UN General Assembly was isolated after a delegate tested positive for COVID-19, but the delegate did not meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We were informed last night by the Permanent Mission that a delegate who was in the General Assembly Hall yesterday morning tested positive for COVID-19 later in the day. We are working closely with this Permanent Mission on necessary follow-up actions. The delegate in question did not meet with the Secretary-General," Dujarric said.

The United Nations has looked into the potential exposure of UN staff who had been present in the General Assembly Hall and contact tracing is being finalized.

"UN staff who might have been in contact with the infected person will be notified individually and guided through next steps. At present, no close contacts amongst UN staff have been identified. The Member State has confirmed that the complete delegation has decided to self-quarantine for fourteen days," Dujarric added.

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Russia's Yaroshenko Says He Will Not File New Petitions as US Courts Ignore Arguments

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko said on Wednesday that he does not plan to file new petitions to US courts about his case because the courts ignore serious arguments.

"I and my lawyers will not be filling those things because it is not helpful. We filed a lot of very serious argumentations in the past, it was impossible to deny them, but US courts simply ignored all those argumentations," Yaroshenko told Radio Sputnik.

A US federal court ruled against the motion for a compassionate release of Yaroshenko from prison on Tuesday. Yaroshenko characterized the decision not to release him over health concerns as being unmotivated.

Yaroshenko noted that he has many chronic health conditions, but declined to provide details. "My health deteriorating with each passing year, but the United States does nothing on that," he complained.

He also noted that medical care is actually absent in his current prison.

"Russian Foreign Ministry, our embassy continue to fight for me, they are sending protests, but US authorities ignore those things," Yaroshenko said.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking and was later extradited to the United States. In 2011, a US court sentenced Yaroshenko to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the United States. Yaroshenko pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

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Former Treasury Secretaries Urge That US Debt Limit be Raised "Without Delay"

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - A group of six former US Treasury secretaries urged on Wednesday for the country's debt limit to be raised promptly and not let a politically divided Congress cause the world's largest economy to default on its fiscal commitments.

"No Congress or President has allowed our country to default," the group comprising former Treasury secretaries Michael Blumenthal, Henry Paulson, Robert Rubin, Timothy Geithner, Lawrence Summers and Jacob Lew said in a joint letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"Unshakeable credit worthiness has long been a wellspring of strength for our nation, and protecting it is a sacrosanct responsibility. This makes it all the more important that Congress and the Administration begin the process to extend the nation's borrowing authority without delay."

House Democrats on Tuesday approved legislation to keep the government funded through early December, lift the limit on federal borrowing through the end of 2022 and provide emergency money for Afghan refugees and natural disaster recovery. But their Republican rivals have expressed unwillingness to back the measure in the Senate.

A bill to raise the US debt limit is needed to avert a government shutdown when funding lapses next week.

In their letter to Pelosi, the former Treasury secretaries said they recognized that over the years, America's politics "have become more polarized and divisive" and addressing the debt limit "has become more contentious and politically fraught."

They noted that the United States has paid all its bills in full and in time over the past 232 years and warned that even a short-term default resulting from the political fallout could have serious repercussions for the US economy.

"Failing to address the debt limit, and allowing an unprecedented default, could cause serious economic and national security harm," the former Treasury secretaries said. "It creates the risk of roiling markets and of sapping economic confidence, and it would prevent Americans from receiving vital services. It would be very damaging to undermine trust in the full faith and credit of the United States, and this damage would be hard to repair."

The White House warned in a memo last week that the economy could fall into recession if Congress does not reach a deal to raise the country's debt limit promptly.

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US Methamphetamine Overdose Deaths Triple From 2015 to 2019 - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Drug overdose deaths involving methamphetamine in the United States nearly tripled from 2015 to 2019, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said in a report on Wednesday.

"Researchers found that from 2015 to 2019, the number of overdose deaths involving psychostimulant drugs other than cocaine, (largely methamphetamine), rose from 5,526 to 15,489, a 180% increase," a press release summarizing the report said.

The study suggests that increases in higher-risk patterns of methamphetamine use, such as increases in the use of other drugs at the same time, may be contributing to US overdose deaths that reached record levels in recent years, the release said.

"We are in the midst of an overdose crisis in the United States, and this tragic trajectory goes far beyond an opioid epidemic," National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Director Nora Volkow said in the release.

Researchers also noted shifts in the populations using methamphetamine between 2015 and 2019. Whereas, historically, methamphetamine has been most commonly used by middle-aged white persons, this analysis found that American Indians/Alaska Natives had the highest prevalence of methamphetamine use, the release said.

The study sought to determine how trends in methamphetamine use contribute to drug overdoses, which killed a record 93,000 Americans in 2020, the release added.

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US House of Representatives Adds Russian Debt Sanctions to Defense Policy Bill - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has supported a measure prolonging the ban on US citizens from buying or selling Russian sovereign debt to secondary markets as Washington continues to unveil measures against Moscow for the alleged interference in the elections, which Russia vehemently denies.

The measure, proposed by Brad Sherman, Democrat from California, is to target bonds in any currency which are issued by the Russian Central Bank, the Russian National Wealth Fund and the Russian Federal Treasury.

The measure will now be included in the annual defense policy bill that is expected to pass the House later this week. The prospects of the success of the measure in the US Senate are still unclear.

Meanwhile, the US Chamber of Commerce said that the provision may limit the ability of US banks to serve their clients in Russia.

"The Sherman Amendment would prohibit U.S. banks from purchasing ruble-denominated bonds, which would limit the ability of U.S. banks to serve their U.S. corporate clients operating in Russia. Basic operations relating to payroll and vendor payments would become impossible," Neil Bradley, the Chamber's executive vice president, wrote to the House on Tuesday.

Washington introduced a ban on US entities from purchasing the ruble-based bonds on April 15 as part of a new series of anti-Russian sanctions over its alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts against the US' interests. The US financial institutions, however, still are able to trade in the secondary bond markets, preserving some of the foreign investment crucial for the Russian economy.

Relations between the US and Russia sank in 2014 under the administration of then-US President Barack Obama during the crisis in Ukraine, when Washington imposed sanctions on Moscow. Since then, the United States has expanded and tightened the sanctions regime following accusations of Russia's alleged meddling in the 2016 US presidential election.

Moscow has repeatedly denied interfering in Ukraine and the US political system.

In March, the US intelligence community accused Russia of interference in the 2020 US election. The Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement that the accusations are groundless and that no facts or concrete evidence have been provided to support those claims.

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Brazilian Delegation at UNGA Isolated After Positive Case of COVID-19 - Source

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Brazilian delegation at the UN General Assembly has been isolated following one positive case of COVID-19, a United Nations source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"We were told that the delegation has been isolated. Yes, the concerned delegation is self-isolating following one positive case confirmed in the mission," the source said.

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US Freight Volume With Canada, Mexico Up 9% Over Pre-Pandemic Levels in July

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States freight volume with Canada and Mexico was up 9 percent in July compared to the levels observed in the same month two years earlier, the US Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Wednesday.

"\$111.3 billion of transborder freight moved by all modes of transportation, up 22% compared to July 2020. July 2021 transborder freight was up 8.6% compared to \$102.4 billion in pre-pandemic July 2019," BTS said in its monthly transborder freight report.

The freight volume was evenly split between Canada and Mexico, with exchanges between the US and Canada totaling \$55.7 billion, while the totals with Mexico amounted to \$100 million less at \$55.6 billion.

The United States' transborder freight volume totals with Canada were up 28.3% year-over-year and increased by 16.9% with Mexico.

Trucks moved \$68.6 billion worth of freight in July, up 13% compared to July 2020 and 7.5% to July 2019. Railways, the second most popular method of transport, moved \$15.7 billion of freight, an increase of 21.8% compared to July 2020 and 6.0% compared to July 2019 levels.

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Saudi King at UNGS Says Middle East Should Be Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on Wednesday urged the international community to make the Middle East a region free of weapons of mass destruction and expressed his support to the joint efforts aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

"The kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] stresses the importance of making the Middle East region free of all weapons of mass destruction. We therefore support international efforts aimed at preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. We are very concerned at Iranian steps that go counter to its commitment," King Salman said while addressing the 76th session of the UN General Assembly.

The Saudi monarch said his country has a legitimate right to defend itself against missile, drone and other kinds of attacks and underscored the need for non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states while calling upon all states to respect each other's national sovereignty.

In 2015, Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the P5+1 group of countries, including the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom plus Germany as well as with the European Union. The agreement stipulated Tehran must scale back its nuclear program and reduce its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including the lifting of an arms embargo five years after the deal was inked.

In 2018, the United States withdraw from the agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions against Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its own obligations under the accord.

Since April, the JCPOA joint commission has held sessions in Vienna, which also hosted several informal meetings designed to prevent the agreement from collapsing after Washington's exit. The sixth round of discussions ended on June 20.

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US to Provide Over \$290Mln in Additional Humanitarian Aid for Yemen - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated more than \$290 million in funding to provide additional humanitarian assistance to Yemen, amounting to more than \$4 billion in assistance so far to the war-torn country, the US State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The United States is providing more than \$290 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Yemen," Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in the statement. "In total, the United States has provided more than \$4 billion to alleviate the suffering of the people of Yemen since the current crisis began in late 2014."

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Saudi King Tells UN General Assembly Yemen's Houthis Reject Peaceful Solution to Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud said in a speech at the UN General Assembly on Wednesday that the Houthi rebels reject the peace initiatives offered through the United Nations to peacefully resolve the conflict in Yemen.

"The peace initiative in Yemen, tabled by the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] last March, ought to end the bloodshed and conflict. It ought to put an end to the suffering of the brotherly Yemeni people," the King said. "Unfortunately, the terrorist Houthi militias reject peaceful solutions. They have placed their bets on a military option to take over more territory in Yemen."

Saudi and Houthi forces continue to clash as part of the conflict in Yemen between the government and the rebels that has been ongoing since August 2014. Saudi Arabia backed the Yemeni government in 2015, leading a coalition of states conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis on its behalf.

Saudi Arabia proposed a widespread United Nations-sponsored ceasefire in Yemen in March that was welcomed by the United States, but has been rejected by the Houthis.

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US Court Sentences Russia's Oleg Nikitin to 28 Months, Nearly Equivalent to Time Served

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia on Wednesday sentenced Russian national Oleg Nikitin to 28 months in prison for violating US export regulations, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

"Today in Savannah, Georgia, a federal judge imposed the sentence of 28 months on Oleg Nikitin from St. Petersburg, Russia, which essentially amounts to the sentence that Mr. Nikitin has already served," Tarasov said. "The judge also signed an order for judicial removal, which entails Nikitin's deportation from the United States as soon as he completes his sentence, which should be very, very soon."

Tarasov expressed hope his client will be able to return to Russia very soon.

"I imagine that we are talking about a few weeks - just to make the arrangements for his travel," he said.

Tarasov added that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will facilitate the travel arrangements.

In addition to the imposing a prison term, the judge also imposed on Nikitin a fine of \$5,000 and a monetary assessment of \$100, Tarasov noted.

During the sentencing, Nikitin expressed regrets about the actions he took.

"I apologize for my actions. I have enough time to think about what was happened to me," he said in English.

Nikitin has pleaded guilty to charges of violating US export regulations in March. He faced up to five years in prison and a significant financial penalty.

The US Justice Department said earlier that Nikitin was a general director of the St.

Petersburg-based energy company KS Engineering (KSE) and conspired with his business partner Anton Cheremukhin as well three foreign nationals to purchase a US-made power turbine worth \$17.3 million in violation of US trade regulations. The turbine was to be employed on a Russian Arctic deep water drilling platform, the Justice Department said.

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US Crude Draw Exceeds Expectations Again on Post-Hurricane Adjustments - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil fell more than expected for a second week in a row, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data showed on Wednesday as disruptions from Hurricane Ida continued to force adjustments in the marketplace.

Crude stockpiles dropped by 3.48 million barrels in the week to September 17, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report. Analysts polled by US media had forecast a drop of 2.45 million barrels. In the previous week to September 10, crude draws ballooned to 6.422 million barrels, almost double to expectations due to Ida-related disruptions.

Ida shut down more than 90 percent of oil and gas production facilities on the US Gulf of Mexico prior to its landfall on August 29. As of Sept. 21, more than three weeks after the hurricane, nearly 16% of oil production on the Gulf, accounting for 320,909 barrels equivalent, remained shut-in due to complications caused by the storm.

"Production is coming back but it hasn't been as swift as thought," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "We should see more normalcy in the next couple of weeks or so."

Crude oil prices rallied in response to the second weekly uptick in draws. New York-traded West Texas Intermediate crude, the benchmark for US oil, was up \$1.40, or 2 percent, at \$71.89 per barrel by 12:15 p.m. ET (16:15 GMT).

London's Brent, the global benchmark for crude, was up \$1.44, or 1.9 percent, at \$75.80 per barrel.

Distillate stockpiles, which include diesel and heating oil, fell by 2.55 million barrels last week against expectations for a draw of 1.11 million barrels, the EIA data showed. In the previous week, distillate inventories fell by 1.69 million barrels.

Gasoline inventories bucked the downtrend, rising by 3.47 million barrels, the EIA said, compared with expectations for a draw of 1.47 million barrels. In the previous week, gasoline stockpiles fell 1.86 million.

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Macron Decides to Return French Ambassador to Washington Next Week – White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – President Emmanuel Macron has decided to return the French ambassador to Washington, DC following the discussion with US President Joe Biden of the implications of the US-Australia deal announced earlier in the month, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Emmanuel Macron has decided that the French Ambassador will return to Washington next week. He will then start intensive work with senior US officials," the White House said in a release.

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Biden, Macron Agree to Meet in Europe at End of October in Recent Call - White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron have agreed to meet in person next month to continue working out tensions between the nations, a joint statement released following a call between the two leaders today on Wednesday said.

Tensions were sparked by news of an AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) group nuclear-powered submarine deal that undermined a separate, pre-existing submarine deal between Canberra and Paris.

"President Emmanuel Macron of the French Republic and President Joe Biden of the United States of America spoke on September 22, at the request of the latter, in order to discuss the implications of the announcement on September 15... They will meet in Europe at the end of October in order to reach shared understandings and maintain momentum in this process," the joint statement said.

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WH National Security Adviser Sullivan to Visit S. Arabia, UAE, Egypt Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan is planning to pay a visit to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt next week, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing sources.

Sullivan will become the most senior official in the administration of US President Joe Biden to visit Saudi Arabia, according to the sources.

The report comes on the heels of the announcement from the US State Department on the approval of a possible \$500 million sale to Saudi Arabia to provide maintenance services to the country's helicopter fleet. The maintenance support services contract supports the Saudi fleet of Blackhawk, Bell and Schweizer helicopters, including the future fleet of Chinook helicopters, the release added.

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Biden Proposes Another High-Level COVID-19 Summit in First Quarter of 2022

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday proposed holding a second virtual summit on the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2022 in order to monitor the progress made and maintain the international response efforts aligned.

"I propose that we come together for a second high level virtual summit in the first quarter of 2022 to help gauge our progress and keep our efforts fully aligned," Biden said during remarks at a Virtual COVID-19 Summit on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

Biden also said that another goal of the second virtual summit will be to dramatically boost global and regional vaccine manufacturing capacity and enhance transparency in order to make vaccine distribution predictable and coordinated.

The president pointed out that United States will be providing nearly \$1.4 billion to reduce COVID-19 deaths and mitigate transmission through bulk oxygen support, expanded testing and strengthening of healthcare systems around the world.

Biden added that United States is currently providing financing to strengthen vaccine manufacturing in Africa to produce more than 500 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for Africa.

Earlier on Wednesday, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients announced that the United States will purchase additional 500 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to donate to low-income and developing countries bringing the total number of donated vaccine doses against the novel coronavirus to 1.1 billion.

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US Court Sentences Russia's Oleg Nikitin to 28 Months, Nearly Equivalent to Time Served

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"Today in Savannah, Georgia federal judge imposed the sentence of 28 months on Oleg Nikitin from St. Petersburg, Russia, which essentially amounts to the sentence that Mr. Nikitin has already served," Tarasov said. "The judge also signed an order for judicial removal, which entails Nikitin's deportation from the US as soon as he completes his sentence, which should be very, very soon."

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NATO Chief Says Alliance Continues to Support Ukraine's Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty

NEW YORK CITY, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has always been a valued partner of NATO and the alliance will continue to back the territorial integrity of the country, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg told journalists on Wednesday after the meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"You can say it's always a great pleasure to meet President Zelenskyy. Ukraine is a highly valued partner of NATO, and NATO will continue to support Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty," Stoltenberg said.

The two are in New York City as part of the UN General Assembly's high-level week.

Ukraine's ambition to achieve EU and NATO membership has been a national priority dictating the country's foreign and domestic policies.

The Ukrainian parliament adopted constitutional amendments that committed the country to seek EU and NATO membership in 2019. In June 2020, the North Atlantic Council recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner.

Earlier in September, Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine is ready for NATO membership, and the country believes that the alliance needs it.

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US Sanctions Sinaloa Cartel Operatives in Mexican State of Sonora - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US government imposed economic sanctions on eight members of Mexico's Sinaloa drug cartel, including the supervisor of a major trafficking route to smuggle fentanyl and other drug into the United States, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Mexican national Sergio Valenzuela Valenzuela as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act)," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

Based in Nogales in the Mexican state of Sonora, Valenzuela oversees a major drug trafficking corridor and is responsible for smuggling tons of fentanyl and other drugs into the United States, the release said.

Valenzuela reports directly to the Sinaloa Cartel Leader Ismael Zambada Garcia (a.k.a. El Mayo), who was previously sanctioned by the United States, the release also said.

Valenzuela is also a fugitive facing a September 2018 drug trafficking indictment returned by a federal district court in the state of California, the release added.

In addition to Valenzuela, OFAC also designated seven other Mexican nationals, including Valenzuela's right-hand man, Leonardo Pineda Armenta, who directs operations for him, and six cartel lieutenants, according to the release.

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Biden Approval Rating Falls to New Low of 43% After US Withdrawal From Afghanistan - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's approval rating has fallen to 43%, the lowest level since his inauguration in January, following the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

Biden's approval rating has lost 13 percentage points over the course of past 3 months. In July, it fell to 50% from 56% in June amid growing cases of the coronavirus Delta variant and remained roughly on the same level in August, at 49%, according to a press release accompanying the poll.

With respect to Vice President Kamala Harris, 49% of Americans approve how he has handled her job and 49% disapprove, the poll found. However, her rating is better than Biden's by six percentage points.

Biden continues to enjoy widespread approval of 90% among Democrats and extremely low approval of 6% among Republican voters, according to the poll results.

The poll was conducted on September 1-17 via telephone among 1,005 adults from all age groups and US states and the District of Columbia.

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Over 2,000 US Investigations of China Spying Underway With New Probes Opening Daily - FBI

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States opens a new counterintelligence probe targeting the Chinese government or individuals acting on its behalf every 12 hours, FBI Director Christopher said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"I believe that China, and by that I mean the Peoples Republic of China government, the Chinese Communist Party, not the Chinese people, that there's no country that represents a more significant counterintelligence threat or a more significant threat to our innovation, our economic security and our ideas," Wray told the US House Homeland Security Committee. Wray added that on average, the FBI opens a new China-related counterintelligence investigation every 12 hours and that 2,000 investigations remain open.

The FBI director explained that the frequency of opening investigations is "not because our agents are looking around for something to do," but because "there's a need."

An FBI has cited Chinese systematic theft of intellectual property and cyber intrusions targeting US businesses, academic institutions, researchers and lawmakers as the agency's top counterintelligence priority.

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US Existing Home Sales Down 2% in August as Prices Keep Buyers Away - Realtors Association

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Sales of existing homes in the United States fell 2% in August as some buyers retreated from an overpriced market, the National Association of Realtors said on Wednesday.

"Sales slipped a bit in August as prices rose nationwide," said Lawrence Yun, chief economist of the realtors' association. "Although there was a decline in home purchases, potential buyers are out and about searching, but much more measured about their financial limits, and simply waiting for more inventory."

Total existing-home sales, including for single-family homes, townhomes, condominiums and co-ops, fell 2% from July to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 5.88 million in August, the association said in a statement.

Year-over-year, sales dropped 1.5%, it added.

Total housing inventory at the end of August was at 1.29 million units, down 1.5% from July's supply and down 13.4% from one year ago. Unsold inventory sits at a 2.6-month supply at the current sales pace, unchanged from July but down from 3 months from August 2020.

The median existing-home price for all housing types in August was \$356,700, up 14.9% from August 2020, when it was at \$310,400. It marked the 114th month running of year-over-year gain in existing home values, as prices rose in every region of the country.

"High home prices make for an unbalanced market, but prices would normalize with more supply," Yun said.

Dire housing shortages in the United States since the financial crisis of 2008 and last year's coronavirus outbreak have pushed up existing home prices to beyond the means of many Americans.

The median selling price for existing-homes in the United States rose 17.8 percent in July from a year earlier to hit a record high of \$359,900, according to the realtors' association. Prices jumped especially after the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 as investment firms rushed to snap up properties at low prices and earn steady incomes from rent. The trend accelerated as more institutional investors started buying rapidly appreciating homes, further eroding affordability.

The Commerce Department said on Tuesday that new housing construction in the US grew more than 17% in the year to August while permits issued for new construction also rose double-digits, signaling efforts by builders to put up more homes in a supply-starved market.

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Biden Announces \$370Mln in US Funding to Help Deliver COVID-19 Vaccines Globally

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday during remarks at the Global COVID-19 Summit on the margins of the UN General Assembly that the US will be giving more than \$370 million to help deliver and administer vaccines around the globe.

"We also know from experience that getting those vaccines into people's arms may be the hardest logistical challenge we face. That's why we need to significantly step up our investment in helping countries get shots in arms," Biden said. "Today, the United States is also announcing that we're providing an additional \$370 million to support administering these shots and delivery globally."

The US will also be providing more than \$380 million to assist the Global Vaccine Alliance, which helps get vaccines to areas in the greatest need, he added.

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Biden Proposes Another High-Level COVID-19 Summit in First Quarter of 2022

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday proposed holding a second virtual summit on the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2022 to monitor the progress made maintain the international response efforts aligned.

"I propose that we come together for a second high level virtual summit in the first quarter of 2022 to help gauge our progress and keep our efforts fully aligned," Biden said during remarks at a Virtual COVID-19 Summit on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

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Biden Says US Launching Vaccine Partnership With EU to Expand Global Vaccinations

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US and EU are launching a joint vaccine partnership to work more closely with one another on expanding vaccination efforts around the world, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday during remarks at the virtual Global COVID-19 Summit.

"The United States is leading the world on vaccination donations. As we're doing that, we need other high-income countries to deliver on their own ambitious vaccine donations and pledges. That's why today we're launching the EU-US Vaccine Partnership to work more closely together, and with our partners, on expanding global vaccinations," Biden said.

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Borrell Tells Sputnik Will Meet Lavrov on UNGA Sidelines to Discuss Range of Issues

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told Sputnik on Wednesday that he will meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss a range of issues.

"Yes... I think it was scheduled, the meeting with Minister Lavrov," Borrell replied when asked about the meeting with the Russian official.

He added that both "have plenty of issues to talk about."

Asked what are the most important matters he will discuss with Lavrov, Borrell replied: "We'll

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Three in 5 US Voters Back Democratic Plan For Green Energy, Electric Car Tax Breaks – Poll
WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – Over 60% of the American electorate are ready to support Democrats' plan of tax credits for renewable energy and electric vehicles amid continuing debate over the \$3.5 trillion budget plan in the US Congress, a new poll by Morning Consult found on Wednesday.

Out of 61% of Americans who support the proposed budget provisions, 30% strongly support the inclusion of tax credits in the bill and 31% somewhat support them, the poll found.

Over 25% of US voters oppose the potential budget provisions with 15% of voters who somewhat oppose them and 12% of those who strongly oppose them, according to the poll results.

The Democratic electorate is more likely than the Republican one to be supportive of the new tax measures, at 76% and 46% respectively, the poll found. At the same time, more Republicans support (46%) than oppose (42%) providing tax credits for renewable energy projects and electric vehicles as part of the new budget framework.

The poll was conducted among 1,998 respondents from all age groups in the period of September 18-20.

In August, Democratic lawmakers in the US Congress aligned to President Joe Biden released a \$3.5 trillion budget framework meant to provide more funds for education, family care, housing and climate change as well as to create jobs.

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Biden Mask Mandate Weakens Support of African-American Voters - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's imposition of face mask rules for workers in government and private businesses has eroded his backing among African-Americans - one of the most reliable Democratic Party voting blocs, a new Morning Consult poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Biden is still popular with most Black voters, with 71 percent of them approving of his job performance, including 37 percent who do so strongly. But since Sept. 8, the share who

disapprove of Biden's job performance has increased 7 points, to 24 percent, and 14 percent said they 'strongly disapprove,'" a press release explaining the poll said.

The September 8 survey was conducted the day before Biden announced a series of sweeping mask mandates. In the latest September 18-20 survey, 71% of Black voters approve of Biden's job performance, down 5 points since the federal vaccine mandate, while the share who disapprove rose 7 points to 24%, the release said.

The rise in negative views came almost entirely from unvaccinated Black voters, 38% of whom say they disapprove of Biden's overall job performance, 11 points since before he announced the mandate, while 56 percent approve, down 6 points over that time frame, the release also said.

The release warned that any erosion of Biden's support among African-American voters bodes ill for Democratic Party prospects in next year's midterm congressional elections.

While Black voters, who helped push Biden over the top against former President Donald Trump in key states last year, are unlikely to abandon the Democrats en masse to back Republicans, low turnout from the group could have dire consequences for Democrats in Congress, according to the release.

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Belarus to Hold International Conference to Mark 30th Anniversary of CIS

MINSK, September 22 (Sputnik) - Belarus will hold an international scientific and practical conference in Minsk on September 27-29 to mark the 30th anniversary of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Vladimir Gusakov, the chairman of the presidium of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (NASB), said on Wednesday.

Belarus presides over the CIS this year.

"In line with the plan of priority activities in the field of humanitarian cooperation of the CIS member states for 2021-2022... on September 27-29 this year, an international scientific and practical conference [called] '30 years of the Commonwealth of Independent States: results, prospects' will be held in Minsk," Gusakov told reporters.

At least 300 representatives of CIS bodies and state institutions, as well as leading scientists, heads of scientific and educational organizations are expected to attend the event, which will be held at the NASB, "ready to receive high-level delegations," according to the official.

So far, delegations from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan have confirmed their participation in the conference. Its plenary sessions are expected to be held at the NASB on September 28, and the CIS Executive Committee on September 29.

The organization has developed into a "unique tool for cooperation between sovereign states... within a relatively isolated geopolitical space," Deputy Chairman of the CIS Executive Committee, Beketzhan Zhumakhanov, said.

The CIS was established on December 8, 1991, by the Soviet leaderships of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR to promote cooperation in key fields across the post-Soviet space.

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US Deputy State Secretary, Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister Discuss Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman has met with Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah Alkhater to talk about Afghanistan and thank Doha for helping in the evacuation operations from Kabul, Sherman said on Wednesday.

"I met with Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister @Lolwah_Alkhater to discuss Afghanistan and express our gratitude to Qatar for their role facilitating the safe and orderly transit of so many people. We also discussed U.S.-Qatar cooperation on climate change and other issues," Sherman tweeted.

Qatari leadership is currently in the US as part of a delegation to the UN General Assembly with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani delivering a speech on the first day of the General Debate.

After the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) took over Kabul on August 15, hundreds of people rushed to the airport, which resulted in several days of chaos. As foreigners and Afghans who helped foreign forces were striving to leave, the airport was shaken by terrorist attacks organized by a local affiliate of the IS terrorist group (banned in Russia). Since mid-August Qatar has been facilitating the evacuation of people safely from Kabul to Qatar. Most of the evacuees are transiting in Qatar, where they are hosted temporarily for a few days before departing on flights to their onward destinations. According to the Qatari foreign ministry data, some 114,000 people left Afghanistan on evacuation flights, with over 58,000 of them via Qatar.

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China Says Meeting of Beijing, Moscow, Islamabad Envoys With Taliban Constructive

BEIJING, September 22 (Sputnik) - The special envoys from Russia, China and Pakistan for Afghanistan held a constructive dialogue with the Taliban (banned in Russia as a terrorist organization) in Kabul, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao said Wednesday.

Earlier this week, reports emerged that the Taliban had invited the Chinese special envoy Yue Xiaoyong, the Russian president's special envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, and Pakistan's special envoy for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq Khan for talks in Kabul on September 21-22.

"They held in-depth and constructive discussions on the recent developments in Afghanistan, especially on inclusiveness, human rights, economic and humanitarian issues, friendly relations

between Afghanistan and other countries, especially neighboring countries, and the unity and territorial integrity of Afghanistan,"

The three met with the movement's Acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hasan Akhund, as well as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah, Beijing confirmed.

"The Taliban side stressed that it attaches great importance to Afghanistan's relations with China, Russia and Pakistan, and the three countries are playing a constructive and responsible role in consolidating peace and stability in Afghanistan," the spokesman added.

The representatives of the three countries also called on the international community to continue providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and stressed that the United States and their allies hold the biggest responsibility for the socio-economic reconstruction of the country and must provide it with the necessary economic and humanitarian assistance.

A new interim government in Afghanistan, led by Akhund, who served as a foreign minister during the first Taliban rule and has been under United Nations sanctions since 2001 was formed on September 6, following the takeover of Panjshir - the last part of Afghanistan holding out against the Taliban rule.