

09/27/21 Monday

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DPRK Fires 'Unidentified Projectile' Moments Before Envoy Speaks at UN General Assembly - Reports

By - Morgan Artyukhina

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff reported early on Tuesday morning that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) had fired one "unidentified projectile" into the Sea of Japan. According to Seoul-based [Yonhap News Agency](#), the JCS gave no indication of what type of missile had been fired. However, the senior brass typically only issue alerts if they believe the test was of a ballistic missile.

The DPRK has used the Sea of Japan to test a number of new short-range ballistic missiles in recent years, but the socialist country also [recently unveiled](#) a new missile fired from a train car, intended to enhance its survivability from a strike by another nation. They have also recently tested a long-range cruise missile.

According to Japan's Kyodo News, the Japanese Defense Ministry reported the DPRK had fired a single missile and there was a low possibility it had landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

The US military later said there is no immediate threat from the North Korean missile launch. "We are aware of the missile launch and are consulting closely with our allies and partners. While we have assessed that this event does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies, the missile launch highlights the destabilizing impact of the DPRK's illicit weapons program," the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The U.S. commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea and Japan remains ironclad," it added.

The test launch came just moments before the DPRK's ambassador to the United Nations was set to address the UN General Assembly underway in New York.

UN Envoy Proclaims Right to Self-Defense

Taking the podium in New York, Ambassador Kim Sung said no one can deny the DPRK's right to self defense and to test weapons, given the hostile policies of other nations.

"The possible outbreak of a new war on the Korean Peninsula is contained not because of the U.S.'s mercy on the DPRK," Kim said. "It is because our state is a growing reliable deterrent that can control the hostile forces in the attempts of a military invasion."

However, he indicated that if the US gives up its "hostile policy, we are also prepared to respond willingly at any time."

Kim added that if the US is serious about ending the Korean War, it should give up its hostile policy and stop its military exercises aimed at the DPRK, as well as the deployment of strategic weapons.

"But it is our judgment that there is no prospect at the present stage for the US to really withdraw its hostile policy," Kim added.

Peace Overtures

Earlier on Monday, a spokesperson for the US [Department of State](#) said the US is "prepared to meet with the DPRK without preconditions and we certainly hope that the DPRK will respond positively to our outreach."

The test comes a day after Kim Yo Jong, Deputy Department Director of the Publicity and Information Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, also said the [country remains open](#) to an inter-Korean summit with leaders from the Republic of Korea, as the South is officially known, but only if mutual "respect" and "impartiality" are guaranteed and the South drops its double-standards.

Last week, South Korean President Moon Jae-in called for a joint declaration on ending the state of war with the DPRK. The two nations discussed such an endeavor in 2018 amid a historic rapprochement and [laid the groundwork](#) for it in two declarations in April and September of that year. However, as peace talks between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and then-US President Donald Trump stalled, so did inter-Korean talks.

The largest stumbling blocks have been strangling economic sanctions against the DPRK intended to force it to give up its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs, and the continued presence of 28,000 US troops in South Korea. Seoul has continued to engage in military drills with the US, which the North has said indicate the South's [lack of seriousness](#) about peace.

A state of war has existed since 1950 between the DPRK on one side and South Korea and the United States on the other. When the Japanese Empire surrendered to the Allies in 1945, ending World War II, the Soviet Union had only liberated half of Korea, which was a Japanese colony. Consequently, a socialist government prevailed in the north, and a capitalist government formed in the south, which passed to American control. The divide erupted in a civil war in 1949 that the North threatened to win, but a US-led military intervention in 1950 pushed the communist Korean People's Army back almost to the Chinese border.

A [Chinese all-volunteer force](#) under North Korean command helped turn the tide of the war, and by the time a ceasefire was signed in 1953, the front lines had been pushed almost to where they were when the war began. However, the brutal war, which included massacres on both sides and US strategic bombing that leveled North Korean cities, left more than 2 million Koreans dead. A permanent peace treaty has never been signed, and Korea remains divided by a heavily defended demilitarized zone.

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Plumbing Poverty: Millions of America's Poorest Don't Have Running Indoor Water - Report
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A new study published by the Guardian on Monday puts a spotlight on the chronic deprivation of running or clean water in millions of American homes, predominantly in Black and indigenous communities and increasingly concentrated in urban areas.

[According to research](#) by the Plumbing Poverty Project (PPP), a collaboration between King's College London (KCL) and the University of Arizona, half a million homes don't have water indoors for washing hands, flushing toilets, or bathing. One-third of those families are concentrated in just 15 US cities, including some of the country's largest and most affluent. The data is largely based on US Census Bureau surveys and highlights how heavily concentrated this level of poverty is in the US.

For example, in San Francisco, where the median household income is [\\$96,265 a year](#) and which has the third-largest concentration of billionaires on the planet, nearly 15,000 families don't have proper plumbing. Of those families, 17% are Black. Black people make up just 9% of San Francisco's population.

The problem isn't getting any better, either - in fact, it's getting worse. According to the researchers' data, the number of San Francisco families without indoor plumbing has increased by 12% since 2000.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as public health experts advised rigorous hand washing and sterilization, the [Public Policy Institute of California](#) noted that 2% of San Francisco homes had inadequate plumbing. They separately noted that of those without adequate plumbing, 57% also lacked a kitchen, highlighting its relationship to extreme poverty.

This required residents to use shared facilities, often between residents on an entire floor, or to depend on public facilities like park restrooms or those in shops during open hours. Adults with jobs or children in schools said they knew to use the showers and toilets before they came home for the evening. Some also said they used chamber pots.

"The story of plumbing poverty in San Francisco is inextricably tied to unaffordable housing, declining incomes, post-recession transformations in the California rental sector, and racialized wealth gaps, fueled by a kind of 'anti-Black urbanism' that has either driven Black San Franciscans into more precarious housing conditions or out of the Bay entirely," Katie Meehan, lead researcher of the PPP and professor of environment and society at KCL, told the Guardian. "It's not only that the gap between the water-rich and the water-poor is widening in America, it's also that it's driven by a housing sector that lacks any safety net for working families, especially households of color, that cannot afford the astronomical prices of San Francisco, Seattle, or now even Portland," Meehan added.

According to the report, 28,000 homes in New York and 19,000 in Los Angeles also lacked indoor plumbing as of 2017. However, changing census questions could be concealing a greater problem, and other cities, including Milwaukee, San Antonio, Phoenix, Nashville, Seattle, and Cleveland have similarly shown little or no progress in decreasing so-called "plumbing poverty" over the last 20 years.

Plumbing Poverty Plagues Rural America

However, the PPP study only focused on homes as a whole and highlighted urban concentrations: nationwide, the number of people without indoor water is [more than 2 million](#). Many of them live on Native American reservations - historically some of the poorest districts of the United States, where the descendants of tribes forced off the vast majority of their land have been deprived of the resources necessary to thrive. For example, in the Navajo Nation, the

country's largest reservation that straddles the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, one-third of its 350,000 people don't have running water.

When the US Army drove the Navajos and other nations off their traditional lands, they also destroyed their traditional ways of life that had allowed them to survive in the harsh climate for centuries. In the 20th century, their hard-fought autonomy was used against them as the Navajo Nation was excluded from inter-state negotiations for sharing water in the region, especially the key 1922 Colorado River Compact, leaving the nation to fight complex legal battles with surrounding states for decades.

Navajo President [Jonathan Nez told](#) the House Natural Resources Committee in 2019 that the nation has had to fight especially hard for water rights in Utah. "In some cases, such as in the community of Oljato on the Arizona-Utah border, a single spigot on a desolate road, miles from any residence, serves 900 people," he said.

Water scarcity is compounded in Navajo by the 521 disused uranium mines that have tainted the water supply. Among Navajos, doctors have identified an illness known as [Navajo Neuropathy](#) caused by consuming irradiated water. While many taps are marked in red to indicate their water is only suitable for livestock, the scarcity of water means that many people drink the water anyway.

One spring in northeastern Arizona was reported in 2015 as having uranium levels "at least five times greater than safe drinking water standards," according to a [study](#) published in the journal Environmental Science & Technology. The contamination caused the early deaths of many children who drank from the spring or whose mothers drank the water while pregnant.

Radiation from the US nuclear program has tainted other Native American sites, as well, including the Hanford site in Washington state, where most of the US military's nuclear warheads were manufactured. The poorly secured site has repeatedly been found to be leaking radiation, with [radioactive dust](#) being found in homes dozens of miles away. The site is upriver from the Yakama Nation reservation, and the three counties surrounding Yakama have seen greatly elevated levels of anencephaly, a rare and fatal birth defect in which a fetus' brain and skull fail to fully form, which is believed to be caused by irradiation. The condition is also [associated with areas](#) of Iraq where the US military has used depleted uranium rounds.

Other rural areas are also plagued by inadequate water access. In Alabama's Lowndes County, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights [denounced widespread](#) open sewage in 2017.

Straight-line PVC pipes and open-air trenches are used to shuffle human waste a few dozen feet away from homes, often next to where the home's water source is. As storms send the sewage overflowing, flooding yards and wooded areas, it carries with it an overwhelming stench and causes infections of diseases thought to be eradicated in the US, [such as hookworm](#), a parasite more commonly seen in the Third World. In 2010, the census reported Lowndes County's population was 73% Black and 31.4% lived below the poverty line - three times the national average.

Millions Get Water from Lead Pipes

In addition to inadequate indoor plumbing, many American cities also suffer from water [tainted by lead](#), which leeches into the water from ancient pipes. While Flint, Michigan's lead contamination has been infamous, cities like Newark, Detroit, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, have also had problems with high lead levels. Lead consumption can

permanently reduce the cognitive abilities of both children and adults, as well as cause numerous neurological conditions.

Nationwide, an estimated [15 to 22 million Americans](#) receive cooking and drinking water from lead pipes, many of which were installed a century ago and which municipalities have devised a number of ways to minimize the dangers from, such as lining the inside of pipes with sodium silicate.

Numerous loopholes in the US Environmental Protection Agency's regulations have allowed municipalities to escape investing in replacing the pipes. An [overhaul in the EPA's rules](#) was implemented in December of last year, but critics say it still contains too many loopholes to keep children safe. The American Jobs Plan championed by US President Joe Biden would [set aside \\$45 billion](#) for eliminating all lead water pipes in the United States.

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Russian Military: Militants Launched Drone Toward Hmeimim Airbase, Pantsir-S Shot It Down
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Russian Defense Ministry said Monday it had intercepted a drone launched at a key Russian military installation in western Syria.

According to Rear Adm. Vadim Kulit, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, the drone was launched from the de-escalation zone in Idlib Governorate toward Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia Governorate, a province to the southwest near the Mediterranean coast. However, the drone was intercepted by a Pantsir-S mobile air defense system (NATO reporting name SA-22 Greyhound).

"The missile armament of the Pantsir-S anti-aircraft missile and cannon system of the Russian airbase destroyed the air target at a distance from the airbase," Kulit told reporters. "There were no casualties or material damage as a result of the incident. Russian airbase Hmeimim is operating as planned."

The short-range air defense system, which excels at gunning down low-altitude drones, missiles and artillery, has enjoyed remarkable success in the Syrian war, successfully taking down drones [and cruise missiles](#) fired by Islamist rebel militants or by Israel at the forces of the Syrian government and its allies, which include Russia.

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US President Joe Biden Aims to Save Obama-Era Policy DACA
By - Nevin Brown

US President Joe Biden plans to revitalize Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, an Obama-era memo, by shoring up its legal status.

The policy was [initially established in June of 2012](#), in an attempt to defer the removal of non-citizens who came to the United States illegally as minors. The Biden administration plans to create a rule that would recreate the Obama-era policy that allows for individuals who came to the United States unlawfully as children to receive deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit.

To be eligible for the proposed version of DACA, individuals need to have arrived in the US before turning 16, have continuously lived in the US since June 15, 2007, are in school or graduated, have no felony convictions, and do not pose a threat to national security or public safety.

From DACA's inception in 2012, it has faced legal challenges. The Trump administration tried to terminate the program in 2017 but was [thwarted by the Supreme Court](#). The policy was suspended this July when District Judge Andrew Hanen found the policy was illegal and in violation of the Administrative Procedure Act. However, due to the nearly 650,000 people enrolled in the program, the ruling has been temporarily stayed to allow for further court rulings. A key part of Judge Hanen's decision was that the Obama-era policy [did not elicit feedback from the public](#). Part of the Biden administration's revitalization plan is to send the policy through a 60-day public comments period.

The Biden administration admits that the long-term viability of DACA relies on Congress passing legislation to provide permanent protection and determine a route to citizenship.

Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough ruled that Democrats cannot include immigration legislation, to be passed through budget reconciliation, in their proposed \$3.5 trillion spending bill. Without the lifeline of budget reconciliation, Democrats will need to convince 10 Republicans in the Senate.

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Is Sir Alex Ferguson Right, That Ronaldo, and not Messi, Could Score a Hat-trick for Anyone?
By - Nevin Brown

The debate over who's better, Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, has raged for over a decade. Sir Alex Ferguson believed that Ronaldo, and not Messi, could score a hat-trick for anyone. With the two superstars changing teams in the same transfer window, perhaps it's time to re-assess the debate.

Back in 2015, Sir Alex Ferguson weighed in on the Messi v. Ronaldo debate and did not mince words.

"Ronaldo could play for Millwall, Queens Park Rangers, anyone, Doncaster Rovers, and score a hat-trick in a game. I'm not sure Messi could do that. Ronaldo's got two feet, quick, great in the air, brave, Messi's brave of course. I think Messi is a Barcelona player. You know what I mean?" For years, Ferguson's jab that Messi was a Barcelona player could never be tested. Messi remained excellent, and, crucially, he remained at Barcelona, while Ronaldo hopped from Real Madrid to Juventus, and now to Manchester United again. However, now that Messi has made

his way to Paris Saint-Germain, Ferguson's assertion that Messi is just a Barcelona player can finally be put to the test.

Where the Messi v Ronaldo Debate Stands

Messi and Ronaldo have dominated European football for so long that it's hard to remember a time when one of them wasn't considered the best player in the world. From 2008 to 2019, Messi or Ronaldo [won the Ballon d'Or](#) every season except for 2018, when Luka Modric claimed the prize. The two men are first and second in all-time Ballon d'Ors, with Messi's six and Ronaldo's five.

It's not hard to understand why the two took turns being crowned the best player in Europe. In seventeen seasons with Barcelona, Messi tallied 627 goals and 252 assists in 714 matches. Ronaldo, in 20 seasons between four clubs, tallied 628 goals and 182 assists in 813 matches. Goal scoring at that level has never been matched for such an extended period of time. However, if you're on team-Ronaldo, you're out of luck. Messi has scored nearly the same number of goals from almost one hundred fewer matches, and bests him in assists by 70.

Will Alex Ferguson be Right About Messi?

Ronaldo has already proven that he can, and will, score a hat-trick no matter where he plays, already finding the back of the net four times in four appearances for United this season. Messi, on the other hand, has not had a fantastic start to his PSG career. In three appearances, he has failed to score or set up a teammate. It has only been 190 minutes of action and with teammates like Neymar and Mbappe, Messi's fortunes are bound to change.

The Verdict

Ronaldo's hot-start is sure making Alex Ferguson look like the legendary manager he is. However, one wonders if he's still angry about what Messi did to his United sides in the 2009 and 2011 Champions League Finals.

When your left foot can do that, why even use your right? Messi will eventually capture a PSG hat-trick and Ronaldo will add to his United tally as well. What Ferguson was most right about is when he said they're both brave. At the end of the day, arguing over Messi v Ronaldo is silly. Appreciate their greatness while it lasts, because they're both one of a kind.

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After Manchester United's Loss to Aston Villa, Will Ole Gunnar Solskjaer Make it Through November?

Manchester United's stunning loss to Aston Villa over the weekend cost them the chance to go top of the table. While a late penalty miss by Bruno Fernandes has captured the headlines, the work of United manager, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, needs to be the real story.

As Bruno Fernandes readied himself to take a 93rd-minute penalty, Aston Villa clung to a 1-0 lead. Since the Portuguese playmaker's arrival in January of 2020, he has been Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's main man from the spot and has rewarded his faith by converting 21 of 22 penalty attempts across all competitions. Fernandes approached the ball at a brisk pace, struck it with power, and provided a lucky fan with a souvenir to [bring his penalty record to 21 for 23](#).

The missed penalty cost United a chance to secure a point and stay level with Liverpool atop of the Premier League. However, the game never should have come down to a late penalty. Aston Villa is a good team, but, at home, it should be an easy three points for United. The club has spent heavily to bring in world-class players and the talent is there for a title charge. At this point, United's inability to breakthrough comes down to one man: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. Ever since Solskjaer was appointed United's manager, there has been a never-ending tug-of-war over his job security. United will look dreadful for a spell and then rattle off a few impressive performances in a row to calm everything down. Solskjaer's ability to come back from the ledge has earned him plaudits in some circles, but it's simply wishful thinking. Great managers don't have to save their job because great managers get results. Simply put, the mere fact that Solskjaer has had to come back from the brink at all is an indictment of his ability. The Aston Villa game is a perfect example of the flaws with Solskjaer's United tenure. The most important indicator of an effective offensive identity is the generation of big chances. These aren't shots from outside the box or shots with a wall of defenders in its path, these are shots that you or I pretend that we can finish with regularity. United had 58% of the possession, took 27 shots, and generated zero big chances. United, under Solskjaer, has consistently struggled to create big chances when they dominate possession and are faced with an organized low block.

Solskjaer's team selection against Villa shows his utter lack of tactical understanding. His front-four of Ronaldo, Pogba, Fernandes and Greenwood is immensely talented, but all are at their best in the middle of the pitch. What he failed to do, was field a lineup that could stretch Villa's defense horizontally to open up gaps for his talented attackers to do what they're best at. Solskjaer attempted to cram his best attackers into one side without taking into account the environments they need to thrive is further evidence of his incompetence. His team has Ronaldo, perhaps the deadliest aerial attacker in the world, and he opted for a lineup that was going to struggle to create chances with crosses from wide areas. This rendered Ronaldo a no-show, and left United to take poor shot after poor shot.

The underlying metrics also point to a side in need of a change at manager. Through six games, United has scored 13 goals and conceded four. This is a solid return, but expected goals paint a different picture. They've generated 9.9 expected goals, and allowed 6.7 expected goals against, and this has been against a relatively poor slate of opponents. Over this stretch, United has faced teams who have managed an average of 6.16 points over six games. That point total would have a team sitting between 13th and 14th place and is a 39 point pace.

Solskjaer has routinely been able to save his job with a string of performances, but the next six weeks will only see the opposition increase in ferocity. From September 29th to November 6th, United faces a daunting slate of games. Starting on September 29th, United face Villarreal, Everton, Leicester City, Atalanta, Liverpool, Tottenham, Atalanta again, and finally Manchester City on November 6th.

If United doesn't improve their performances, there's a real chance that by the first week of November, they'll be out of the Premier League title race and on the brink of elimination from the Champions League. Knowing Solskjaer, he'll do just enough to keep his job and United relevant, without ever really competing for the things that matter at a club like Manchester United.

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North Korea's KCNA Labels US 'Most Heinous Human Rights Abuser'

By - Evan Craighead

The claim appeared in a Monday article published by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), and authored by an international affairs researcher.

The North Korean state media outlet denounced the US as manipulative and power-hungry for global dominance when it comes to human rights abuses.

"Human rights' touted by the U.S. are nothing but a trick to easily realize its wild ambition for dominating the world," [the KCNA expressed](#). "The US is the most heinous human rights abuser in the world that severely disturbs the normal and peaceful development of sovereign states under the pretext of 'human rights.'"

The researcher contended that the US' "hypocritical moves under the cloak of human rights" must be destroyed before the US realizes global dominance.

"No wonder, the US abuses the 'human rights issues' for putting political pressure on the anti-imperialist independent countries," KCNA added, noting US human rights violations such as the decadeslong "blockade" on Cuba, which - in an attempt to hurt "China's political stability" - resulted in "trillion dollars of damage" to the country's people.

"Now many countries resolutely stand against the US human rights farce for curbing their development," the outlet concluded.

The report comes in the wake of [Pyongyang's assertion that the US should be held accountable](#) for the US-led coalition's "gross violation of human rights."

At the time, North Korea's Foreign Ministry declared that the US mission gave rise to a number of "inhumane crimes" before it "came to an end with the hasty flight of US troops."

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ANALYSIS - Scholz as German Chancellor Would Likely Seek More Freedom From US

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Olaf Scholz if he does take over as German Chancellor would probably try to steer a more independent course from the United States, including completing Nord Stream 2, although he may be forced to maintain the status quo on many other major foreign policy issues, analysts told Sputnik. According to official preliminary results from the nationwide vote, Scholz and his Social Democratic Party (SPD) emerged as the largest party with 206 seats in the Bundestag, the federal parliament. Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister Bavarian Party came second with 196 seats.

The Greens led by Annalena Baerbock came in third with 118 seats, enabling the SPD to hold an absolute majority with only them as coalition partners. However, Scholz was expected to

seek the participation of the fourth place liberal, free market Free Democrats (FDP) with 92 seats as well, German commentators said.

NORD STREAM 2 COMPLETION

Earlier on Monday, Scholz said that all the parties involved should undertake obligations in connection with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline launch, while Ukraine should remain a transit country.

"Judging from the campaign and post-victory statements by Olaf Scholz, he will try to steer a more independent course from Washington and complete the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project while maintaining Merkel's pledge to keep Ukraine in the gas loop," American University in Moscow President Edward Lozansky told Sputnik.

However, Lozansky cautioned, if during the government coalition negotiations Baerbock gets the foreign minister position that she demands, Scholz's life would be a lot more complicated.

"I am sure he understands this and will try to find another portfolio for her," Lozansky said.

Financial analyst, historian and former merchant banker Martin Hutchison recalled that the SPD had traditionally always favored the Nord Stream pipeline projects and therefore Scholz's victory would not have much effect on completing the second one.

Independent Institute Center for Peace & Liberty Director Ivan Eland said Scholz was likely to tilt away from Washington towards a more centered and European independent position.

"A center-left government will likely be slightly more favorable to Russia and slightly less favorable to the US than Christian Democratic unity coalition," Eland told Sputnik. "The Green Party may have some demands on the Nord Stream 2 project, but most of the Social Democrats and Free Democrats are probably alright with it. I think, however, it is almost a done deal."

MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY SHIFT UNLIKELY

Germany's next foreign minister will most likely come from the Free Democrats or the Greens, as these parties are currently projected to become the smaller partner in the future coalition government, Konstantin Kosachev, the deputy speaker of the Russian upper house, said on Monday.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner said nothing substantial will change with regard to either domestic or foreign policy. Above all, Germany would not dare to break ranks with Washington on major foreign policy issues, Brenner added.

"Germany will continue to follow an Atlanticist line on China, Iran, etc. - like all of the other American vassals. It will neither back Ukraine adventurism nor press them to live up to the Minsk II deal. [And] they will do nothing to soften the US hybrid war against Iran," Brenner told Sputnik.

Brenner predicted they will keep silent on the US hybrid war against Russia and the same on China despite potential economic costs and worries about an escalating confrontation.

Financial analyst and Trends Journal publisher Gerald Celente agreed that little of substance would change in Berlin policymaking, since Scholz's narrow margin of victory had reduced his room to maneuver.

"As we see it, considering that the 'centrists' won a narrow victory, the establishment is in full control," Celente said. "From the Nord Stream 2 project, to NATO, it will essentially be more of the same."

Hutchinson said Green influence in the new government might complicate Scholz's desire to maintain stable ties with Russia and President Vladimir Putin. Hence, he added, relations between Berlin and Moscow could become "sticky."

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RPT - IOM Looking for Alternatives for Haitians at US Border, Brazil Being 1 Option - Sources

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is actively looking for alternative destinations for Haitians who have gathered on the US-Mexico border other than returning to Haiti and Brazil may be asked to host some of the migrants as one option, IOM sources told Sputnik.

Some 15,000 migrants, mostly from Haiti, arrived in the Texas town of Del Rio along the US-Mexico border over the recent weeks, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and deploy border agents, including on horseback. Images shared on social media of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers corralling the migrants have prompted criticism by activists.

"Given the current socioeconomic and political situation in Haiti and knowing that a number of these Haitian nationals had previously been issued permanent residencies, and in some cases had children in other countries of the region, IOM is actively looking for alternatives other than return to Haiti for those who have other options. The enquiry made from IOM to the Brazilian Embassy in Mexico is part of this search for humane, regular and safe migration options for this population," the sources said in a statement.

The IOM is very concerned about the situation in which Haitian nationals found themselves in Mexico, and particularly at the border with the United States, the statement said.

"Should migrants be willing to return and should concerned States be in agreement, IOM is ready to offer its expertise through its Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Program to help these migrants return in a safe and informed manner," the statement said.

The IOM pointed out in the statement that the AVR program is implemented under specific conditions "and applies a strict protocol to ensure that conditions upon return do not put returnees or their families at risk."

Following his speech at the UN General Assembly, US President Joe Biden vowed to get the migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border under control.

Last week, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced that the Biden administration conducted 17 flights to Haiti to transport about 2,000 migrants. Mayorkas also said US law enforcement agents involved in an incident involving alleged whipping of Haitian migrants were assigned to administrative duties and are no longer working with migrants.

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RPT - Russian Consulate in Houston May Be Left With 2 Diplomats by End of 2021 - Consul General

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Russian Consulate General in Houston, Texas, may be forced to operate with only two diplomats by the end of this year unless the situation with respect to the United States' issuing visas improves, Consul General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"Frankly, if the situation does not change, then by the end of this year only two diplomats will remain in the Consulate General: your humble servant and the deputy consul-adviser. This is less than a quarter of the required number of people," Zakharov said.

The consul said the two people performing consular activities - signing documents, officially contacting the US authorities, visiting persons under arrest or imprisonment - would have to cover 13 US states in South and Midwest of the United States, where "tens of thousands of our compatriots live."

Zakharov said the Consulate General would also have to reduce the number of citizens it can receive and expects an increase the response time.

"Well, if the situation doesn't change, my deputy and I will have to recall our young years and, with the permission of Moscow, as they say in our professional jargon 'sit at the window' ourselves - receive citizens, draw up powers of attorney, print passports and visas, answer letters, and so on," Zakharov said. "Alas, in this situation we will have no choice but to limit the reception."

Zakharov explained that after the closures of the Russia's Consulates General in San Francisco and Seattle at the request of the US government, the main burden of serving Russian citizens living on United States' West Coast fell on the diplomatic facility in Houston.

"It is simply more convenient and less expensive for our customers to come to us rather than to the more distant missions in Washington or New York. It is not surprising that the number of consular actions we perform has almost doubled in comparison with 2017. At the same time, it is unlikely that it will be possible to handle the same volume of work in the current conditions of underrepresented personnel," he said.

Zakharov pointed out that the list of tasks of the diplomatic mission is not limited only to consulate services but also has a political component that includes the promotion of the entire spectrum of Russia's interests abroad, the development of bilateral economic, cultural, educational and other ties as well as information and explanatory work.

"It is also worth noting that this year - again due to a lack of staff - we were forced to refuse to hold field sessions in those cities that they were counting on us, first of all, Denver, Colorado and Dallas, Texas," he said.

For the same reason, it was not possible to fully carry out all the events planned for the 60th anniversary of the first man's flight into space, Zakharov added.

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RPT - Israel Ready For Direct Talks With Palestine Without Preconditions - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Israel is prepared to have direct talks with Palestine without any preconditions, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, told Sputnik.

"We always call for direct talks with the Palestinian authority for years but without preconditions but they refuse," Erdan said when asked whether Israel is ready for direct talks with Palestine. "President [Mahmoud] Abbas has been continuing to boycott the state of Israel for years and years because he expects that all his demands will be accepted even before the first day of negotiations which cannot be accepted by the state of Israel."

He went on to claim that Israeli and US leadership understands that Abbas was "not a real partner for peace and negotiations."

The Palestinians are ready to resume peace talks with Israel but have yet to see a willingness from the latter's new leadership, Palestinian National Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik last week.

Al Maliki added that the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres should publicly highlight that the Palestinians have reacted positively to his call for renewed dialogue with Israel and should specifically call out Israeli officials responsible for blocking the resumption of talks.

Last Tuesday, Guterres urged the leaders of Israel and Palestine to resume negotiations towards a two-state solution during his remarks at the UN General Assembly.

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Blinken, Singapore Foreign Minister Sign MOU to Renew Development Training - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary State Antony Blinken and Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan signed a memorandum extending a development and capacity building training program with the addition of more courses on environmental issues, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"They signed a Memorandum of Understanding renewing the 10-year partnership of the US-Singapore Third Country Training Program and emphasized climate change and environmental sustainability, with an understanding to include courses focused on these important topics each year," Price said in the statement released on Monday.

Before their meeting Balakrishnan told reporters courses will be updated to also include topics such as digital space, smart cities, and epidemic preparation.

According to the State Department, the US-Singapore Third Country Training Program (TCTP) is focused on capacity building through training courses on topics like connectivity, sustainable development, cybersecurity, WTO trade facilitation, biological threats, and intellectual property rights, among many others.

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Texas Death Row Inmate Scheduled to Be Executed Tuesday Asks US Supreme Court for Stay

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Death row inmate Rick Rhoades, who is set to be executed Tuesday evening in the state of Texas, is asking the US Supreme Court to delay his execution in order to investigate whether his trial jury was racially biased against him, a court filing revealed.

"Mr. Rhoades respectfully requests that the Court stay his execution currently set for September 28, 2021, pending the filing, consideration, and disposition of his Petition for Writ of Certiorari," the filing said on Monday.

Rhoades argues in the complaint that he was denied access to certain trial records that he alleges would help him investigate whether the jury selection for his trial was defective due to racial bias.

Rhoades, 57, was convicted for stabbing two brothers to death while they slept in 1991, a day after he was paroled on a previous burglary charge.

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US Lawmakers Object to Reports of Biden Interest in Working With Russia on Terrorism

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The top Republican lawmakers overseeing US foreign policy sent a letter to the Biden administration objecting to reports that it is interested in using Russian military bases in Central Asia to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

US media reported that last week top US general Mark Milley discussed with his Russian counterpart Valery Gerasimov the Biden administration's interest in potentially using Russian bases in Central Asia to carry out counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

"We are deeply troubled to learn from press reports that your administration is in discussions with the Russian Federation to secure access to Russian military installations in Central Asian countries and potentially engage in some form of military cooperation on counterterrorism with the Russians," the lawmakers said on Monday in the letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The letter is signed by House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul, House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Mike Rogers, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jim Risch, and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Jim Inhofe.

The lawmakers said working with Moscow will not further US counterterrorism goals and it will not create a path to the "stable and predictable" relationship with Russia the Biden Administration claims it wants.

Moreover, the lawmakers said US-Russian military cooperation is prohibited under the US National Defense Authorization Act.

The lawmakers requested an immediate briefing on any talks the Biden administration had about its interest to work with Russia on counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. Last week, Milley also said that Washington should explore the possibility of expanding new military contacts with Russia, including potentially allowing observers at combat drills.

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US Senate Republicans Block Bill to Raise Debt Ceiling on Eve of Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Republicans in the US Senate voted to block legislation that would raise the debt ceiling to avoid an impending government shutdown and fund the work of the government.

The motion to invoke cloture on the motion to proceed with the consideration of the legislation, which requires 60 votes to pass, failed in a vote of 50-48.

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US Senator Menendez Urges New Sanctions on Turkey if It Acquires More Russian Weapons

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez said in a statement that Congress may pursue new sanctions against Turkey if the country acquires additional Russian S-400 air defense systems.

"We were crystal clear when we wrote the CAATSA [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act] law: Sanctions are mandated for any entity that does significant business with the Russian military or intelligence sectors," Menendez said on Monday. "Any new purchases by Turkey must mean new sanctions."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Ankara intends to buy another set of Russian S-400 air defense systems despite pressure from Washington.

Last week, Erdogan said the continuous pressure on Turkey over its purchase of the S-400 system is unacceptable. Erdogan pointed out that the United States made a mistake by refusing to sell Turkey F-35 fighter jets under the pretext of the S-400 purchase.

Erdogan is scheduled to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday in Sochi to discuss bilateral trade, but also cover pressing issues, including Syria, Afghanistan and Libya.

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Boeing to Build 5 Poseidon Maritime Aircraft Worth \$750M In for Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$750 million US Navy modification contract to build five new Poseidon P-8A maritime reconnaissance aircraft for Germany, the Defense Department said.

"The Boeing Company [in] Seattle, Washington, is awarded a \$756,634,580... modification to a previously awarded contract... for the production and delivery of five Lot 12 P-8A aircraft for the government of Germany," the Defense Department said in a press release on Monday. Almost all the work on the contract - more than 98.1% - will be performed in Seattle in the US state of Washington and work is expected to be completed in February of 2025, the release said.

The P-8 operates as an anti-submarine and anti-surface aircraft and is also utilized in shipping interdiction roles. The aircraft is armed with torpedoes, Harpoon anti-ship missiles and other weapons and can operate with unmanned aerial vehicles , or drones.

The P-8 is already operated by the US Navy, the Indian Navy, the Royal Australian Navy and the UK Royal Air Force.

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Boeing Wins \$3.4Bln Order to Sustain Air Force C-17 Globemaster Fleet - Pentagon

ASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$3.4 billion US Air Force contract to maintain the Air Mobility Command force of C-17 Globemaster III aircraft over the next decade, the US Defense Department said.

"The Boeing Company [of] Long Beach, California, has been awarded a \$3,464,266,341... contract for the C-17 Globemaster III Sustainment Program," the Defense Department said in a press release on Monday. "The period of performance is nine years and eight months."

The Defense Department explained in the release that the contract will provide support and sustainment services to the government product support manager/product support integrator for the C-17 weapon system.

"Support includes ... program management; sustaining logistics; material and equipment management; sustaining engineering; quality assurance; depot level aircraft maintenance and modifications; F117 propulsion system management; long-term sustainment planning; field services, unique foreign military customer services and Air Logistics Center partnering support," the release said.

Work will be performed in multiple domestic and international locations and is expected to be completed by May 30, 2031, the release added.

The contract also involves Foreign Military Sales to the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, the NATO Airlift Program Office, India, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Qatar, according to the release.

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US to Reimburse Networks \$1.9Bln for Replacing Huawei, ZTE Equipment - Regulator

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will spend \$1.9 billion to reimburse networking companies for replacing their Huawei or ZTE equipment that the US authorities deem to pose a security threat, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said in a public notice.

"The Commission established the \$1.9 billion Reimbursement Program to reimburse providers of advanced communications services with ten million or fewer customers for costs incurred in the removal, replacement, and disposal of covered communications equipment or services from their networks that pose a national security risk," the FCC said in the notice on Monday.

"Covered communication equipment or services eligible for Reimbursement Program support is limited to the communications equipment or services produced or provided by Huawei Technologies Company (Huawei) or ZTE Corporation (ZTE)."

The FCC explained that the new program will cover replacement of all equipment or services obtained no later than June 30, 2020, and eligible providers must file a form to apply for funding under the program between October 29 and January 14, 2022.

On June 30, 2020, FCC designated the Chinese giants Huawei and ZTE as companies posing a national security threat to the United States and banned the use of FCC's Universal Service Fund to purchase equipment or services from all companies designated in this way.

The program comes amid ongoing US-China trade and political tensions as Washington banned Huawei from obtaining crucial parts, such as semiconductors, and bared the company from accessing the Google's Android operating system. The United States alleges Huawei and ZTE are a part of China's intelligence apparatus, while the companies dispute the allegation.

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RPT - IOM Looking for Alternatives for Haitians at US Border, Brazil Being 1 Option - Sources

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is actively looking for alternative destinations for Haitians who have gathered on the US-Mexico border other than returning to Haiti and Brazil may be asked to host some of the migrants as one option, IOM sources told Sputnik.

Some 15,000 migrants, mostly from Haiti, arrived in the Texas town of Del Rio along the US-Mexico border over the recent weeks, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and deploy border agents, including on horseback. Images shared on social media of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers corralling the migrants have prompted criticism by activists.

"Given the current socioeconomic and political situation in Haiti and knowing that a number of these Haitian nationals had previously been issued permanent residencies, and in some cases had children in other countries of the region, IOM is actively looking for alternatives other than return to Haiti for those who have other options. The enquiry made from IOM to the Brazilian

Embassy in Mexico is part of this search for humane, regular and safe migration options for this population," the sources said in a statement.

The IOM is very concerned about the situation in which Haitian nationals found themselves in Mexico, and particularly at the border with the United States, the statement said.

"Should migrants be willing to return and should concerned States be in agreement, IOM is ready to offer its expertise through its Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Program to help these migrants return in a safe and informed manner," the statement said.

The IOM pointed out in the statement that the AVR program is implemented under specific conditions "and applies a strict protocol to ensure that conditions upon return do not put returnees or their families at risk."

Following his speech at the UN General Assembly, US President Joe Biden vowed to get the migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border under control.

Last week, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced that the Biden administration conducted 17 flights to Haiti to transport about 2,000 migrants. Mayorkas also said US law enforcement agents involved in an incident involving alleged whipping of Haitian migrants were assigned to administrative duties and are no longer working with migrants.

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Six Cities, 22 US States Urge Biden to Crackdown on Greenhouse Gas Emissions - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - California is leading a coalition of 22 US state attorney generals and their counterparts in six major cities in calling on President Joe Biden to impose far more stringent controls on greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks, California Attorney General Bonta said.

"...Bonta today led a coalition of 22 attorneys general, the cities of Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose, and the counties of Denver and San Francisco in urging the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to adopt more stringent greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) standards for passenger cars and light trucks," Bonta's office said in a press release on Monday.

The transportation sector accounts for nearly one-third of all GHG emissions in the United States and reducing emissions from it is essential to stave off the worst effects of the climate crisis and to confront the inequitable distribution of climate change impacts, the release said. "More stringent standards will also decrease fine particulate air pollution and ozone - two pollutants which cause significant adverse health impacts. According to EPA estimates, the proposed standards would - conservatively - result in between \$86 billion and \$140 billion of total net benefits," the release said.

In 2020, there were 22 \$1 billion weather events, the most recorded since the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) began tracking the cost of these disasters. The average number of \$1 billion events since 1980 is seven; the average number since 2015 is more than double at 15, the release added.

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Texas Lawmakers Propose New Congressional Districts in Cities of Austin, Houston

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Texas Senate proposed during a special session a new congressional district map that adds two new seats in the US House of Representatives and would give Republicans a stronger hold in the state.

The Republican-controlled Senate revealed the proposal on Monday based on data from the 2020 US census, which added new congressional districts in the cities of Austin and Houston. The voting rights watchdog group Democracy Docket said the proposal would reportedly protect incumbent Republican Congressmen by removing Democratic voters from their districts and overlapping districts represented by Democratic House lawmakers.

The proposed congressional district map would reportedly pit Democratic Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee against her Democratic Congressman Al Green. In addition, Republican Congressman Dan Crenshaw's district would overlap with the district represented by Democratic Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia.

The proposed plan would need to be approved by Texas Governor Greg Abbott.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) -

ELECTIONS IN GERMANY

* Russia is closely following the results of the parliamentary elections in Germany and hopes for continuity of relations under the new authorities, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

* The Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader and candidate for chancellor Olaf Scholz said all involved parties should undertake obligations in connection with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline launch, while Ukraine should remain a transit country.

* Germany attaches great importance to transatlantic partnership, Scholz assured.

* CDU/CSU bloc leader Ralph Brinkhaus in the old convocation of the Bundestag expressed disappointment with the results of the federal election, noting that conservatives still have a chance to form a new cabinet.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The Russian Consulate General in Houston, Texas, may be forced to operate with only two diplomats by the end of 2021 unless the situation with respect to the United States' issuing visas improves, Consul General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

* US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will lead the US delegation to Geneva for strategic stability dialogue with Russia which is scheduled on September 30, the US State Department said.

* Cameron International Corporation, a Texas-based company has agreed to pay more than \$1.4 million penalty for providing services to the Russian energy company Gazprom-Neft Shelf in violation of the United States' Ukraine-related sanctions, the US Treasury Department said.

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * Afghanistan withdrew on Monday its participation in the UN General Assembly high-level debates, spokeswoman for the UN General Assembly's President, Monica Grayley, told Sputnik.
- * The United Nations has so far received \$131 million out of \$1.2 billion pledged by international donors at the conference to support Afghanistan, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.
- * The Taliban (banned in Russia) imposed a curfew in Jalalabad, the capital of the Afghan province of Nangarhar, where several deadly explosions took place over the past ten days, a source told Sputnik.

PUTIN TALKS WITH ERDOGAN, LUKASHENKO

- * The Kremlin is engaged in preparations for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to the Russian resort city of Sochi, his negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin are expected to focus on trade and the economy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
- * Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko spoke and touched on NATO troops deployment to Ukraine, Peskov said, adding that Putin repeatedly said this crosses the "red lines."

COVID-19

- * The Russian Ministry of Health has authorized the start of clinical trials of the new Betuvax recombinant vaccine against COVID-19, according to the register.
- * US State Department spokesperson Ned Price announced on Monday that he was tested positive for COVID-19 and added that he would be in quarantine for 10 days.
- * President Joe Biden received his COVID-19 booster shot at the White House and said the relevant US health agencies have determined that the injection is "safe and effective."

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US Blue-Chip, Tech Stocks Fumble on Worries of Rate Hike

NEW YORK, September 27 (Sputnik) - Fears of an imminent US rate hike weighed on Wall Street on Monday, sending blue chips, including high-trending technology stocks, lower, even as a senior Federal Reserve official sought to allay market fears that the central bank was mulling such an action.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stocks Exchange, settled down almost 12 points, or 0.3%, at 4,444.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, led by Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished down 78 points, or 0.5%, at 14,970.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, comprising mostly industrial stocks, was the only major index that bucked Monday's lower trend, closing up 71 points, or 0.2%, at 34,869.

"It's been an interesting start to the week as equity markets made strong gains early in the day before giving most back," Craig Erlam, an analyst at online trading portal OANDA, said.

"Policymakers are continuing to grapple with rising inflation which is both higher and potentially less transitory than previously anticipated, [making] life very uncomfortable for central banks." Fed Governor Lael Brainard said Monday that any attempt by the central bank to taper its long-running economic stimulus should not mean an automatic rate hike would follow. The question of when the Fed 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 Fed's stimulus program and other monetary accommodations have been blamed for aggravating price pressures in the United States. The central bank has spent an estimated \$2.2 trillion in propping up the US economy with its stimulus program since the COVID-19 outbreak. It has also kept rates unchanged at between zero and a quarter percent over the past 18 months.

At his news conference after the Fed's September policy meeting last week, Chairman Powell suggested mid-2022 as an appropriate target for concluding the central bank's monthly bond-buying of \$120 billion. The Fed's so-called dot-plot plan also called for interest rates to be raised any time next year onwards, he said.

Powell is due to update the US Senate on Tuesday on the Fed's latest policy decisions and how they would help shield and grow the economy from the near two-year-old pandemic. What he says could lead to a reexamination of the Fed's targets.

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US Has No Announcements on Possible Nuland Visit to Russia – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, 27 (Sputnik) – US State Department has no announcements on a possible visit of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland to Russia, a spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"We have no travel announcements at this time," the spokesperson said.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Saturday, when asked about a possible visit of Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, that Moscow and Washington are preparing a number of meetings at the level of the Foreign Ministry and the State Department.

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Fed Stimulus Taper Will Not Trigger Automatic Rate Hike - Governor Brainard

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve slashing economic stimulus does not necessarily entail interest rates rising, Lael Brainard, governor of the central bank, said Monday amid speculation that a rate hike should be automatic on the back of the so-called taper.

"I would emphasize that no signal about the timing of liftoff should be taken from any decision to announce a slowing of asset purchases," Brainard said in a speech prepared for delivery at a business conference in Arlington, Virginia. Liftoff has become a popular reference for a rate hike, which America has not had since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

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Powell is due to update the US Senate on Tuesday on the Fed's latest policy decisions and how they would help shield and grow the economy from the near two-year-old coronavirus pandemic. What he says could lead to a reexamination of the Fed's targets.

Brainard said going forth, the Fed would likely make US employment its main guide for a rate change.

"We have learned this summer that it is important to remain highly attentive to the data and to avoid placing too much weight on an outlook that remains highly uncertain," she said. "In implementing policy step by step, we must remain faithful to our new framework and attentive to changing conditions in order to ensure sufficient momentum as fiscal tailwinds shift to headwinds to achieve our maximum employment and inflation goals."

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

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

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

The Fed thinks growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. But Chairman 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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US Citizen Pleads Guilty to Helping North Korea Evade Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - An American citizen pleaded guilty in US court for agreeing to help North Korea evade US sanctions through cryptocurrency services, the Department of Justice said on Monday.

"VIRGIL GRIFFITH, a US citizen, pled guilty to conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act by providing services to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea including technical advice on using cryptocurrency and blockchain technology to evade sanctions," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The release said Griffith is a cryptocurrency expert and as early as 2018 worked to provide services to individuals in North Korea by developing and funding cryptocurrency infrastructure in the country for the purpose of evading US sanctions.

Griffith, who lived in Singapore, traveled to North Korea in 2019 despite the US Department of State denying him permission to travel to the country, the release said. While in North Korea, Griffith attended a conference in Pyongyang to provide instruction on how North Korea could use cryptocurrency and blockchain technology to launder money and avoid US sanctions, the release said.

Griffith will be sentenced on January 18, 2022, the release said.

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RPT - US Deputy Envoy for Climate Visits Africa to Discuss Glasgow Conference – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, 27 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Special Envoy for Climate Johnathan Pershing is visiting African countries to discuss the upcoming climate conference in Glasgow, the State Department said in a statement on Monday.

"Pershing will meet with national and African Union counterparts, civil society, private sector, and other representatives of donor countries and financial institutions on efforts to address the climate crisis and raise global climate ambition ahead of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which will be held October 31 to November 12, 2021, in Glasgow, United Kingdom," the statement read.

From September 27 to October 8, Pershing will be visiting South Africa, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and Senegal, it added. He also will hold virtual meetings with senior Kenyan and African Union officials on Friday.

The Scottish city of Glasgow is set to host the COP26 summit from October 31 to November 12, gathering representatives from some 200 countries. The UN climate conference, which was canceled last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, will seek to speed up the implementation of the groundbreaking Paris Agreement that aims to bring annual global temperature increase to under 1.5 degrees Celsius.

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"Pershing will meet with national and African Union counterparts, civil society, private sector, and other representatives of donor countries and financial institutions on efforts to address the climate crisis and raise global climate ambition ahead of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which will be held October 31 to November 12, 2021, in Glasgow, United Kingdom," the statement read.

From September 27 to October 8, Pershing will be visiting South Africa, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and Senegal, it added. He also will hold virtual meetings with senior Kenyan and African Union officials on Friday.

The Scottish city of Glasgow is set to host the COP26 summit from October 31 to November 12, gathering representatives from some 200 countries. The UN climate conference, which was canceled last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, will seek to speed up the implementation of the groundbreaking Paris Agreement that aims to bring annual global temperature increase to under 1.5 degrees Celsius.

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Senior US Officials Convey to OSCE Commitment to Continue Working on Nagorno-Karabakh

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Senior US officials met on Monday with representatives of OSCE Minsk Group and conveyed the commitment of Washington to continue working to help Armenia and Azerbaijan resolve the issues related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the US State Department said.

The US side was represented by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of European and Eurasian Affairs Dereck Hogan and National Security Council Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat, while the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs were represented by France's Stephane Visconti, US Andrew Schofer, Russia's Igor Khovaev, as well as Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office Andrzej Kasprzyk

"[Hogan and Sloat] conveyed the commitment of the United States to continue working with its fellow co-chair countries to help Armenia and Azerbaijan resolve all outstanding issues related to or resulting from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including with regard to detainees, missing persons, and humanitarian demining efforts," the statement said.

The sides noted that September 27 marks the one-year anniversary of the start of renewed intensified hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

"They underscored only a comprehensive resolution that addresses all outstanding issues can normalize relations between the two countries and allow the people of the region to live together peacefully," the state department added.

The decades-long conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh flared up on September 27, 2020, leading to military and civilian casualties on both sides. The clashes ended with the signing of a ceasefire deal by Yerevan and Baku, which was mediated by Moscow, on November 9.

The deal resulted in a significant loss of territories controlled by Yerevan-aligned Artsakh and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region to monitor the truce.

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US Ready to Meet With North Korea Without Preconditions – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) – The United States is ready to hold a meeting with the North Korean leadership without preconditions to resolve the pressing issue of the Korean peninsula denuclearization, US Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Monday.

"We are prepared to meet with the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] without preconditions and we certainly hope that the DPRK will respond positively to our outreach," Porter said at a press briefing.

Porter underscored that the US' goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Earlier in September, the United States State Department said it considers the North Korean missile launches to be a threat to the country's neighbors and the international community, and urged Pyongyang to return to dialogue on denuclearization.

During a trilateral meeting in September, high-ranking diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States discussed a possible response to the North Korean missile tests. The parties agreed to continue cooperation on the denuclearization of North Korea by combining dialogue with Pyongyang and sanctions pressure.

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Florida State Govt. to Probe Facebook For Election Interventions – Governor DeSantis

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) – Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has directed his Secretary of State Laurel Lee to launch a probe into Facebook, following a media report that it spared favored users from being banned for publicizing their political views, the state government said on Monday

"Today, Governor DeSantis directed Secretary of State Laurel Lee to investigate Facebook for alleged election interference, following a bombshell report that the tech giant put its thumb on the scale of numerous state and local races by exempting elite users from Facebook's own rules," the state said in a news release.

According to Facebook internal documents obtained by the Wall Street Journal, the company applied a double standard to its users and granted select users the freedom to disregard the platform's own community standards without the threat of enforcement action, the release explained.

"If this new report is true, Facebook has violated Florida law to put its thumb on the scale of numerous state and local races....That is why I am directing Secretary Lee to use all legal means to uncover violations of Florida's election laws. The thought of Facebook clandestinely manipulating elections is an affront to the basic principles of our republic," DeSantis said in the release."

If the Wall Street Journal report was accurate, Facebook had created a privileged class of speakers and has empowered them to manipulate US elections with impunity, the release stated.

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State Department Spokesperson Ned Price Says Tested Positive for COVID-19

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price announced on Monday that he was tested positive for COVID-19 and added that he would be in quarantine for 10 days.

"After experiencing symptoms for the first time this morning, I tested positive for COVID-19 shortly thereafter, & will now quarantine for the next 10 days. I'm feeling under the weather but am grateful for the protection from severe illness offered by safe and effective vaccines," Price tweeted.

State Secretary Anthony Blinken tested negative for COVID-19 just this morning, while no other member of his immediate surrounding is showing symptoms, Deputy spokesperson, Jalina Porter, later said.

Price assumed the post of the department's spokesman in the administration of Joe Biden on January 20. He served in the Central Intelligence Agency from 2006-2017 and resigned when Donald Trump, came to power.

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Russian Consul in Houston Says Hopes Upcoming US-Russia Talks Improve Work of Mission

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Moscow hopes that the next round of the US-Russia talks will lead to positive outcomes in the work of Russian diplomats in the US, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said earlier that about 60 employees of Russia's diplomatic mission (with family members more than 140 people) are currently awaiting a decision on the visa requests submitted to the US State Department.

"I would like to hope that the planned next round of consultations on bilateral issues will nevertheless lead to positive changes, and it will be possible to find mutually acceptable solutions," Zakharov stated.

When asked whether there has been any improvement in the work of the diplomatic mission in the United States since the Geneva summit, Zakharov, stressed, "Unfortunately, at this stage, no."

"The way our American partners are 'slowing down' the solution to this problem gives the impression that only the Russian side needs the normal, full-fledged work of diplomatic missions and consular offices," he noted. "All constructive proposals emanating from Moscow disappear without a trace in the bureaucratic obstacles of American departments."

Zakharov went on to say that Russia does not put forward any unreasonable, exaggerated demands.

"We are talking about an equal, respectful attitude towards each other, a reasonable interpretation of the provisions of international normative acts regulating the sphere of diplomacy," he stressed. "In response, there is either silence or new restrictions."

Zakharov explained that the relatively recent efforts by Washington are limiting the duration of business trips of employees of Russian overseas missions in the United States to three years.

"It is noteworthy that neither the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, nor the Consular Convention between the USSR and the United States of June 1, 1964, even in principle, do not imply such a condition," he said. "Yes, these documents contain provisions regarding the number of personnel of embassies and consulates (it should be within 'reasonable and normal' limits), but there is not a word about the time frames."

Zakharov pointed out that by such steps, Washington is trying to influence the personnel policy and the rules of rotation of the Russian Foreign Ministry in the US.

"That defies logic," he stated. "This is still the sovereign right of the directing side. And, as always, only the Russians were 'lucky,' diplomats of other states, as far as we know, are not limited in terms of stay."

Zakharov underscored that the move has impacted the diplomatic mission in Houston in the most negative way.

"My colleagues, whose three-year business trips are coming to an end, have to return home without replacement. That is, there is simply no one to work," he explained. "Only in the last six months, several employees have left in this way."

Commenting on finding a replacement for the diplomats, Zakharov stressed that each diplomat is one of a kind.

"When traveling abroad, these people face high demands ranging from sophisticated professional preparation to the state of health," he said. "The main thing is that the Americans continue to pursue a policy of 'visa containment' by not issuing visas to prepared candidates."

And if earlier separate cases of so-called visa exchanges were carried out, recently, the state of affairs has stalled."

The Russia-US dialogue on resuming the normal process of work of diplomatic missions has seen no progress, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said earlier in September, adding that Washington makes attempts to pressure Moscow in order to bargain one-sided advantages for itself.

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Russian Consulate in Houston May Be Left With 2 Diplomats by End of 2021 - Consul General

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Russian Consulate General in Houston, Texas, may be forced to operate with only two diplomats by the end of this year unless the situation with respect to the United States' issuing visas improves, Consul General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"Frankly, if the situation does not change, then by the end of this year only two diplomats will remain in the Consulate General: your humble servant and the deputy consul-adviser. This is less than a quarter of the required number of people," Zakharov said.

The consul said the two people performing consular activities - signing documents, officially contacting the US authorities, visiting persons under arrest or imprisonment - would have to cover 13 US states in South and Midwest of the United States, where "tens of thousands of our compatriots live."

Zakharov said the Consulate General would also have to reduce the number of citizens it can receive and expects an increase the response time.

"Well, if the situation doesn't change, my deputy and I will have to recall our young years and, with the permission of Moscow, as they say in our professional jargon 'sit at the window' ourselves - receive citizens, draw up powers of attorney, print passports and visas, answer letters, and so on," Zakharov said. "Alas, in this situation we will have no choice but to limit the reception."

Zakharov explained that after the closures of the Russia's Consulates General in San Francisco and Seattle at the request of the US government, the main burden of serving Russian citizens living on United States' West Coast fell on the diplomatic facility in Houston.

"It is simply more convenient and less expensive for our customers to come to us rather than to the more distant missions in Washington or New York. It is not surprising that the number of consular actions we perform has almost doubled in comparison with 2017. At the same time, it is unlikely that it will be possible to handle the same volume of work in the current conditions of underrepresented personnel," he said.

Zakharov pointed out that the list of tasks of the diplomatic mission is not limited only to consulate services but also has a political component that includes the promotion of the entire spectrum of Russia's interests abroad, the development of bilateral economic, cultural, educational and other ties as well as information and explanatory work.

"It is also worth noting that this year - again due to a lack of staff - we were forced to refuse to hold field sessions in those cities that they were counting on us, first of all, Denver, Colorado and Dallas, Texas," he said.

For the same reason, it was not possible to fully carry out all the events planned for the 60th anniversary of the first man's flight into space, Zakharov added.

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Atlas V Booster Carries Latest US Landsat Satellite Into Orbit - NASA

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The United Launch Alliance (ULA) successfully fired the Landsat 9 satellite into orbit on an Atlas V booster missile from the Vandenberg Space Force Base in the US state of California, NASA announced on Monday.

After previously delays since the originally scheduled date of September 16, Landsat 9 was launched smoothly at 2:12 pm US Eastern Time. The takeoff was podcast live by NASA.

Landsat 9 is "a joint NASA and US Geological Survey (USGS) mission that will continue the legacy of monitoring Earth's land and coastal regions that began with the first Landsat satellite in 1972," the space agency said.

Landsat 9 will now join its sister satellite, Landsat 8, in orbit in collecting images from across the planet every eight days, NASA also said.

The mission will continue the Landsat program's critical role in monitoring the Earth and helping manage essential resources, including crops, irrigation water, and forests, NASA added.

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Delta Variant May Yet Worsen to Slow America's Return to Work - Fed's Brainard

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The impact of COVID-19's Delta variant on the US workforce may worsen in the coming months to significantly slow employers' targets of bringing staff back to their site or office, Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard said Monday.

"While I am hopeful for improvements in the September employment report with the return to in-person education, the effects of Delta have likely prolonged caregiving constraints," said in a speech prepared for delivery at a business conference in Arlington, Virginia.

To illustrate her point, Brainard said there were 2,000 school closures for COVID-19 across nearly 470 school districts in 39 of the 50 US states.

"While the disruptions last just under six days on average, the possibility of further unpredictable disruptions could cause some parents to delay their plans to return to the labor force. Similarly, COVID-related challenges have reduced the availability of day care, preschool, and after-school care, further complicating parental return-to-work decisions."

With record-high job openings and an unemployment rate just above 5%, the headline vacancy-to-unemployed ratio has risen above 1 vacancy per job seeker and was now at pre-pandemic levels, Brainard said.

"Some cite this ratio of job openings to job seekers as indicating we are close to full employment," she said. "But virus conditions may be driving an important wedge between labor supply in the near term relative to the medium term."

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

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

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

The Fed thinks growth will average at 6.5% for all of 2021. But Chairman 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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"Frankly, if the situation does not change, then by the end of this year only two diplomats will remain in the Consulate General: your humble servant and the deputy consul-adviser. This is less than a quarter of the required number of people," Zakharov said.

The consul said the two people performing consular activities - signing documents, officially contacting the US authorities, visiting persons under arrest or imprisonment - would have to cover 13 US states in South and Midwest of the United States, where "tens of thousands of our compatriots live."

Zakharov said the Consulate General would also have to reduce the number of citizens it can receive and expects an increase the response time.

"Well, if the situation doesn't change, my deputy and I will have to recall our young years and, with the permission of Moscow, as they say in our professional jargon 'sit at the window' ourselves - receive citizens, draw up powers of attorney, print passports and visas, answer letters, and so on," Zakharov said. "Alas, in this situation we will have no choice but to limit the reception."

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US Release of Huawei CFO Not Linked to China Releasing Canadian Citizens - White House

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The release of Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor from Chinese custody is not linked to the release of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in Canada hours beforehand, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I think it's important to note and to be clear about this: there is no link... This is a legal matter, it was an announcement made by the Department of Justice... [President Joe Biden] raised the two individuals, the two Michaels who have been released - very positive news. It should not come as a surprise that President Xi raised the Huawei official. But again, there was no negotiation on this call," Psaki said during a press conference.

Psaki added that the United States' policy toward China has not changed as a result of either action and the relationship between the two countries remains one of competition.

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US Successfully Tests Hypersonic Missile at Speeds Over Mach 5 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The United States last week successfully tested a Raytheon-built hypersonic missile that reached a speed of Mach 5, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced and Research Project Agency (DARPA) said on Monday.

"DARPA, in partnership with the US Air Force, completed a free flight test of its Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapon Concept last week," DARPA said in a press release. "The missile, built by Raytheon Technologies, was released from an aircraft seconds before its Northrop Grumman scramjet (supersonic combustion ramjet) engine kicked on. The engine compressed incoming air mixed with its hydrocarbon fuel and began igniting that fast-moving airflow mixture, propelling the cruiser at a speed greater than Mach 5."

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US Judge Grants Unconditional Release of Man Who Tried to Kill President Reagan - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge on Monday agreed that John Hinckley, the man who tried to assassinate former President Ronald Reagan in 1981, can be released from all court-imposed restrictions in June, a court filing revealed.

Hinckley was found not guilty because of insanity and was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC. In 2016, he was allowed to leave the hospital to live at his mother's home in the state of Virginia under court-imposed restrictions.

"Minute Entry for proceedings held before Judge Paul L. Friedman: Evidentiary hearing/Status Conference as to JOHN W. HINCKLEY, JR held on 9/27/2021," the court filing said. "The parties address the status of this action, and the court GRANTS the joint request of the parties to place Mr. Hinkley on unconditional release until June 2022. Order will be issued by the court."

Judge Friedman said in a court hearing that Hinckley must continue to obey the court-imposed rules and remain mentally stable until June, according to media reports.

The court-imposed restrictions placed on Hinckley include doctor and therapist monitoring of his medication and therapy sessions. Hinckley is not allowed to have a gun and cannot contact any of Reagan's family or the families of other victims injured in the assassination attempt.

Hinckley attempted to kill Reagan on March 30, 1981. He shot former White House Press Secretary James Brady in the head, police officer Thomas Delahanty in the back of his neck, Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy in the abdomen and Reagan in the lung.

Hinckley said he wanted to impress his idol - actress Jodie Foster - by shooting Reagan. Later, he was diagnosed with acute psychosis, major depression and narcissistic personality disorder.

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US Company to Pay \$1.4Mln for Providing Services to Russian Energy Company – Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Cameron International Corporation, a Texas-based company has agreed to pay more than \$1.4 million penalty for providing services to the Russian energy company Gazprom-Neft Shelf in violation of the United States' Ukraine-related sanctions, the US Treasury Department said on Monday.

"Cameron International Corporation ("Cameron"), a Houston, Texas-based supplier of goods and services for the oil and gas industries, and a subsidiary of Schlumberger Limited ("Schlumberger") of Curacao, Netherlands, has agreed to pay \$1,423,766 to settle its potential civil liability for apparent violations arising from its provision of services to the Russian energy firm Gazprom-Neft Shelf for an Arctic offshore oil project," the Treasury Department said in a release.

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Biden Receives COVID-19 Booster, Says US Agencies Determined Shot to Be 'Safe, Effective'

WASHINGTON, 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Monday received his COVID-19 booster shot at the White House and said the relevant US health agencies have determined that the injection is "safe and effective."

"The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) looked at all of the data, completed their review and determined that the boosters for the Pfizer vaccine are safe and effective," Biden said minutes before receiving the shot.

The US president said he assumed booster shots by other COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers can be approved later.

Biden urged Americans to get vaccinated by repeating his position that COVID-19 is a "pandemic of unvaccinated" - an assertion disputed by some epidemiologists and other medical professionals.

"Over 77 percent of adults have gotten at least one shot, about 23 percent have not got any shots," Biden said and accused those individuals who have not received the injections of damaging the country.

Biden also said that on Wednesday he will travel to Chicago, Illinois, to discuss why it is important for businesses to institute their own vaccine requirements.

On Thursday, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices issued a recommendation for booster shots to be administered only to those over 65 years of age and to individuals at risk.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky overruled the decision and made other categories who are allegedly at risk, such as healthcare workers and teachers, eligible to get booster shots.

On Friday, Biden said booster shots will be available for all eligible Americans in 80,000 locations across the United States.

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UN Receives \$131M In Out of \$1.2B In Pledged by Donors for Afghanistan - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has so far received \$131 million out of \$1.2 billion pledged by international donors at the conference to support Afghanistan, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday. "You'll recall \$1.2 billion for humanitarian development aid was pledged. To date, \$131 million has actually been received, that's 21.7% of the \$606 million required through the end of this year," Dujarric said.

The spokesperson said they are very pleased with the pledges and even more pleased when they get cash.

The United Nations convened the pledging conference to assist the country on September 13 in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Afghan economy has been facing collapse since the Taliban (banned in Russia) seized power last month, as the takeover prompted international organizations and donor countries to suspend aid and funding of humanitarian projects. The International Monetary Fund, among other financial institutions, blocked an automatic payout of \$460 million and suspended the country's special drawing rights in August.

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Afghanistan Withdraws Participation in UN General Assembly Debate - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan on Monday withdrew its participation in the UN General Assembly high-level debates, spokeswoman for the UN General Assembly's president, Monica Grayley, told Sputnik.

"The Office of the President of the General Assembly was informed that the Member State withdrew its participation in the General Debate," Grayley said when asked why Afghanistan was not appearing on the updated speakers list for Monday.

The issue of Afghanistan's participation was unclear after the Taliban (banned in Russia) submitted a letter to the United Nations last week requesting that it take part in the debate.

United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Afghanistan's Ambassador to the world body Ghulam Nabi Isac Zai, appointed by toppled former President Ashraf Ghani, is set to address the UN General Assembly on Monday.

Dujarric said Afghanistan's permanent diplomatic mission informed the United Nations over the weekend that they would not participate in the UN General Assembly debate.

"We received a communication from them via email that they wish to be taken out from the speaker's list, and we did," he said.

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US Federal Reserve Should Focus on Future, Not Present, Inflation - Chicago Fed Chief

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve should be more worried about an unsupportive economy not generating consistent inflation in the coming years, than current short-term price pressures, Charles Evan, a senior official of the US central bank said Monday. "I'm more uneasy about us not generating enough inflation in 2023 and 2024 than the possibility that we will be living with too much," Evans, president of the Chicago chapter of the Fed, told a live-streamed event.

Evans, one of the more dovish members of the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, typically advocates for a more relaxed monetary regime to allow the economy to grow, sometimes at the expense of inflation.

His comments came a day before Fed Chair Jay Powell was due to update the US Senate on the central bank's latest policy decisions and how they would help shield and grow the economy from the coronavirus pandemic.

John Williams, who is president of the New York chapter of the Fed, said at a separate event on Monday that he expected inflation, now trending above 2%, to moderate by next year. Williams also said he expected the economy to grow by between 5.5% to 6% this year.

At his news conference after the Fed's September policy meeting last week, Chairman Powell suggested mid-2022 as an appropriate target for concluding the central bank's monthly bond-buying of \$120 billion.

The Fed's so-called dot-plot plan also called for interest rates, suppressed at near-zero since the COVID-19 outbreak, to be raised any time next year onwards, he said.

Powell's Senate testimony on Tuesday could, however, lead to a reexamination of these targets, depending on what he says.

The question of when the Fed 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 Fed'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 central bank's spending, 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 Fed's forecast.

The Fed, however, has been grappling with overwhelming inflation and an underperforming job market.

The Fed'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 Fed's own target for inflation is 2% per annum.

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US Deputy Secretary of State to Visit Geneva for Stability Talks With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will lead the US delegation to Geneva for strategic stability dialogue with Russia scheduled for September 30, the State Department announced on Monday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Geneva, Switzerland on September 29 to lead a US interagency delegation to a September 30 US-Russia bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue. She will be joined by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins," the statement said.

The State Department noted that the two delegations last met in Geneva on July 28.

"The Strategic Stability Dialogue follows from a commitment made by President Biden and Russian President Putin in their June 2021 Geneva meeting to have a deliberate and robust dialogue that will seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures. Deputy Secretary Sherman will also travel to Bern to inaugurate the first U.S.-Swiss Strategic Partnership Dialogue with Swiss State Secretary Livia Leu," the statement added.

Sherman will then travel to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where she is due to meet with senior officials and civil society members on October 4. She will also visit New Delhi, India, on October 6 for a series of bilateral meetings as well as for the India Ideas Summit which will be held on October 6 and October 7. Also on October 7, Sherman will travel to the Indian city of Mumbai for talks with business and civil society.

Sherman will complete her trip in Islamabad, Pakistan, on October 7-8 where she is to meet with senior officials.

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US Drug Enforcement Administration Warns of Fake Prescription Pills With Fentanyl, Meth

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) issued a warning to the public on Monday about an increasing number of fake pills with dangerous ingredients including fentanyl and meth.

"Today, the Drug Enforcement Administration issued a Public Safety Alert warning Americans of the alarming increase in the lethality and availability of fake prescription pills containing fentanyl and methamphetamine. DEA's Public Safety Alert, the first in six years, seeks to raise public awareness of a significant nationwide surge in counterfeit pills that are mass-produced by criminal drug networks in labs, deceptively marketed as legitimate prescription pills, and are killing unsuspecting Americans at an unprecedented rate," the DEA said.

The DEA said that they have seized fake pills of the aforementioned nature in all 50 states, totaling more than 9.5 million counterfeit pills seized so far this year – more than twice the number of the last two years combined.

Criminal drug networks manufacture the pills to look like legitimate pharmaceuticals including oxycodone, hydrocodone, Xanax, and Adderall. They are then frequently sold on social media and other online marketplaces, making them available to everyone including minors, according to the agency.

While the majority of the fake pills are manufactured in Mexico and then brought into the US, the chemical precursors for the production of the drugs come from China, the DEA added.

They noted that the public warning does not apply to legitimate prescription medications prescribed by a doctor and dispensed by a licensed pharmacist, as that supply chain is unimpacted by the fake pills.

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Deputy State Secretary to Travel to Geneva for Stability Talks with Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will lead the US delegation to Geneva for strategic stability dialogue with Russia which is scheduled on September 30, the US State Department announced on Monday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Geneva, Switzerland on September 29 to lead a U.S. interagency delegation to a September 30 U.S.-Russia bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue. She will be joined by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins," the statement said.

The State Department noted that the two delegations last met in Geneva on July 28.

"The Strategic Stability Dialogue follows from a commitment made by President Biden and Russian President Putin in their June 2021 Geneva meeting to have a deliberate and robust dialogue that will seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures. Deputy Secretary Sherman will also travel to Bern to inaugurate the first U.S.-Swiss Strategic Partnership Dialogue with Swiss State Secretary Livia Leu," it added.

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US Murder Rate Increases 29% in 2020 Amid Pandemic - FBI

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The US murder rate increased by 29% in 2020 compared to 2019 marking the first such increase in four years, the FBI said on Monday. "In 2020, there were an estimated 1,277,696 violent crimes... The volume of murder and non-negligent manslaughter offenses increased 29.4 percent," the FBI said in a press release. The increase in violent crime in 2020 came as the United States grappled with racially charged riots following the death of George Floyd and the outbreak of the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in nationwide lockdown orders and millions of Americans losing their jobs. The release said aggravated assault cases rose by 12% in 2020 compared to the previous year. Overall, violent crime in the United States increased by 5.6% compared to 2019, the release said. Property crimes dropped by 7.8% last year compared to 2019, but motor vehicle thefts rose 12%, the release said.

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Pfizer Starts Second Phase of Testing New Antiviral COVID-19 Oral Drug in Exposed Adults

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - Pfizer has started the second phase in the study of its new oral antiviral drug to prevent COVID-19 infection in adults exposed to the novel coronavirus, the company said on Monday. "Pfizer Inc. today announced the start of the Phase 2/3 EPIC-PEP (Evaluation of Protease Inhibition for COVID-19 in Post-Exposure Prophylaxis) study to evaluate the investigational novel oral antiviral candidate PF-07321332, co-administered with a low dose of ritonavir, for the prevention of COVID-19 infection," the company said in a release. The new study is enrolling individuals 18 and older living in the same household with an individual who has a confirmed symptomatic coronavirus infection, the release said. If successful, the oral antiviral therapy will be able to stop the virus in the early stages in individuals exposed to the novel coronavirus and prevent the virus from replicating itself and inhibiting the onset of infection in others, Pfizer Chief Scientific Officer Mikael Dolsten said. On Sunday, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla said the world would be able to return to normal life within a year provided there will be annual revaccinations.

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Biden to Receive COVID-19 Booster Shot Live on TV Monday - White House

WASHINGTON, 27 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will receive his COVID-19 booster shot live on TV at 1 p.m. (17:00 GMT) today, the White House said on Monday.

“The President will deliver remarks and receive a COVID-19 booster shot in line with the CDC’s [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and FDA’s [Food and Drug Administration] recommendations,” the White House said.

On Thursday, the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices issued its recommendation with regard to booster shots against the novel coronavirus. The Committee recommended the boosters for millions of Americans who are at risk for getting a serious disease due to underlying health conditions but excluded frontline workers from it. The CDC’s director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, overruled the decision and made the workers at risk, including healthcare workers and teachers, eligible for getting a booster shot.

Biden said later that booster shots will be available for all eligible Americans in 80,000 locations across the country.

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Taliban Unpredictability Poses Biggest Constraint for US Evacuation Efforts - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - The unpredictability of the Taliban’s decision making regarding whom they allow to leave Afghanistan remains the biggest constraint to the Biden administration’s efforts US citizens and others, a senior State Department official said on Monday.

“The biggest constraint to the departure of our citizens and others from Afghanistan remains the Taliban’s unpredictability regarding who’s permitted to depart,” the official said.

The second big constraint to US government’s efforts to evacuate individuals is the lack of regular commercial air service so those who wish to leave Afghanistan can do so in a predictable manner, the official said.

Since August 31, at least 85 American citizens and 79 lawful permanent residents have left Afghanistan with the assistance of the US government, the official said.

The total number who have departed could be higher due to people leaving Afghanistan for third-party countries on private charter flights outside of the visibility of the US government, the official said.

There are approximately 100 American citizens and lawful permanent residents ready to leave Afghanistan, but that the number changes every day due to people changing their minds and taking advantage of other options to get out, the official added.

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Israel Ready For Direct Talks With Palestine Without Preconditions - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Israel is prepared to have direct talks with Palestine without any preconditions, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, told Sputnik.

"We always call for direct talks with the Palestinian authority for years but without preconditions but they refuse," Erdan said when asked whether Israel is ready for direct talks with Palestine.

"President [Mahmoud] Abbas has been continuing to boycott the state of Israel for years and years because he expects that all his demands will be accepted even before the first day of negotiations which cannot be accepted by the state of Israel."

He went on to claim that Israeli and US leadership understands that Abbas was "not a real partner for peace and negotiations."

The Palestinians are ready to resume peace talks with Israel but have yet to see a willingness from the latter's new leadership, Palestinian National Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik last week.

Al Maliki added that the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres should publicly highlight that the Palestinians have reacted positively to his call for renewed dialogue with Israel and should specifically call out Israeli officials responsible for blocking the resumption of talks.

Last Tuesday, Guterres urged the leaders of Israel and Palestine to resume negotiations towards a two-state solution during his remarks at the UN General Assembly.

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Israel Expects New Normalization Deal With Arab Muslim Nation This Year - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Israel expects a new deal on normalization of relations with an Arab country this year, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, told Sputnik.

When asked whether they expect a new deal on normalization of ties with Arab nations this year, Erdan said, "This year."

"We are working with the American administration to identify more Arab Muslim countries that might normalize relations with Israel and I hope that quite soon you'll hear other good news about other Arab countries," Erdan stated.

The Israeli envoy, however, refused to name the specific country for fear of jeopardizing the chances.

"The problem is if I tell you the name of this country it might ruin the chances to achieve peace with this specific country," he noted.

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Boeing Provides First Block III F/A-18 Fighter Jets to US Navy - Statement

WASHINGTON, 27 (Sputnik) - Boeing has provided to the US Navy the first of the 78 contracted Block III F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets, the company said in a statement on Monday.

"Block III is the most advanced version of the Super Hornet and exceeds fourth-generation fighter capabilities," the statement said.

Block III provides the US Navy with additional capabilities, including advanced cockpit system and tools, which allow for increasing a pilot's situational awareness, the statement explained.

"Getting the first operational Block III in our hands is a great step forward in supporting our capability and readiness goals," US Navy F/A-18 Program Manager Capt. Jason Denney said in the statement.

Boeing received a \$4 billion contract on 61 single-seat and 17 two-seat Block III F/A-18 Super Hornets in March 2020, and the jet's first flight took place two months later, the statement added.

Boeing will continue to deliver Block III capabilities to the US Navy through the mid-2030s, according to the statement.

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Syrian Constitutional Committee Reconvene Mid-October - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - The next session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee will convene in the middle of October, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Sputnik on Monday.

"It will [resume] very soon.... in the middle of October," Mekdad said when asked about where does the resumption of the Syrian political process stand.

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UN Security Council Urges New Lebanon's Government to Implement Reforms - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Monday called on the Lebanese newly formed government led by Prime Minister Najib Mikati to swiftly implement reforms amid a dire economic crisis that has plunged much of the population into poverty.

"The members of the Security Council urged Lebanon's new government to swiftly and transparently implement the well-known, necessary and tangible reforms, as reiterated in the new government's ministerial declaration," the council said in a statement said. "Such reforms are key to respond to the dire needs and legitimate aspirations of the Lebanese population regarding the urgent security, economic, social and humanitarian challenges facing the country."

The Security Council said such reforms are necessary for the country to ensure international support.

The council also stressed the importance of holding free, fair and inclusive elections in 2022. On September 10, a new government was declared in Lebanon 13 months after the resignation of the previous one. Last week, a majority of lawmakers in the Lebanese parliament voted confidence in the new government, with Najib Mikati at the helm.

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Myanmar Will Not Speak in UN General Assembly Monday - UNGA President Spokesperson UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Myanmar, scheduled to participate in the UN General Assembly high-level debates on Monday, has withdrawn its participation in the event, the spokeswoman for the UN General Assembly President, Monica Grayley, told Sputnik. The updated list of speakers for Monday did not include Myanmar that was set to speak in the debate before.

"They withdrew. A while ago," Grayley said when asked why Myanmar disappeared from the list. Myanmar's envoy to the United Nations, Kyaw Moe Tun, appointed by the toppled government, earlier in the month said that he would most likely not address the session as negotiations on the country's representation at the world's body were ongoing.

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Afghanistan Withdraws Participation in UN General Assembly Debate - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan withdrew on Monday its participation in the UN General Assembly high-level debates, spokeswoman for the UN General Assembly's President, Monica Grayley, told Sputnik.

"The Office of the President of the General Assembly was informed that the Member State withdrew its participation in the General Debate," Grayley said when asked why Afghanistan was not appearing on the updated speakers list for Monday.

The issue of Afghanistan's participation was unclear after the Taliban (banned in Russia) submitted a letter to the United Nations last week requesting that it take part in the debate. Later in the week, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Afghanistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ghulam Nabi Isac zai, appointed by toppled former President Ashraf Ghani, is set to address the UN General Assembly on Monday.

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Blue Origin to Conduct 2nd Human Launch of New Shepard With 4 Astronauts on October 12

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) – Jeff Bezos' aerospace firm Blue Origin will conduct its second human flight to space and back with four astronauts onboard using a New Shepard rocket on October 12, the company said on Monday.

"Today, Blue Origin announced New Shepard's 18th mission, NS-18, will lift off on Tuesday, October 12, carrying four astronauts to space and back, including Dr. Chris Boshuizen, a former NASA engineer and co-founder of Planet Labs, and Glen de Vries, Vice-Chair, Life Sciences & Healthcare, Dassault Systemes and co-founder, Medidata," the company said in a press release.

In the coming days, the company will announce the other two astronauts who will be joining the mission, the release said.

The liftoff is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. local time (13:30 GMT) from Site One in West Texas, according to the release.

On July 20, Blue Origin successfully launched its first human flight with Jeff Bezos, his brother Mark, a former test pilot Wally Funk, and Blue Origin's first customer, a Dutch teenager Oliver Daemen. The flight lasted 11 minutes and the spacecraft reached the maximum speed of about 2,300 miles per hour.

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Afghanistan Missing From List of Speakers for Final Day of UN General Assembly

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan has disappeared from the final version of the list of speakers for the UN General Assembly on Monday.

The list of speakers for the last day of the high-level debates does not have Afghanistan among its participants, according to the document, despite figuring on the list in the run up.

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday that Afghanistan Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ghulam Isaccai, appointed by toppled President Ashraf Ghani, is set to address the UN General Assembly on Monday.

Last week, the United Nations revealed it had received a letter from the Taliban (banned in Russia) requesting participation in the ongoing 76th UN General Assembly and nominating a new permanent representative in place of Isaccai.

The Afghanistan mission to the United Nations has not yet responded to Sputnik's request for comments on the matter.

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Iranian Nuclear Program 'at Critical Point,' 'Red Lines' Crossed - Israeli Prime Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 27 (Sputnik) - The Iranian nuclear program is currently "at a critical point" and all red lines in Tehran's nuclear program have been crossed, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Monday at the UN General Assembly.

"Iran's nuclear weapon program is at a critical point. All red lines have been crossed. Inspections ignored. Iran is currently violating the International IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguard agreements," he said. "Iran's nuclear program has hit a watershed moment and so has our tolerance. Words do not stop centrifuges from spinning."

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Iranian Nuclear Program 'at Critical Point,' 'Red Lines' Crossed - Israeli Prime Minister to UN General Assembly

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White House National Security Advisor Sullivan to Travel to Saudi Arabia, UAE - Official

WASHINGTON, September 27 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates alongside regional US envoys, National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Emily Horne announced on Monday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), joined by National Security Council Middle East and North Africa Coordinator Brett McGurk and U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking. Mr. Sullivan will meet with senior leaders on a range of regional and global challenges," Horne said in a statement.

Sullivan will become the most senior official in the administration of US President Joe Biden to visit Saudi Arabia. According to media reports, he will hold a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to press the kingdom to halt its military actions in Yemen.

The announcement comes as Washington is increasing pressure to end the war in Yemen. Last week, the US House of Representatives adopted an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would terminate US military logistical support to Saudi warplanes and intelligence sharing as it relates to the war in Yemen.

In the early months of the new US administration, Biden announced a suspension of US support for Saudi Arabian offensive operations in its conflict with Yemen. The US has been the principal supplier of arms to Saudi forces and has frequently targeted alleged terrorists in the country with drone strikes.