

09/29/21 Wednesday

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Kim Jong Un Says He's Willing to Restore Inter-Korean Hotline Starting in October - Report
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported Thursday morning that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was willing to restore the inter-Korean hotline with the South as early as next month. However, Kim rejected US proposals for dialogue, calling them a cover for its hostile attitude toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The hotline isn't like the fictional "red phone" direct line on the president's desk seen in Cold War films: in fact, it's 48 different communication lines. Further, the lines were never truly severed, but during periods of cooler relations officials on either side refused to answer or use them, including the line at the peace village of Panmunjom inside the demilitarized zone.

That said, after relations hit a new low in 2020, the North sent an unmistakable message of disapproval by [blowing up](#) their joint liaison office in Kaesong, a city just north of the border. The line was most recently restored to use in late July, but broken again [just days later](#) when South Korea began [military drills](#) with the United States.

Speaking at the second session of the Supreme People's Assembly, Kim said it was up to South Korea as to whether it would continue their 71-year military standoff or choose to foster new relations with the DPRK. He reassured the South that his country has no reasons to provoke or hurt the South. However, he said the South should end its hostilities before seeking an end-of-war declaration.

Kim's statements follow South Korean President [Moon Jae-in's comments](#) at the United Nations General Assembly last week in which he renewed a proposal for declaring an end to the Korean War that began in 1950. While a ceasefire was signed in 1953, no permanent peace treaty was arrived at, resulting in the creation of the DMZ that divides the two nations and the stationing of 28,000 US troops in South Korea.

Kim Yo Jong, Deputy Department Director of the Publicity and Information Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, also [said earlier this week](#) that the socialist state 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.

Moon and Kim discussed an end-of-war declaration during a historic rapprochement in 2018 that led to the relaxation of military tensions and opening of new cultural and trade ties. However, after parallel talks between Kim and then-US President Donald Trump fell apart, and Moon refused to back away from his alliance with the US, inter-Korean relations soon soured. The United Nations Security Council said Wednesday that it would meet the following day to discuss the topic of North Korea. The UN has called on the socialist state to give up its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs, but Pyongyang says it needs them to guarantee its

security in the absence of a peace treaty with the US and removal of American troops and weapons from the peninsula.

However, the DPRK has in recent years tested short-range weapons not barred by UN resolutions, including most recently a [hypersonic glide vehicle](#), KCNA reported on Wednesday.

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What's in it for Iran? Three Ways Tehran Will Benefit From Joining Shanghai Pact

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Earlier this month, Iran formally launched the procedures for its accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a political, economic and security community that includes much of Asia.

The SCO was formed in 2001 and today has nine members: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan - and now Iran, although its accession process could take two years to complete. Together, they account for 40% of the world's population and 28% of its gross domestic product (GDP).

Addressing SCO members at the group's summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on September 17, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein [Amir Abdollahian said](#) Iran's acceptance would have an "important impact" on its multilateral cooperation within the framework of its foreign policy "oriented towards neighbors and Asia."

But what's that really mean for the Islamic Republic of Iran? Here are a few ways the country will benefit from its membership in the SCO.

While the SCO isn't a tightly integrated economic bloc like the European Union, or a military bloc like NATO, it does provide a forum in which broad cooperation between Eurasian nations can be coordinated and promoted. At its core, the SCO is an organization for promoting regional stability, and Iran can benefit greatly from that.

Iran's relations with Tajikistan have already benefited. Despite sharing a language - Tajik and Persian are mutually intelligible - Dushanbe has [repeatedly accused Tehran](#) of supporting the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), an Islamist party banned since 2015. During the civil war of the 1990s, the IRPT was on the losing side in the three-way conflict that the parliamentarians under President Emomali Rahmon won. Past applications by Iran to join the SCO were vetoed by Tajikistan on that basis.

However, at the Dushanbe summit, Iran and Tajikistan seemed to have finally buried the hatchet as they signed eight new trade agreements expected to increase commerce between them tenfold.

Tehran also has a major stake in the stability of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover. Except for Turkmenistan, all of Afghanistan's bordering nations are SCO members. As [Sputnik has reported](#), Iranian diplomats have worked to [coordinate a regional](#) response with those nations, that include Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China, that will push the Taliban into forming a moderate and inclusive government and proscribe supporting terrorist groups.

Trade Opportunities

The SCO doesn't have a free trade zone or common banking system and isn't likely to sprout one anytime soon, despite some early rumblings in that direction in some corners. However, the tracks for signing new bilateral or multilateral trade agreements have been heavily greased by Iran's membership in the SCO, which could take some pressure off Tehran from the US' "maximum pressure" sanctions.

Even before accession began, Iran had signed a [25-year cooperation agreement](#) with Beijing in March that will, among other things, lead to its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, a globe-spanning infrastructure megaproject initiated by China. Similarly, Iran has [sought to revise](#) its 20-year friendship deal with Russia, which would have been automatically extended in March.

The 7,200-kilometer International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) between Mumbai, India, and Moscow, Russia, runs the length of Iran and negotiation of the corridor, which is [intended to compete](#) with the Suez Canal for Eurasian trade, has brought Iran closer to other nations.

In particular, Iran helped expand the port facilities at Chabahar, a coastal city just miles from the border with Pakistan, and has negotiated [use of the railway](#) connecting Chabahar to Zahedan, 628 kilometers inland. Zahedan is a key gateway to Afghanistan, where India has acquired [several iron mining](#) concessions in Hajigak - iron that will have to pass through Iran.

Surviving US Sanctions

Hadi Tizhoush Taban, chairman of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce, told [Tehran Times](#) on Tuesday that joining the SCO was a "golden opportunity" for Iran to develop its non-oil exports. This will help it to compensate for the loss of GDP resulting from US sanctions intended to totally eliminate Iran's petroleum exports.

[World Bank data](#) from 2017 - the last year before the US reimposed economic sanctions after accusing Tehran of violating the 2015 nuclear deal - shows petroleum formed 17% of Iran's GDP that year. However, since 2009, Tehran has successfully halved its national budget's dependency on oil revenues from 60% to 30% as part of a long-standing plan to move away from dependency on petroleum.

According to the Iranian daily [Financial Tribune](#), in the fiscal year 2019-2020, Iran's non-oil exports exceeded the value of its oil exports for the first time in its history, with about half of those exports coming from Iran's manufacturing sector.

Mehdi Mir-Ashraf, head of Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA), [said in late July](#) that the March-July period had seen a 47% increase in non-oil exports over the same period a year prior. Last week, Islamic Republic News Agency ([IRNA](#)) [reported](#) a 126% increase in mining exports in the five months since March - when the Iranian calendar year began - over the same period a year prior, and a 176% increase in steel exports during that period.

However, while Iran hasn't been as isolated from SCO members as it has from other states by US sanctions, it would be a mistake to see the bloc as anti-American or anti-Western. Pakistan and India are close partners of the United States, and India was significantly deterred by the onset of US sanctions.

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EU Court of Justice Strikes Down Morocco Trade Deal over Western Sahara Exports By - Morgan Artyukhina

The European Union Court of Justice has struck down a trade deal with Morocco it says didn't have consent from the Polisario Front, which has declared Western Sahara to be an independent Saharawi republic. The court previously ruled against the deal in 2018, but the EP passed it anyway, claiming it had found a loophole.

In its [Wednesday ruling](#), the EU's top court pointed to a ruling [dating to 2016](#), which had said a trade deal could only include products from Western Sahara if the people of the territory consented to it and benefited from it.

[Politico reported](#) in 2018, as the draft text was being negotiated in Rabat, that the Moroccan government had invited Saharawi civil society groups to Rabat in February in an attempt to establish consent. However, representatives from the Polisario Front said they were not invited to the meeting.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (POLISARIO) was formed during the era of Spanish colonization to fight for an independent republic for the indigenous Saharawi people. After the Spanish left in 1975, Polisario continued to fight the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces that tried to claim the territory for their own. In a 1991 peace deal, the United Nations recognized Polisario as the legitimate representatives of the Saharawi people.

The EU court made this central to its ruling on Wednesday, noting that due to Polisario's absence from the negotiating table, "the steps taken by the EU authorities before the conclusion of the agreements at issue cannot be regarded as having secured the consent of the people of Western Sahara."

[According to RFI](#), the deal is valued at some €153 million over a four-year period. According to the [Associated Press](#), the collapse of the deal will deprive Morocco of about €52 million a year on fishing alone. Three-quarters of the 128 EU fishing boats licensed to ply the waters off Western Sahara come from Spain.

"The EU ignored both its own Court and the only party that lawfully ought to have a decisive voice in this matter: the people of Western Sahara," said NGO Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) [in a statement](#). "Today, the EU Court of Justice righted that wrong."

"This is a victory for justice, and for the people of Western Sahara. We hope that EU Member States will now finally abide by the Court's rulings, and exclude Western Sahara from the broad scope of the Union's relations with Morocco. It is high time for the EU to stop being part of the problem in the last colony in Africa, and to become part of the solution," WRSW chief Sylvia Valentin said in the release.

Genevra Forwood, an EU lawyer who represented Rabat, told [Morocco World News](#) they would appeal the verdict.

"There is no legal impact on the agricultural and fisheries agreements between Morocco and the EU," she said.

Indeed, the ruling provided for the agreements to continue for a "certain period" to preserve the "external action for the European Union and legal certainty of its international commitments."

The Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), a non-governmental organization that advocates on behalf of Saharawi activists and journalists, welcomed the court ruling.

“It is time for the EU to demonstrate that it does not see itself as above the law and to have the courage to maintain this ruling through its engagement with its counterparts,” read a statement given to Sputnik, urging the “EU member states, Council, and Commission to uphold the integrity of its institutions and legal framework.”

The activists called on the EU to give “clear instructions calling for the withdrawal of companies who continue to illegally trade and benefit from the natural resources of Western Sahara in violation of this ruling” and to “immediately engage with the POLISARIO Front in a responsible dialogue to secure the consent of the Saharawi people.”

“Refusing to implement this ruling would grant Moroccan occupying forces the green light to continue committing crimes against humanity and violating international law,” they added.

The warm waters off the coast of Western Sahara hold some of the world’s most fertile fisheries, and are believed to hold petroleum reserves under the seafloor. In addition, while the territory’s terrain is mostly barren, significant phosphate deposits exist in the north, which holds the world’s largest such mine at Boucraa.

A [2018 report drafted](#) by the European Parliament’s fisheries committee noted that “more than 90% of the catch by the EU fleet is taken in the waters adjacent to Western Sahara.”

Further, New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch noted in a [February 2019 letter](#) to MEPs that “in practice, in order for Morocco, as an occupying power, to lawfully exploit Western Sahara’s resources, it would have to establish a fund with transparent bookkeeping that shows the resources utilized or exported, the revenue derived, and the channelling of those revenues to the sole benefit of the people of Western Sahara.”

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Alabama Governor on Defensive Over Plan to Use \$400 Million in Federal Covid Relief to Build Prisons

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Alabama Republicans are firing back amid criticism by Democrats for a decision to use \$400 million given to the state by the federal government to build and repair prisons. Governor Kay Ivey (R) said the funds are meant to replace lost revenue.

“The Democrat-controlled federal government has never had an issue with throwing trillions of dollars toward their ideological pet projects,” Ivey said in a [Tuesday statement](#). “These prisons need to be built, and we have crafted a fiscally conservative plan.”

Her comments come after Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, [sent a letter](#) to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Monday urging her to halt the “misuse” of funds given to the state by the American Rescue Plan (ARP).

“Directing funding meant to protect our citizens from a pandemic to fuel mass incarceration is in direct contravention of the intended purposes of the ARP legislation and will particularly harm

communities of color who are already disproportionately impacted by over-incarceration and this public health crisis,” Nadler wrote. “The ARP is a historic effort to provide urgent assistance in a time of great suffering. It should not be used to worsen our national problem of over-incarceration.”

Other Alabama politicians soon sounded off as well, including Alabama State Sen. Greg Reed (R), who said Democrats “should focus more on the runaway inflation, the crisis at our Southern border, the disastrous Afghanistan withdrawal.”

“We aren’t going to let a New York City politician tell Alabama what we can and cannot do. These funds are intended to replace revenue lost as a result of the pandemic, and are clearly eligible for prison construction,” Reed tweeted on Tuesday. “We are in a special session right now to protect the people of Alabama from a costly federal intervention, and I really couldn’t care less about the opinion of Washington liberals.”

However, their position is not unanimous: Sen. Kirk Hatcher (D) told the [Associated Press](#) that he had concerns about using the money for non-COVID purposes, recalling that “we are now still [number one in the country](#) for deaths.”

The massive stimulus bill passed in March set aside \$1.9 trillion for a host of programs that included funding for healthcare programs, but also economic stimulus and relief, including loans for small businesses, debt relief money and cash checks cut for individuals.

Under the plan in a special session of the Alabama legislature on Monday, the Cotton State would build three new prisons with 4,000 beds each, one of which would be a women’s prison, and would renovate other existing facilities. [Ivey called](#) the prison system “broken” and characterized the plan as an “Alabama solution to this Alabama problem.”

The state’s prison system has drawn federal rebuke in the past, highlighting their poor conditions, but noting that problems such as understaffing, corruption, training, violence, illicit drugs and sexual abuse could not be solved simply by building new facilities. The Department of Justice also sued Alabama [just last year](#), saying the state’s prisons for men are “riddled with prisoner-on-prisoner and guard-on-prisoner violence.”

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Ronaldo Rescues Manchester United Against Villarreal, but Can He Save Their Season?
By - Nevin Brown

Manchester United stared at a familiar proposition on Wednesday night. Knotted at 1-1 against their Europa League Final foe Villarreal, United looked out of ideas. In a game where they had been second best, a draw appeared to be a fair consolation. That was until Cristiano Ronaldo rescued the day.

Losing to Villarreal would have put Manchester United’s Champions League dreams on life support. They would be on zero points and looking up at three teams, two with four points, and one with three. A tie would have kept the dream alive, but any slip ups could prove costly. However, a win and its three points would get United right back in the thick of it.

United found themselves down 1-0 to Villarreal after a 53rd minute goal from Paco Alcacer. This wasn't a fluke goal either, Villarreal had been the better side. The Yellow Submarine constantly created chances down United's right side as Aaron Wan-Bissaka watched from the sidelines ruing his red card against Young Boys. Once again, it looked like United were going to be upset in the Champions League.

The imminent defeat was wrestled away by a superb volley from Alex Telles in the 60th minute. The set-piece routine looked straight out of a video game for its audacity and execution. United had won a set piece near the goal line for what was essentially a short corner. Accordingly, Villarreal prepared for a lofted cross into the 18-yard. However, Bruno Fernandes and Alex Telles had other ideas. Fernandes lofted the ball to Telles readied himself for a first time strike with his favored left foot. The result was a thing of beauty.

Against the run of play, United were back on level footing. However, it wasn't until the introduction of Edison Cavani and Nemanja Matic in the 75th minute that United looked like they might go ahead and claim all three points. The pressing and intensity that Cavani brought disrupted Villarreal's build-up and gave United ample chances to win the ball high up the field. In the 79th minute, Cavani missed a header at the back post that would be United's best chance of the game.

As the game neared the 90th minute, Villarreal broke through again, but Boulaye Dia had two shots blocked by David De Gea in the six yard box. The game looked destined for a tie until Ronaldo made his mark.

Ronaldo had a relatively quiet night. He wasn't able to get consistent service, his runs weren't rewarded, his half-hearted pressing did little to trouble Villarreal, but in the end, it didn't matter. Ronaldo was brought back to United for one simple reason: to score goals. Fred played a cross to the back post that Ronaldo headed to a streaking Jesse Lingard in front of goal. Swarmed by Villarreal defenders, Lingard poked the ball to a waiting Ronaldo, who buried the shot, won the game, and rescued Manchester United.

Ronaldo's goal will capture all the headlines and will erase the previous 90 minutes of poor play. That's why United brought Ronaldo back. He is one of the rare players who can erase a bad performance with individual moments of brilliance. Tonight, it was enough to rescue United, but will it be enough to rescue their season?

Suggesting United needs saving requires context. They're one point off the lead in the Premier League, and sit one point behind Atalanta in their Champions League group. For as early as it is in the season, United are right where they need to be to compete for the two trophies they covet the most.

However, United's status as Champions League and Premier League contenders doesn't look set to last. Their expected goals in the Premier League show a side that's well behind Liverpool and Manchester City in quality, and that's without them having played any team in the big-six. Their play in the Premier League looks absolutely sterling compared to the performances they've mustered in the Champions League.

In both of their Champions League matches, they've been thoroughly played off the pitch. If their group had two European heavyweights it would be somewhat understandable. However, United haven't even played the best team in their group yet, Atalanta. If United wants a challenge for the big trophies again, they need to improve their performances on the pitch.

As tonight proved, Ronaldo is still capable of making a difference, but he is not the game wrecking force he was when he first left United. He remains the finest finisher in the entire world, but that's essentially it. He doesn't press, he rarely creates chances for others, and he can't beat defenders one-on-one with consistency. For the performances to improve, there needs to be a tactical shift, and that starts with the manager.

United have the talent to compete for big trophies, and it's up to Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to harness all the power at his disposal. The result tonight will ease the pressure, but already United fans are demanding more.

If Solskjaer is banking on Ronaldo saving United's season, and his job in the process, then he'll be coaching a Norwegian League side by next time this year. If United wants to challenge for trophies, they need to install a system that can generate more than a few half chances a game for Ronaldo. If it wasn't for two goalkeeper errors, Ronaldo could very easily be on one Premier League goal.

Manchester United doesn't need Ronaldo to rescue them. They just need Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to stop holding them back, because it shouldn't be this hard to win when you have Ronaldo leading your line.

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What Is the Brain-Eating Amoeba That Recently Killed a Child in Texas and How to Avoid It
By - Nevin Brown

A brain-eating amoeba killed a Texas child on September 11th. The culprit, *Naegleria fowleri*, is found all throughout the southern United States. Here's how to avoid tragedy.

A child died after visiting a splash pad in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Officials were alerted on September 5th that the child was suffering from meningoencephalitis, brain swelling, caused by the brain eating amoeba, *naegleria fowleri*.

The child tragically succumbed six days later. The rare condition has no known cures, and the few treatments available are minimally effective. [According to the CDC](#), there is a 97% fatality rate for those suffering from an infection brought on by *naegleria fowleri*. In the 148 documented instances from 1962 to 2019, only four people have survived.

Several drugs have been shown to be effective against *naegleria fowleri* in laboratory settings, but that success has not translated in the real world. A new therapeutic known as miltefosine recently helped two people survive when combined with aggressive management of brain swelling.

Where is *Naegleria fowleri*?

Naegleria fowleri is only found in freshwater and prefers warm temperatures. The amoeba prefers warmer temperatures up to 115°F (46°C) and its reproductive rate is highest at moderately warm temperatures. The amoeba is found in soil and has also been found in geothermal water, warm water discharge from industrial plants, swimming pools that are poorly maintained, and water heaters.

In human infections, the amoeba travels up through the nose and into the brain, with no documented cases coming from the drinking of contaminated water. In a few rare instances, infection has been caused through nasal rinsing of improperly maintained and cleaned devices. *Naegleria fowleri* is commonly found in lakes and rivers in warmer regions. The amount and concentration of the amoeba play a significant role in the risk of infection, which is incredibly low. From 2010 to 2019, only 34 deaths occurred in the United States, compared to over 34,000 drowning deaths from 2001 to 2010.

How to stay safe from *Naegleria fowleri*

The best way to stay safe from *naegleria fowleri* is to avoid swimming in freshwater during the warmer parts of the year. If you do, try to avoid submerging your head underwater.

According to the CDC, "Initial symptoms of PAM start about 5 days (range 1 to 9 days) after infection. The initial symptoms may include headache, fever, nausea, or vomiting. Later symptoms can include stiff neck, confusion, lack of attention to people and surroundings, loss of balance, seizures, and hallucinations. After the start of symptoms, the disease progresses rapidly and usually causes death within about 5 days (range 1 to 12 days)."

If you experience any of these symptoms following a swim in freshwater, seek medical treatment as soon as possible. However, thousands of people swim in warm freshwater every year in the United States. Even if you flout these recommendations, you're likely to be just fine.

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Members of House Armed Services Committee Take Shots at President Joe Biden

By - Nevin Brown

Members of the House Armed Services committee used the hearing and testimony of General Mark Milley, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and General Frank McKenzie to slam President Biden for his handling of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The hearing started with a statement from Representative Mike Rogers (R-AL), who raised concerns that the President was delusional over the fallout from the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

"This wasn't an extraordinary success, it was an extraordinary disaster. It will go down in history as one of the greatest failures of American leadership," [he added](#).

Republican lawmakers primarily focused their attention on the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan when questioning General Mark Milley, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and General Frank McKenzie. However, Gen. Milley's alleged calls with his Chinese counterpart also drew the ire of lawmakers.

An interview from August 19th, [between President Joe Biden and ABC News' George Stephanopoulos](#), was consistently referenced. In the interview, Stephanopoulos asked President Joe Biden, "Your top military advisors warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops," to which Biden responded, "No, they didn't. It was split. Tha-- that wasn't true. That wasn't true."

Lawmakers wanted clarity over whether or not the administration's top military advisors warned Biden of the consequences a full withdrawal carried. Their responses consistently contradicted the President's account of the events.

General Milley, General McKenzie, and Defense Secretary Austin painted a picture of how the withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded. The trio consistently pointed to the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban* as being the starting point for the poor withdrawal from Afghanistan.

[The deal saw the US and coalition forces agree to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan](#) on a timeline and in return, the Taliban would not harbor, train, or use Afghanistan as a launching pad for terrorist attacks. The agreement is said to have demoralized the Afghan security forces and spurred corruption amongst Afghan politicians and officials, who began to cut deals with the Taliban.

While the environment of a failed withdrawal was set months before the Biden administration took office, the trio did not completely exonerate Biden from blame. The group believed that 2,500 to 3,000 troops should have been left behind to keep Kabul secure. That advice was not heeded in the end.

General Milley did define what victory in Afghanistan would have looked like and confessed the chances were slim. He believed that an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government sharing power to end the civil conflict in the country would have been the only realistic victory. While he believed it was unlikely, he thought that chances weren't zero.

The committee also raised concerns over the military's choice of airport for their evacuations, the failed drone strike that killed 10 Afghan civilians, and the geopolitical and military disadvantages presented by not having a base of operations in Afghanistan.

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NBA Players Won't Get Paid for Games They Miss Due to Vaccine Requirements
By - Nevin Brown

In a statement made on Wednesday morning, Mike Bass, the NBA's executive vice president of communications, said that "any player who elects not to comply with local vaccination mandates will not be paid for games that he misses."

The [announcement](#) comes in the wake of NBA media day, an annual tradition before NBA training camps begin when several star players indicated they were not vaccinated and expressed hesitancy to do so.

Players for the Golden State Warriors and Brooklyn Nets, according to local vaccine mandates, will not be allowed to play in their home arenas if unvaccinated. Both teams are considered title contenders and have key players, Kyrie Irving and Andrew Wiggins, who have indicated that they are unvaccinated.

While few players have confirmed they are unvaccinated, responding to the question by saying it is "private" has become the unofficial "no." There have been exceptions, Jonathan Isaac and

Bradley Beal both said they were unvaccinated and questioned the need for vaccinations. Beal has since walked back on his statements.

It has been revealed that [the NBA wanted a vaccine mandate](#), but the players association rejected the proposal. The NBA threatening the loss of wages due to missing games for not being vaccinated puts pressure on unvaccinated players to get vaccinated. Missing half of your games not only would see some players lose millions of dollars, but also puts your team at a competitive disadvantage.

Current reporting indicates that the vast majority of the league has been vaccinated, and many teams' rosters are at 100%. Some got the vaccine as soon as they could, while others were more hesitant and only received their first dose recently. The NBA and the NBA Players' Association are still finalizing an agreement over health and safety protocols for this season.

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Tunisian's President Named Arab's World First Ever Female Prime Minister
By - Adriana Montes

Tunisia's President Kais Saied appointed Najla Bouden Romdhane on Wednesday as the new Prime Minister, a crucial step in leading the country out of its political crisis.

Saied was allegedly under pressure to name a government since July amid growing domestic and international criticism that he has embarked on after dismissing the last Prime Minister, suspended parliament and seized power in what critics called a "[coup](#)."

The Tunisian Press Agency [reported](#) that President Saied recalled it being the first time in Tunisia's history that a woman held this position.

"This is a historic moment, an honour for Tunisia and a tribute to Tunisian women. We will endeavor with firm resolve to combat corruption and fight against the anarchy that reigns in several institutions," he stated.

Following the extended emergency measures that allow Saied to rule by decree, Romdhane will likely have less power than the previous prime ministers, but will nonetheless have to act quickly to secure release from the country's exceedingly looming [debt](#).

Tunisia's political crisis has stemmed after years of stagnation, aggravated by the pandemic and political uncertainty.

Romdhane, 63, who did not speak on her first appearance in her new role, holds a doctorate in geology and is a higher education professor at the Tunis National School of Engineering.

Before being appointed prime minister, Romdhane served as the World Bank's Programme Implementation Officer at the Ministry of Higher Education. Aside from that, she's presumed to have insufficient government experience.

Saied wasted no time in assigning the new prime minister her first task, where she's to propose a cabinet in the coming days.

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Search for Gabby Petito Leads to Discovery of Missing Man's Body
Adriana Montes

The high-profile search for Gabby Petito leads a rescue team to the body of a missing hiker Robert Lowery, who disappeared in the same park where Petito's body was found.

The body of the 46-year-old Texas father of two was found [after the case](#) of Gabby Petito provided crucial tips and search efforts.

Lowery was last seen walking on the Black Canyon Trail in the Bridger-Teton National Forest on August 20 holding a black duffel bag, sleeping bag and tent.

The Teton County Search and Rescue team located a body matching Mr. Lowery's description on Tuesday at the base of the Teton Pass, about 65 kms (40 miles) from where Ms. Petito's body was found, and [confirmed in a statement on Tuesday](#) that a body matching Lowery's description has been recovered.

"The widespread news coverage of the Gabby Petito search helped bring light to Lowery's case, and resulted in at least two members of the public calling local authorities this past weekend with new information about his possible last seen point," said Teton County Search and Rescue. Mr. Lowery had allegedly traveled from Houston to Wyoming on August 19 to explore a popular hiking and mountain biking trail named the Black Canyon Trail.

In a [statement](#) to KPRC, Mr. Lowery's family said they were grateful for the help in finding him. "Bob has been a wonderful father, son, brother and friend."

"We specially want to thank Teton County Sheriff's Deputy Chad Sachse and his department for all of their work during this month that Bob has been missing."

Authorities presumably don't believe that the two cases are connected.

The cause of death is under investigation, as the family awaits the Teton County, Wyoming coroner's report.

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House Republicans Are Split on Infrastructure Bill as Vote Approaches
By - Adriana Montes

House Republican leaders have set in motion an all-inclusive effort to secure GOP votes for a bipartisan infrastructure bill proposal ahead of a final vote Thursday.

The opposed leaders are leaning on their members to reject the \$1 trillion infrastructure [bill](#) by arguing that it was designed to only pave the way for Democrats to [revolt](#) and push through their far greater social policy and climate change bills.

The measure is a result of a compromise among moderates on both sides.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) is fiercely opposing Biden's infrastructure bill, while the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, along with some Republican senators who helped draft the bill, have launched a counterattack to try and persuade House Republicans to back the legislation.

"It's a good bill; it's right there for the country, so I urge Republicans to support it," [said](#) Senator Rob Portman, a Republican from Ohio and one of the bill's negotiators. "There will be some who have told me they will, but they are under a lot of pressure."

A small number of Republicans who are members of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus have also announced they are planning on voting in favor of the legislation, including Representatives Tom Reed of New York, Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania and Don Bacon of Nebraska.

On Monday, Representative Don Young (R-AK), the longest-serving member of the House, expressed his support with an emotional [speech](#) on the House floor.

House Minority Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA) is closely monitoring which Republicans intend to vote for the infrastructure proposal.

"We're against that big spending package that will increase inflation and raise taxes," Scalise [said](#).

"We are working to keep that number as low as we possibly can," he added.

"This is a desperate administration looking for a victory to distract Americans from the crises caused by Biden, both at home and abroad while opening the floodgates for trillions more in future spending," said Representative Beth Van Duyne (R-TX) during a [press hearing](#) last week.

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Border Towns to Sue Biden for 'Failure to Enforce the Law'

By - Adriana Montes

The Texas county that witnessed the flood of 30,000 migrants early September has stated its initiative in joining forces with neighboring counties to sue the Biden administration and push motion at the southern border.

Del Rio — the county seat of Val Verde — was the epicenter of the border disaster as tens of thousands of migrants collected underneath a bridge.

"We've talked about immigration reform for as long as I can remember. Both parties have had control of Washington at one point or another over the last 20 years, and we have failed to do anything about it other than create the mess that we have today," Val Verde County

Commissioner Beau Nettleton mentioned in a Tuesday night [assembly](#).

Nettleton mentioned that it was time for fellow border counties and cities to unite in a suit to challenge US immigration policies after their "failure to enforce the law" at the border, causing the largest influx of migrants in more than [20 years](#).

President Joe Biden has received massive backlash from both parties for the administration's failure to address the crisis at the southern border.

The Texas commissioner said years of ineffective policies have forced border towns to unfairly carry the burden.

"Fifty percent of the population of this city was sitting underneath our International Bridge – how is a town of this size, with our tax base supposed to deal with that problem," he said, referring to the flood of Haitian migrants earlier this month.

"It is a complete failure of everything that is going on in Washington, for not just the last couple of years, but for many, many years."

The state of Florida has taken the lead in suing the Biden administration over its policies regarding immigration and the border, with the southern state being negatively impacted by the federal government's "[catch-and-release](#)" immigration policies.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, alongside Attorney General Ashley Moody, signed the Biden Border Crisis Executive Order in Lee County on Tuesday, and [announced](#) the significant actions taken to hold the administration and federal government accountable for refusing to enforce the immigration laws of this country.

"I think this is intentional, I think this is ideological," DeSantis said. "They want a massive illegal migration into this country."

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US Q2 GDP Grew By 6.7% According to Final Reading for Quarter - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.7% in the second quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said Thursday in its final reading for April-June growth, putting growth 0.1% higher than previously estimated.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.7 percent in the second quarter of 2021," the department said in a statement. "The increase in second quarter GDP reflected the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic."

Economists polled by US media had projected a final reading of 6.6% for the second quarter.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 362,000, Below 400,000 Mark for 9th Week Running - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims were at 362,000 last week, remaining below the key 400,000 level for a ninth week in a row in continued recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, data from the Labor Department showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending September 25, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 362,000," the department said in a news release, adding that the number was, however, 11,000 higher from the previous week's 351,000.

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RPT - French Ambassador Returns to Washington After US-France Dispute Over AUKUS Deal

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - French Ambassador to the United States Philippe Etienne returned to Washington after almost two weeks of absence amid the dispute between two countries over the US submarine contract with Australia, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the airport.

Etienne declined to answer journalists' questions upon his arrival at Washington's Dulles International Airport on Wednesday.

The ambassador was called back to Paris on September 17, two days after Australia abandoned a \$66 billion agreement on submarines with France in favor of a partnership with the United States and the United Kingdom under the trilateral security alliance AUKUS. France considered the move a "stab in the back," and also recalled its ambassador from Australia. On September 22, following a phone conversation with US President Joe Biden on the matter, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to send Etienne back to Washington. Last week, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian discussed the issue with his US counterpart, Antony Blinken, noting that the restoration of confidence between the two states "would take time and action."

In mid-September, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia declared the formation of AUKUS as a platform for defense and security cooperation. The announcement came as Canberra unilaterally withdrew from the \$66 billion agreement on submarines with Paris in favor of the supply of vehicles within the framework of the alliance.

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Pentagon Leaders Told Senators US in Talks to Use Russian Bases for Afghan Ops - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley told lawmakers in a classified briefing that the Biden administration is in talks about using Russian bases in Central Asia to conduct counterterrorism missions against targets in Afghanistan, Politico reported citing several senators who attended the briefing.

The report said on Wednesday that the United States is in talks with the governments of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and others.

The US defense leaders told senators the option to use Russian military bases in Central Asia is being seriously considered, the report said.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Kenneth McKenzie detailed the types of military aircraft and launching points that could be used to launch strikes against targets in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the report added.

On Tuesday, the US defense chief told lawmakers in an open hearing that the United States asked Russia for clarification about an apparent offer from Russian President Vladimir Putin to host US forces on Russian military bases in Central Asia for counterterrorism operations. The Pentagon and CENTCOM did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the matter, the report said.

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Biden Administration to Issue New Memo to Terminate Trump-Era Remain in Mexico Policy

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release it will issue a new memorandum to terminate the Trump-era Migrant Protection Protocols program after a Texas judge ordered the federal government to reinstate the rule, which required asylum-seeking migrants to stay in Mexico while awaiting court proceedings.

"The Department of Homeland Security intends to issue in the coming weeks a new memorandum terminating the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)," DHS said in the release on Wednesday. "Although the Department issued a June 2021 memorandum that terminated MPP, a Texas district court vacated that prior termination determination and issued an injunction that requires the Department to work in good faith to re-start MPP."

The new memorandum to terminate MPP will not take effect until the current injunction from the Texas court is lifted, the release said.

DHS is currently working to restart the MPP program as ordered by the court, the release said. In August, the US Supreme Court ruled against the Biden administration's bid to end the Trump administration's so-called Remain in Mexico policy.

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Congressional Committee on January 6 Events at Capitol Subpoenas Trump Ally, 10 Organizers

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The congressional Select Committee investigating the events on the US Capitol on January 6 said that it has subpoenaed long-time Trump ally Katrina Pierson and ten other organizers of rallies that occurred before the riot, according to a press release.

"Today, Chairman Bennie G. Thompson announced that the Select Committee has issued subpoenas for deposition testimony and records to individuals tied to the events and rallies leading up to the January 6th insurrection, including the January 6th rally at the Ellipse that immediately preceded the violent attack on the US Capitol," the release said on Wednesday. "The subpoenas were sent to 11 individuals as part of the Select Committee's efforts to collect information from them and their associated entities on the planning, organization, and funding of those events."

Also included among those subpoenaed is Maggie Mulvaney, who is the niece of former President Donald Trump's chief of staff Mick Mulvaney. The Select Committee said in the release that she was listed on permit paperwork for the January 6 rally as a VIP lead. Other subpoenaed organizers include Amy Kremer, Kylie Kremer, Cynthia Chafian, Carline Wren, Justin Caporale, Time Unes, Megan Powers, Hannah Salem and Lyndon Brentnall. On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol to protest the lawmakers certifying the 2020 presidential election results from several US states that Trump claimed were subject to election and voter fraud. A protester, military veteran Ashli Babbitt, was killed by police inside the Capitol. The authorities have charged some 500 people for participating in the event.

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US House of Representatives Passes Bill to Suspend Debt Ceiling Through December 16, 2022

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Wednesday evening that would suspend the debt ceiling through December 16, 2022.

"The House passed the House Amendment to S. 1301 - Temporary Extension of Public Debt Limit, by a vote of 219-212," the House Press Gallery said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the House Rules Committee amended an unrelated bill that has already passed the Senate in order to try and suspend the debt ceiling. The vote on the House floor fell mostly along partisan lines, with only one Republican voting in favor of the legislation and two Democrats voting against it.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned Congress on Tuesday that the US government may run out of cash by October 18 unless they suspend the debt ceiling before then, adding that failure to raise the debt ceiling could lead to a crisis of "enormous proportions."

Senate Republicans led by Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have already blocked two attempts by Democrats to fund the government, avoid a government shutdown and raise the debt ceiling. The legislation passed by the House on Wednesday is an attempt by congressional Democrats to split the debt ceiling issue from the government funding and shutdown issue in the hopes that Republicans may still accept their proposal on the latter.

The Senate is likely to shoot down the legislation once it gets back them given that the Democrats lack the 60-vote threshold to suspend the debt ceiling.

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REVIEW - US Lawmakers Remain Deeply Divided as Hours Tick Toward Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Barely 24 hours remain for Democrats in the US Congress to strike an agreement with their Republican rivals on a budget deal to avert a government shutdown, although a compromise might be elusive given their polarizing views. If a budget deal is not struck, the federal government will run out of funding at 11:59 p.m. local time on Thursday before the fiscal year begins on October 1.

In addition, Congress must make a deal to raise the debt ceiling by October 18 to prevent the country's first ever default on payments.

SHUTDOWN LOOMS

The US has seen ten government shutdowns over the past two decades, with the last under the Trump administration.

The 2019 shutdown lasted an historic 35 days, cost taxpayers \$11 billion, and forced 300,000 federal workers onto furlough.

If lawmakers do not have a budget in place by the time October begins, agencies will be unable to obligate new spending. As a result, the government is forced to reduce agency activities and stop nonessential operations.

The federal government would also stop issuing paychecks for all US troops and federal employees, and only certain essential federal employees would be allowed to work. However, active-duty service members would continue working, although the flow of their paychecks may be disrupted.

A shutdown would also affect Social Security, Medicare and food assistance benefits, national parks, environmental and food inspection, air travel, among other services.

DEBT CEILING

Although failure to reach a budget deal is concerning, failure to raise the debt ceiling, which currently stands at \$28.5 trillion, would have more serious consequences including damaging the country's credit rating.

In 1939, Congress created the first aggregate debt limit, setting it at \$45 billion. The ceiling represents the legal limit on the total amount of federal debt the government can accrue.

Since the end of World War II, the debt ceiling has been modified nearly 100 times.

But at no time ever has the United States defaulted on its debt payment before, with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and even President Joe Biden warning repeatedly over the past month of the ramifications of such action on not just the No. 1 economy but also the world.

An almost certain downgrade of the United States' gold standard credit rating by Standard & Poors and Moody's will result from it as well.

Yellen warned on Tuesday that a debt default by the United States from its lawmakers' inability to raise the country's debt ceiling will be a "self-inflicted wound of enormous proportions."

Republicans, on their part, have accused Democrats of wasteful spending and say that extending the debt ceiling will put the country further down a debt path of no return.

Biden's rivals have tied the raising of the debt limit, which is to pay everyday bills like social welfare, to the president's more ambitious \$4 trillion infrastructure rebuilding plan that the administration says will be funded partly by higher taxes on wealthy Americans.

"We won't address the real problems in this country that led us to be \$28 trillion plus in debt, and now you're asking us to get further in debt. I'm horrified. My constituents are horrified," Cynthia Lummis, a Republican Senator for the state of Wyoming, told Yellen at a Senate hearing on Tuesday.

WHERE NEGOTIATIONS STAND

On Wednesday, The House passed legislation in Congress to suspend the existing debt limit.

For a conclusive deal, Democrats will still need bipartisan support from the Republicans.

To ensure no internal opposition to the Democrats' vote, Biden was personally negotiating with senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin who had previously expressed deep concern over the size of the president's spending plans, and threatened to block these.

The Politico news portal reported that Democratic leaders had reached an agreement with moderates in the party to vote on the debt limit and that the group will no longer block it on the House floor. There was no confirmation of this, however.

White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said the administration was working around the clock with lawmakers to finalize legislation to avoid a government shutdown ahead of Thursday's deadline.

The Senate failed on Monday to pass a key procedural vote to advance the House-passed short-term government funding bill as the deadline to avert a shutdown looms at the end of the week.

The Senate voted 48 to 50 on the procedural motion, with Republicans opposing the stopgap measure because it included an extension of a debt ceiling. Republicans said they were unwilling to support the debt limit increase and are demanding that Democrats take the political heat for the vote.

All Republicans voted in opposition and Democrats supported the measure, with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer switching his vote to "no" in a procedural move that allows him to call for another vote on the measure.

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AstraZeneca to Seek US Approval for COVID-19 Vaccine Later This Year - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca will file a request for approval of its novel coronavirus vaccine in the United States later this year, the company said in a statement.

Earlier this year, concerns emerged over side-effects of the AstraZeneca vaccine due to very rare cases of blood-clotting after vaccination. After some nations temporarily suspended use of the vaccine, the WHO said it considers the benefits of the drug to outweigh its risks.

"We continue to work with the FDA [US Food and Drug Administration] on submission," the company said on Wednesday. "Currently, the situation with respect to the pandemic and availability of alternative vaccine supply in the US doesn't really support an Emergency Use Approval. So, we believe that US approval will be via a BLA [Biologics License Applications] which we expect to be submitted later this year."

The FDA has so far authorized three vaccines for emergency use across the United States, including Pfizer, Moderna and Janssen.

In February 2021, the World Health Organization listed two versions of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, giving the green light for these vaccines to be rolled out globally through the COVAX mechanism.

According to AstraZeneca, its vaccine shows 92 percent and 86 percent efficiency against hospitalization in the Delta and Alpha variant cases, respectively. At the same time, a UK-based study from May, published in the New England Journal of Medicine on July 21, showed that AstraZeneca was 33% effective after one dose, 60% effective after two.

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US Aviation Agency Says Virgin Galactic May Resume Operations After Closing Mishap Probe

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in a statement that Virgin Galactic may resume flight operations after it concluded its investigation of the Unity 22 launch mishap that took place in the state of New Mexico in July.

"Today, the FAA closed the mishap investigation of the July 11 Virgin Galactic Unity 22 launch," the FAA said on Wednesday. "The FAA required Virgin Galactic to implement changes on how it communicates to the FAA during flight operations to keep the public safe. Virgin Galactic has made the required changes and can return to flight operations."

The FAA said it determined that Virgin Galactic's spacecraft, which was carrying owner Richard Branson, deviated from its assigned airspace when it descended from space and the company failed to notify the agency about the incident as required.

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US to Run Out of Cash by Late October, Early November if Debt Limit Not Increased - CBO

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Congress needs to increase the US debt limit by the end of the month or by early November at the latest, before the Treasury Department exhausts measures used to keep paying the nation's bills, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said.

"CBO projects that, if the debt limit remains unchanged, the Treasury's ability to borrow using extraordinary measures will be exhausted, and it will most likely run out of cash near the end of October or the beginning of November," the congressional agency said in a press release on Wednesday.

After that point, the debt limit would cause delays of payments for some government activities, a default on the government's debt obligations, or both, a CBO report attached to the release.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has told lawmakers that without an increased debt limit the United States will run out of ways to pay its bills around October 18.

The debt limit is one of two budget-related crises confronting the United States, the other being the need to pass a stop-gap spending measure that will allow the Treasury Department to continue paying bills after midnight on Thursday, the beginning of fiscal year 2022.

On Wednesday afternoon, the US House of Representatives looked likely to authorize spending in the new fiscal year - a measure that analysts said should sail through the Senate. Without a stop-gap spending measure, the US government would shut down on Friday.

In contrast, the debt limit does not authorize any spending.

Senate Republicans have rejected several plans to increase allowable debt because the measure is linked to massive increases in social welfare spending sought by Democrats prior to the 2022 mid-term elections, according to media reports.

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French Ambassador Returns to Washington After US-France Dispute Over AUKUS Deal

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – French Ambassador to the United States Philippe Etienne returned to Washington on Wednesday after almost two weeks of absence amid the dispute between two countries over the US submarine contract with Australia, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the airport.

Etienne declined to answer journalists' questions upon his arrival at Washington's Dulles International Airport.

The ambassador was called back to Paris on September 17, two days after Australia abandoned a \$66 billion agreement on submarines with France in favor of a partnership with the United States and the United Kingdom under the trilateral security alliance AUKUS. France considered the move a "stab in the back," and also recalled its ambassador from Australia.

On September 22, following a phone conversation with US President Joe Biden on the matter, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to send Etienne back to Washington.

Last week, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian discussed the issue with his US counterpart, Antony Blinken, noting that the restoration of confidence between the two states "would take time and action."

In mid-September, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia declared the formation of AUKUS as a platform for defense and security cooperation. The announcement came as Canberra unilaterally withdrew from the \$66 billion agreement on submarines with Paris in favor of the supply of vehicles within the framework of the alliance.

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G7 Finance Ministers Reach 'Common Understanding' on Reshaping Global Tax Rules - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen met virtually with the G7 finance ministers and reached an understanding on several important global tax issues, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

"Earlier today, US Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen participated in a productive virtual meeting with her G7 finance minister counterparts to convene on the ongoing efforts to improve the international tax system to make it equitable and equipped to meet the needs of the 21st century global economy. A common understanding was reached on some of the important open issues, to support reaching final political agreement within the OECD Inclusive Framework in October," the Treasury Department said in a release on Wednesday.

Yellen reiterated the importance of reshaping global tax rules to make sure corporations pay their "fair share" and provide governments with the resources to invest in their people and economies, the release said.

On Tuesday, Yellen made similar statements during a call with European Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis, during which the two officials discussed international tax reform issues and the practice of governments undercutting the other's tax rates.

During the G7 meeting in June, the leaders of the world's advanced economies agreed to impose a global minimum tax on corporations' international earnings - a pact that was later supported by 134 countries representing more than 90% of the world's gross domestic product.

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SPUTNIK STOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov arrived in Geneva on Wednesday to take part in the strategic stability consultations with the United States, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Rosneft and ExxonMobil have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to study joint projects in the field of low-carbon technologies as well as the production of ammonia and hydrogen, the Russian oil company said.

GAS SUPPLIES TO EUROPE

* The price of gas futures in Europe hit new all-time high above \$1,050 per 1,000 cubic meters, according to trading data on ICE Futures.

* The contract for the supply of gas from Russia to Hungary bypassing Ukraine will create problems with the import and storage of gas in Ukrainian underground storage (UGS) facilities, the Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine said.

* Hungary is a sovereign country and decides on its own where to buy gas and how to get it, choosing a safer way to get gas, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said on Wednesday at a press conference in the Czech town of Usti nad Labem.

AFGHANISTAN

An extraordinary summit of the G20 leaders on Afghanistan will take place on October 12, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

* The talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi lasted about three hours and ended.

* The two leaders bilateral relations and regional issues, including the situation in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and the Caucasus.

FRANCE RELATIONS WITH US, AUSTRALIA

* French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on Wednesday called for a thorough review of France's cooperation with Australia after the latter's decision to withdraw from bilateral agreement on submarines.

* The crisis in relations between Paris and Washington is serious, it did not end after the dialogue between the two countries was resumed, Le Drian said.

* The crisis in relations between Paris and Washington should not call into question NATO's main mission of collective defense, Le Drian said.

US-EU ECONOMIC TIES, SANCTIONS

* US and EU officials on Wednesday released a joint statement following the inaugural meeting of the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (TCC), pledging to deepen Transatlantic trade and economic relations between the two entities.

* The US Treasury Department added seven individuals - from Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Bahrain - and one entity to its list of Specially Designated Nationals for their alleged links to Hezbollah.

* The Committee of Permanent Representatives in the European Union (COREPER) agreed to extend the targeted sanctions for chemical weapons proliferation and use by one more year, the adoption is scheduled for October 11, a source in the EU told Sputnik.

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Biden Rejected Request to Meet With Palestinian President on Margins of UNGA - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden rejected a request from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to have a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly last week, Axios reported on Wednesday

The report said Abbas wanted to meet on the margins of high-level week at the United Nations in New York City or in Washington after the UN event.

The White House initially told the Palestinians that Biden would not have bilateral talks with world leaders at the UN General Assembly and he had no room in his schedule to host Abbas at the White House.

However, Biden met Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on the margins of the UN General Assembly last week. Biden also met with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide soon after he returned to Washington from New York.

Israel's ambassador to the United States Gilad Erdan told Sputnik earlier this week that Israel is prepared to have direct talks with the Palestinians without any preconditions. Last week, Palestinian National Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik that the Palestinians are also ready to resume peace talks with Israel but have yet to see a willingness from the latter's new leadership.

Erdan said that Israeli and US leaders understand that Abbas was not a real partner for peace and negotiations.

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Milley Blamed State Department for Hampering Afghanistan Evacuation – Reports

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – During a closed congressional hearing on Tuesday, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley blamed the Department of State for a chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan, saying officials “waited too long” to order civilian evacuations out of the Kabul airport, Axios reported on Wednesday citing two sources. On Tuesday and Wednesday, Milley, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and the Central Command Chief Gen. Frank McKenzie delivered testimonies to the House and Senate committees on the conclusion of the war in Afghanistan.

During the public part of the hearing, Milley acknowledged that the Pentagon and the State Department disagree on many occasions and it was particularly pronounced during the evacuation operation from Afghanistan, according to the report.

The general, however, pointed out that he “wasn’t blaming anybody per se, but was speaking from a purely military perspective. The quicker we moved out non-combatants, the safer they would be.”

The botched evacuation from Afghanistan has been a subject of harsh criticism on behalf of the US lawmakers from both party camps. Congressmen demand from the Biden administration to provide answers to why the withdrawal of troops and evacuation from Afghanistan was so problematic and chaotic, leaving thousands of loyal Afghans and hundreds of Americans behind. Some congressmen even demanded Milley and Austin to resign over the consequences of the evacuation and withdrawal operations in Afghanistan.

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US, EU Officials Pledge to Deepen Transatlantic Economic Relations - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US and EU officials on Wednesday released a joint statement following the inaugural meeting of the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (TCC), pledging to deepen Transatlantic trade and economic relations between the two entities.

“The US-EU Trade and Technology Council met for the first time in Pittsburgh on 29 September 2021... The United States and the European Union reaffirm the TTC’s objectives to: coordinate approaches to key global technology, economic and trade issues; and to deepen Transatlantic trade and economic relations, basing policies on shared democratic values,” the joint statement said.

The meeting, which was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was co-chaired by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, European Commission Executive Vice President Margrethe Vestager and European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis.

The joint statement said that while the US and EU recognize the positive potential of artificial intelligence (AI), they also realize that the technology could pose a threat to fundamental rights and freedoms. As such, they affirmed in the statement their intention to develop and implement AI in a way that aligns with human rights and shared democratic values.

The TCC established several working groups that cover areas including technology standards, climate and clean tech, data governance, and global trade challenges, according to the joint statement.

In addition to the political leadership co-chairing the TCC, the event also brought together representatives of industry, labor organizations, think tanks, non-profit organizations, environmental constituencies, academics, and other civil society members, a fact sheet released by the White House said.

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US Senate Parliamentarian Rejects Democrats' Backup Immigration Plan - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The Senate parliamentarian rejected a second attempt by Democrats to include a path to citizenship for millions of immigrants in the United States in a budget reconciliation bill that can pass with no Republican votes, The Hill reported on Wednesday.

Democrats revised a plan nixed by parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough earlier this month by changing the eligibility date from 1972 to 2010, thereby reducing the number of undocumented immigrants who would be eligible for permanent residency from 8 million to 6.7 million, the report said.

But MacDonough told Democrats that the second plan was a non-starter, according to a copy of the guidance obtained by newspaper.

Changing the registry date is a "weighty policy change and our analysis of this issue is thus largely the same" as Democrats' previous proposal, MacDonough told Democrats in her guidance.

Legal US permanent residents are eligible to apply for citizenship after a waiting period.

Meanwhile, Democrats are pursuing other back-up plans with the Senate referee, an unnamed source familiar with the strategy said in the report.

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YouTube Confirms It Will Remove Anti-Vaccine Channels in Under New Content Policy

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - YouTube confirmed to Sputnik on Wednesday that it will be removing prominent channels from its platform known for contradicting officially approved information of COVID-19 and vaccines against it.

The statement comes on the heels of reports that the video-sharing giant is planning to delete all information it considers false about currently vaccines that had been approved and confirmed as safe and effective by the World Health Organization and local health officials.

"We can confirm the channels of several well-known vaccine misinformation spreaders will be terminated under this new policy, including those belonging to Joseph Mercola, the Children's Health Defense Fund (Robert F. Kennedy, Jr affiliated channel), Erin Elizabeth, and Sherri Tenpenny. (Several months ago, we terminated channels associated with Rashid Bhuttar and Ty and Charlene Bollinger.)" a YouTube spokesperson said.

In its blog post released on Wednesday, YouTube explained that content debating the effectiveness and safety of vaccines has been produced for years despite guidance from health authorities of the contrary.

"Specifically, content that falsely alleges that approved vaccines are dangerous and cause chronic health effects, claims that vaccines do not reduce transmission or contraction of disease, or contains misinformation on the substances contained in vaccines will be removed. This would include content that falsely says that approved vaccines cause autism, cancer or infertility, or that substances in vaccines can track those who receive them," it explained. The online media company noted that since last year, it has already deleted over 130,000 videos for violating our COVID-19 vaccine policies.

"Our new guidance on vaccine side effects maps to public vaccine resources provided by health authorities and backed by medical consensus. These policy changes will go into effect today, and as with any significant update, it will take time for our systems to fully ramp up enforcement," it concluded.

The company added that the guidelines will not only cover specific immunizations, but will also apply to general statements about vaccines.

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White House Says Working 'Around the Clock' With Congress to Avoid Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The White House is working around the clock with US lawmakers to reach a deal to finalize legislation to avoid a government shutdown ahead of the Thursday deadline, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

Congress must pass a law to fund the US federal government by October 1, the start of the next fiscal year, and if at least a temporary budget is not adopted by that time, many federal institutions will be shut down.

"We're working in lockstep and around the clock to get both of these pieces of legislation done," Psaki said during a press briefing regarding work to pass Biden's infrastructure bill and a reconciliation package. "We have lots of time left in the day."

The 2019 partial shutdown cost the US economy \$11 billion - or roughly \$31.4 million per day, Psaki noted, citing Congressional Budget Office estimates.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Senator Chuck Schumer said the Senate may vote on the legislation on Thursday to avoid a government shutdown.

US House Democrats plan to pass the \$1 trillion infrastructure package this week. The bill includes \$550 billion in new spending for bridges, roads, water infrastructure, electric vehicle

infrastructure, strengthening energy grids and expanding internet access nationwide. The US Senate approved the legislation in August.

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US Indicts Hacker From Turkey For Cyberattack on US Hotel Chain - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – A hacker believed to be living in Turkey faces up to 10 years in prison for a denial-of-service attack on a multinational hotel chain based in the US city of Chicago, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

“In August 2017, Izzet Mert Ozek used the WireX botnet, which consisted of compromised Google Android devices, to direct large amounts of network traffic to the hospitality company’s website, preventing legitimate users from completing hotel bookings, according to an indictment returned Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Chicago,” the department said in a press release. The indictment charges Ozek with one count of intentionally causing damage to a protected computer. Ozek is believed to be residing in Turkey, and a warrant for his arrest will be issued, the release added.

There was no mention of a possible motive for the attack, which, according to the release, is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

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US Homeland Security Chief, Haitian Envoy Discuss Treatment of Migrants in Texas

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Wednesday he met with Haitian Ambassador to the United States Bocchit Edmond to discuss the mistreatment of Haitian migrants on the Texas-Mexico border.

“I appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with Ambassador Edmond about our shared commitment to ensuring that Haitian migrants are treated with dignity and respect,” Mayorkas said. “I look forward to continuing to work with the government of Haiti and other partners throughout the hemisphere as we work toward safe, orderly, and humane management of migration in the region.”

Some 15,000 migrants, mostly from Haiti, arrived in Del Rio, Texas, earlier this month prompting Texas to declare a state of emergency and deploy additional state police officers and National Guard troops to stem the surge. Images shared on social media of Border Patrol agents corralling the migrants prompted widespread criticism.

Mayorkas added that the Biden administration is currently in talks with officials in Brazil and Chile to determine which Haitian migrants had legal status in those countries and can be deported there, given that many of them came from third countries in the Americas and not directly from Haiti.

On Friday, Mayorkas said the United States to date conducted 17 flights to Haiti to transport about 2,000 individuals who tried to cross the southern border of the United States.

Mayorkas said an investigation is ongoing into allegations Haitian migrants were mistreated in Del Rio, Texas, earlier this month.

Haiti's misfortunes continue to mount, including the devastating earthquake in August, which killed over 2,000 people; rampant gang violence and a political crisis following the assassination of previous President Jovenel Moise on July 7, exacerbated by the postponement of the general election and the constitutional referendum in the country.

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CDC Issues Health Alert Recommending Pregnant Women Get COVID Vaccine Due to Health Risks

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Wednesday issued a health alert recommending pregnant women get vaccinated for COVID-19 due to the increased risk of pregnancy complications among the infected.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends urgent action to increase [COVID-19] vaccination among people who are pregnant, recently pregnant (including those who are lactating), who are trying to become pregnant now, or who might become pregnant in the future," the CDC said. "In addition to the risks of severe illness and death for pregnant and recently pregnant people, there is an increased risk for adverse pregnancy and neonatal outcomes, including preterm birth and admission of their neonate(s) to an intensive care unit (ICU). Other adverse pregnancy outcomes, such as stillbirth, have been reported."

Approximately 31% of pregnant women were fully vaccinated before or during their pregnancy despite the known risks, the CDC said. They added that there are racial and ethnic differences in vaccination rates among the pregnant population, with only 15.6% of non-Hispanic black women having been vaccinated as of September 18, 2021.

Pregnant women also risk passing COVID-19 onto their newborns, with about 1 to 4% testing positive for viral transmission according to the CDC.

The CDC recommended that public health authorities take action to try and increase the vaccination rate among pregnant women, including a focus on racial and ethnic inequities in vaccine coverage.

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UN Launches Global Framework to Support Syria, Iraq Returnees - UNICEF Executive Director

UNITED NATIONS, September 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has launched the Global Framework for UN support for third country nationals returning from Syria and Iraq, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta Fore said on Wednesday.

"It is my pleasure today to launch the Global Framework for UN support for returnees from Syria and Iraq, and its Multi-Partner Trust Fund," Fore said in a statement. "Designed with human rights and gender equity at its center, the framework aims to support member states to address the situation of thousands of foreign children and families in detention centers and closed camps in Syria and Iraq."

Fore noted that the Global Framework has been established with cooperation of many United Nations offices, including the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, among others.

"Time continues to pass, and for some of these children, half of their childhood has been spent in limbo. They have gone years without access to primary education," Fore said. "Many are malnourished and exposed to violence, while some are injured or living with disabilities. They have limited access to health care, clean water, and other services."

Fore went on to say that most of the 2,000 children, who have returned from the region, have already reunited with their families, are attending school and recovering well.

Member states are supporting family-based care and avoiding placing children in institutions, providing psycho-social support and enrolling children in school, Fore said.

Moreover, the member states are engaging communities to provide support and social acceptance, Fore added.

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US Defense Secretary Expresses Concern About Fate of Afghan Pilots in Tajikistan

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a congressional testimony on Wednesday that he is concerned about the fate of US-trained Afghan pilots and other personnel who are currently held in Tajikistan after the US troops and embassy personnel fled Kabul.

"We will get with State [Department] right away to see if we can move this forward. I share your concerns," Austin told a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Reports have recently emerged about over 140 US-trained Afghan personnel who are currently being held outside of the Tajik capital of Dushanbe. The Afghans have been waiting for more than a month to be transferred by the US government.

There are at least two women among the pilots and one of them is eight months pregnant, according to media reports.

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US, Central Asian States Urge Taliban to Fight Terrorism, Allow Safe Passage to Evacuees

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan during the C5+1 Ministerial to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and urge the Taliban (banned in Russia) to fight against terrorism, according to joint statement distributed by the State Department on Wednesday.

"Regarding Afghanistan, participants affirmed the importance of mitigating a potential humanitarian crisis and calling on the Taliban to counter terrorism, allow safe passage for foreign citizens and Afghans who want to leave, and form an inclusive government that respects basic rights," the statement said.

The participants highlighted the importance of continued C5+1 support for Afghans and coordinated efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and ensure food security, the statement added.

Blinken and his counterparts met on the margins of UN General Assembly in New York on September 22. During the meeting, the participants discussed a number of issues, including the celebration of the 30-year anniversaries of the Central Asian countries' independence and the establishment of bilateral relations with the United States, as well as COVID-19, economic connectivity and the climate crisis, according to the statement.

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Saudi Crown Prince, US Official Discuss Yemeni Conflict, Defense Cooperation - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met and discussed efforts to end the conflict in Yemen in addition to maintaining US support to help Riyadh defend against all regional threats, especially from Iran, the Saudi government's press agency said on Wednesday.

"Mr. Sullivan affirmed the strategic partnership between the two countries' and the iron-clad US commitment to support the Kingdom's territorial defense against all threats, including Iranian sponsored missile and drone attacks," the agency said in a press release. "He also emphasized President [Joe] Biden's endorsement of the Saudi goal of advancing a durable political solution and end to the Yemeni conflict."

The Crown Prince affirmed the Saudi initiative to try to end the Yemeni conflict with a UN-monitored comprehensive ceasefire and launching peace talks between the warring parties, and supporting the United Nations proposal to allow ships carrying oil derivatives to Hudaydah port and opening Sanaa International airport.

The two sides underscored the need for intensive diplomatic engagements to reach these goals and the importance for the Houthis to participate in good faith negotiations with the Yemeni government.

Sullivan is scheduled to visit Egypt later on Wednesday to discuss matters related to the Libyan elections and regional security issues.

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US Creates Council to Coordinate Police Training, Protect Minorities - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - A new US Law Enforcement Coordination Council (LECC) will examine use of force policies of police departments throughout the United States and evaluate whether law enforcement training adheres to a set of key principles that include a rigorous protection of civil rights, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Wednesday.

"The LECC, which will be chaired by [Homeland] Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas, will immediately begin comprehensive reviews that ensure more fair, equitable, and impartial policing, as well as officer and community safety," the DHS said in a press release.

The LECC will immediately form two sub-committees, one of which will examine police use of force policies, including those that govern de-escalation tactics, the use of chemical agents such as tear gas and less-than-lethal munitions, the release said.

The second subcommittee will examine police training in a bid to ensure adherence to key principals such as protection of civil rights, respect for privacy, a data-driven focus on preventing implicit bias, the promotion of bans on racial profiling and enhancement of de-escalation techniques, the release added.

Creation of the council represents DHS' first unified law enforcement coordination body. It will include leadership of every DHS law enforcement unit, as well as leadership of DHS Headquarters offices with oversight roles such as the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Privacy Office and Office of the General Counsel, according to the release.

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CENTCOM Commander Says War in Afghanistan Not Over, But US No Longer Party to It

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The conflict in Afghanistan has not ceased, but the United States is no longer a party to that conflict, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Kenneth McKenzie said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"I believe the war in Afghanistan is not over. I believe we are not a party to that war," McKenzie told a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In early August, the Taliban (banned in Russia) stepped up their offensive against the Afghan government forces and entered the capital city of Kabul on August 15. The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed on August 31 as per an agreement with the Taliban, ending the nearly 20-year US military presence in the country.

On September 6, the Taliban announced that the last resisting province, Panjshir, had come under their control and shortly thereafter announced the composition of the new interim government of Afghanistan.

The international community has so far been hesitant about establishing relations with the Taliban as the governing party in Afghanistan. However, numerous countries have established some form of communication with the Taliban to ensure safe evacuation of their citizens from Afghanistan and the allocation of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of the terror group's takeover.

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US Crude Stockpiles Up for First Time in 9 Weeks as Hurricane Ida Effect Fades - EIA Data

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil rose for the first time in nine weeks, weekly data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday, as disruptions from Hurricane Ida faded to allow more production to come on board.

Crude stockpiles rose by 4.58 million barrels in the week to September 24, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report. Analysts polled by US media had forecast a drop of 2.2 million barrels. In the previous week to September 17, there was an outsized 3.5 million barrels drawdown as shut-ins related to the August 29 hurricane led to chronic disruptions in supply. Ida shut down more than 90% of oil and gas production facilities on the US Gulf of Mexico prior to its landfall. As of September 23, some 294,414 barrels equivalent per day of oil, amounting to 16.2% of production in the Gulf, remained inaccessible to refiners, according to the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, the government agency responsible for keeping track of the situation.

The fading fallout from Ida also led to a second straight weekly build in gasoline stockpiles, as refiners appeared to process more crude oil and send out finished products into the marketplace.

Gasoline inventories rose by 193,000 barrels for the week to September 24, versus the forecast draw of 1.5 million, according to the EIA. In the previous week, stockpiles of motor fuel rose by 3.48 million.

Inventories distillates, which include diesel and heating oil, gained 384,000 barrels in the latest week against an expected deficit of 1.4 million, data showed.

Separately, the EIA revised estimates on US crude production upwards by half a million barrels for the week ended September 24, estimating output at 11.1 million barrels per day versus a previous 10.6 million.

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Milley Says Conveyed Trump's 'Intent' to Prevent Nuclear Escalation in Call With China

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday that in his call with China he was conveying then-President Donald Trump's "intent" to reassure Beijing that the United States will not attack China with a surprise nuclear strike.

"What I said to the call to China was - I guarantee you that President Trump is not going to attack you in a surprise attack. I was carrying out his intent, President Trump's intent and in order to protect American people, to prevent an escalation or an incident," Milley said.

A new book by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa titled "Peril" revealed that Milley had phoned his Chinese counterpart Gen. Li Zuocheng on January 8 to assure him that the United States was not planning to declare war or to attack China amid the post-election turmoil in the United States.

During a Senate hearing on the conclusion of the war in Afghanistan on Tuesday, Milley told lawmakers that he was "certain" that Trump "did not intend on attacking the Chinese, and it is my directed responsibility to convey presidential orders and intent."

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Congressional Report Shows High Levels of Heavy Metals in US Baby Foods - Congresswoman

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - A report prepared by the Democrat staff on the US House Oversight Committee shows alarming levels of toxic heavy metals in baby food and criticizes the industry for posing serious health risks to babies and toddlers, Congresswoman Raja Krishnamoorthi said on Wednesday.

"Today's report reveals that companies not only under-report the high levels of toxic content in their baby food, but also knowingly keep toxic products on the market. The facts speak for themselves, and the fact of the matter is that the baby food industry has consistently cut corners and put profit over the health of babies and children," Krishnamoorthi said in a press release explaining the report.

Krishnamoorthi chairs the US House Oversight Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy.

Testing conducted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the state of Alaska found that rice cereal made by Beech Nut and Gerber found more inorganic arsenic than FDA's 100 parts per billion (ppb) limit - an already dangerously-high standard that FDA is now lowering, the release said.

Tests of Plum Organics baby food found levels of arsenic of up to 225 parts per billion along with high levels of lead and cadmium, the release said.

The report also accused Walmart of weakening its arsenic standard by quadrupling arsenic levels permitted in its baby foods from 23 ppb to 100 ppb, the release added.

The report recommended that the FDA accelerate proposed timelines for publishing final limits for heavy metals and require companies to conduct tests on finished products. The report also urged baby food manufacturers to phase out products that have high amounts of ingredients that frequently test high in toxic heavy metals, such as rice.

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Canada-US Line 3 Oil Pipeline Completed, Service Will Begin on Friday - Company Statement

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The Canadian natural gas developer Enbridge announced on Wednesday that it completed its \$9 billion Line 3 pipeline replacement project and service will begin at the end of the week.

The 1,097-mile-long pipeline will deliver 760,000 barrels of crude oil daily from Alberta, Canada, to the US state of Wisconsin. Enbridge replaced most of Line 3's 34-in diameter pipeline with a new 36-inch diameter pipeline.

"Enbridge Inc. announced today the achievement of a major milestone with the substantial completion of the Line 3 Replacement Project and the establishment of an in-service date of October 1," the company said in a press release.

A segment of the Line 3 pipeline that went through 337 miles in Minnesota faced strong opposition from environmental and tribal groups who claimed it threatened to harm water resources and may violate several tribes' treaty rights to hunt, fish and gather wild rice in the region.

However, in June the Minnesota Court of Appeals ruled that Enbridge had received key approvals from state regulators to allow the completion of the pipeline.

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US Has No Basing Agreements With Neighboring Afghanistan Countries - CENTCOM Commander

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has no basing agreements with any of the countries neighboring Afghanistan, but the Defense Department is still able to conduct missions in that country using its distant bases in the region, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Kenneth McKenzie said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"As of today, I have the ability to enter Afghanistan and to fly missions. It's a long haul but I have the ability to do that today," McKenzie told the US House Armed Services Committee.

"Obviously it's a neighboring country that's allowing us access [to Afghanistan], but we're not based in any neighboring country."

The Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) completed the seizure of Afghanistan after it entered the capital of Kabul on August 15, leading to a collapse of the US-backed government.

The Taliban declared that foreign evacuation operations and the exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan were to be completed by August 31, when the Kabul Airport - the sole point of departure for evacuation flights - came under their control.

After President Joe Biden announced the full US withdrawal from Afghanistan on April 14, the Defense Department started exploring possible arrangements with neighboring countries that would allow access, basing and overflight rights necessary to address terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan.

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Austin, Milley Say No Payments Made by US to Taliban During Evacuations

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said they were not aware of any payments to the Taliban (terrorist group, banned in Russia) by the US or coalition forces at any time during last month's evacuation.

"To my knowledge, there was not," Austin told a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan.

When asked the same question, Milley replied: "I have no knowledge of any money that transmitted from any element of the United States government to the Taliban."

The Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) seized control of Afghanistan after entering the capital Kabul on August 15 that led to the collapse of the US-backed government there. The Taliban declared foreign evacuation operations and the exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan were to be completed by August 31, after which the Kabul Airport - the sole point of departure for evacuation flights - came under its control.

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Pessimism Over US Economy Grows in September, Approaches Early-Pandemic Levels – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – Confidence in the US economy in September fell to levels not seen since January but not quite as low as during the onset of the coronavirus crisis in the spring of 2020, according to the latest survey released by Gallup on Wednesday.

"The latest index score is -21, down from -12 in August after falling from -6 in July. September's score matches the record low for 2021 that was recorded in January. At that time, increased pessimism among Republicans just ahead of the presidential transition was found to account for the drop," a press release explaining the poll said.

Gallup's Economic Confidence Index represents Americans' net optimism about the economy, combining their views about current economic conditions and perceptions of the direction of the economy.

The index has a theoretical maximum of +100 if all Americans were to say the economy is "excellent" or "good" and improving, and a theoretical minimum of -100 if all were to say the economy is "only fair" or "poor" and getting worse.

After taking a steep nosedive during the onset of the pandemic, economic confidence has largely remained below zero, only shortly dipping up to +1 and +2 twice in 2021.

Americans' confidence in the economy as captured by the index in September is not as low as the -33 recorded in April 2020.

The latest index reading likely reflected the August jobs report released September 3 showing weak job growth compared with prior months. Inflation could also be a factor, with consumer prices up 5.3% in August compared with the same month last year, according to the release. The economic confidence level was gauged September 1-17 among 1,005 US adults living in all 50 states and comes with a 4% margin of error.

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US Senate Can Take Action on Wednesday to Fund Government, Prevent Shutdown - Schumer
WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate can take action on Wednesday to fund the federal government and prevent a shutdown ahead of the critical Thursday deadline, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"The Senate could take action as early as today to address a concern that demands the immediate attention of this chamber, the funding, funding the federal government beyond September 30 to prevent a government shutdown. Senate Democrats will be introducing a continuing resolution that keeps the government open until early December," Schumer said on the Senate floor on Wednesday.

Schumer added that while the work of the government is funded, there is still a need to address the urgent matter of extending the debt ceiling and preserving the full faith and credit of the United States.

On Tuesday, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell shut down Schumer's proposal to hold a vote on raising the debt ceiling with a lower 51-vote threshold, while a day earlier, Senate Republicans blocked a piece of legislation that required 60 votes to fund the government, raise the debt ceiling and prevent a shutdown.

Congress must pass a law to fund the federal government by October 1, the start of the next fiscal year, and if at least a temporary budget is not adopted by that time, many federal institutions will be shut down.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen recently warned lawmakers that the US government may run out of cash by October 18 unless Congress raises the debt ceiling. Yellen added that failure to raise the debt ceiling could lead to a crisis of "enormous proportions" and warned acting at the last minute could seriously harm business and consumer confidence due to the risk of a negative US credit rating.

The most recent government shutdown happened between December 22, 2018 and January 25, 2019.

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Half of Americans Oppose Biden Plan to Double US Refugee Admissions to 125,000 - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's plan to raise the cap on refugees from 62,500 to 125,000 in fiscal year 2022, which begins Friday, remains broadly unpopular with half of the voters in the United States and support from just 37 percent, a Morning Consult poll commissioned by Politico revealed on Wednesday.

"Voters were twice as likely to strongly oppose the directive as they were to strongly support it, an imbalance driven by Republicans: 65 percent of GOP [Republican] voters strongly opposed the move, compared with 32 percent of Democrats who strongly supported it. The enthusiasm gap on the topic has been consistent throughout Biden's term," a press release explaining the poll said.

The 50 percent opposition in the latest survey was nearly identical to when voters were asked in May about support for Biden's decision to raise the refugee cap for fiscal 2021 from a historic low of 15,000 set by the Trump administration to 62,500, the release said.

The poll also reflected Democrats' vulnerability on immigration, which has been featured with increasing prominence in Republican messaging ahead of 2022 mid-term elections, the release also said.

A 55 percent majority of voters disapproved of Biden's handling of immigration, up 16 percentage points from his opening weeks in office and his worst marks on a list of 14 issues regularly tracked in Morning Consult/Politico polling, the release added.

The survey also indicated Republicans in Congress are narrowly favored over their Democratic counterparts, 44 percent to 39 percent, on trust to handle immigration - a sizable swing from January, when Democrats in Congress had a 10-point edge in trust on the question, according to the release.

The poll of 2,000 registered voters was conducted from September 24 to 27 with a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

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US Sanctions 7 Individuals, One Entity in Middle East Over Links to Hezbollah - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Wednesday added seven individuals and one entity to its list of Specially Designated Persons for their alleged links to Hezbollah.

The sanctions target Ali Reda Hassan Al Banai of Qatar, Yahya Muhammad Al-'Abd-Al-Muhsin of Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Muayyid Al-Banai of Qatar, Sulaiman Al-Banai of Qatar, Majdi Fa'iz Al-Ustadz of Turkey, Ali Ridha Qasabi Lari of Qatar, Abd Al-Rahman 'Abd Al-Nabi Shams of Bahrain and the Doha-based Aldar Properties, the Treasury Department said.

According to US State Secretary Antony Blinken, the sanctions are the result of the joint work US and Qatar aimed at Hezbollah financial network based in the Gulf.

"This represents one of the most significant joint actions we have taken with a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partner to date and underscores our extensive bilateral cooperation on countering terrorism finance," Blinken said.

The secretary added that the group seeks to abuse the international financial system by "utilizing global networks of financiers and front companies to support its malign activity."

"The United States will continue to cooperate with partners, such as the Government of Qatar, to protect the U.S. and international financial systems from terrorist abuse. Concurrent with this action, the Government of Bahrain has frozen bank accounts and referred three individuals to their prosecutor's office," he concluded.

Hezbollah is an Iran-backed Lebanese Shiite political party and militant group founded in the 1980s. It is considered a terrorist organization by Israel, the US and a number of Western countries.

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US Wildlife Service Proposes Removing 23 Species From Endangered List Due to Extinction

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed removing 23 different animal species from the list of endangered species due to their extinction, FWS on Wednesday.

"The US Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to remove 23 species from the Endangered Species Act (ESA) due to extinction. Based on rigorous reviews of the best available science for each of these species, the Service has determined these species are extinct, and thus no longer require listing under the ESA," the agency said in a statement.

Among the 23 species being proposed for delisting are the ivory-billed woodpecker, Bachman's warbler, two types of freshwater fishes, eight species of Southeastern freshwater mussels and 11 species from Hawaii and the Pacific Islands, the statement said.

Although the ESA provided protections too late for the 23 species, it has successfully prevented the extinction of more than 99 percent of listed species, the statement added.

A total of 54 species have been removed from the ESA following population recovery, while 56 other species have been downlisted from endangered to threatened, according to the statement.

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US Pending Home Sales Jump 8% on Year to August Despite Record Prices - Realtors' Data

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – Pending home sales in the United States rebounded strongly in August after two prior months of declines and despite record-high prices, data from the National Association of Realtors showed on Wednesday.

Pending home sales rose 1.4% last month, after shrinking by 1.8% in July, according to the realtors' index which measures signings on existing home purchases that have yet to be concluded. Year-on-year, the growth was a lot more pronounced, surging 8.1%.

"Rising inventory and moderating price conditions are bringing buyers back to the market," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the realtors' association, said in a news release. "Affordability, however, remains challenging as home price gains are roughly three times wage growth."

US home prices jumped almost 20% in July to another record high, the S&P Dow Jones Indices' housing price index showed on Tuesday, as concerns that the Federal Reserve might raise interest rates in the not too distant future spurred more buyers into an already overcrowded market.

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

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US Sanctions 7 Individuals, One entity in Middle East Over Links to Hezbollah - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Wednesday added seven individuals and one entity to its list of Specially Designated Persons for their alleged links to Hezbollah.

The US government has designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

The sanctions target Ali Reda Hassan Al Banai from Qatar, Yahya Muhammad Al-'Abd-Al-Muhsin from Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Muayyid Al-Banai from Qatar, Sulaiman Al-Banai from Qatar, Majdi Fa'iz Al-Ustadz from Turkey, Ali Ridha Qasabi Lari from Qatar, Abd Al-Rahman 'Abd Al-Nabi Shams from Bahrain and the Doha-based Aldar Properties, the Treasury Department said.

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US Senate Can Take Action on Wednesday to Fund Govt, Prevent Shutdown - Schumer

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate can take action on Wednesday to fund the government and prevent the shutdown ahead of the critical Thursday deadline, Senator Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday.

"The Senate could take action as early as today to address a concern that demands the immediate attention of this chamber, the funding, funding the federal government beyond

September 30 to prevent a government shutdown. Senate Democrats will be introducing a continuing resolution that keeps the government open until early December," he said on the Senate floor.

He added that while the government is funded, there is still a need to address the urgent matter of extending the debt ceiling and preserving the full faith and credit of the US.

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YouTube to Remove Anti-COVID-19 Vaccine Content - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - YouTube will be removing all content that includes information against officially approved COVID-19 and other vaccines, and will terminate the channels belonging to several prominent anti-vaccination activists, Axios reported on Wednesday.

YouTube plans to delete all information it considers false about currently administered vaccines that had been approved and confirmed as safe and effective by the World Health Organization and by local health officials, the report cited company Vice President Matt Halprin as saying. Halprin explained YouTube will block all content that accuses vaccines of creating significant health problems, including cancer, autism and other serious disorders, the report said.

In the months that followed the launch of the COVID-19 vaccine misinformation policy, YouTube observed content and realized there appeared to be an interaction between general vaccine hesitancy that was being promoted on the platform and COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, the report said.

YouTube management felt they need to address both, the report added.

At the same time, YouTube will allow scientific discussions about the content of specific clinical trial and historical videos about vaccines, according to the report.

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Over Half of US Voters Want Gov't. to Negotiate Drug Prices for Elderly Americans - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - A 56 percent majority of US voters favor proposals to allow Medicare, the national health insurance program for seniors, to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical suppliers, however support among Republicans plunges once they are told one such plan is part of Democrats' \$3.5 trillion budget bill, a new poll by Morning Consult revealed on Wednesday.

"The [Democrat] drug pricing plan, which would allow the federal government to directly negotiate the prices of some prescription drugs through Medicare, is a key sticking point for lawmakers as they scramble to iron out the \$3.5 trillion package," a press release explaining the poll said.

In conducting the survey, Morning Consult first told participants of a Congressional Budget Office estimate that 2019 version of the bill approved by the House would pressure drugmakers to lower prices and reduce federal spending by \$456 billion, but could also result in fewer drugs introduced in the United States over time, the release said.

When provided with that context, 56 percent of voters said they were in favor of the plan, including 73 percent of Democrats and 42 percent of Republicans, the survey found.

Meanwhile, 36 percent of Republicans said they do not support the proposal in general - but their opposition hardened to 48 percent and Republican support dropped to from 42 percent to 28 percent when they were asked whether it should be included in Democrats' budget bill, the release said.

Overall, half of voters still supported the plan's inclusion in the reconciliation package, the release said.

The US House of Representatives plans to vote first on a separate \$1 trillion infrastructure bill that has support from lawmakers in both parties before taking up the more contentious \$3.5 billion budget.

Democrats face pressure to trim the size of the larger package given uncertain prospects of

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Defense Conference Involving US, Northern European Nations Launches in Helsinki - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - A two-day defense conference involving military leaders from 11 northern European nations and the United States kicked off Wednesday in Helsinki to discuss regional challenges, the US European Command (EUCOM) said.

"The two-day event brings together military leaders from 12 nations to discuss the security environment and its challenges in northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region while promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between the countries in attendance," a EUCOM statement said.

Dubbed the Northern Europe Chiefs of Defense Conference, it brings together US top brass with representatives from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden in a thinly veiled bid to counteract Russian interests in the region. "The strategic importance of the high north and Baltic regions cannot be understated," EUCOM Commander Gen. Tod Wolters in the statement. "Our northern European Allies and Partners are highly capable and have diverse operational experience that contributes immensely to the security of the Euro-Atlantic."

The EUCOM underscored that the defense cooperation between northern European nations, the United States and allies throughout Europe continue to be strong.

The EUCOM noted that the event was planned for 2020 however was rescheduled one the COVID-19 pandemic.