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Eyeing Oman, Israel's Foreign Ministry Hopes for More Normalization Deals in Coming Year
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Israel's Foreign Ministry is looking far and wide for more Muslim nations willing to develop ties in the wake of 2020's Abraham Accords, a senior ministry official said, and the al-Busaidi monarchy in Muscat is a top choice.

"We're speaking basically to all countries in the region, in the Middle East and North Africa," Eliav Benjamin, who heads the Middle East and Peace Process Division at the Israeli Foreign Ministry, told [reporters on Wednesday](#).

"They each have to decide when will be the right time for them and how to go about it. We're speaking to all of them, Oman as well ... we have ongoing cooperation," he added.

Between September and December of last year, Israel established diplomatic relations with four new Arab states - Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco - thanks to a US-led negotiation process. Hailed as the Abraham Accords, the deal temporarily halted a planned annexation of large parts of the West Bank's Jordan River valley by Israel.

Oman, a former British client state, has long sought to be a neutral mediator in a region divided by many different loyalties. Up until his death in January 2020, the late Sultan Qaboos sought to bring Houthi and Saudi diplomats [together for peace talks](#).

More recently, the sultanate, now led by Qaboos' cousin, Haitham bin Tariq, [hailed the Abraham Accords](#) peace deals, saying he hoped it would "be a practical tributary toward achieving peace based on ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and establishing an independent Palestine with its capital in East Jerusalem."

Informal talks between Israel and Oman aren't unheard of, either. Three Israeli prime ministers have secretly visited Oman - Yitzhak Rabin in 1994, Shimon Peres in 1996 and Benjamin Netanyahu in 2018 - with the 1996 visit even leading to the [opening of trade offices](#) in both nations. However, those relations were quickly severed in 2000 after the Second Intifada broke out. Still, according to the [Times of Israel](#), "the government of Oman quietly encouraged Israeli diplomats to stick around, as long as the ongoing engagement between the two countries stayed secret."

In June, Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi told Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid during a [rare phone call](#) that it was the country's policy was not to make peace with Israel before "the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital."

A few days later, al-Busaidi [told Ash-Sharq al-Awsat](#) that "we will not be the third Gulf state to normalise, as I mentioned, but we support the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and we respect the sovereign decisions of states, just as we expect others to respect our sovereign decisions."

While that might seem to close the book on the subject, it's important to note that Morocco made similar declarations several months before suddenly agreeing to a peace deal. [As Sputnik has reported](#), the catalyst was American recognition of Morocco's claim to rule Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory to its south that the United Nations has pledged to hold an independence referendum in and which the native Saharawi people call a Moroccan colony. For the UAE and Bahrain, it seems that what greased the wheels was the promise of new [US weapons sales](#), including the lucrative F-35 stealth fighter; in Sudan, the new civilian government was [rewarded for its deal](#) by being removed from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Normalization of relations with Israel goes against the [so-called "Three No's"](#) of the 1967 Khartoum Resolution. When Arab leaders met in the Sudanese capital in the aftermath of Israel's astounding victory in the Six-Day War in which it seized Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula from surrounding Arab nations, they agreed on three principles to govern their joint orientation towards Israel: no peace, no recognition, and no negotiations.

Several other countries are also options for Israel to establish or restore relations. For example, Muslim states across the Sahel region, including [Chad and Mauritania](#), have established and then broken relations with Israel; while N'Djamena re-established relations in 2019, Nouakchott so far has not. Saudi Arabia, a close US ally that has long had underground connections to Jerusalem, has also [reportedly considered](#) abandoning its position on a Palestinian state and making a deal with Israel.

Israeli daily [Yedioth Ahronoth also reported](#) in December 2020, in the wake of Morocco's about-face, that Jerusalem was also talking to Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Maldives. However, it also claimed that Oman would be next, citing sources in Jerusalem. However, for now the administration of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, a strong proponent of annexing the Palestinian-majority West Bank, is unwilling to consider such a cost.

"The Israeli government won't deliberate on the establishment of a Palestinian state under the present government of Bennett or Lapid when he comes into office under the rotational agreement," Bennett's interior minister, Ayelet Shaked, told [UAE-based outlet The National](#) on Tuesday.

"There is a consensus among the parties not to get involved in the issue, which could cause an internal rift," she said. Israel's shaky coalition government includes parties from across the political spectrum, including the first-ever Arab party in an Israeli government.

"We believe in economic peace as a means of improving Palestinians lives and to create cooperative industrial zones. But not a state with an army, absolutely not," she said, referring to the infrastructure projects proposed by the Trump administration in the so-called [Deal of the Century](#) that preceded the Abraham Accords, was widely panned in the Arab World and [wholeheartedly rejected](#) by the Palestinians.

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Chinese Journalist Denounces 'US Invaders' Amid News of Secret Special Forces Training on Taiwan

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After reports appeared in US media on Thursday that a small number of US troops had secretly been deployed to Taiwan for more than a year, a leading Chinese journalist has called on them to reveal their locations on the autonomous island, which China claims as its own territory.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) reported on Thursday, citing anonymous US officials, that two dozen US Special Operations forces and US Marines had been in Taiwan for more than a year, where they have been training Taiwanese forces amid heightened tensions with China.

In response to the story, the Chinese Foreign Ministry told the WSJ that "China will take all necessary steps to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity" and that it expects the US to adhere to its prior agreements about the status of Taiwan. When it established relations with the People's Republic of China in 1979, the [US agreed to end](#) its political and military support for the government in Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a rebellious province of China.

In response to an inquiry by the WSJ on Thursday, Pentagon spokesperson John Supple said the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, passed by Congress to outline its future informal relations with Taiwan, "provides for assessments of Taiwan's defense needs and the threat posed by the People's Republic of China," as the paper put it.

"I would note the PRC has stepped up efforts to intimidate and pressure Taiwan, including increasing military activities conducted in the vicinity of Taiwan, which we believe are destabilizing and increase the risk of miscalculation," Supple also said.

However, Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the Global Times, an outlet owned by the Communist Party paper People's Daily, had some sharper words for Washington.

"Why just two dozen members? Why secretly? The US should send 240 servicemen publicly, in US military uniform, and make public where they are stationed," Hu tweeted on Thursday. "See whether the PLA will launch a targeted air strike to eliminate those US invaders!"

The Pentagon and Taiwanese governments had no comment about the Journal's story.

However, in a separate comment on Thursday, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said that the US "commitment to Taiwan is rock solid" and that the US "will continue to deepen our ties" with Taiwan.

The revelation also vindicates reports in Taiwanese media in November of 2020 that US Marines were operating on the island. As [Sputnik reported](#) at the time, the report originated with Taiwanese Naval Command, which said that special "Marine Raiders" would be there for four weeks for "routine Taiwan-US military exchange and cooperation training."

Supple [told US military publication Stars and Stripes](#) at the time that the reports were "inaccurate." However, Taiwan News responded by pulling the veil back even further.

"The US sends small units of elite troops of other branches of the armed forces for joint training missions to Taiwan on an annual basis, but they are rarely acknowledged by the Taiwan government. For example, the ROC Army Aviation and Special Forces Command and United States Army Special Forces (the Green Berets) every year hold a joint exercise called Balance Temper," the [Taipei-based publication](#) wrote on November 13. The War Zone, a US-based defense news publication, [published ultra-rare footage](#) it had identified of the Balance Temper drills the previous June.

Ironically, at his confirmation hearing in May, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict [Christopher Maier told](#) the Senate Armed Services Committee that the US should be training Taiwanese forces in guerrilla tactics to resist a theoretical Chinese invasion.

In [response to a question](#) by US Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) about US Special Forces training their Taiwanese counterparts along the lines of how they trained US allies in the Baltic States, Maier said it was “a key contributor” and something the US “should be considering strongly.” Sputnik has also reported on [mysterious flights](#) to and from the island, including by cargo aircraft operated by companies with known links to the US Central Intelligence Agency. Their movements have also been documented by online flight tracking services.

Standing ‘Shoulder to Shoulder’

Also on Thursday, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a high-profile visit to Taipei, where he expressed hope Canberra’s support for Taiwan would increase. Like the US, Australia recognizes the Chinese government as the single government of all of China, and maintains only informal relations with the Taiwanese government via a liaison office.

“It is in large measure to try to help to end this isolation from which Taiwan has been suffering for so many decades that I am here in this country and I do hope that this will be the first of many visits,” [Abbott told Taiwanese](#) President Tsai Ing-wen, seeming to describe Taiwan as a separate country.

“You have demonstrated to all of the countries of this region that it is possible to be both rich and free and it is possible to have both liberty and democracy,” he further said. “Of course not everyone and not everywhere is pleased [by] Taiwan’s progress, and I do note that Taiwan is challenged on an almost daily basis by its giant neighbour. It’s more important than ever, under such circumstances, that your fellow democracies stand shoulder to shoulder with you.”

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, no friend of China’s, told reporters on Thursday that Abbott was “a private citizen” visiting Taiwan in his own capacity.

Last month, Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom came together to sign a new military cooperation agreement they termed AUKUS. While billed as a simple defense agreement that will provide, among other things, a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, the deal is widely seen as aimed at China. Another regional bloc, the Quad group, also includes Japan and India in addition to Australia and the US, who have [described it as complementary](#) to AUKUS.

Beijing has described the new defense agreements as [“pseudo-multilateralism”](#) and said they provoke [“discord” among nations](#) of the region.

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‘Crimes Against Humanity’: Venezuela’s VP Says US ‘Blocked’ \$5 Billion COVID-19 Loan from IMF

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After the International Monetary Fund (IMF) withheld a \$5 billion loan from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the country’s vice president has slammed the United States for fouling

the deal. Washington has long sought to force the Venezuelan government from power using strangling economic sanctions.

"The International Monetary Fund refuses to give our people the \$ 5 billion that correspond to our country to fight the pandemic. The reason: the express veto of the United States against Venezuela," Venezuelan Vice President [Delcy Rodriguez said](#) Wednesday in a teleconference speech to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

"We have been the target of more than 430 unilateral coercive measures that have blocked our foreign and private trade, against all legal principles of sovereign immunity," she said, noting the sanctions had cost the country's oil sector, the backbone of its export economy, \$63 billion. This, she noted, amounted to "a drastic 99 percent reduction in revenue."

"These measures are crimes against humanity and violate the international system of guarantee of human rights," Rodriguez added. She urged UNCTAD to "group, quantify and analyze the macroeconomic impacts of unilateral coercive measures" on her country.

The United States is the largest shareholder in the IMF, a neoliberal international lender established after World War II for the purpose of restructuring the international monetary system that had been wrecked by years of depression and war.

The US State Department responded on Thursday, [telling Reuters](#) that only governments recognized by the IMF could receive loans from it.

"We welcome further agreement among all political actors in Venezuela to allow for unfettered and transparent access to humanitarian assistance," the statement said.

Two Years of Blocked Funds

In January 2019, the US backed an attempted coup by Juan Guaido, an opposition politician who, at the time, was head of Venezuela's National Assembly, a body disempowered by the country's Constituent Assembly after its conduct was declared unconstitutional. Guaido decried Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's reelection victory the year prior as illegitimate and declared himself the country's interim leader. While some 50 Western and US-aligned states backed Guaido's putsch, his small movement withered into political irrelevance.

In April of that year, however, the IMF effectively sided with Guaido by declaring it wouldn't engage with any Venezuelan authorities until the question of the country's government had been settled.

"We are guided by our membership on that issue, and at this point, this determination has not been made," the [IMF said at the time](#). It is headquartered in Washington, DC, about three blocks from the White House.

When the COVID-19 pandemic came the following year, Caracas sought \$5 billion via the IMF's Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI), a special mechanism for distributing COVID-19-related relief funds, the bank [again refused the loan](#), saying there was "no clarity" on international recognition of the country's government. It has maintained this policy until the present.

In August 2021, the IMF did actually approve a \$5 billion RFI payout to Venezuela, but withheld the actual money, again citing a supposed dispute in the country's governance, despite the fact that Guaido has neither institutional nor political power, having lost his legislative seat, and exists as a "government" only on paper in Washington, DC.

However, Venezuela has encountered more problems as well. In June, Maduro accused UBS of [holding up several payments](#) to the World Health Organization intended to get the country

COVID-19 vaccines via the COVAX program. The first vaccine shipments from COVAX only arrived last month.

'The Pandemic Does Not Adhere to Borders'

US sanctions have killed tens of thousands of Venezuelans since 2015, when then-US President Barack Obama declared the country an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." They have created shortages of fuel, medicine, food, and other goods that have helped drive hyperinflation and create the dire conditions that are then denounced by Western non-governmental organizations as failures of the Venezuelan government.

In February, several progressive [US lawmakers urged](#) the new Biden administration to drop its sanctions against Venezuela in order to allow the country to effectively fight its COVID-19 outbreak.

"It is both a moral and public health imperative that our efforts to combat COVID-19 are global in scope because the pandemic's economic consequences require international cooperation," the lawmakers wrote. "The pandemic does not adhere to borders, nor does it account for complex geopolitical realities - until the virus is eradicated everywhere, it is not eradicated anywhere." Just days later, [Alena Douhan](#), the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, similarly said US sanctions were "not justified." She noted that "existing humanitarian exemptions are ineffective and insufficient," and that the structure of US sanctions encourages "over-compliance," a euphemism for illegal overreach.

"Repeated refusals of banks in the United States, the United Kingdom and Portugal to release Venezuelan assets even for buying medicine, vaccines and protective kits, under the control of international organizations, violates the above principle and impedes the ability of Venezuela to respond to the COVID-19 emergency," Douhan notably pointed out.

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NATO Secretary-General 'We Don't Regard China as an Adversary or an Enemy'

By - Nevin Brown

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg discussed China, climate change, the European Union, international arms agreements, and France's row with the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia in an interview with Politico, Stoltenberg made clear that [NATO does not view China as an enemy](#). In fact, he believes that to solve some of the world's most pressing issues, more cooperation between NATO nations and China is necessary.

"We need to engage with China on important issues such as climate change — there's no way to reduce emissions enough in the world without also including China. We need to discuss arms control with China. So, we need to engage politically with China," Stoltenberg told the publication.

However, Stoltenberg's diplomatic stance towards China also acknowledges their fast-rising military, massive economy, and assertiveness as posing potential security risks for NATO. The two stances, of needing to engage with China as a superpower, and needing to combat China as a superpower, appear as an attempt to appease the different factions that make up NATO. The United States has pushed more competitive and combative rhetoric against China, while European countries have been more willing to engage with China, especially on an economic level. Stoltenberg said that NATO needs to work more closely with Asia-Pacific allies, such as Japan and Australia, to help curb China's growing economic and military influence in the region. Outside of NATO's relationship with China, Stoltenberg talked about how NATO's role in arms control and tackling climate change will be of critical importance. He touted how arms agreements during the Cold War were successful in reducing the US and USSR's nuclear arsenals. He highlighted the US and Russia's START agreement, which limits long range nuclear warheads, as a good starting point for future arms control agreements.

"China has to be included because China is a global power and with a global role also comes global responsibilities. And therefore, we are working to find ways to include China in arms control," he said.

Stoltenberg also made clear that NATO, a military alliance, needs to take on climate change to maintain security in its member nations. He put it bluntly: "climate change is a crisis multiplier." "It will affect the way we conduct military operations with extreme heat, with increased sea levels... Melting of the polar ice will change where we can operate... So it will have a direct impact on how our military are organized and conduct their missions and operations," he added. He acknowledged the need for countries to reach zero carbon emissions and that NATO members were looking at ways to reduce the carbon footprint of their military activities without sacrificing the strength and capabilities of their armed forces.

When asked about France's row with the US, UK, and Australia over their AUKUS submarine deal, he definitively sided with the three English-speaking nations.

"I understand that France is disappointed. At the same time, NATO allies agreed as late as June this year at the NATO summit in Brussels with President Biden and all the other leaders that we need to work more closely with what we call the Asia-Pacific partners... And therefore, it is a good thing that NATO allies work with Australia," he stated.

France is a member nation of NATO and had a deal with Australia to build diesel-powered submarines for the Australian Navy. The new agreement that Australia signed with the US and the UK will deliver nuclear-powered submarines in an effort to expand their Navy's reach in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the final part of the interview, the NATO head talked about the European Union potentially creating its own coordinated armed forces. Stoltenberg was skeptical of the logic and put it simply, "the EU cannot replace NATO." His reasoning was that "more than 90% of the people living in the European Union, they live in a NATO country. So by strengthening NATO, we are actually strengthening the defense of Europe."

Stoltenberg, the former Norwegian Prime Minister, has been the Secretary-General of NATO since 2014. The next election to head NATO will be held in 2022 in Madrid.

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US Senate Passes Bill to Raise Federal Debt Ceiling Until Early December

By - Nevin Brown

The move will allow the government to pay its bills until December 3. Without congressional action to hike the \$28.4 trillion debt limit, the Treasury Department says it could run out of money by October 18.

The US Senate has passed a bill to temporarily increase the federal debt ceiling until early December.

The vote broke primarily down party lines, with all 50 Democratic and Independent senators voting in favor of the measure and 48 of 50 Republican senators voting against the measure. The 11 Republican senators who ended the 60-vote filibuster were Roy Blunt of Missouri, John Barrasso of Wyoming, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Susan Collins of Maine, John Cornyn of Texas, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Rob Portman of Ohio, Mike Rounds of South Dakota, Richard Shelby of Alabama, and John Thune of South Dakota.

North Carolina Republican Senator Richard Burr did not cast a vote.

The measure to raise the debt ceiling prevents the US from defaulting on its debts.

However, the measure is only a short-term solution: the US will rack up around \$480 billion in debt by December 3rd. Lawmakers will shortly be thrust into action over funding the government and, likely, raising the debt ceiling once again.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen believes having a debt ceiling is, "increasingly damaging to America," and that "it's led to a series of politically dangerous conflicts that have caused Americans and global markets to question whether or not America's serious about paying its bills. It's flirting with a self-inflicted crisis."

If the debt ceiling had not been raised, it would have been the first time the US had ever defaulted on its loans. The fallout from doing so could have caused the US economy to crash and potentially impact the global economy as well.

The default itself has never happened, but the threat of it is widely used for political bargaining in Congress. Republicans and Democrats are both aware of the dire consequences of not raising the US debt ceiling in these situations and use the enormity of the vote to gain concessions in negotiations.

The bill now goes to the House for passage before being signed by President Joe Biden. He will endorse an increase in the national debt ceiling right after it is approved by Congress, the White House assured.

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Bernie Sanders Campaign Alums Launch 'Left Flank Strategies'

By - Nevin Brown

A new political consultancy, Left Flank Strategies, is helmed by three Bernie Sanders campaign alums. The group markets itself as an alternative to traditional, more moderate Democratic consultancies.

The firm works on progressive campaigns and is led by Anna Bahr, Karthik Ganapathy and Bill Neidhardt.

The trio has ties to Bernie Sanders and represents a growing group of progressive-leaning consulting firms. Ganapathy worked on Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign, Neidhardt on Sanders' 2020 bid, and Bahr was most recently Sanders' national deputy press secretary.

"We work with leading progressive voices because we share the same values: building an economy that works for working people, saving the planet from environmental disaster, and rooting out institutional injustice," the firm's mission statement [reads](#).

The firm offers general consulting, campaign management, media relations, message development, crisis management, debate prep, media training, issue advocacy, grassroots organizing, video production, graphic design, and speechwriting.

As progressives continue to [gain political clout](#) within the Democratic party, progressive-leaning political consultancies have emerged. Left Flank Strategies joins Justice Democrats, who helped elect Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), New Deal Strategies, and BlackBrown Partners in the fast-growing world of progressive political consulting. As more firms emerge, it's likely candidates will follow.

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Biden Administration Fight to Not Disclose Details of CIA Torture of Detainee

By - Adriana Montes

The US Supreme Court is set to hear case of Abu Zubaydah, a Palestinian man held at Guantanamo Bay who endured brutal torture by the CIA at a "black site" in Poland following the 9/11 attacks.

Arguments about the government's ability to assert what is known as the "state-secret privilege" are reportedly being questioned.

The central issue of the case concerns whether Zubaydah, 50, who was captured in Pakistan in 2002, will be able to obtain information related to his detention.

Zubaydah and his lawyer are requesting a subpoena testimony from two former CIA contractors who supervised his torture while detained at the "black site" CIA facility in Poland.

A federal appeals court allegedly sided with Zubaydah and claimed that a judge has the power to determine whether any information he is seeking can be disclosed, regardless of the government's oath to keep the information a secret.

Zubaydah, the first person held by the CIA, spent four years at CIA black sites where he underwent extensive torture, before being transferred to Guantánamo Bay in 2006. He was

described as an al-Qaeda* leader and long-time associate of Osama bin Laden before the Senate torture [report](#) later found that the CIA had "significantly overstated" Zubayah's role in the organization.

The CIA black site in Poland has never been publicly acknowledged by the US government, though its existence has been widely reported in the media.

Zubdayab's lawyers [reportedly](#) noted that they expect non-privileged information from contractors James Elmer Mitchell and John Bruce Jessen underlining Zubdayah's "torture in Poland, his medical treatment and the conditions of his confinement."

The Biden administration insists that information — that includes the locations of former CIA detention facilities — cannot be disclosed to prevent it from jeopardizing national security.

After a federal court initially ruled that Mitchell and Jessen should not be required to testify, an appeals court ruled 2-1 that the lower court made a mistake in ruling out questioning entirely before attempting to differentiate what can and cannot be disclosed.

The government [reportedly](#) acknowledges that Zubaydah's treatment by the CIA "included the use of [enhanced interrogation techniques](#)."

The Supreme Court is set to hear arguments next month in another case involving questions about the state secrets privilege. That case, *FBI v. Fazaga*, arose out of the use of an FBI informant to secretly infiltrate Muslim communities in southern California more than a decade ago. Oral arguments will take place on November 8

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NBA Vets Charged in \$4 Million Insurance Fraud Scheme

By - Adriana Montes

US Attorney Audrey Strauss said the indictment accuses 18 former NBA players of defrauding \$4 million from the NBA's Health and Welfare Benefit Plan — which provides additional coverage to eligible active and retired players — by submitting bogus invoices with glaring typos and discrepancies, according to Manhattan federal prosecutors.

More than a dozen NBA veterans have been charged in US federal court in a sweeping alleged health insurance scheme to defraud the league's benefit plan, according to an indictment released by the US Southern District of New York on Thursday.

Federal prosecutors said ex-NBA player and alleged ringleader Terrence Williams, who played for the Boston Celtics, Orlando Magic and Los Angeles Clippers over the course of his career, is accused of "orchestrating" the multi-million dollar scheme and recruiting other players in the health plan.

The former player is said to have allegedly offered fake invoices and letters of reimbursement to the retired players in exchange for \$230,000 in kickbacks.

The defendants included six-time NBA All-Defensive Team member Tony Allen and former Lakers guard Shannon Brown. Allen's wife, Desiree Allen, is the only woman charged in the indictment.

Prosecutors claimed that the defendants allegedly submitted “false and fraudulent claims for reimbursement of expenses for medical and dental services that were not actually rendered,” [according to court papers](#).

Amongst the discrepancies asserted, phony documentation submitted by Williams, particularly a pair of letters that were allegedly from a chiropractor, were submitted by two defendants in the case and raised suspicion.

“[The] letters are unusual in several respects: they are not on letterhead, contain unusual formatting, have grammatical errors, and one of the letters misspells a purported patient’s name,” the indictment [reportedly](#) states.

Additional glaring discrepancies consisted of ex-Chicago Bulls player Gregory Smith and ex-Boston Celtics power forward Ronald Glen Davis both allegedly submitted costly dental work performed at a Beverly Hills dentist’s office — during a time they found themselves out of the country.

“The former NBA players relied on the submission to the plan of false invoices for chiropractic, dental and wellness services that were never provided,” said Strauss.

“As alleged, travel records, email, GPS data and other evidence show that the defendants who reportedly received medical and dental services on a location at a particular date were often nowhere near the provider’s offices when the claimed services were supposedly provided.” The fraud, which began in 2017, resulted in a \$2.5 million windfall for the defendants, court papers allege.

The defendants are each charged with one count of conspiracy to commit healthcare and wire fraud, and may face up to 20 years in prison, with Williams facing an additional charge of aggravated identity theft for “impersonating” the plan’s administrative manager in a call to intimidate another player who had refused to pay the kickback, according to Strauss.

Former NBA player Sebastian Telfair is currently in custody, and scheduled to be presented in a Manhattan federal court Thursday afternoon, officials said. Fourteen defendants were arrested in nine other states, where they’ll appear before a judge. According to Strauss, three have yet to be taken into custody.

“Thanks to the hard work of our law enforcement partners, their alleged scheme has been disrupted, and they will have to answer for their flagrant violations of the law,” Strauss concluded.

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Florida Eliminates 8-Inch Snail for the Second Time in 10 Years

By - Adriana Montes

The snails which were first spotted in Southern Florida in the 1960s, are said to be one of the most damaging snails in the world — known to carry a parasitic nematode that can cause bacterial meningitis in humans and can consume at least 500 types of plants according to the state's Department of Agriculture.

Florida announced on Wednesday that it has, for the second time, eradicated the 8-inch giant African land snail — an invasive species that can eat the stucco off your house and cause meningitis.

Florida's Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried reportedly [made the declaration](#) at a news conference at Miami's Douglas Park, where the eight-inch snail was first discovered in 2011. There's a high risk that these snails could threaten a \$250 billion industry for crops that Florida farmers grow and invest in.

"It'll eat your plants, and it'll eat your house," Trevor Smith, director of the division of plant industry and a Florida State Plant Regulatory official [reportedly said](#) at the news conference, according to the Sun Sentinel.

"Our trade partners do not want this pest. So it was absolutely imperative that we come in and eradicate this thing so it didn't impact our international trade," Smith added.

In addition to Miami-Dade County, hundreds of the snails were [reportedly found](#) in Florida's Broward County, notably western Davie, in 2014.

Since then, the state has collected over 168,000 of the eight-inch long snails that can measure almost 5 inches in diameter, and can reproduce about 1,200 eggs a year.

Officials aren't certain how the species arrived here before the 2011 discovery in Coral Gables, but a state investigation [reportedly revealed](#) that in 2010, dozens of giant African land snails were smuggled to Miami from Nigeria.

"I'm happy to say there's still only one place on earth where the giant African land snail has been eradicated," Smith said, before adding, "and now we've done it twice."

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Man Reportedly Falls Nine Stories from Jersey City, NJ Building — and Survives

By - Adriana Montes

Jersey City police spokeswoman Kimberly Wallace-Scalcione reportedly described the incident as an attempted suicide and did not disclose the 31-year-old man's identity.

A man jumped nine stories from a high-rise building in Jersey City, NJ on Wednesday morning, landed on a parked BMW — and miraculously survived, according to [media reports](#) citing officials and a witness.

Disturbing footage shared online by a bystander shows the man agonizing on the floor next to the vehicle moments after the fall. The collapsed BMW with shattered windows was also captured.

Warning: the following video is disturbing and may offend sensibilities

A witness [told](#) the Daily Voice that the man landed with a very loud noise and was screaming for help.

"The sound was very loud," Christina Smith told the publication. "He was screaming 'help.' I was trying to tell him to calm down and stop moving."

The man was rushed to the hospital and remained hospitalized Thursday afternoon in critical condition with life-threatening injuries, according to city officials.

Police said the incident did not involve any suspicious activity but they are still investigating, according to Wallace-Scalcione.

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Tesla Moving Headquarters From California to Texas, Elon Musk Announces
By - Adriana Montes

The decision was made because there is more space in Texas to expand operations and it has a more affordable cost of living. Musk himself, after a spat with the California authorities, already moved to a suburb of Austin from Los Angeles, where he lived for more than 20 years.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk announced Thursday that the leading electric vehicle maker is moving its headquarters from Silicon Valley to Texas.

"I'm excited to announce that we're moving our headquarters to Austin, Texas," Musk said at an annual [shareholder meeting](#), which took place at Tesla's vehicle assembly plant outside of Austin, near the city's airport.

Tesla aims to increase output from Fremont, California by 50 percent, although he says the plant is hitting its limits on how much more it can handle.

"When we first went in there, it was like a kid in his parents' shoes; tiny us and this giant factory," Musk said of its inaugural plant in Silicon Valley.

Musk reiterated that Tesla was ramping up deliveries and growing strong, despite the shortages of computer chips and other components.

"To be clear we will be continuing to expand our activities in California," Musk added. "Our intention is to increase output from Fremont and Giga Nevada by 50%. If you go to our Fremont factory it's jammed."

Though California remains Tesla's biggest market in the US, the state [reportedly](#) paved stricter policies and set restrictions to protect worker safety and health during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, Musk felt more compelled to appeal to cheaper, less-regulated Texas, and moved to Austin in 2020.

Among the issues, Musk cited were the company's need for additional space, expensive home prices in the Bay Area, and long commutes for workers.

"We're here in Austin and our factory is like five minutes from the airport, 15 minutes from downtown," Musk said.

"We're going to create an ecological paradise here on the Colorado River. It's gonna be great." Tesla seems to be following in the footsteps of companies Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co. and Oracle Corp., which moved their corporate headquarters to Texas earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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RPT - CIA China Study Center Threatens to Foster Groupthink, Infect Analysis - Ex-Officer

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The CIA's creation of a new integrated center to study China could lead to misleading groupthink infecting the entire intelligence assessment process, former agency analyst and officer Philip Giraldi told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, CIA Director William Burns announced the new China mission center was planned to confront perceived threats from Beijing and address the global challenge posed to the United States from China, according to an agency statement.

"The idea is that with everyone together it will speed up the process of winnowing through an ocean of information to come up with useful insights," Giraldi said on Thursday. "The problem is it also produces groupthink as one interpretation strongly embraced and then promoted can infect the entire process, preventing alternative views from surfacing."

The former CIA officer said the move also reflects the extent of Washington's concerns.

"They [CIA] are clearly seeing China as a multi-faceted global threat, which is plausible if not completely accurate, and the Center would presumably follow the model of having analysts, case officers, technical staff as well as representatives from Secret Service, FBI, NSA [National Security Agency], Treasury and others on hand," Giraldi said.

He cautioned that many independently arrived at assessments were more valuable than a homogenized product.

Giraldi was also a US Military Intelligence officer and is now director of the Center for the National Interest and a founding member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group.

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Novatek CFO Gyetvay Files Motion Asking US Court to Dismiss Tax Charges - Filing

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Novatek Chief Financial Officer Mark Gyetvay's defense team filed a motion to dismiss all US government tax charges citing statute of limitations, a court filing revealed.

"All the charges filed by the government in this case are untimely on the face of the Indictment and should therefore be dismissed," the document filed with a US district court in Florida said on Thursday.

On September 23, US authorities arrested Gyetvay on tax evasion charges. Last week a US federal court modified Gyetvay's conditions of release by moving him from house arrest to curfew.

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Musk Says Tesla Moving Headquarters to Texas

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Tesla founder Elon Musk said they are moving the company's headquarters from the US state of California to Texas because there is more space to expand operations and it has a more affordable cost of living.

"I'm excited to announce that we're moving our headquarters to Austin, Texas," Musk said on Thursday during a shareholder meeting.

Musk, who is also the founder of SpaceX, conducts test launches of his prototype Starship rocket in the Texas city of Boca Chica, which he has dubbed Starbase.

Musk also said Tesla will continue to expand activities in California.

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US House to Meet Next Week if Senate Passes Short-Term Debt Ceiling Increase - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will cut its recess short and reconvene next week if the Senate passes a bill for a short-term lifting of the federal debt ceiling, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a letter to her Democratic colleagues.

"We have also been working to protect the full faith and credit of the United States," Pelosi said on Thursday. "At this writing, the Senate is engaged in hours of debate that will lead to a vote to lift the debt ceiling. Hopefully that will occur and if it is necessary for members to return early, Leader [Steny] Hoyer will give sufficient notice as promised."

The US Senate is scheduled to vote on Thursday night on a bill to temporarily raise the debt ceiling by \$480 billion that which will allow the government to pay its bills until December 3.

The US national debt stands at \$28.4 trillion.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen posited in a letter to Congress that failing to raise the debt ceiling could cause an economic crisis of enormous proportions.

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Blinken to Meet President Lopez-Obrador During Visit to Mexico City Friday - US Official

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador during a visit to Mexico City on Friday, a senior Biden administration official said during a conference call.

"We look forward to discussions with our Mexican counterparts during the trip on an updated security framework to meet today's challenges and ways to reinvigorate security cooperation that will be called the US-Mexico bicentennial framework for security, public health and safe communities," the official said on Thursday. "Secretary Blinken will meet with President Lopez Obrador and Secretary [Marcelo] Ebrard."

Blinken will be joined by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, US Attorney General Merrick Garland, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols and

National Security Council Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere Juan Gonzalez, the official said.

The US and Mexican delegations will discuss enhancing cooperation to disrupt drug cartel groups operating in Mexico and addressing human smuggling on the US southern border, the official said.

The US delegation will also consult with their Mexican counterparts on the plans to reinstate the Trump-era Remain in Mexico policy as ordered by a court recently, the official added.

The trip takes place amid a record number of illegal immigrants crossing into the United States via the border with Mexico. Some 15,000 asylum-seeking migrants, mostly from Haiti, were apprehended in Del Rio, Texas, last month. Overall, more than 1.5 million migrants have been apprehended on the US-Mexico border since October 2020.

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CIA China Study Center Threatens to Foster Groupthink, Infect Analysis - Ex-Officer

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"The idea is that with everyone together it will speed up the process of winnowing through an ocean of information to come up with useful insights," Girdali said on Thursday. "The problem is it also produces groupthink as one interpretation strongly embraced and then promoted can infect the entire process, preventing alternative views from surfacing."

The former CIA officer said the move also reflects the extent of Washington's concerns.

"They [CIA] are clearly seeing China as a multi-faceted global threat, which is plausible if not completely accurate, and the Center would presumably follow the model of having analysts, case officers, technical staff as well as representatives from Secret Service, FBI, NSA [National Security Agency], Treasury and others on hand," Girdali said.

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Girdali was also a US Military Intelligence officer and is now director of the Center for the National Interest and a founding member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group.

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Crews Recover 5,544 Gallons of Crude Oil from California Coast Oil Spill - Unified Command

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Crews have recovered 5,544 gallons of crude oil from the Pacific Ocean that spilled in as a result of a leak in a pipeline off the coast of Southern California, the interagency Unified Command response team said in an update.

"More than 800 people are conducting response operations. To date, 5,544 gallons of crude oil have been recovered," the Unified Command said on Thursday.

The cleanup crews have assessed all accessible shorelines from the northernmost point of Huntington Beach, south to San Clemente, the Unified Command said. Members of the public should avoid any contact with visible oil on beaches, it added.

Pilots conducted 11 overflights of the impacted area on Wednesday and six more were scheduled for Thursday. Additionally, 12,860 feet of containment boom have been deployed to contain and concentrate the spill for cleanup.

The leak, first reported on Saturday, spilled roughly 126,000 gallons of oil into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of southern California near Los Angeles. The Unified Command said that the cause of the spill is still under investigation.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik)

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON IRAN

* The United States has learned of Iran's expectation that Vienna talks to resume the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action re-start soon and hopes that they will begin as soon as possible, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

* The United States considers engagement with Russia in Iran constructive as Moscow agrees that Vienna talks must resume, Price said.

PUTIN-KISHIDA TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin, who turns 69 on Thursday, held a phone conversation with Japan's new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and congratulated him on taking office, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Kishida and Putin confirmed commitment to continue dialogue on the Japan-Russia peace agreement during a phone conversation.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKET

* The White House is monitoring the global energy market in a situation in which the situation with increasing gas prices underscores the need to diversify energy supplies, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

* Increasing Russian gas supplies to Europe is possible, everything depends on commercial agreements, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said,

NORD STREAM 2

* Berlin believes that the commissioning of Nord Stream 2 is possible on the basis of an agreement concluded with the United States, the German government said in response to the request of the Alternative for Germany faction in the German Bundestag of the previous convocation, the text of the document was seen by Sputnik.

* NATO fears an increase in the Russian military presence along the route of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the head of the Polish National Security Bureau, Pawel Soloch, told reporters after a meeting of the heads of the NATO countries' intelligence services, which took place in Brussels.

* Austrian energy company OMV hopes that gas will be soon supplied to Europe through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, OMV CEO Alfred Stern said,

US DEBT CEILING

* US Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer announced on Thursday that Democrats have reached a deal with Republicans on the extension of the debt ceiling through December.

EARTHQUAKE IN JAPAN

* The number of injured a powerful earthquake in Japan's Greater Tokyo Area has grown to 22, the broadcaster NHK reported.

* Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno confirmed that there had been no reports of emergency situations at nuclear facilities after a powerful earthquake in the capital region.

RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

* NATO actions contradict their statements on resumption of dialogue with Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* NATO's decision to withdraw accreditation of eight members of the Russian mission is not related to any "particular event," Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

* Stoltenberg said that he discussed the possibility to convene the NATO-Russia Council with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov but no agreement was reached.

NAVALNY CASE

* An open letter of 45 countries to Moscow within the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) regarding the incident with opposition figure Alexey Navalny is another anti-Russian action, Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

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Wall Street on 3-Day Winning Streak Ahead of US Jobs Report for September

NEW YORK, October 7 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street rounded out a third straight day of gains ahead of Friday's scheduled release of the US jobs report for September, which analysts expect to be better than the previous month's yet not too strong to push the Federal Reserve towards deciding on a rate hike.

Also boosting sentiment was the deal reached between Democrat and Republican lawmakers, who managed to agree on raising the US debt ceiling by \$480 billion to avert a government shutdown and debt default at least until December.

"Jobless claims show the labor market is heading in the right direction again... as investors remain upbeat that the US won't default on its debt," said Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA. "The outlook for 2022 remains optimistic given markets are still expecting Democrats to ultimately deliver infrastructure spending and President Biden's economic plan by December.

Wall Street's Big Tech sector, represented by the Nasdaq Composite Index, again led gains for the day, while the blue-chip S&P 500 and the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average indexes came in second and third, respectively.

Nasdaq, comprising growth stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed up 152 points, or 1.1%, at 14,654. The tech barometer has gained 2.8% over the past three sessions.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 36 points, or 0.8%, at 4,400. The blue-chip indicator has accumulated 2.3% in gains since Monday's close.

The Dow finished Thursday's session up 340 points, or 0.1%, at 34,757. The broad-based industrial indicator has risen 2.2% over the past three days.

After a heady run through most of the first three quarters of the year, US stocks have encountered sharp swings since last month on a range of worries that include escalating oil prices and inflation. This week alone, Nasdaq had its worst day since June, when it fell just over 2% on Monday.

For Friday's September jobs report, analysts expect the Labor Department to report a gain of 500,000 positions versus 235,000 in August. If the rise is more than 600,000, it could prompt the Federal Reserve to expedite the rollback of its long-running stimulus and super-low interest rates programs.

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Biden Renews US National Emergency Executive Order on Syria - White House

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has renewed the US government's declaration of national emergency powers in dealing with Syria, the White House announced on Thursday.

"The situation in and in relation to Syria, and in particular the actions by the Government of Turkey to conduct a military offensive into northeast Syria, undermines the campaign to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [banned in Russia]," Biden said in a press release.

The ongoing crisis continues to endanger civilians and further threatens to undermine the peace, security and stability in the region while still posing an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States, the release said.

"For this reason, the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13894 of October 14, 2019, must continue in effect beyond October 14, 2021. Therefore ... I am continuing for one year the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13894 with respect to the situation in and in relation to Syria," Biden said.

Biden's predecessor, President Donald Trump on October 14, 2019 by Executive Order 13894 declared a national emergency pursuant to the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to deal with the Syrian crisis, Biden noted.

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US Army Delivers Equipment for First Prototype Hypersonic Weapon Batter - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The US Army said on Thursday it completed the delivery of the ground equipment for the United States' first prototype hypersonic weapon land-based missile launcher.

"Today the US Army equipped the I Corps' 5th Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment, 17th Field Artillery Brigade, with the nation's first prototype hypersonic ground equipment," the Army said in a press release. "Known as the Long Range Hypersonic Weapon, this land-based, ground-launched system will provide a critical weapon and powerful deterrent to adversaries." The delivery includes a battery operations center, four transporter erector launchers, and modified trucks and trailers that make up the Long Range Hypersonic Weapon ground equipment, the release said.

The release said the Army plans to have the weapon system fully operational with live hypersonic rounds by 2023.

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US Arrests January 6 Capitol Rioter for Attacking Police - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - A Pennsylvania man who joined the January 6 protest at the US Capitol faces charges that include attacking police officers during; the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[Michael] Dickinson was at the US Capitol on Jan. 6 where he was captured on Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) body-worn camera (BWC) and open source video footage throwing items at law enforcement. Specifically, the footage shows Dickinson throwing what appears to be a coffee tumbler at law enforcement," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Later video shows Dickinson picking up a large bucket filled with liquid and throwing the liquid and the bucket at law enforcement officers who appeared to be attempting to clear rioters from Capitol grounds, the release said

Charges against Dickinson include assaulting, resisting, or impeding certain officers; civil disorder; and engaging in physical violence on restricted grounds. Dickinson made his initial appearance in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, the release added.

In the eight months since January 6, more than 600 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol, according to the release.

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US Deportations of Haitian Migrants Will Worsen Situation in Haiti - Ex-US Envoy

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's decision to deport Haitian migrants is not the right solution and will worsen the situation in the Caribbean country, former US Special Representative for Haiti Daniel Foote said on Thursday.

"Deportation back to Haiti is not the answer right now," Foote said during a congressional hearing. "Haiti is too dangerous... deportation in the short term is not going to make Haiti more stable, in fact it's going to make it worse."

US media reported, citing DHS officials, said the US has conducted flights to Haiti to transport about 5,500 individuals who tried to cross the southern border of the United States. Foote resigned from his post in protest, claiming the deportations were inhumane.

The United States must focus on addressing issues in Haiti that are driving migration in the region, Foote said. More Haitian migrants are expected to make their way to the US southern border especially if they may have heard some migrants made it through in August and September.

Foote said security is a majority concern in Haiti undermined by a police force has become politicized and that would take years to return to normal.

However, Foote said he thinks the United States has the capability to crack down on gangs in Haiti in six to 12 months.

Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake in August in which more than 2,000 people died in addition to suffering poverty, rampant gang violence and a political crisis following the assassination of previous President Jovenel Moise in July.

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Gasoline Prices in US to Remain High Throughout Fall due to Oil Value - AAA

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) – American Automotive Association (AAA) forecast that gasoline prices in the United States will remain elevated throughout the fall season due to the

volatile situation in global oil markets, AAA spokesperson Andrew Gross told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Gasoline prices will likely remain somewhat elevated through the fall," Gross said.

Since Monday, the US national average for a gallon of regular gasoline has increased four cents to \$3.24, which is the highest pump price since October 2014, he added.

High crude oil prices remain the major trigger, while a slight increase in domestic US demand has also contributed to the rise in the national average, he noted.

"Prices rose earlier this week following OPEC+, which comprises the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia, and their allies, choosing not to move forward with an agreement to produce 800,000 barrels per day in November," Gross added. "Instead, OPEC+ decided to keep its 400,000 barrels per day planned production increase intact for now." Earlier this week, global oil prices hit a record high since 2014 in the wake of OPEC+ reaffirming its decision to stick to its planned output increase.

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US Charges Ex-Taliban Commander With Killing American Troops in 2008 - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged a former Taliban (banned in Russia) commander Haji Najibullah with conducting attacks on US troops in Afghanistan, including killing three servicemembers in June of 2008, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[T]he superseding indictment charges NAJIBULLAH with attacks on US troops conducted by NAJIBULLAH and the Taliban fighters under his command, including a June 26, 2008, attack on an American military convoy that killed three US Army servicemembers," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Najibullah has been previously charged with kidnapping of a US journalist and two Afghan nationals in 2008 and is currently in federal custody, the release said.

In 2007, the defendant was the commander of about a thousand Taliban fighters in Afghanistan's Wardak province bordering on Kabul, the release said. On June 26, 2008, the fighters attacked a US military convoy killing three US sergeants and their Afghan interpreter, the release said.

During another attack on US troops in November of 2008, Najibullah's fighters shot down a US military helicopter. Following the attack, the US officials refuted the Taliban's claims that everyone who was on the helicopter were killed, the release said.

In total, Najibullah's indictment contains 13 counts of various crimes, including hostage-taking, kidnapping, murdering US nationals, destroying US aircraft, providing material support for acts of terrorism, and conspiring to use weapons of mass destruction, the release added.

Each count in the indictment carries a maximum penalty ranging from 20 years to life in prison, according to the release.

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Eleven Sailors Injured After US Submarine Strikes Object in Indo-Pacific - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Eleven sailors were injured after a US submarine struck an object in international waters in the Indo-Pacific region on Saturday, USNI News outlet reported on Thursday citing a Navy official.

The Navy said that 11 sailors received moderate to minor injuries in the incident. The vessel will now sail to Guam, where it is expected to arrive within the next 24 hours.

The US Navy's Pacific Fleet said in a statement that the submarine remains in safe and stable condition, and that the nuclear propulsion plant remains unaffected and fully operational.

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US Believes 'Critical' for Israel to Refrain from Settlement Activity - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price on Thursday refused to comment on reports that the Biden administration has been pressuring Israel behind closed doors to hold back its settlement constructions in the West Bank but said Washington believes it is crucial to refrain from unilateral steps, including settlement activity.

"We don't comment on private conversations that may be taking place, whether that's between the Secretary and his counterpart and the President and his counterpart," Price said in a press briefing. "We believe it is critical for all parties to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution, [and] that of course, includes settlement activity."

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has been planning to approve the construction of 2,000 new housing units in existing settlements and some 1,000 new units on the occupied Palestinian territory, Axios reported.

The outlet said during a meeting in the White House in late August, Biden told his Israeli counterpart that he expects Israel to show restraint on his settlement plan, and Bennett replied that Israel would build new units according to needs from "natural growth."

However, after his return from Washington, Naftali told settler leaders that he opposed Biden's request, Times of Israel reported. This prompted US charge d'affaires in Jerusalem Michael Ratney to reiterate Biden's request for restraint.

Tel Aviv is now hesitant to approve the construction of new settlements due to pressure from the United States.

The issue of Israel's settlements in the West Bank, considered to be an occupied territory by the United Nations, is one of the main stumbling blocks in the peace process to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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US Aware Iran Expects Vienna Talks to Resume Soon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has learned of Iran's expectation for the Vienna talks on reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to re-start soon and hopes negotiations will begin as soon as possible, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We have heard similar statements from the Iranian government at various levels over the past couple of weeks... that they expect negotiations to resume soon. We hope their definition of soon matches our definition of soon," Price said. "We would like negotiations to resume in Vienna as soon as possible."

Price emphasized that it is important for the parties to come back together to the negotiating table and to continue where they left off in Vienna on the basis of what has been already accomplished.

"We continue to believe the diplomatic path is open. We continue to believe a diplomatic approach is the best means to verifiably once again ensure that Iran can never obtain a nuclear weapon, with permanent and verifiable restrictions that the JCPOA put in place but we also we think the imminent return to Vienna is necessary because this is not a process that can go on indefinitely," he stated.

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

In 2018, the United States withdrew unilaterally from the JCPOA and implemented comprehensive sanctions against Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its own obligations under the accord.

Since April, Vienna has been hosting talks aimed at preventing the Iran nuclear deal from failing altogether. The sixth round of the talks finished on June 20 and the negotiations have since hit a deadlock.

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US to Continue Deepening Ties With Taiwan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to strengthen its relations with Taiwan amid rising tensions between Taipei and Beijing, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Our commitment to Taiwan is rock solid and it contributes, we believe, to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the broader region as well," Price said. "We'll continue to stand with our friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security and values, and we will continue to deepen our ties with a democratic Taiwan."

Price went on to say that the United States strongly urges China to cease its military, diplomatic and economic pressure and coercion against Taiwan.

On Wednesday, Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng said China might mount a full-scale invasion of the island nation by 2025. China has sent in recent days almost 150 military aircraft close to Taiwan while US and other allied forces conducted drills in the South China Sea.

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to abide by the Taiwan agreement, which ensures a peacefully-determined future for Taiwan in exchange for US recognition of Beijing as the official Chinese government.

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US Nuclear-Powered Submarine Struck Object in Indo-Pacific Waters - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - A US Navy nuclear-powered submarine struck an object while operating in international waters in the Indo-Pacific region and there are no life-threatening injuries as a result of the incident, the Pacific Fleet Public Affairs Office said on Thursday.

"The Seawolf-class fast-attack submarine USS Connecticut (SSN 22) struck an object while submerged on the afternoon of Oct. 2, while operating in international waters in the Indo-Pacific region. The safety of the crew remains the Navy's top priority. There are no life threatening injuries," the Pacific Fleet Public Affairs Office said in a statement.

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State Dept. Says Working to Facilitate Aid to N. Korea, Including Via UN Sanctions Cmte.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Washington is involved in efforts to facilitate the provision of assistance to vulnerable people in North Korea and seeks to expedite approvals from the UN Sanctions Committee to allow international humanitarian actors to bring aid into the country, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We do support efforts to alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people. We are involved in efforts to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid to the neediest in North Korea," Price said. "This is most evident, I would say, in our ongoing work to expedite approvals in the UN 1718 Committee [UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea] for organizations from around the world to deliver life-saving aid to the DPRK [North Korea]."

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Afghan SIV Applicant Sues US After Ignored Pleas to Protect His Children in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - An Afghan father living in the United States is suing the Department of State after two years of ignored pleas to bring his two sons left behind in Afghanistan through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, according to a lawsuit filed by the International Refugee Assistance Project on Thursday.

"To date, the State Department has not responded to Mohammad's petition for protection or made any effort to evacuate or protect H.S.P. and S.A.P.," the complaint said. "Plaintiffs seek an order from this Court compelling Defendants to respond to Mohammad's petition for protection and take appropriate action to protect his children."

Mohammed, whose full name is not given for security reasons, promoted women's and children's rights throughout Afghanistan between 2016 to 2019 as part of an initiative funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the lawsuit said. However, Mohammad and his wife, sons, mother, and brothers received repeated death threats from the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) because of his link to the US government, the lawsuit said.

In August 2019, the filing added, Mohammad took a business trip to the US state of California, but decided to remain in the United States under asylum protections after he discovered the Taliban visited his home in Kabul and left threatening notes. Mohammed hoped to bring his wife and his sons to the United States promptly, but he cannot do so until his Special Immigrant Visa application has been approved.

Mohammad has been waiting desperately for his SIV application to be fully processed since May 2019, but it is currently in the final stages to approve him for lawful permanent status in the United States.

Meanwhile, Mohammad's sons, who are nine and eleven years old, have been eluding the Taliban by moving to different residencies every few days following the fall of Kabul in August, the lawsuit said. The situation is especially stressing after Mohammad's wife died of a heart attack in October 2020 because of a threatening encounter with the Taliban, according to the filing.

After the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, hundreds of people rushed to the airport, which resulted in several days of chaos.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas previously said the United States has admitted more than 40,000 individuals evacuated from Afghanistan. Approximately 13 percent of the 40,000 individuals were US citizens, 8 percent lawful permanent residents, and 79 percent Special Immigrant Visa holders, applicants, or other vulnerable Afghan nationals, according to Mayorkas.

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US to Continue Deepening Ties With Taiwan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to strengthen its relations with Taiwan amid rising tensions between Taipei and Beijing, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Our commitment to Taiwan is rock solid and it contributes, we believe, to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the broader region as well," Price said. "We'll continue to stand with our friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security and values, and we will continue to deepen our ties with a democratic Taiwan."

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White House Says Option to Mandate Vaccinations for Commercial Flights 'Not Off Table'

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - An option to require vaccinations on commercial flights is not off the table of the Biden administration as it remains focused on the aggressive action to fight the ongoing pandemic, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday during a press briefing.

"I would say, no options are off the table. We are focused on the aggressive and urgent action [to fight the coronavirus pandemic]," Jean-Pierre said when asked whether the administration is planning to require vaccinations on commercial flights.

As of today, unlike international travelers, domestic flyers are not required to get tested for COVID-19 though there are some restrictions when traveling to the states of Hawaii and Kansas.

At the same time, this situation can soon change if a bill introduced by a senator from California Dianne Feinstein becomes law. The US Air Travel Public Safety Act would require all travelers to be fully vaccinated, fully recovered or test negative ahead of their domestic flight.

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Flight Carrying Americans, Afghans From Mazar-i-Sharif Airport Lands in Qatar - US Senator

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - A flight carrying Americans and Afghans who have been waiting at the Mazar-i-Sharif airport in Afghanistan for evacuation have finally left on a charter flight and landed in Qatar, US Senator Richard Blumenthal said on Thursday.

"I'm elated & relieved to announce that 2 planes chartered by [Sayara International] have safely arrived at Al Udeid Air Force Base in Qatar from Maser-e Sharif, Afghanistan with hundreds of brave, resilient Americans & Afghan allies onboard," Blumenthal said in a tweet.

While there were nearly 800 individuals aboard the two flights, there are still hundreds like them remaining in Afghanistan awaiting evacuation, Blumenthal added.

The Democratic Senator from Connecticut also said that the US has a moral and humanitarian obligation to protect and evacuate friends and allies from Afghanistan, and that the US government's work on the matter will not stop until they have fulfilled their promises to Afghan partners.

Blumenthal expressed his gratitude for a network of advocates and volunteers that he said worked tirelessly to make the flights possible as well as Qatari and Albanian partners for their support on the mission.

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Debt Limit Extension Agreement Positive Move Forward - White House

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The legislation approved by the House on Wednesday to suspend the US debt ceiling is a positive step forward and it gives some breathing room, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"This is a positive step forward, it gives us some breathing room," She said.

Jean-Pierre noted the US administration has been in close contact with US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and added that the administration shouldn't be in the position in which it is now in the first place.

"There should never be a political game, the President [Joe Biden] made it clear - Republicans should not bring us at the brink of default as they did," she said.

Earlier on Thursday, Schumer said that the Senate could move to consider the legislation through December 16, 2022, as early as next week.

If the US defaulted on its debt, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen posited in a letter to Congress that failing to raise the debt ceiling could cause an economic crisis of "enormous proportions."

Without congressional action to hike the \$28.4 trillion debt limit, the Treasury Department says it could run out of money by October 18.

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US State Department Says Russia Has Been Constructive Engagement on Iran

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States considers engagement with Russia in Iran constructive as Moscow agrees that Vienna talks must resume, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Russia has been constructive in its engagements in the context of the P5+1," Price said in a briefing. "We agree with the Russian Federation that Iran should not be able to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is precisely why we and the Russians agree on this one issue that we should resume negotiations in Vienna as soon as possible."

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US Aware Iran Expects Vienna Talks to Resume Soon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has learned of Iran's expectation that Vienna talks to resume the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action re-start soon and hopes that they will begin as soon as possible, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We have heard similar statements from the Iranian government at various levels over the past couple of weeks... that they expect negotiations to resume soon. We hope their definition of soon matches our definition of soon," Price stated. "We would like negotiations to resume in Vienna as soon as possible."

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Pentagon Says NSA Working With Big Companies on Cyber Information Sharing

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The National Security Agency (NSA) is working with big defense industrial base companies on information sharing on cyber issues, Defense

Department Acting Chief Information Officer Kelly Fletcher said during an interview at the Billington CyberSecurity Summit on Thursday.

"To talk a little bit about what NSA is doing, I think it's very cool. They're focused on big defense industrial base companies, and when they say they're a collaboration center, they are a collaboration center. They are really trying to say 'Hey, we have some exquisite information.' It's the NSA. But also these commercial entities, these big companies, they have some pretty unique and interesting information. So we're working to collaborate, sort of for the common good," Fletcher said.

The US government's pivot to a so-called "zero trust" cyber architecture - which assumes all devices in a network to be untrustworthy by default - will require the support of industry partners as well as the Defense Department, Fletcher added.

In May, President Joe Biden signed an Executive Order to improve information sharing between the US government and private industry partners on cyber issues. The order also provided for an implementation of stronger cybersecurity standards in the federal government by securing cloud services and developing a zero-trust architecture.

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White House Monitoring Global Energy Market Amid Need to Diversify Supplies - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The White House is monitoring the global energy market in a situation in which the situation with increasing gas prices underscores the need to diversify energy supplies, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"We continue to monitor global energy market supply and will work with our agency's partners to determine if and when actions are needed," Jean-Pierre said during a press conference, adding that the current situation regarding the gas prices "really underscores the need to

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UN Welcomes Iran-Saudi Arabia Talks as 'Critical' to Regional Stability - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, October 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes direct negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and believes these discussions are critically important for the stability of the Middle East, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"I think discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are extremely important and are frankly critical to the stability of the region," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "We very much welcome those talks, and... we are standing by to help in any way we can should we be asked." Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud said that the talks between Saudi and Iran's new government took place on September 21.

The relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia are often referred to as "Cold War" given that the two rivaling nations have sided with opposing sides in various conflicts in the region, including in Syria and Yemen.

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US Refunds Nearly \$800,000 to Customers Cheated in Fake Debt Collection Scheme - Regulator

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Consumers targeted by a debt collector who unlawfully brokered and collected fake debts will receive \$772,512 in compensation for their losses, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said on Thursday.

"Hylan Asset Management, LLC, and its owners, Andrew Shaevel and Jon E. Purizhansky, bought, placed for collection, and sold lists of phantom debts, including debts that were fake or imposed on consumers without their knowledge or consent," the FTC said in a press release. Hylan referred the fake debts to several collection agencies, which then illegally collected the money, the release said.

As part of a 2019 the settlement, the defendants agreed to a permanent ban from the debt collection industry and surrendered funds to the FTC, the release added.

The agency is using that money to send checks averaging \$539 to 1,432 consumers, according to the release.

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UN Says Backs All Accredited Media After Ukraine Diplomat Calls Russian Media 'Terrorists'

UNITED NATIONS, October 7 (Sputnik) - United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday that the world body strongly supports every media organization accredited to work at its headquarters in New York following a recent incident involving a senior Ukrainian diplomat labeling all Russian media as "terrorists."

Earlier in the week, a RIA Novosti reporter approached the head of the Directorate-General for International Security at the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Volodymyr Lakomov, during the UN General Assembly First Committee meeting in order to ask him a question. Lakomov refused to talk to the correspondent, saying he considers all Russian media representatives to be "terrorists" and "propaganda-terrorists."

"We strongly support every media organization that is accredited and present in this building and their right to ask questions," Dujarric said when asked the extent to which the Ukrainian diplomat's behavior complies with the principles of freedom of the press and the United Nations headquarters ethics.

Dujjaric also said that member states and delegates answer questions posed to them in the way that they see fit.

However, the UN spokesman pointed out that the United Nations does not consider RIA Novosti to be a terrorist group.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has repeatedly raised concerns about harassment of journalists in Ukraine. In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, RSF lowered Ukraine by one position to listing it as 97th, between Liberia and Mauritania.

Earlier this year, Kiev banned several opposition-minded broadcasters, as well as all Russian media outlets operating in Ukraine.

Russia filed in August its first inter-state complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, raising concerns about the clampdown on freedom of speech and the press in Ukraine as well as about violations of the European Convention on Human Rights.

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US Sentences Former CEO of Energy Company to 2 Years for Wire, Mail Fraud – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) – Former Chief Executive Officer of an electric utility firm Atlanta-based SCANA Kevin Marsh has been sentenced to 2 years in prison for conspiring to defraud ratepayers in order to retain over \$2 billion in tax credits following the company's failure to build two new units for a nuclear plant in South Carolina, the US Department of Justice said on Thursday.

“Acting United States Attorney M. Rhett DeHart announced today that Kevin B. Marsh, 66, former SCANA Corporation (SCANA) Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of Directors, was sentenced to two years in federal prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud,” the Justice Department said in a press release.

In late 2016, Marsh was overseeing a project that involved an expansion of Virgil C. Summer Nuclear Station in South Carolina. After being informed that the project was running late, he conspired with others to conceal this information from federal regulators in a bid to keep the project going and retain billions in tax credits, the release said.

Besides that, Marsh made a number of false statements that allowed SCANA to obtain permission to increase rates imposed on the company's rate-paying customers, the release said.

In addition to the prison sentence, Marsh has also paid \$5 million in federal forfeiture prior to his sentencing and will pay a fine of \$200,000, according to the release.

At the end of 2020, SCANA agreed to pay at least \$137.5 million in fines and disgorgement over the failed expansion of Virgil C. Summer Nuclear Station in South Carolina.

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Facebook Launches Mental Health Resources After Criticism About Platform's Effects on Kids

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Facebook announced on Thursday that it is launching new mental health resources, tools and programming across all its apps, after being criticized by a former employee in Congress of the social media platform's negative effects on children. "For World Mental Health Day on October 10, we're launching new mental health resources, tools and programming across our apps. We're working with mental health experts and organizations around the world to connect people with the support they need, and we're launching new content and tools to encourage people to start conversations about mental health," Facebook said.

The company explained that it has joined forces with numerous mental health experts to introduce new tools in its Emotional Health resource center, including resource cards on tips for positive mental health and guides to mental health support for various communities such as Black, Asian, Latino and others.

With the help of Facebook-owned WhatsApp, UNICEF has launched a new Global Mental Health chatbot that offers tips for communicating as well as introduced new suicide prevention tools.

On Tuesday, former Facebook product manager Frances Haugen told a congressional testimony that the social media network was allegedly aware it inflicted harm on the mental health of teenagers but did not do much to prevent content promoting "hate and division," as well as content that created a toxic environment for teenage girls. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg denied Haugen's allegations.

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New Challenges Facing World Can Be Addressed Only Via US, Russia Joint Action - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - New challenges that the world is facing today can be dealt with only through the International collaboration and specifically between Moscow and Washington, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on an occasion of the anniversary of the opening of the Alaska-Siberia route (ALSIB).

"Today, the experience of the partnership between Moscow and Washington in countering common threats and maintaining global stability continues to be relevant," Antonov said in an Op-Ed published in the Washington Times on Thursday. "Nowadays the world faces new challenges – terrorism, climate change, the global pandemic and proliferation of WMDs. The fact remains unchanged, though, that they can be addressed only through cooperation among all members of the international community, including Russia and the United States. Only via joint action can we ensure safety and prosperity on the planet – just like the greatest generation of victors, the Soviet and American veterans, who together defended peace for all of us."

October 7 marks the 79th anniversary of the ALSIB operation launch, which served as one of the main supply channels under the Lend-Lease program during World War II.

Antonov underscored that this air route symbolizes the partnership between Russia and the United States in the fight against Nazism and its allies.

"The ALSIB project was used not only for delivering warplanes," he added. "The airway was many times exploited by high-ranking government officials of the two countries, including Foreign Minister of the USSR Vyacheslav Molotov, Soviet Ambassadors to the US Andrei Gromyko and Maxim Litvinov, Vice President of the United States Henry Wallace, Senator Wendell Willkie and others."

The Alaska-Siberia Air Route operated in 1942-1945 was used as part of the US Lend-Lease program to deliver US warplanes to the Soviet Union. It consisted of roads and airports that began in Montana and ran some 6,000 miles through Canada on to Alaska, where Soviet pilots tested the aircraft before flying them into Siberia to be sent westward for use against German forces. Over 8,000 US warplanes were sent to the Soviet Union along ALSIB to aid the country in its fight against Nazi Germany.

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US Extradites Suspect From Netherlands on \$.2Mln Fraud Plot Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The US government has extradited a suspect from the Netherlands on charges of running a more than \$2.2 million wire fraud conspiracy, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"As alleged, Napoleon Grier was part of a criminal conspiracy that bilked victims out of more than \$2 million in advance fees for promised project financing that was never delivered," US Attorney Audrey Strauss said in a Justice Department press release. "Now, Grier is in US custody and facing federal felony charges."

Grier and his co-conspirators allegedly defrauded victims of \$2.275 million as part of an advance fee scheme. He was taken into custody by Dutch authorities in Amsterdam on August 13, 2019 and after contested extradition proceedings, he finally arrived in the United States on Wednesday, the release said.

"Grier and his co-conspirators - operating out of offices near Wall Street in New York, New York - held themselves out to victims as experienced financiers and promised that they could obtain financing for victims' intended projects. ... [But they] never provided any of the financing they promised to victims," the release added.

Grier and his co-conspirators then never returned any of the more than \$2.275 million in advance fees they defrauded the victims into depositing into escrow accounts, according to the release.

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US Airline Employment Remains 3.2% Below Pre-Pandemic Level – Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) – US airlines employed a total of 718,407 workers in August, a 0.3% increase from July, but 3.2% fewer than in pre-pandemic August 2019, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Thursday.

"The August industry numbers consist of 613,657 full-time and 104,750 part-time workers, an increase from July of 5,238 full-time and a decrease of 2,784 part-time workers," BTS said in a press release.

As of August, the largest passenger airlines are operating with 63,341 fewer employees than at the March 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the release added.

Among the biggest US carriers, United Airlines has dropped 20,025 workers, Delta Air Lines 14,896, and American Airlines 9,820 during the pandemic.

However major cargo airlines are operating with 21,761 more employees, with Federal Express having added 20,630 workers.

Major US airlines have said travel demand is dipping because of the delta variant.

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Pentagon Says No Recent Unsafe Interactions Between US, Iranian Vessels in Persian Gulf

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - There have been no unsafe interactions recently between US and Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf, US Navy Central Command Public Affairs Officer Tim Hawkins said on Thursday.

"There have been no recent unsafe or unprofessional interactions involving Iranian and US Navy vessels in the Arabian Gulf," Hawkins said.

The statement contradicts most recent Iranian media reports that Iranian vessels pursued US speedboats in the Persian Gulf. The reports contain footage that purportedly shows Iranian vessels chasing boats flying US flags.

A return to the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), remains a central issue in the US-Iran relationship. However, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on Wednesday that there is little time remaining to negotiate a return given Iran's progress in its nuclear program.

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Just 36% of US Adults Trust Media, 2nd Lowest Score Ever Recorded - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Americans' trust in the media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly has edged down four percentage points since last year to 36%, making this year's reading the second lowest ever, a Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"In all, 7% of US adults say they have 'a great deal' and 29% 'a fair amount' of trust and confidence in newspapers, television and radio news reporting," a press release explaining the poll said.

The combined total is just four points above a record low 32 percent recorded in 2016, amid the divisive presidential election campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the release said.

The findings are the latest in Gallup's tracking of the public's confidence in key US institutions, which began in 1972.

Between 1972 and 1976, 68-to-72 percent of Americans expressed trust in the mass media; yet, by 1997 trust had dropped to 53 percent. Trust in the media, which has averaged 45% since 1997, has not reached the majority level since 2003, the release said.

Meanwhile, partisans' trust in the media continues to reflect a sharp polarization of the US electorate. Currently, 68 percent of Democrats, 11 percent of Republicans and 31 percent of independents say they trust the media, the release added.

The poll was conducted September 1-17 with telephone interviews from a random sample of 1,005 US adults in all 50 US States with a margin of error of plus or minus 4%, according to the release.

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UPDATE - US Weekly Jobless Claims Below Key 400,000 Mark for 10th Week Running - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims were at 326,000 last week, remaining below the key 400,000 level for a tenth week in a row in continued recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, data from the Labor Department showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending October 2, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 326,000, a decrease of 38,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

Unemployment filings have not crossed the 400,000 bar since the week ended July 31. That is an important indicator for the Federal Reserve, which is closely watching labor market recovery to begin tapering its monthly stimulus of \$120 billion for the economy.

Economists polled by US media had expected 348,000 filings in the latest week. In two previous weeks, the numbers reported by the Labor Department were higher than forecast, although below the 400,000 bar.

"This is a nice improvement after two weeks of disappointing data," economist Adam Button said in a comment posted on ForexLive.

Continuing claims for the week ended September 25 — reported with a one-week lag — slid to 2.71 million from the previous week's level of 2.81 million. That brought the weekly unemployment rate down by 0.1% to 2.0%.

Some 19 months into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

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

The US economy itself shrank 3.5% in 2020. This year though, growth has been quite dynamic, with a 6.7% rebound for the second quarter though that was still below the 8.5% expected by economists.

The Fed thinks growth will average at 6.5% for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell also says it may take a while for "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4% or lower — to occur. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.2% in August.

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US Homeland Security Dept. Enacts Plan to Tackle Climate Change - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security said on Thursday that it has released a plan to tackle the climate change, including actions to bring about vehicle fleet electrification and workforce education.

"Today, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released a new Climate Action Plan outlining the steps the Department is taking to tackle the climate crisis, including bolstering the Department's ability to adapt to climate change, building national resilience, undertaking mitigation measures, and addressing key vulnerabilities," the DHS said in a release.

As part of the new plan, the DHS said climate-resilient facilities and infrastructure will be created and actions undertaken to electrify at least 50% of its vehicle fleet by 2030, the release said.

The new plan envisages provision of funding for various programs, including wildfire resilience programs, flood control programs and small-town coastal hazard mitigation plans, the release added.

The DHS will also assess climate change impacts in order to secure the necessary supplies of food, medicine and energy as well as take steps to increase climate literacy among its workforce.

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US Soldiers Secretly Stationed in Taiwan Trained Troops to Defend Against China - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - US Marines and special operations forces have been secretly training Taiwanese soldiers on the island to defend against possible Chinese aggression, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

The report said the US soldiers have been operating in Taiwan for at least a year, during which time they have conducted training for Taiwanese ground force units as a way to prepare them for threats coming from China.

The US government and Taiwanese officials did not comment on the alleged deployment, but the aforementioned US officials claim that the deployment is on a rotational, variable schedule. On Wednesday, Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng said China might mount a full-scale invasion of the island nation by 2025. China in recent days sent almost 150 military aircraft close to Taiwan while US and other allied forces conducted drills in the South China Sea.

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to abide by the Taiwan agreement, which ensures a peacefully-determined future for Taiwan in exchange for US recognition of Beijing as the official Chinese government.

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Just 44% of US Voters Have Confidence in Elected Leaders, Candidates – Poll

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - Americans' trust in elected leaders flirted with record lows, with a minority saying they have confidence in political candidates or elected officials, and only a slight majority expressing confidence in voters' choices during elections, a Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"Less than half of U.S. adults (44%) say they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in people who hold or are running for public office, rivaling the record low of 42% from 2016," a press release explaining the poll said. "Meanwhile, a small majority (55%) express a similar level of confidence in the judgments of the American people under the democratic system, the lowest Gallup has measured to date but not meaningfully different from 56% readings in 2016 and 2020."

Gallup polls of both measures, which date back to 1972 for politicians and 1974 for American voters, show a nearly continuous decline in confidence for both politicians and voters during subsequent decades, the release said.

Thursday's poll shows confidence in politicians down 24 percentage points from its peak in 1974, while confidence in the judgments of the American voters is down 31 points from its peak in 1976, the release said.

After former President Barack Obama's election to the White House in 2008, Republicans' confidence in politicians plummeted and has yet to get back to its former level, according to the release.

Gallup has recorded double-digit gaps between the two parties' levels of confidence in most years since, including a 25-point difference between Democrats (64%) and Republicans (39%) in the latest poll — one of the largest gaps Gallup has found.

The poll was conducted September 1-17 with telephone interviews from a random sample of 1,005 US adults in all 50 US States with a margin of error of plus or minus 4%, Gallup said.

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Pfizer Vaccine for Under-12 Could Be Ready for Emergency Use by Nov - White House's Zients

NEW YORK, October 7 (Sputnik) - Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for children aged five to 11 could be authorized for emergency use by federal health regulators by late November, White House COVID Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said in an interview broadcast by CNN on Thursday. "Again, it's up to the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] and CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and scientific processes," Zients said when asked whether the vaccine would be approved for the 5-11 age group before the US Thanksgiving holiday on November 25. "But yes, it could and we will be ready as soon as the FDA and CDC give the go-ahead."

Earlier in the day, Pfizer and its vaccine development partner BioNTech Group said in a tweet that they had asked the FDA to grant Emergency Use Authorization for their COVID-19 vaccine in children of ages five to below 12.

"We're committed to working with the FDA with the ultimate goal of helping protect children against this serious public health threat," the two vaccine developers said in the tweet.

The FDA has tentatively scheduled a hearing on October 26 to consider the Pfizer-BioNTech request. Health experts who act for the agency have promised in previous testimony to move quickly on the matter.

FDA Acting Commissioner Janet Woodcock was quoted saying in US media last week that children might require "a different dosage or formulation from that used in an older pediatric population or adults".

Pfizer itself has proposed giving children a third of the adult dosage.

Very few children became severely ill from the initial COVID-19 outbreak of 2020. But the more dangerous and transmissible Delta variant that emerged later landed nearly 30,000 of them in US hospitals in August, alarming health authorities.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says nearly 6 million Americans younger than 18 have been infected with the coronavirus. Of the roughly 500 Americans under the age of 18 who have died from COVID-19, about 125 were children aged between five and 11.

Young people below 12 account for nearly 30 million of America's 330 million population.

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Guterres Says \$8Bln Needed to Reach 40% of World Population With Vaccines By End of 2021

UNITED NATIONS, October 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday that some \$8 billion will be required to ensure that 40% of people worldwide are vaccinated by the end of 2021.

Earlier on Thursday, Guterres, together with World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, launched the Global COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy to reach 70% of the world's population with vaccines by the middle of 2022.

"With vaccine production now at nearly 1.5 billion doses per month, we can reach 40% of people in all countries by year's end - if we can mobilize some \$8 billion to ensure that

distribution is equitable," Guterres said during a press conference. "I urge all global stakeholders to step up, mobilize their resources and turn this strategy into reality."

Guterres also warned that if global vaccine distribution remains uneven, there is a risk that new coronavirus variants able to resist vaccines will emerge in the Global South and undermine all vaccination efforts.

"Not to have equitable distribution of vaccines is not only a question of being immoral, it is also a question of being stupid," he said.

The UN chief called on the G20 countries, set to convene on October 30, to use the upcoming meeting to deliver on their commitment to get the world vaccinated.

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US Senate Majority Leader Says Democrats Have Reached Deal on Debt Ceiling Till December

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) – US Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer announced on Thursday that Democrats have reached a deal with Republicans on the extension of the debt ceiling through December.

"I have some good news," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor. "We have reached an agreement to extend the debt ceiling through early December and it's our hope that we can get this done as soon as today."

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Blinken, Japan Foreign Minister Discuss N. Korea's Weapons Programs - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi discussed over the telephone North Korea, climate change and other issues, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister shared their concerns about the DPRK's [North Korea's] nuclear and ballistic missile programs and reaffirmed their commitment to address and resolve these issues through US-Japan-Republic of Korea trilateral cooperation towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Price said in a statement.

Blinken and Motegi also discussed the US-Japan bilateral relations and emphasized issues concerning security, the statement said.

The two officials agreed that the United States and Japan share the continuing commitment to address climate change issue, the statement added.

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US Pledges to Pursue Anti-Corruption Probes After Pandora Papers Revelations – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 7 (Sputnik) – The United States pledges to cooperate with its international partners to continue anti-corruption probes following the Pandora Papers revelations, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Tobin Bradley said on Thursday.

"Investigations like the Pandora Papers highlight well-known systemic vulnerabilities," Bradley said during a virtual discussion at the International Monetary Fund. "Further investigation is needed to determine the extent to which these activities alleged in the Pandora Papers were illegal."

The Biden administration has pledged to work with partners and allies to address these issues, Bradley, who works in the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, said.

"Our administration recognizes that we will only be successful in combating corruption if we work together with international partners," he added.

The United States developed a new anti-corruption strategy, which includes modernizing efforts to fight corruption, curbing illicit finance, holding corrupt actors accountable, and building international partnerships, Bradley noted.

The Pandora Papers, compiled by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists following a two-year investigation, exposed over 35 current and former global leaders, as well as more than 330 politicians and officials worldwide, who reportedly used tax havens and hid real incomes through offshore companies. The dossier contains over 11.9 million confidential documents.

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Earlier in the day, Pfizer announced that it submitted a request to the FDA to grant an Emergency Use Authorization of its vaccine in children ages five to under-12