

10/19/21 Tuesday

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Top Trump Security Adviser Contradicts 'Imminent Attack' Claim Behind Soleimani Assassination
By - Morgan Artyukhina

In a new book about his time in the Trump administration, a retired US Army general who served as a senior adviser to the White House contradicts the justification given by Donald Trump for the January 2020 killing of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani, which was that he was allegedly planning an "imminent attack" against US troops and embassies.

A new book that hit shelves today by Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg reveals that the Trump administration planned the killing of Soleimani as part of a "disproportional" response to attacks on US troops in Iraq by Shiite militias. Kellogg was then-Vice President Mike Pence's national security adviser, and also served as executive secretary and chief of staff for the US National Security Council under Trump.

"We had always considered him a legitimate target because he was a sponsor for terrorism and was directly responsible for the deaths and maiming of hundreds of Americans," Kellogg writes about Soleimani in "War by Other Means: A General in the Trump White House," according to the [UK Daily Mail](#), which received an advance copy of the book.

Soleimani commanded the Quds Force, an elite formation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and commanded Iranian forces in Syria fighting against Daesh* and al-Qaeda*-linked terrorist groups before leading the Iranian and Iraqi fight to push Daesh out of Iraq. Despite being sanctioned by the United States as a terrorist, Soleimani enjoyed enormous prestige across the Middle East as the "linchpin" who united disparate militia groups to halt Daesh's advance toward Baghdad when the Americans would not commit to anything more than airstrikes against Daesh.

Because of the anti-Daesh war, Soleimani was closely linked with militia groups in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which were equally hostile to the continued US presence in Iraq and periodically staged attacks against US forces there. According to Kellogg's book, an exchange of strikes in late December 2019 is what pushed the White House over line and decided to take Soleimani out.

'Our Target Would be Soleimani'

On December 27, 2019, the Shiite militia group Kata'ib Hezbollah (Brigades of the Party of G-d) [attacked an Iraqi](#) military base in Kirkuk where US forces were based, killing a US contractor and injuring four US service members, as well as two Iraqi service members. The next day, the US launched an airstrike on Kata'ib Hezbollah positions, and that evening, [protests in Baghdad](#) descended on the US embassy in the Green Zone and set fire to some of its outer structures. Washington blamed Iran for both of those attacks, and Soleimani in particular, who they learned would be secretly traveling to Baghdad in just a few days.

“But our response had barely begun,” Kellogg wrote about the December 28 airstrikes. “We had highly reliable intelligence reports affirming that our chief enemy here was Soleimani.”

“The Iranians had crossed our ‘red line’ by killing an American and reinforced their folly by attacking our embassy in Baghdad. We would respond. And this time our response would be disproportional,” Kellogg wrote. “We jumped up the escalation ladder. Our answer would be unambiguous. Our target would be Soleimani.”

The airstrike, carried out by an MQ-9 Reaper combat drone, hit a group of vehicles at Baghdad International Airport just after midnight on January 3, 2020, [killing 10 people](#). Among them was Soleimani, as well as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kata’ib Hezbollah and deputy commander of the PMF.

The fury over the US attack, which was carried out without consulting the Iraqi government, led to the country’s parliament voting to ask all US forces to leave the country. However, Trump threatened to [freeze Iraqi oil assets](#) in a Federal Reserve bank account if Baghdad followed through.

Story Changes Again & Again

“Soleimani was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel, but we caught him in the act and terminated him,” [Trump told reporters](#) at his Mar-a-Lago resort the day after the attacks. He would later claim that Soleimani planned on targeting a US embassy, then later increased his claim [to four embassies](#).

After other senior administration leaders, including then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper, clarified that there wasn’t actually intelligence pointing to a specific attack Soleimani was allegedly planning, Trump momentarily let the mask slip by [tweeting on January 13](#) that “it doesn’t really matter because of his horrible past!”

Then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo similarly claimed Soleimani was “actively plotting to “take big action” against the US. “There would have been many Muslims killed as well, Iraqis and people in other countries as well. It was a strike that was aimed at both disrupting that plot, deterring further aggression, [and] we hope, setting the conditions for de-escalation, as well,” [he told Fox News](#) on January 3.

However, Pompeo also soon said he had no specific intelligence on a specific threat posed by Soleimani, and also [admitted within a week](#) that “we don’t know precisely when - and we don’t know precisely where” the supposed attack was to have taken place.

However, by July of 2020, Pompeo had changed his tune again, aligning more closely with what Kellogg writes in his book. His response came after Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, [submitted a report](#) on Soleimani’s assassination finding it was an “arbitrary killing” that violated the United Nations charter.

“The strike that killed General Soleimani was in response to an escalating series of armed attacks in preceding months by the Islamic Republic of Iran and militias it supports on US forces and interests in the Middle East region,” [Pompeo told Fox News](#) on July 10. “It was conducted to deter Iran from launching or supporting further attacks against the United States or US interests, and to degrade the capabilities of the Quds Force.”

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All Clear After Bomb Threat Issued at US Department of Labor in DC Over 'Suspicious Package'
By - Morgan Artyukhina

US Capitol Police alerted the media of several road closures in central Washington, DC, on Tuesday evening due to a bomb threat at the US Department of Labor headquarters.

The Washington, DC Metropolitan Police Department told Sputnik that federal agents were investigating a suspicious package amid a bomb threat at the DoL building.

"We are assisting FPS [Federal Protective Services] in reference to a suspicious package and we're looking into it," the spokesperson said.

The two locations where road closures were mentioned by USCP - First St. and Constitution Ave. NW and First St. and Louisiana Ave. NW - are located due east of the DoL building, on the edge of the US Capitol grounds.

Just over a month ago, a man was [arrested outside](#) the Democratic National Committee headquarters south of the Capitol building with several large knives and neo-Nazi symbols etched on the side of his truck. A month earlier, another man was arrested near the US Capitol and the Library of Congress after [threatening to detonate](#) a bomb if US President Joe Biden didn't resign from office. The man surrendered to police without a fight.

Less than an hour after sending out the alert, USCP said the bomb threat "has concluded and all related road closures have reopened."

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Labor Activists Hail 'Striketober' as Over 100,000 Union Workers Across US Prepare Work Stoppages

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A new wave of strikes is unfolding across the United States as many of the socioeconomic trends of the last 18 months come to a head.

Close to 100,000 workers across several industries in the US are either on strike or preparing to go on strike this month, leading to the coining of a new labor hashtag: #striketober. Many are so-called "essential workers," whose work was deemed necessary during pandemic lockdowns intended to keep the rest of the population safe from COVID-19. Having faced some of the highest death rates and worsening working conditions, many are now fed up and demanding better working conditions.

"Workers are on strike for a better deal and a better life," [said Liz Shuler](#), president of the AFL-CIO, the nation's biggest labor federation. "The pandemic really did lay bare the inequities of our system and working people are refusing to return to crappy jobs that put their health at risk."

Some of those on or preparing to strike include:

1,400 workers at Kellogg's, a company that makes breakfast cereal at several plants across the Midwest, who are striking over a [proposed "two-tier" system](#) that would create a class of lower workers with inferior pay and benefits

24,000 nurses and health care workers at health care provider Kaiser Permanente have [authorized a strike](#) over a similar two-tier employee structure, which also follows a highly profitable year

More than 10,000 workers at manufacturing plants for tractor maker John Deere, who [rejected a contract](#) that gave them minimal raises and denied pensions to new hires, all in the wake of the company's most profitable year on record

2,500 workers at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, New York, where nurses have [faced rapidly deteriorating](#) working conditions including longer hours, a huge number of patients, and chronic shortages of safety and sanitary equipment they say endanger both themselves and their patients

More than 60,000 television and film production workers in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees union are [likely to revolt against](#) a shaky contract agreed to without rank & file approval that addressed few of their demands, making a strike they'd previously prepared for all the more likely

4,700 transit workers at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), who have [authorized a strike](#) beginning on November 1 if contract negotiations fail, as they're increasingly seen as likely to

More than 1,000 coal miners at Alabama's Warrior Met Coal have [been on strike](#) since April, seeking a new contract that would reverse the rapid deterioration in working conditions seen since new ownership took over in 2016

Several other powerful strikes have concluded in recent days, including a [monthslong effort](#) by workers at Nabisco and a [nationwide work stoppage](#) of the weekend by Instacart workers, who are not unionized.

Many of the strikes have seen violence as well, including [numerous instances](#) of strikers being hit by vehicles owned by management or [buses carrying scabs](#), or workers willing to take the jobs of the striking workers. At the John Deere plant, injuries also resulted from attempts to replace striking assembly line workers with employees from other sectors untrained on such skilled work.

"We've definitely seen an uptick in late September and October," said Johnnie Kallas, a Ph.D. student at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) who tracks labor actions across the US, as [told to NBC](#).

"It's a combination of two factors: workers have more labor-market leverage with employers needing and struggling to hire, and then a lot of these workers have been on the front line of a global pandemic for the past 19 months and were touted as heroes, which has given them lots of leverage."

Additional leverage could come from [persistent worker shortages](#) across many industrial sectors, as well as the associated product shortages resulting from backed up shipping ports and other [breakdowns in the supply chain](#).

Spike in Unionizing as Approval Rises

In addition to strikes, the pandemic has also sparked a wave of labor organizing, from [Dollar General](#) stores and [Starbucks coffee shops](#) to online shopping giant Amazon, which was [found](#)

[in violation](#) of US labor laws in April after the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union objected to [efforts by Amazon](#) to affect the results of a unionization vote at its massive shipping facility in Bessmer, Alabama.

While union membership in the US has halved since 1983 to just 11% of workers in 2020, largely thanks to an unceasing wave of industrial closures and flight driven by neoliberal economic policies and labor busting that at times was conducted by the US president, recent polls show that approval of labor unions is its highest in half a century. [According to a Gallup poll](#) in August, 68% of Americans approve of unions, with 78% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 approving.

Other trends are driving worker organization as well, including [rising poverty](#) and [hunger rates](#) during the pandemic and [persistent unemployment](#), all while the Biden administration allows special pandemic relief [measures to expire](#).

The [Federal Reserve reported](#) earlier this week that the richest 10% of Americans own 89% of all stocks on the US stock market, and that the richest 1% of the country had gained \$6.5 trillion in corporate equities and mutual fund wealth since the pandemic began in March 2020, while the bottom 90% had collectively gained just \$1.2 trillion in that time.

"Covid was a wake-up call, because it wasn't just you could get injured on the job, but going to work could kill you," Kate Bronfenbrenner, the director of labor education research at the ILR, told NBC. "Workers are feeling like they're working harder than ever and they put themselves out there during Covid and risked their lives for what?"

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Malaysia's Transgender Tycoon Nur Sajat Granted Asylum in Australia From Blasphemy Charges

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A Malaysian trans woman on the run from police after being accused of insulting Islam in her home country has apparently found refuge in Australia. The millionaire celebrity, who runs a cosmetics company and starred in a reality show, said on social media she will have to start from scratch.

Nur Sajat, a 36-year-old entrepreneur with a burgeoning cosmetics company bearing her name, said on a [TikTok livestream](#) on Monday that she was in COVID-19 quarantine after arriving in Canterbury, a suburb of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

"I'm not running away. I'm migrating. All this while I was quiet because I wanted to open a new shop at a new location, and thank you for the support," she said, according to The [Malaysia Star](#).

"I just want to be free to be myself ... to have human rights," she said, adding that she "could not wait" to start afresh in Australia after having sold all her businesses in Malaysia.

"We have been quiet all this while because we plan to open a new shop in a new location and Alhamdulillah [thank God], we've got a lot of support. I am very excited and happy," she said.

She also urged her followers not to judge her for her religious position. Born a Muslim, she renounced her faith earlier this year in a video posted on social media, according to the [Associated Press](#).

"If I'm still Muslim, just let me be with my own ways, and you follow your own ways," Sajat said on Monday. "Don't judge me. We respect each other. Stop calling me a sinner as well... Thank you, I appreciate all of your advice."

Flight From Malaysia

Her quest began in February when she failed to appear for a court hearing after being charged with insulting Islam. The charges stemmed from an incident in 2018 in which she appeared in a religious ceremony wearing women's clothing. Afterwards, police in Selangor state, which surrounds the capital of Kuala Lumpur, mounted a massive search for Sajat, who apparently fled to Thailand, which has [more permissive rights](#) for trans people.

However, when she was arrested in Thailand last month for having illegally entered the country and threatened with deportation back to Malaysia, LGBTQ rights groups stepped up in her defense.

Thilaga Sulathireh, co-founder of Malaysian transgender activist group Justice for Sisters, [told AFP at the time](#) that the "continuous persecution against Nur Sajat represents the climate of repression against LGBT persons in Malaysia."

"The police must immediately drop all investigations and harassment against Sajat," she told AFP.

About 60% of Malaysia's 32 million people are Muslims, for whom Sharia handles religious and family matters as part of a complex legal system. The other 40%, split between Buddhists, Christians, and several other religions, follow a code of secular common law, as do Muslims in affairs that fall outside the specific purview of Sharia.

However, Malaysian Sharia, locally called syariah, has grown more stringent in recent years under pressure from conservative political groups. In 2018, for example, two women were fined and [sentenced to public caning](#) for being lesbians. It's a trend growing across the region, [where Brunei](#) and some [regions of Indonesia](#) have enacted strict anti-LGBTQ laws in recent years. Under Malaysian syariah, dressing in clothes of the gender one wasn't assigned at birth is a crime, and if she were deported and convicted, Sajat would spend three years in a men's prison for the offense.

Public Fascination

Following her arrest in Thailand, Malaysian police officials threatened her with so-called "conversion therapy" if she returned, according to the [Washington Post](#). The widely discredited practice aims to torture LGBTQ people into giving up their identities.

Numan Afifi of Pelangi Campaign, a Malaysian LGBTQ human rights group, told the Post the "continuous persecution against Nur Sajat is a reflection of the climate of repression against the LGBTI+ community. She has experienced harassment, bullying and doxxing by online users over the years."

Sajat's decision to live publicly and openly as a trans woman, including even filming a reality TV series about her day-to-day life, has earned her both widespread admiration and condemnation. "The Malaysian public is fascinated with Nur Sajat mainly because hers is a success story. She made it as an entrepreneur and became a cosmetics millionaire," Afiq Harraz, secretary general of Parti Aspirasi Sains Malaysia (SAINS), a new political group, [told the SCMP](#) last month.

He said “the actual unnatural obsession with Sajat” really comes from Malaysian authorities, who cannot accept her open defiance of the status quo, even though she is within her rights under the Malaysian constitution to do so.

“She is harming no one with her decision,” he said.

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Southwest Drops Plan to Put Unvaccinated Staff on Unpaid Leave in December

By - Adriana Montes

American Airlines and Southwest, which are both based in Texas, will still require their new-hire employees to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination before their first day.

Southwest Airlines is dropping plans to put unvaccinated employees with pending exemptions on unpaid leave after the December deadline.

Instead, employees whose accommodations weren’t reviewed or approved by December 8 could continue to work while following COVID-19 guidelines. This comes after Southwest’s announcement earlier this month where they warned employees must be fully vaccinated by the deadline in order to keep their jobs.

Southwest issued a statement to NewsNation confirming their decision.

“If an accommodation has not been reviewed or approved by December 8, the Employee will continue to work, while following all COVID mask and distancing guidelines applicable to their position, until the accommodation has been processed. While we intend to grant all valid requests for medical and/or religious accommodations, in the event a request is not granted, the Company will provide adequate time for an Employee to become fully vaccinated while continuing to work and adhering to safety protocols,” it [reads](#).

In early September, President Joe Biden announced sweeping new [COVID-19 guidelines](#) that required staff at large companies to be vaccinated or face weekly testing.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who is a strong opponent of mandatory COVID-19 vaccines, issued an [executive order](#) last week banning all organizations from enforcing vaccination in the state.

Abbott said in a tweet he shared that COVID-19 vaccines “should always remain voluntary & never forced.”

But American and Southwest Airlines have said they will abide by the federal order made by the president, considering they are large airlines that are federal contractors.

Executives at both carriers in recent days have tried to urge employees to apply for medical or religious exemptions to reassure job security under the mandate.

On Tuesday, hundreds of Southwest employees and customers rallied outside of Southwest Airlines’ headquarters in Dallas to protest against the vaccine mandate, the Dallas Morning News [reported](#).

An airline spokeswoman said the carrier took notice of the demonstration.

"Southwest acknowledges various viewpoints regarding the Covid-19 vaccine, and we have always supported, and will continue to support, our employees' right to express themselves, with open lines of communication to share issues and concerns," she said.

Rumors circulated last week that employees had staged a massive "sickout" in protest of the new policy after more than 2,000 flight cancellations were [declared](#), leaving thousands of passengers stranded.

The pilots' union told members late Tuesday that the cancellations were due to a shortage of unavailable crews, and that there was nothing to indicate such cancellations will permanently come to a halt.

The Dallas-based airline denied the allegations, and blamed air traffic control issues and bad weather for weekend "operational challenges" that resulted in the cancellations.

The pilot's union [said](#) in early October that they were looking to file a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) to stop Southwest from carrying forward the vaccine mandate.

The company clarified it's giving employees until November 24th to get fully vaccinated or apply for an exemption.

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'We Really Need a Wake-Up Call,' Rep. Gallagher Says on China's Defense Advancements
By - Adriana Montes

Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI), slammed the Biden administration after China reportedly tested a hypersonic missile with nuclear capabilities, and warned the US of falling behind Chinese defense advancements.

Gallagher discussed the issue on "Fox & Friends First" on Tuesday, saying "this should be our Sputnik moment."

"We really need a wake-up call, this should be our Sputnik moment," Gallagher insisted. "But I hate to say it, Secretary Austin and the Biden administration are trying to cut defense. They're trying to cut our conventional capability."

"That's what their budget did, particularly for the Navy. That's unacceptable at a time when Communist China is growing more aggressive, more bellicose and out-innovating us in certain areas."

This comes after [reports](#) that China had tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic glide missile back in August — a missile that travels into space and circles the globe in an orbital-like fashion before speeding through the atmosphere toward its target.

An announcement that has remained largely unaddressed by the Biden administration and that allegedly "caught the US government by surprise" despite consistent warnings, the Financial Times [reported](#).

"You have a rocket carrying a hypersonic glide vehicle that flew into low orbit space before landing," Gallagher explained. "What makes that so dangerous is not only the speed at which these missiles travel, but the fact that they can maneuver mid flight."

"They're extremely difficult to track, which completely undermines our early warning and our missile defense system, so you can imagine the Chinese using conventional weapons against our homeland to target bases, ports and key sites like precision-guided munition plants."

The Republican representative expressed his concern regarding China's ability to infiltrate and "profit off of" American technology and what that could mean for the future.

"The other thing that I think makes this so troubling is that we know that the Chinese benefited in part from American technology in order to outpace us here," said Gallagher. "There was a Chinese firm called Phytium that uses American semiconductor technology in order to power a supercomputer at a hypersonic test facility that models the heat and drag on these missiles."

"Here's yet another instance of the Chinese profiting off American technology in order to build things that could be used to kill Americans in the future. It's a very perverse and dangerous situation."

Gallagher's remarks come after lead Republicans requested an [increase of 3-5 percent over inflation](#) to counter China's growing military, a much larger sum for the 2022 fiscal year than the Biden administration initially sought.

Meanwhile, China continues to [strengthen](#) its military funding, and implemented a nearly 7% increase in defense spending this year, aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty and meeting the needs of military reforms.

[Hypersonic weapons](#) have been at the heart of America's race with China and Russia, which are both arguably ahead.

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Ecuador President Declares State of Emergency Amid Rise in Violent Crime
By - Adriana Montes

The announcement, that came shortly before a visit by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, was made as part of a crackdown on the consumption and trafficking of drugs amongst other crimes.

Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso declared a state of emergency Monday amidst a rise in violent crime and deadly prison riots, prompting the mobilization of police and military onto the streets.

"Starting immediately, our armed forces and police will be felt with force in the streets because we are decreeing a state of emergency throughout the national territory," Lasso said in a [national broadcast](#) on Monday.

"In the streets of Ecuador, there is only one enemy: drug trafficking," the right-wing leader declared.

He added that "in recent years, Ecuador has gone from being a drug trafficking country to one that also consumes drugs."

The 60-day state of emergency will allow police to increase patrols, as well as join drug and firearms operations in nine of the country's 24 provinces, including Guayas, home to major city Guayaquil.

In response to a spike in deaths within prisons, Lasso [reportedly](#) named a new defense minister on Monday. The latest massacre was in September this year, where 118 people were killed in what authorities identify as the most brutal prison massacre Ecuador has endured.

The government has blamed the violent clashes on a battle between gang members.

Ecuador is a transit route for cocaine smuggled from neighboring Peru and Colombia, and the powerful Mexican drug cartels are said to operate through local gangs.

The prisons reportedly experienced deadly outbreaks after a 10-ton shipment of cocaine and arms were seized in August, according to a [report](#) by Borderland Beat.

Lasso [said](#) drug trafficking has brought an increase in homicides, burglaries of homes and thefts.

"The national government will deploy all law enforcement to carry out a single mission: to restore security to citizens. We will take the battle to the underworld wherever it hides."

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RPT - Deripaska's Spokesperson Links FBI Raids of Relatives' Homes to Sanctions

MOSCOW/WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - FBI raids on the homes of businessman Oleg Deripaska's relatives in Washington and New York are linked to US sanctions, the businessman's spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The FBI is indeed currently conducting raids in the houses belonging to relatives of Oleg Deripaska. The raids are carried out on the basis of two court orders related to US sanctions. The aforementioned houses are located in New York and Washington, Oleg Deripaska himself does not own them," he said on Tuesday.

Entry onto the property of the Washington home is currently barred by police tape, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Several vehicles belonging to the FBI are parked outside the building where reporters have lined up.

FBI agents are seen standing outside the house.

The agents have been going in and out of the building, taking plastic containers, paper and boxes from the cars back to the house.

At some point, the police also arrived at the scene.

The husband of former White House advisor Kellyanne Conway has also been spotted near the house. George T. Conway III, an attorney, took several photos and declined to speak to the press.

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Powell, Loved and Reviled, Gets Mixed Reaction in Black Community

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell's death this week has drawn mixed assessments on his legacy - from being called a war criminal to a man of great integrity - by members of the Black community who spoke to Sputnik.

Powell died on Monday at the age of 84 from complications of COVID-19. He had been treated over the past few years for multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that impairs the body's ability to fight infections and to respond well to vaccines.

"I have been watching these brainwashed, bougie Negroes crying crocodile tears because Colin Powell is dead. They have said of my criticisms of him that it's inappropriate on this day," Washington, DC activist Kymone Freeman told Sputnik. "There's a lot of blood on his hands. I consider him to be a war criminal."

Powell has been roundly criticized for presenting as established fact to the UN that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction ahead of the 2003 invasion. Freeman said by doing this Powell gave then-President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney a pretext to invade. As the participant and architect of several US invasions, Powell cannot escape culpability, he said. In addition, Freeman said Powell left behind a sordid and troubling legacy involving the killing of untold numbers of innocent civilians in Vietnam, Panama and Grenada, lives needlessly lost on the altar of greed, empire and hegemony.

"He killed a bunch of [people] in Vietnam and Panama. He lied to enable war criminals Bush and Cheney to rob Iraq of oil and kill 1 million people," Freeman said. "But people support him and people like him because they want to be on a winning team or have the hope of one day obtaining the American dream, even though the United States is a numbers racket with people who stole and continue to steal resources from Black people."

Attorney, writer and political commentator Alton Drew, however, has the polar opposite view of Powell and his legacy.

"Let's face it. He was a believer and a patriot but he had integrity and a solid background. He's probably the last of his kind," Drew told Sputnik. "I have friends who were saddened by his passing. That's the type of guy he was. He was good at what he did. He was that good in the matrix in which he operated, and in this sphere, he checked off all the boxes. He was a soldier, fought in the war, got wounded and had cred."

Powell, the first Black person to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, occupied a unique but usable position, Drew said.

"One of his staffers said yesterday that he was able to speak his mind, which I believe he did. He never came off as a politician and he was very popular," said Drew. "In 1996, he walked away from the [Republican presidential] nomination. His wife was concerned that they might kill him but being an old soldier, he probably wasn't worried. He probably thought that it's one thing to be an assistant to the president and something else completely to being the commander-in-chief."

Drew, whose roots spring from St. Kitts and Nevis in the Eastern Caribbean, said Powell was seen as a man of integrity.

"He was a statist but stood in a different space. He was still one of America's most popular politicians," he said. "I had respect for him. He was a fellow Caribbean person and a smart guy. I resonated with the Caribbean connection because his parents were double immigrants, as were my great aunt and my parents."

Drew, unlike Freeman and others, would not label Powell a war criminal, saying the term is "overused and overplayed."

Drew said people, especially Blacks, could learn from Powell's actions.

"The most powerful thing he did was when he decided to walk away from the nomination," he said. "He was saying, 'I'm not going to participate as long as it's not politically expedient to me, my brand, my system and my values.' Black people should consider following that course and not participate in this system if it doesn't benefit them. We should not be afraid to create something different or be afraid to be us."

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US House Committee Advances Resolution Calling for Criminal Contempt Charge Against Bannon

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US House committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot advanced a resolution recommending a criminal contempt of Congress charge against former Trump aide Steve Bannon.

The committee approved the measure unanimously on Tuesday and will now send it to the House floor for a full vote, which is expected this week.

Contempt of Congress charges can only be pursued by the Justice Department and can result in a penalty of up to one year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000.

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US Homeland Security Chief Tests Positive for COVID-19 - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has tested positive for COVID-19 and will work from home per health guidelines, spokesperson Marsha Espinosa said.

"Secretary Mayorkas tested positive this morning for the COVID-19 virus after taking a test as part of routine pre-travel protocols. Secretary Mayorkas is experiencing only mild congestion; he is fully vaccinated and will isolate and work at home per CDC protocols and medical advice. Contact tracing is underway," Espinosa said via Twitter on Tuesday.

Mayorkas was scheduled to join US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on his trip to Colombia to discuss various issues, including irregular migration and narcotics trafficking, but will no longer be traveling due to the positive test.

The homeland security chief, who was fully vaccinated, represents another so-called "breakthrough" case among high-ranking government officials such as state Department spokesperson Ned Price, who recently recovered from a bout of COVID-19.

The White House said in a statement that no principal has been determined to be in close contact with Mayorkas because the most recent contact was during the outdoor National Peace Officers' Memorial Service that took place on Saturday that falls outside the 48-hour close contact window.

Mayorkas had contact with President Joe Biden at the 40th Annual National Peace Officers' Memorial Service on Saturday.

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US Federal Agents Looking Into Suspicious Package Amid Bomb Threat at Labor Dept. - Police

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US federal agents are looking into a suspicious package possibly linked to an ongoing bomb threat at the Labor Department building in the nation's capital, a Metropolitan Police Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We are assisting FPS [Federal Protective Services] in reference to a suspicious package and we're looking into it," the spokesperson said on Tuesday.

Earlier, Capitol Police told staff that due to a bomb threat at the Labor Department roads would be closed at First Street and Constitution Avenue NW and First Street and Louisiana Avenue NW, according to an alert posted by Axios.

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Biden Admin. Not Seeking to Make States Choose Between Working With US or China - Blinken

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not seeking to pressure countries to decide whether to do business with the United States or China and it is not looking to contain the latter, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"We're not asking countries to choose between the United States and China nor, as I've said repeatedly, do we seek to contain China or hold it back," Blinken said during a press conference on Tuesday. "What we do seek to do is uphold the highest possible standards as we're engaged around the world."

Blinken emphasized that trade and investment with China are important for all countries and usually beneficial.

However, Blinken said that in the case of China there is no division between the private enterprise and the state so countries should take precautions before investing in that country.

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US Indicts Congressman for Concealing Facts, Making False Statements - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury has charged US Congressman Jeff Fortenberry with concealing facts and making false statements as part of an investigation into illegal donations to his 2016 election campaign, the US Attorney's Office said in a statement. "Federal grand jury indictment charges US Rep. Jeff Fortenberry with one count of scheming to falsify and conceal material facts and two counts of making false statements to federal investigators looking into illegal contributions to his 2016 campaign," the US Attorney's Office said via Twitter on Tuesday.

Fortenberry, representing Nebraska's 1st congressional district since 2005, is the top Republican on the US House Appropriations Committee's agriculture panel. He was also part of the delegation sent to Haiti following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

Earlier in October, a spokesperson for Fortenberry said the investigation is related to illegal campaign contributions from Lebanese-Nigerian billionaire Gilbert Chagoury.

Chagoury, a foreign national prohibited by federal law from contributing to any US elections, paid \$1.8 million in March to settle a probe into campaign finance violations. He admitted to making \$180,000 in illegal contributions to four political candidates, including to Fortenberry. "We will fight these charges," Fortenberry said in a video published on YouTube.

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Haiti Kidnapping Indicative of Much Larger, Unsustainable Security Situation - Blinken
WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The kidnapping of American and Canadian missionaries in Haiti is indicative of a much larger and unsustainable security situation in the country, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press conference in Ecuador.

"This is also indicative of a much larger problem, and that is a security situation that is quite simply unsustainable. Gangs dominate many parts of Port-au-Prince and other parts of Haiti, the National Police can't even operate in many of these areas," Blinken said on Tuesday.

The US has been working closely with the Haitian National Police to try and build their capacity and put in place programs that can effectively deal with the gangs, Blinken added.

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US Stocks Extend Rally as Third Quarter Earnings Sparkle, S&P 500 Near Record High

NEW YORK, October 19 (Sputnik) - US stocks extended their rally on Tuesday, with the S&P 500 index nearing all-time highs amid stellar earnings reported by companies for the third quarter.

Healthcare giant Johnson & Johnson, consumer behemoth Procter & Gamble and streaming service Netflix are among companies that have reported better-than-expected profits for the quarter. On the technology front, Apple rolled out new accessories this week while Google introduced its latest line of phones on Tuesday.

The combination fueled gains not just on the S&P 500 but also the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average and the tech-laced Nasdaq Composite as investors embraced risk, battling away worries about rising inflation and the Federal Reserve's planned tapering of its long-running stimulus program.

"Investors remain upbeat on earnings as more companies continue to deliver strong beats," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA said. "Healthcare and insurers impressed while consumer stocks battled surging commodity and transportation costs. Every inflation warning from corporate America was somewhat expected, so markets won't get unnerved unless they start to see the Fed[ederal Reserve] panic."

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 US stocks, closed up 33 points, or 0.7%, at 4,520. The blue-chip indicator is less than 30 points away from a record high and is up 4.9% for October.

The Dow finished the session at 35,457, up 200 points, or 0.6%. The Dow is up 4.8% for the month.

Nasdaq, comprising Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, closed at 15,129, up 107 points, or 0.7%. It has gained 4.7% since October began.

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Russian Ambassador to US, World Bank Leaders Discuss 'Further Cooperation'

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov met with World Bank Group (WBG) President David Malpass and Vice President Anna Bjerde to discuss the results of the recent annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as prospects of greater cooperation, the Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement.

"The sides discussed the outcomes of the 2021 Annual Meeting of the Bretton Woods Institutions and prospects of further cooperation between Russia and WBG," the statement said on Tuesday.

Malpass separately said in a message via Twitter that he was glad to discuss with Antonov global development challenges, climate action and other issues of mutual concern.

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Lawsuit Targets US State of Oklahoma Ban on Race, Gender Talk in Schools - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - A lawsuit filed on behalf of students and educators challenges Oklahoma legislation that restricts public school teachers and students from discussing race and gender issues in classrooms, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said.

"The lawsuit argues HB 1775 not only chills students' and educators' First Amendment right to learn and talk about these issues, but it also prevents students from having an open and complete dialogue about American history - one that includes the experiences and viewpoints of all historically marginalized communities in this country," an ACLU press release said on Tuesday.

Oklahoma is one of eight states across the United States that have passed similar laws aimed at censoring discussions around race and gender in the classroom, and this is the first federal lawsuit facially challenging one of these statewide bans, the release said.

The Oklahoma bill's lead authors in the state House and Senate declared the measure's intent was to prohibit conversations related to "implicit bias," "systemic racism" and "intersectionality," among other concepts, the release added.

The lawsuit argues the measure represents an unlawful restraint on freedom of expression by silencing students' and educators' speech through its vague and overbroad terms, according to the release.

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US Indicts Congressman for Concealing Facts, Making False Statements - Justice Dept.

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"Federal grand jury indictment charges US Rep. Jeff Fortenberry with one count of scheming to falsify and conceal material facts and two counts of making false statements to federal investigators looking into illegal contributions to his 2016 campaign," the US Attorney's Office said via Twitter on Tuesday.

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Italian Senate Bans Parliamentarians From Working Without Green Pass

ROME, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Senate leadership of the Italian parliament has banned senators from working without a green pass - the COVID-19 vaccination certificate - after a lawmaker refused to present her COVID-19 certificate, the Italian media reported on Tuesday. Earlier on Tuesday, member of parliament Laura Granato refused to show the green pass at the entrance to the parliament building and went to a meeting of the Commission on Constitutional Affairs.

After the leadership of the Senate was informed about the situation, the speaker of the upper house of parliament, Elisabetta Casellati, confirmed at a general meeting that the rules for presenting a green pass when coming to work also apply to the members of parliament. Granato, who was then sanctioned with a ban on participation in parliamentary activities for 10 days, called the decision a "unilateral government action" and "distortion" of the regulatory principles.

From 15 October, all workers in Italy must present the so-called green pass - electronic COVID-19 vaccination certificate - to access their workplaces. Opponents of these measures held a series of demonstrations, the largest of which took place in Milan, Rome and the port of Trieste.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORY OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik)

FBI SEARCH OF DERIPASKA HOUSE

* The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on Tuesday confirmed to Sputnik that it is conducting an authorized law enforcement activity at a real estate property in the US capital that is supposedly linked to Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska.

* Shares of Russian aluminum giant Rusal fell 6% on the Moscow Exchange on the news of the FBI raid on Deripaska's house in the United States.

* The FBI has raided the homes of relatives of Deripaska in Washington and New York that are linked to US sanctions, the businessman's spokesperson told Sputnik.

* The Washington Post's article alleging that the searches in the houses of the relatives of Deripaska in the United States are connected with a criminal investigation is not true, the businessman's spokesperson told Sputnik.

PUTIN-DRAGHI TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi discussed preparations for the G20 summit and Afghanistan during their phone conversation on Tuesday, the Kremlin said.

* Draghi and Putin discussed the development in Afghanistan and preparations for the G20 summit in Rome, the Italian Council of Ministers said.

NORTH KOREA MISSILE LAUNCH

* The US condemns North Korea's latest test of a ballistic missile and believes the situation underscores the need for more diplomacy, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

* The United States condemns North Korea's latest ballistic missile launch and urges Pyongyang to stop provocative actions and to engage in diplomacy with Washington, the State Department said.

* The United Nations is concerned about the recent missile launches by North Korea, including reports of one missile being launched from a submarine into waters off Japan, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

* Members of the Extended Troika format on Afghanistan met in Moscow on Tuesday and discussed common threats and humanitarian assistance to Kabul, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The Taliban movement (banned in Russia) hopes to continue cooperation with the new US special envoy for Afghanistan, Thomas West, who replaced Zalmay Khalilzad at this post, Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Kahar Balkhi said.

* Russia expects that the dialogue on Afghanistan will continue after the Moscow format meeting on Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

NAVALNY CASE

* France is not supporting Russia's request for mutual legal assistance in the case of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny and calls for open investigation, France's mission to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said.

* Germany's permanent representation to the OPCW has rejected all accusations of Russia in its note related to the Navalny case.

* The United Kingdom is dissatisfied with Russia's response to 45 countries' questions related to the case of Navalny, submitted through the OPCW, and believes that Moscow evades responsibility for the alleged poisoning, the UK Permanent Representation to the OPCW said.

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European Commission Allocates Additional \$4Mln of Humanitarian Aid for Eastern Ukraine

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - The European Commission has allocated an additional \$4 million (3.5 million euros) of humanitarian aid to support victims of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the press service of the EU Delegation to Ukraine said on Tuesday.

"The European Commission has announced an additional €3.5 million in humanitarian aid to support vulnerable people affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the humanitarian situation, resulting in even more instability and vulnerability.

In 2021, the Commission has allocated €29 million in humanitarian aid for eastern Ukraine," the EU Delegation to Ukraine said in a press release.

By allocating additional funding, the European Commission is planning to help the most vulnerable categories, including elderly and people with disabilities to meet their basic needs amid threat of conflict and COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, "help them access healthcare and essentials, and prepare for the upcoming winter," Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarcic said as cited in the press release.

Lenarcic stressed the importance of resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine, saying that "the EU will support people in eastern Ukraine for as long as needed, but only permanent peace can bring a real solution."

In April 2014, the Ukrainian authorities launched a military operation against the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics in eastern Ukraine, which declared independence after what they deemed a coup in Kiev in February 2014. According to the latest UN data, about 13,000 people have become victims of the conflict.

The issue of resolving the situation in Donbas is under discussion, among other things, during meetings in the contact group, which since September 2014 has already adopted three documents regulating steps to de-escalate the conflict. However, skirmishes continue even after the ceasefire agreements between the parties to the conflict were concluded.

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FBI Taking Out Boxes From New York House Allegedly Linked to Russian Billionaire Deripaska

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - FBI agents are in the process of taking out boxes with unknown content from a house in New York City that is supposedly linked to a Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska, and loading them into cars, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Tuesday.

It is unknown what is in the boxes that are being carried out of the house, which allegedly belongs to Deripaska's relatives.

The Sputnik correspondent witnessed a large van earlier accompanied by cars with flashing lights that left the territory in the area of 12 Gay Street in Manhattan. The authorities have now closed the street.

Earlier on Tuesday, a Deripaska representative told Sputnik that the FBI is conducting searches in the homes of his relatives in Washington and New York in connection with the US sanctions regime.

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Brazil's Senate Accuses Bolsonaro of Mass Homicide as Herd Immunity Policy Fails - Reports

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - An investigation by a Brazilian congressional panel concluded that President Jair Bolsonaro intentionally let COVID-19 kill at least 300,000 Brazilians in a failed bid to achieve herd immunity, the New York Times said on Tuesday, citing an official report set to be released later in the week.

The Brazilian leader is accused of mass homicide as his failure to timely respond to the pandemic and reluctance to introduce restrictive measures in fear of damaging the economy led to the deaths of some 300,000 people, or roughly half of the country's COVID-19 death toll, the report said as cited by the New York Times.

Among the actions that led to the escalation of the situation the report mentions Bolsonaro's encouragement of mass gatherings, skepticism towards wearing masks and vaccination, the daily said.

Based on the results of the investigation, the panel recommends bringing criminal charges against Bolsonaro and 69 other people involved in the decision-making at the early stages of the pandemic, including the country's current and former politicians and three of Bolsonaro's sons.

The investigation has been ongoing for six months, spearheaded by a special COVID-19 Senate committee. The hearings were broadcast in Brazil and featured testimonies of bribery and disinformation operations. The report comes at a time when Bolsonaro's ratings are plummeting, threatening his chances of re-election next year.

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FBI Says Search of Deripaska Relatives' Home in Washington Will Last 'Couple More Hours'
WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The search of a residence in Washington connected to the family of Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska will continue for a couple more hours, FBI agents told reporters on Tuesday.

The agents leaving the residence linked to Deripaska said their search will last "a couple more hours" when asked by journalists at the scene whether they were finished.

A Deripaska representative told Sputnik that the FBI is conducting searches in the homes of Deripaska's relatives in Washington and New York in connection with the US sanctions regime. The FBI and US Justice Department have declined to comment on the details of the probe.

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Airport Terminal in Manchester Remains Closed Following Suspicious Package Report

LONDON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The second terminal of the UK airport in Manchester remains closed after a suspicious package was reported in the terminal, with flights operating from the terminal one, a spokesperson for the airport told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"The second terminal remains closed while Greater Manchester police continue to assess reports of the suspicious package. All flights will operate from the first terminal until further notice," the spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier on Tuesday, the representative of the airport said that an evacuation was underway at Manchester Airport following the report of a suspicious package, with Greater Manchester police being in charge of the incident.

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Australian Intelligence Chief Says Espionage Soon to Overtake Terrorism Threat

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - The threat to Australia presented by foreign spies will soon be greater than the challenges it faces from terrorism, Australian intelligence chief Mike Burgess said in a report presented to the country's parliament on Tuesday.

Burgess, who heads the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO), warned that foreign agents have stepped up their "sophisticated and wide-ranging" attempts to intervene in the country's internal affairs during the pandemic using modern technology, the ABC broadcaster said.

"Foreign spies are attempting to obtain classified information about Australia's trade relationships, defence and intelligence capabilities," he was quoted as saying by the ABC. Given the scope and frequency of such malicious activities, the ASIO chief predicted that espionage cases might soon overtake the threat of terrorism in the country. However, Burgess noted that he did not intend to downplay the latter, as there has been an alarming trend of radicalization of younger people, especially men, in Australia over the recent years.

"At the same time, our investigations into ideologically motivated violent extremists, such as racist and nationalist violent extremists, have grown. During 2020-21, these investigations approached 50 per cent of our onshore priority counterterrorism caseload," he said in the report, as quoted by the broadcaster.

In turn, Australian federal police commissioner, Reece Kershaw, reported that in the past year, 25 people were charged with terrorism, but said these cases were hard to detect as they were mostly committed by lone actors using basic means and weapons, such as knives, vehicles and guns.

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WADA Will Not Sanction UKAD, British Cycling for Anti-Doping Rule Violations

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - The World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA's) independent Intelligence and Investigations (I&I) Department has found an anti-doping rule violation by the United Kingdom Anti-Doping Agency (UKAD) and the British Cycling Federation (British

Cycling), but will not impose any sanctions against these organizations, according to the WADA said in a press release.

An investigation into allegations found that in 2011, United Kingdom Anti-Doping (UKAD) allowed British Cycling to analyze samples from athletes in private, using a non-WADA accredited laboratory, for the purposes of screening for a prohibited substance.

The WADA I&I investigation, known as Operation Echo, was launched in March 2021, when British media reported that UKAD had allowed British Cycling to analyze samples from athletes in private, using a non-WADA accredited laboratory, to screen for a prohibited substance after traces of the banned anabolic steroid were found in an unnamed athlete's blood sample.

"'Operation Echo' confirmed that in February 2011, as part of a study into potential contamination of supplements, British Cycling collected samples from elite riders and screened these samples for the androgen and anabolic steroid, nandrolone. Contrary to the rules laid down by the World Anti-Doping Code and the relevant International Standard, the samples were collected by British Cycling staff rather than doping control officers, analyzed by a non-WADA-accredited laboratory, and provided by the athletes on the basis that UKAD would never know the results," WADA said in a press release.

WADA also noted that "the samples could be collected and analyzed at a non-WADA-accredited laboratory."

The agency did not impose any sanctions against UKAD, since the employees involved in the events of 2011 no longer work there, and UKAD has already taken measures to avoid a repeat occurrence. During the investigation, British Cycling and UKAD provided WADA with full cooperation and transparency.

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US Justice Department Refuses to Comment on Oleg Deripaska Probe

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice has refused to provide any comments on the ongoing investigation of Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska.

The department asked to send all questions regarding the investigation of the Deripaska case to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The FBI also declined to comment on the details of the probe but confirmed that it is conducting an authorized law enforcement activity in a house in Washington DC that allegedly belongs to Deripaska relatives.

Earlier on Tuesday, a Deripaska representative told Sputnik that the FBI is conducting searches in the homes of his relatives in Washington and New York in connection with the US sanctions regime.

Entry onto the property of the Washington home is currently barred by police tape, a Sputnik correspondent reported, while at least one vehicle has been towed away.

FBI agents are seen standing outside the house. At some point, the police also arrived at the scene.

The husband of former White House advisor Kellyanne Conway has also been spotted near the house. George T. Conway III, an attorney, took several photos and declined to speak to the press.

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US Not to Allow Any Country to Use Its Currency to Benefit from Exports - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is not going to allow any country in the world to use its currency to benefit on exports, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Tuesday.

"In terms of the issue of currency manipulation, the [US] President [Joe Biden] and the secretary [of the Treasury Janet Yellen] have been very clear that we will not allow any country to unfairly use its currency to push for more exports," Adeyemo said during a US Senate hearing.

The Treasury Department's "Monitoring List" contains 11 US major trading partners - China, Japan, South Korea, Germany, Ireland, Italy, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Mexico. In April, the Treasury Department found that the 11 trading partners should remain on the "Monitoring List" due to their national currencies exchange rates practices.

The Treasury Department urged China to increase transparency of its foreign exchange interventions, the policy objectives of its exchange rate management regime and the relationship between the central bank and foreign exchange activities of the state-owned banks. In March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States will use every tool to stop other countries to manipulate currencies and steal US intellectual properties.

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Credit Suisse to Pay \$475Mln to US to Settle Charges for Mozambique Bond Offerings - SEC

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The global investment banking company Credit Suisse will pay \$475 million to the US and UK governments to settle charges connected to a scheme involving Mozambican bond offerings, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Tuesday.

"Credit Suisse Group AG has agreed to pay nearly \$475 million to US and UK authorities, including nearly \$100 million to the Securities and Exchange Commission, for fraudulently misleading investors and violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) in a scheme involving two bond offerings and a syndicated loan that raised funds on behalf of state-owned entities in Mozambique," the SEC said in a press release.

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UK Plans to Create 'Persistent' Military Presence in Indo-Pacific Region - General

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom plans to maintain an ongoing and "persistent" but not continuous security presence in the Indo-Pacific region, Chief of the Defense Staff Gen. Nicholas Carter said on Tuesday.

"The United Kingdom has plans to establish a 'persistent' military presence in the Indo-Pacific region," Carter told a podcast hosted by the Center for a New American Security.

Carter explained that the visit of the warships would be an intermittent one.

"Realistically, it's episodic... It's not going to occur every year," he said.

Carter noted the United Kingdom had a long-term association with many countries in the region going back to the days of the British Empire. He said London continued to operate an advanced jungle warfare school in Brunei on the island of Borneo.

"Our jungle warfare school in Brunei will be available to friends and partners in due course ... We've always recruited a lot of service men and women from these countries. We've always had 350 Gurkhas. We're going build on those long associations," he said.

However, the revived planned increased UK presence in the Indo-Pacific would not be accompanied by any reduction in London's contribution to and participation in NATO, Carter added.

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UPDATE - Yellen Keeps US Bank Transaction Reporting at \$10,000, Dropping Wider Net for Tax Cheats

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury is reinstating its \$10,000 threshold for the reporting of banking transactions in the United States, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday, jettisoning her earlier idea to drop the level to \$600 in a bid to catch as many tax evaders as possible.

The Biden administration had wanted a lower reporting level to capture an estimated \$160 billion in personal income taxes that go unpaid each year, but Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal had proposed sticking to the original threshold.

"Today's new proposal reflects the administration's strong belief that we should zero in on those at the top of the income scale who don't pay the taxes they owe," Yellen said in a statement. Since he took office in January, President Joe Biden has asked the wealthy to pay their "fair share" to fund his administration's infrastructure and welfare spending plans, totaling about \$4 trillion. Biden has lamented that some of the richest US companies and citizens pay virtually no

taxes by exploiting loopholes or basing their tax jurisdictions in countries with excessively generous tax rates.

The Biden administration wants the US corporate tax raised to 26.5% from 21%. It has also proposed a 3-percentage-point surtax on top earners and a hike of up to 5-percentage points on capital gains taxes. Tax breaks will be offered to low-income earners, with no additional burden for those making less than \$400,000 a year.

Aside from advocating higher taxes at home, the Biden administration has succeeded in moving the ball overseas, getting the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to agree to a minimum corporate tax rate of 15% for at least 136 countries.

The global pact will allow countries to collect around \$150 billion in new revenues annually instead of their previous "race-to-the-bottom" practice that saw them undercutting one another on taxes, to the benefit of multinational companies, the OECD said.

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Facebook to Pay \$14M in Fines, Payment to Victims in Discrimination Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Social media giant Facebook has agreed to pay a civil penalty of \$4.75 million, including up to \$9.5 million to eligible victims of the company's alleged discrimination, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) said in a release on Tuesday.

"Under the DOJ settlement, Facebook will pay a civil penalty of \$4.75 million to the United States, pay up to \$9.5 million to eligible victims of Facebook's alleged discrimination, and train its employees on the anti-discrimination requirements of the INA [Immigration and Nationality Act]," the release said.

The Justice Department said the civil penalty and backpay to victims marks the largest fine and monetary award its Civil Rights division has ever recovered in the 35-year history of the US anti-discrimination law.

Facebook made separate settlement agreements with the Department of Justice and the Department of Labor, the release said. The settlements resolve claims that Facebook often refused to hire US workers and only hired temporary visa holders from January 2018 to September 2019 through the potential abuse of the Labor Department's permanent labor certification program, which allows an employer to hire a foreign worker to work permanently in the United States, the release said.

The Justice Department filed a lawsuit against Facebook in December 2020 alleging that Facebook intentionally discriminated against US workers based on their citizenship or immigration status, which violates a US anti-discrimination law, the release added.

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US Condemns North Korean Missile Launch, Underscores Need for Diplomacy - White House

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US condemns North Korea's latest test of a ballistic missile and believes the situation underscores the need for more diplomacy, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We condemn the DPRK's (North Korea) ballistic missile launch. These launches violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions and are a threat to the region. We call on the DPRK to refrain from further provocations and engage in sustained and substantive dialogue... These launches also underscore the urgent need for dialogue and diplomacy. Our offer remains to meet anywhere, anytime without preconditions," Psaki said during a press conference.

The United States is also consulting with allies in the region about the issue, Psaki said.

Earlier on Tuesday, US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim met with Japanese and South Korean counterparts on how to engage North Korea moving forward, she added.

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At Least 10,000 Children Killed or Maimed in Yemen Since 2015 - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - At least 10,000 children have been killed or injured since the onset of the conflict in Yemen in 2015, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) spokesperson James Elder said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The Yemen conflict has just hit another shameful milestone: 10,000 children have been killed or maimed since fighting started in March 2015. That's the equivalent of four children every day," Elder said.

Elder explained that he returned on Monday from a mission to Yemen where he witnessed scores of children suffering from the combined effects of the violent conflict, economic devastation, shattered services and underfunded United Nations response.

Elder pointed out that more than 11 million children in Yemen are in need of humanitarian aid, while 400,000 children suffer from severe malnutrition.

"UNICEF urgently needs more than US\$235 million to continue its life-saving work in Yemen until mid-2022. Otherwise, the agency will be forced to scale down or stop its vital assistance for vulnerable children," he said.

Elder also urged the parties to the conflict in Yemen and actors with influence over them to halt the fighting and stop adding children to the list of those killed and maimed.

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Biden Orders Establishing Commission on Advancing Educational Opportunities for Blacks

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Tuesday issued an executive order to establish an initiative and a commission within the US Department of Education to advance educational and economic opportunities for Black Americans.

"To advance equity in our nation's schools and to promote the economic opportunity that follows it, there is established in the Department of Education the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans, of which the Secretary of Education shall serve as chair," Biden said in the executive order.

Biden explained that the initiative will advance equity and opportunity by focusing on policies that increase general understanding of systemic causes of educational challenges faced by Black students and improve Black children's and families' access to and participation in high-quality early childhood programs.

In addition, the initiative will ensure that all Black students have access to excellent teachers, school leaders, and other professionals, he said.

Biden also said he established a Presidential Advisory Commission on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans that will provide advice on matters relating to the development of educational programs and promotion of career pathways. The initiative will also be supported by a federal interagency working group that will collaborate across the government with respect to resources and opportunities available across the federal government. Senior officials from the departments of State, Treasury, Defense, Justice and Labor as well as others will be involved in the activities of the working group.

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FBI Declines to Comment on Reports About Raids on Deripaska Relatives' Home in New York

NEW YORK, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has declined to comment on the recent reports about searches it has undertaken in a house that allegedly belongs to Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska's relatives in New York.

"We cannot provide any information," the FBI press office in New York City told Sputnik. The FBI also refused to clarify whether any investigative actions were being carried out at the indicated address of the house in New York.

Earlier on Tuesday, a Deripaska representative told Sputnik that the FBI is conducting searches in the homes of his relatives in Washington and New York in connection with the US sanctions regime.

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Yellen Keeps US Bank Transaction Reporting at \$10,000, Dropping Wider Net for Tax Cheats

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury is reinstating its \$10,000 threshold for the reporting of banking transactions in the United States, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday, jettisoning her earlier idea to drop the level to \$600.

The Biden administration had wanted a lower reporting level to capture an estimated \$160 billion in personal income taxes that go unpaid each year, but Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal had proposed sticking to the original threshold.

"Today's new proposal reflects the administration's strong belief that we should zero in on those at the top of the income scale who don't pay the taxes they owe," Yellen said in a statement. Since he took office in January, President Joe Biden has asked the wealthy to pay their "fair share" to fund his administration's infrastructure and welfare spending plans, totaling about \$4 trillion. Biden has lamented that some of the richest US companies and citizens pay virtually no taxes by exploiting loopholes or basing their tax jurisdictions in countries with excessively generous tax rates.

Yellen noted in the release that the Biden administration wants to raise the US corporate tax to be raised to 26.5% from 21%.

The administration has also proposed a 3-percentage-point surtax on top earners and a hike of up to 5-percentage points on capital gains taxes. Tax breaks will be offered to low-income earners, with no additional burden for those making less than \$400,000 a year, the release added.

Aside from advocating higher taxes at home, the Biden administration has succeeded in moving the ball overseas, getting the 136-country Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to agree to a minimum corporate tax rate of 15%.

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US Budgets \$40M In to Research Grid-Scale Storage of Solar Power - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US government will fund 40 projects with grants totaling \$40 million to develop the next generation of technologies to convert sunlight to electricity and store the power for extended periods, the Department of Energy said on Tuesday. "We are laser focused on deploying more solar power and developing more cost-effective technologies to decarbonize our electricity system," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release. "The 40 projects announced today - led by universities and private industry across the country - is an investment in the next generation of innovations that will strengthen the nation's solar capacity and enhance our grid resilience."

The effort includes three projects to develop long-duration thermal energy storage, which can store and deliver at least ten hours of electricity whenever it is needed, the release said.

Concentrated solar thermal power (CSP), as opposed to photovoltaic panels that make electricity directly from sunlight, captures heat from sunlight and uses that heat to generate electricity or to support carbon free industrial processes, the release said.

Thirteen projects will develop technologies that can enable CSP plants to operate at very high temperatures, which are necessary to produce fuels and industrial chemicals, the release added.

The grants will also fund three research projects with the goal of extending the life of a typical photovoltaic panel from 30 to 50 years, according to the release.

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FBI Confirms Conducting Law Enforcement Activity at Oleg Deripaska's House in Washington

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on Tuesday confirmed to Sputnik that it is conducting an authorized law enforcement activity at a real estate property in the US capital that is supposedly linked to Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska.

"The FBI is conducting an authorized law enforcement activity at that address, but we don't have any other further information to provide at this time," the FBI press office told Sputnik.

Earlier on Tuesday, US media reported that FBI agents were raiding Deripaska's house, adding that the reason for the search remains unknown.

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First Bitcoin ETF ProShares Begins Trading Amid Heavy Regulatory Oversight

NEW YORK, October 19 (Sputnik) - ProShares Bitcoin Strategy ETF on Tuesday became the first exchange-traded fund to trade on the value of Bitcoin, a cryptocurrency that remains under scrutiny from regulators despite its growing acceptance in business circles.

The Proshares ETF tracks Bitcoin futures, or contracts speculating on the future price of Bitcoin, rather than the price of Bitcoin itself. Investors in the ETF should, therefore, expect variances in its price versus that of the actual cryptocurrency.

Just over an hour into trading, the ProShares ETF was down 33 cents, or 0.8%, on the day at \$40.55, after peaking at \$41.71 on its debut. The price of Bitcoin itself was up \$54.40, or 0.1%, at \$62,254.

The lackluster debut for the ETF and price of Bitcoin on Tuesday - which rose to as high as \$63,221, short of the \$64,374 record high hit in April - was testimony of the regulatory pressure that remained on the cryptocurrency, analysts said.

"The whole exercise begs the larger question: If this news can't get Bitcoin to new highs, what can?" Wall Street analyst Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive, noting the pre-hype launch for the ETF that fed belief that Bitcoin itself would see an all-time peak Tuesday. "Even if you're bullish, there's a good argument to head to the sidelines here."

The ETF comes more than a decade after the January 2009 launch of bitcoin itself and had been long overdue, argued crypto advocates on Wall Street as well as those passionate about digital innovation.

Tougher laws for cryptocurrencies are being drafted around the world even as central banks, including the US Federal Reserve, toy with the idea of having their own digital currencies. While central bank authorities agree that the monetary system of the future might largely be dictated by cryptocurrencies, many are also wary of illegitimate activities from these and have been studying ways to counter them.

Investor protection has also been a problem for regulators. Bitcoin, the first in the crypto business and a standard-bearer for the industry, has been very volatile this year, rallying more than 800% from a year ago then dropping by about half in value before returning to near its record high.

The ProShares ETF was personally cleared by US Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Gary Gensler who said it will provide "significant investor protections." Gensler has led the regulatory onslaught against cryptocurrencies, branding them as the "Wild West" of the financial world.

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Washington Airport Screeners Seize Passenger's Gun With 13 Bullets - Security Agency

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Officers at the Ronald Reagan Airport in the US capital prevented a passenger ticketed for an outbound flight from boarding with a loaded handgun with 13 bullets, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said on Tuesday.

"When the gun was spotted in the X-ray machine, the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority police were alerted. The police confiscated the gun and cited the man on a weapons charge," the TSA said in a press release.

Seizures of guns from US airline passengers attempting to board aircraft have increased during the coronavirus pandemic, the release said.

For example, TSA officers detected 3,257 firearms on passengers or their carry-on bags at checkpoints last year, although the total number of passengers screened at airport checkpoints across the country fell by 500 million compared to 2019 due to the pandemic, the release added.

In 2020, TSA caught approximately ten firearms per million passengers as compared to about five firearms per million passengers in 2019. Of the guns caught by TSA in 2020, about 83 percent were loaded, according to the release.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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Israel Envoy to UN Says Iran Uses Nuclear Talks to Buy Time to Reach Weapons-Grade Uranium

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan on Tuesday accused Iran of using the nuclear diplomacy talks in Vienna to buy time to achieve near weapons-grade uranium enrichment.

"The real threat to global security is quickly advancing Iran continued to progress towards its goal of becoming a nuclear threshold state," Erdan said during a UN Security Council meeting. "It is using the diplomatic talks to buy time so that it can enrich uranium to near weapons-grade levels, while gaining nuclear know-how that can never be reversed."

Erdan also stated that Tehran continues to violate its international commitments regarding enrichment and stockpiling of uranium while obstructing the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is charged with monitoring Iran's nuclear program.

Since April, Vienna has been hosting talks aimed reviving the Iran nuclear agreement. The sixth round of talks finished on June 20 and the negotiations have since hit a deadlock. Iran has insisted the negotiations should resume after the country's new President Ebrahim Raisi takes office and a new government was formed in August.

According to the Russian permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, the work to restore the agreement was completed by almost 90%, with the only outstanding issue being the political aspect of United States' obligations.

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Chemical Substances in Navalny's Blood, Water Bottle From Omsk Hotel Identical - OPCW

BERLIN, October 19 (Sputnik) - The chemical substance found in the blood of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny is identical to the one detected in a water bottle from a

Russian hotel he stayed at, according to a note from the German permanent representation to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The United States and 44 other countries sent a list of questions to Russia about the incident with Navalny through the OPCW. Moscow sent a counter request addressed to Germany, France, Sweden and the technical secretariat of the organization. Among other things, Russia asked for clarification on why its investigators cannot question Navalny's ally Maria Pevchikh, a UK citizen with alleged ties to the British intelligence, who accompanied him on the flight to Berlin. A bottle she bought at a departure zone of a Russian airport was later submitted as evidence of his attempted poisoning.

"The traces found by German experts on the water bottle which had been collected from Mr Navalny's hotel room are identical with the traces found in the biomedical samples taken from Mr Navalny," the statement said.

However, the German mission refused to comment on the role of Pevchikh in the incident, noting that Berlin has no knowledge of her status or whereabouts.

To the questions of why the bottle was not provided to the Russian side for investigation and why the chemical substance ended up on an item purchased in a departure zone of an airport, the mission replied that it was up to Russia to find out since the events took place on the Russian soil. "This does not require the possession of the bottle," according to the mission. Moscow further inquired why it still had no information on the exact formula of the chemicals found in Navalny's blood and on the bottle, to which the German side referred to an older report of the OPCW technical assistance visit to Berlin, which stated that the substance was "acting as a cholinesterase inhibitor" and was structurally similar to the toxic chemicals of the Novichok family.

"Germany considers that information to be fully sufficient for the Russian authorities, who are in the possession of their own biomedical samples from Mr Navalny and thus have all necessary information at their disposal to launch an investigation of the case and of the events that took place on Russian territory," the document concluded.

The Swedish mission in its response to Moscow's request also referred to Germany's answer concerning the exact formula of the chemical allegedly used to poison Navalny.

Last August, Navalny fell ill on a domestic Russian flight. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing. Based on the results of the examinations, the Omsk doctors concluded that Navalny had a metabolic disorder, while no poison substances were found in his blood and urine.

Several days later, Navalny was flown to the Charite hospital in Berlin for further treatment. The German government claimed that doctors found traces of a nerve agent of the Novichok type in his system. A number of countries and media outlets speculated that there was evidence of foul play by Moscow. Russia has since denied any involvement in the case.

Moscow believes that the incident was a provocation aimed at discrediting Russia, since Berlin is yet to show any tangible evidence in support of its accusations. Moscow has also pointed out multiple times that the OPCW ignored Russian requests for assistance, hindering the investigation.

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EU, South Korea, Oman Exercise Joint Naval Drills

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - The European Union, South Korea and Oman carried out their first joint naval and information exchange exercise against the threat of piracy in the Arabian Sea, an official EU press release said Tuesday morning.

"Based on the scenario of an anti-piracy operation, the joint naval exercise included boarding a vessel with helicopter-borne special operations forces, live heavy machine gun fire, a search and rescue operation, and complex tactical evolutions at sea," the press release reads.

The drills involved the EU Naval Force Somalia – Operation Atalanta flagship, frigate Victoria, and South Korea's destroyer Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin, as well as the Oman Maritime Security Centre.

The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was adopted in September 2021. It urges for more joint activities with Indo-Pacific partners to provide maritime security in the region.

South Korea has signed a Framework Participation Agreement with the EU for participation in EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, such as EU Naval Force Somalia – Operation Atalanta. According to the agreement, Korean ships and personnel took part in this operation. The statement said that the EU and South Korea are committed to strengthening their partnership in the area of security and defense.

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UNICEF Delivers 40 Tonnes of Medical Supplies to Kabul to Treat Diarrheal Diseases

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) announced on Tuesday that it has delivered 40 tonnes of medical supplies to Kabul to help the authorities deal with the deteriorating situation concerning diarrheal diseases in Afghanistan.

"UNICEF has just delivered nearly 40 tonnes of medical supplies, including kits and medicines for acute watery diarrhea (AWD), to Kabul to treat the rising number of cases of diarrheal diseases in the country," UNICEF said in a press release. "The medical supplies are part of UNICEF's emergency response and will help treat around 10,000 people suffering from dehydration caused by the disease."

UNICEF noted that in the past weeks, the reported number of acute watery diarrhea cases has surpassed 1,500 in Kabul and the surrounding districts.

"This outbreak comes as Afghanistan grapples with alarming levels of malnutrition amongst children under the age of five, a measles outbreak and the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic," the release added.

UNICEF also announced in the release that in the coming weeks it expects to deliver more medical supplies to Afghanistan.

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Taliban Want to Continue Contacts With New US Special Envoy for Afghanistan

KABUL, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement (banned as a terrorist organization in Russia) hopes to continue cooperation with the new US special envoy for Afghanistan, Thomas West, and looks forward to the full implementation of the Doha agreement, the Taliban government's Foreign Ministry's spokesman, Abdul Kahar Balkhi, said on Tuesday.

On Monday, the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced that Zalmay Khalilzad decided to leave the post of the US special envoy for Afghanistan. He will be replaced by his deputy, Thomas West. Khalilzad said he considered it was a good time to leave the office since Washington began a new phase of its policy towards Kabul.

Balkhi praised "great progress" in negotiations with the United States achieved under Khalilzad. "We saw good progress in negotiations with two US administrations led by Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad. We are optimistic about moving forward with the new representative Mr. Tom West & full implementation of Doha Agreement will normalize relations between both governments," Balkhi wrote on Twitter.

In February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace agreement that stipulated the withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban abating violence and guaranteeing that the country will not turn into a safe haven for terrorists.

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Trump Says Would Have Stopped Rioters if Present at US Capitol - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said he would have stopped a group of rioters at the US Capitol on January 6 from doing anything bad if he were there himself, according to an interview excerpt from David Drucker's book "In Trump's Shadow: The Battle for 2024 and the Future of the GOP" published Tuesday and featured in Business Insider.

"I wanted to go down with the crowd. I said I was going to go down with the crowd. But they wouldn't let me go... I think if I did go down there, I would have stopped the people from doing anything bad," Trump said.

On Monday, Trump sued the US House Select Committee investigating the events on January 6 for what he claims are illegal requests to obtain White House records, saying the records have no connection to the events.

The Select Committee said the following day it will continue the probe and fight what it characterized were Trump's attempts to impede its work.

Trump associate and former Breitbart media chief Steve Bannon also refused to comply with a subpoena that required him to testify before the Select Committee, arguing that he is not required to testify given the executive privilege rule.

Trump's lawsuit points out that the FBI has found no evidence the event was part of an organized plot to overturn the 2020 election results nor that Trump and his associates were involved in any such exercise.

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UPDATE - Lavrov Believes NATO Should Take First Steps to Improving Relations With Moscow

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - Moscow believes that NATO should be the first to take steps to improve the bilateral relations after a diplomatic row saw ties deteriorate, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday.

"We do assume this, as we have never initiated the degradation of relations either with NATO or with the European Union or with any country in the West or any other region," Lavrov said in response to a question about whether the onus is on the other side to repair battered relations. Lavrov also accused NATO of "burying" the Russia-NATO Council, which could convene for urgent consultations amid crises.

Commenting on the issue of the closure of the NATO information office in Moscow, Lavrov noted that it had to be expected since there had been no information exchanges with the NATO headquarters for a long time and all military-to-military contacts had been officially cut off. In this light, the top Russian diplomat criticized Western partners who had lamented the loss of opportunities for dialogue and accused Moscow of being unwilling to negotiate, saying that their statements showed "an understanding that their positions are losing" and "a desire to blame someone else and a lack of diplomatic culture."

To illustrate his point, Lavrov noted that Moscow proposed two years ago to agree on the guidelines for military exercises on the line of contact between Russia and NATO and on minimum distances allowed for combat aircraft and warships. "[In response] just a wall of silence," he added.

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Blinken Discusses With New UN Envoy Restart of Political Process in Yemen - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had discussed reviving of the political process to the ongoing conflict in Yemen with new UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Tuesday.

"The Secretary congratulated the Special Envoy on his new role and discussed efforts to engage all parties without preconditions and secure a ceasefire, address urgent humanitarian priorities, restart the political process in Yemen, and ensure accountability for human rights violations and abuses," Price said. "He restated that resolving the conflict remains a top US foreign policy priority."

Yemen's conflict between government forces and the Houthi movement has been ongoing since August 2014. The situation in the country was further complicated after Saudi Arabia joined the conflict on the side of the Yemen government in 2015 and began conducting air, land and sea operations against the Islamist rebel movement.

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Evergrande's Deal to Sell 51% Stake in Property Unit Paused – Reports

BEIJING, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Evergrande Group's deal to sell a 51% stake in the Chinese real estate giant's property services to Hopson Development Holdings has been halted, Chinese media said Tuesday.

The group found itself on the brink of default in summer after years of debt-fueled building spree. It accumulated \$304 billion in loans as of June.

The sale was likely put on hold due to a lack of consensus among the group's stakeholders, the state-run financial news outlet Cailian Press said. Hopson Development planned to buy the control stake for \$5.1 billion.

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Russia's Internet Regulator Says Google May Face Revenue-Based Fines

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - Google is set to face revenue-based fine for repeated failure to delete information prohibited in Russia, the head of Roskomnadzor Andrey Lipov said on Tuesday.

"This is a standard procedure: a violation is recorded, the violator is summoned, a protocol is drawn up, the protocol is sent to court, the court decides on the amount of the fine," Lipov told reporters on the sidelines of the Spectrum 2021 forum, commenting on Google's work in Russia. "In this case, this is a repeated violation — it will be revenue-based fine."

Lipov also stated that Twitter has removed more than 90% of the prohibited information. The official added that the Russian Internet regulator is ready to meet with representatives of the social network as soon as work on the removal of prohibited information is completed.

Roskomnadzor in early October drew up a protocol against Facebook for repeated failure to delete information prohibited in Russia, that will be brought to court. The company may also face revenue-based fines.

The watchdog planned to draw up a protocol for a second offense in October for Google as well. It confirmed to Sputnik plans to bring Facebook and Google to justice under the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation.

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US Housing Starts Down 1.6% in September Amid Supply, Labor Constraints - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The take-off rate for homebuilding in the United States fell by 1.6% in September, the Commerce Department data revealed on Tuesday, as supply chain and labor issues continued to constrict a market where demand remained high despite record high prices.

"Privately-owned housing starts in September were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1,555,000," the Commerce Department said in a news release. "This is 1.6 percent below the revised August estimate of 1,580,000."

Economists polled by US media had forecast September housing starts at 1.62 million.

The Commerce Department data contrasted with a survey released by the National Association of Home Builders on Monday that showed its Housing Market Index up four points in October as builders remained encouraged by buyer enthusiasm despite record high home prices keeping some off the market.

"Given high prices, the crux of the issue here is getting the supplies and workers to build the homes," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive.

The crisis brought about by the measures implemented to address the coronavirus pandemic has left key building materials in the United States, such as windows and power circuit breaker boxes, in short supply. Labor shortages have also crept up with many people still not returning to full-time work.

However, housing starts were higher compared to a year ago, with last month's rate being 7.4% higher than in September 2020.

Historically, housing starts have fallen from their most recent high of 1.72 million in March that marked a 14-1/2-year high.

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Greece, Cyprus, Egypt Jointly Condemn Turkey's Actions in Mediterranean

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - Leaders of Greece, Cyprus and Egypt have jointly condemned Turkey's policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, according to a joint statement released on Tuesday following a trilateral summit in Athens.

"We condemned the illegal drilling and seismic operations by Turkish vessels in Cyprus EEZ/continental shelf, in maritime areas already delimited in accordance with international law. We also reiterated our condemnation of the continuous violations of Greek national airspace

and territorial waters in the Aegean Sea and all other illegal activities in areas falling within Greece's continental shelf, in contravention of international law," Cypriot presidency said in a statement published after the meeting of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi.

The leaders further urged Ankara to abstain "in a consistent and sincere manner" from provocations and other actions that violate international law and called for a productive dialogue, which "cannot be conducted in an aggressive environment or under the threat of the use of force."

On the issue of Cyprus, the three sides reaffirmed their support of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions that call for a "bizonal, bicomunal federation with a single sovereignty, a single international personality and a single citizenship" and prompted Ankara to also abide by them.

The leaders criticized Turkey's decision to further open up areas of the buffer town of Varosha and demanded a return to negotiations to arrive at "a just, comprehensive and viable settlement" of the issue.

Cyprus has been de facto divided since 1974, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983, recognized only by Turkey.

Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been conducted almost from the moment of its division. The UN has attempted brokering reunification talks, but the negotiation has reached an impasse.

In July, the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, backed by Ankara, unilaterally demilitarized the UN-protected quarter of Varosha, a town in the buffer zone that separates the Greek and Turkish communities on the island. The UN Security Council condemned the move, saying it violates all previous UN resolutions on Cyprus.

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Surveys in 46 Nations Show US Image in Other Nations Improving Under Biden - Report

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Median approval of the United States' global leadership has rebounded under President Joe Biden, rising 19 percentage points from ratings at the end of the Donald Trump presidency, a Gallup report said on Tuesday.

"As of early August 2021, across 46 countries and territories, median approval of US leadership stood at 49%. This rating is up from the 30% median approval at the end of Donald Trump's presidency and matches the rating during former President Barack Obama's first year in office in 2009," a press release explaining the report said.

Biden's a 36 percent disapproval rating is also higher than any of those under former President Barack Obama, but seven percentage points below the final disapproval rating under Trump - a record high 44 percent, the release added.

The report credited Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and halt Trump's decision to leave the World Health Organization for much of the improved image.

The report also noted that Biden vowed to repair US alliances through diplomacy and restore the United States' image in his first foreign policy speech as president.

"These words and actions likely reassured many longtime US allies and the international community at large and may have contributed to the surge in approval ratings across most of the 46 countries and territories surveyed through the first half of 2021," the release said.

At the same time, the report warned that what happens in the next six months - and in the aftermath of the quick US withdrawal from Afghanistan - may set the tone and position of the US for the rest of the Biden presidency.

Results for the 2021 approval ratings are based on nationally representative, probability-based samples among the adult populations, aged 15 and older, in 46 countries surveyed between April and August 2021. Surveys were conducted either through telephone or face-to-face interviews, according to the release.

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Worst Flooding in Decades Impacts 700,000 in South Sudan - UN Refugee Agency

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - The UN Refugee Agency is alarmed at the destructive consequences of the worst in decades flooding in South Sudan, which affected the lives of over 700,000 people, compounding a humanitarian crisis in a country already facing the triple threat of conflict, COVID-19, and hunger, UNHCR Representative in South Sudan Arafat Jamal said on Tuesday.

Flooding, triggered by early seasonal rainfall since August, has inundated farmland, killed livestock and destroyed homes in four states, forcing families to seek refuge on higher ground and in neighboring towns.

"As the worst flooding in decades impacts over 700,000 people across South Sudan, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is alarmed at the critical needs facing the most vulnerable," Jamal said at a press briefing in Geneva.

The UNHCR representative said that the agency, together with the humanitarian country team and the government, has been "delivering urgently needed support to the most affected, including hygiene items, food, emergency shelter and solar lanterns to provide light."

Jamal stressed that the seasonal rains in South Sudan, which are expected to continue until the end of the year, will result in an "increase in the number of people needing humanitarian assistance," noting that climatic stresses "have sparked inter-communal conflict" between host communities and the displaced due to floods and drought.

The UNHCR representative praised the efforts of the government of South Sudan, which "has already allocated US\$10M to flood response efforts," calling on the international community to "urgently assist affected communities to rebuild and protect people's lives and livelihoods."

The flood situation caused by heavy seasonal rains in South Sudan is worsening every year. The UN Refugee Agency reported that many communities have not witnessed flooding to this extent since 1962, while there are communities in South Sudan that have been affected by three years of consecutive flooding.

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Indian Counterterrorism Agency Takes Over Probe Into Kashmir Murders – Reports

NEW DELHI, October 19 (Sputnik) - India's counterterrorism force has taken over investigations into six of the 11 killings of civilians in the Kashmir valley as part of a larger probe into a suspected conspiracy by Pakistani militants, media reported.

Five people killed in the Indian-controlled Kashmir areas were migrant workers, the Hindustan Times said. The Indian government has moved thousands of migrants to safe locations, with hundreds more fleeing the Himalayan valley since attacks began in early October.

The National Investigation Agency will investigate the deaths of a pharmacist in Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, a street vendor, two teachers and two laborers, the Indian paper cited sources as saying.

The agency conducted a series of raids and arrested terror suspects last week as part of what it called a "terrorism conspiracy case." It accused Pakistani-based militants of "unleashing a reign of terror" in the disputed valley to change the status quo. Both India and Pakistan claim Kashmir in its entirety.

The authorities say militants are targeting Hindu minorities in the area. Two migrant workers were gunned down on Sunday in the town of Kulgam, a day after the shooting of a street food vendor in Srinagar. A week earlier, two Sikh teachers were shot dead by militants who entered a government school in Eidgah.

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Kremlin Believes Gov't Did Best to Ensure Russians' Access COVID-19 Vaccine Despite Flaws

MOSCOW, October 19 (Sputnik) - Moscow believes that the government has done an excellent job of providing all Russians with access to COVID-19 vaccines, and urged those citizens that remained hesitant to get vaccinated to be more responsible, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

"Traditionally, people blame the government for everything the state always keeps this in mind and feels its share of responsibility. Of course, not everything that needed to be done was done in terms of raising awareness about the lack of alternatives [to vaccination] and the importance of vaccination ... but it is also true that all citizens of our country need to show a more responsible position," Peskov told reporters.

He stressed that citizens need to think about the lives and safety of their friends and relatives and get vaccinated. But the fact that some still remain hesitant means that there have been some flaws in the government's approach, Peskov added.

Overall, though, the Kremlin spokesman is confident that Moscow did its best and provided all necessary conditions for mass vaccination.

Russia has registered a total of 7.9 million COVID-19 cases and over 220,000 deaths since the outbreak of the pandemic. So far, nearly 100 million people received at least one dose of the vaccine, while 47.3 million have been fully vaccinated against the virus, which amounts to 32.8% of the country's population.