

11/18/21 Thursday

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Senate Advances \$740 Billion Pentagon Budget After Schumer Drops Merger With Anti-China Bill

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Senate is now poised to consider the massive Pentagon budget bill for 2022 after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), who leads Democrats in the legislature's upper house, abandoned an attempt to unilaterally merge the bill with a stalled bill on industrial competition with China.

By a vote of 84-15, the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA) was advanced to a full floor discussion on Wednesday evening, marking the end of a complex and controversial process of proposing amendments.

"While there are many areas of agreement on these legislative proposals between the two chambers, there are still a number of important unresolved issues," Schumer said in [a joint statement](#) with his House counterpart, Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), adding that both chambers "will immediately begin a bipartisan process of reconciling the two chambers' legislative proposals so that we can deliver a final piece of legislation to the president's desk as soon as possible."

[According to Politico](#), the NDAA was due to be advanced on Wednesday morning, but voting was held up for most of the day as Schumer attempted to force the inclusion of a pet project of his, the US Innovation and Competition Act (USICA), which the Senate passed in March, but the House has stalled in committee debates. The bill would set aside \$110 billion for tech research to [compete with China's](#) burgeoning tech sector, half of which would go toward addressing the [ongoing microchip shortage](#).

Republicans by and large opposed merging the two bills, and Schumer only relented when he reached an agreement with Pelosi to prioritize resolving their differences over the USICA with a special conference committee.

The Senate's timeline is tight: the upper chamber was hoping to vote on the massive defense bill before leaving for the Thanksgiving holiday on Monday, which begins a weeklong period during which Americans typically travel great distances to spend time and feast with family. However, it's not just debating the bill itself that needs to happen, but the many proposed amendments - of which there [were some 945](#) as of Thursday afternoon.

All of them won't get a vote of course, but some of the more sweeping and contentious ones are likely to, including a proposal to revoke the 2002 [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#) Against Iraq; an amendment that would remove the requirement that women register for the draft; a proposal to reduce the US nuclear stockpile and head off development of new nuclear weapons systems begun under former US President Donald Trump; and a proposal to allow sale of the advanced F-35 jet to NATO ally Greece, according to [Air Force Magazine](#).

The US' annual defense budget, which does not include its nuclear weapons, which fall under the Department of Energy's purview, is by far the world's largest. [According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute \(SIPRI\)](#), the US accounted for 39% of the world's total military expenditure in 2020, having increased for the third year in a row.

In 2020, the US spent \$778 billion on its military, which was more than three times the next-highest spender, China, which shelled out just \$252 billion for its military.

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US Sanctions Six Iranians, One Entity For Alleged Attempt to Influence US 2020 Elections
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US Treasury announced on Thursday it had sanctioned six Iranians and one Iranian-owned company for allegedly attempting to influence the US election held on November 3, 2020. According to a [press release](#) by the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), six men were added to the list of specially designation nationals (SDNs): Sajjad Kashian, Seyyed Kazemi, Hosein Akbari Nodeh, Mostafa Sarmadi, Seyed Mehdi Hashemi Toghroljerdi, and Mohammad Bagher Shinrakar. It also added the Iranian internet company Emen Net Pasargad to the list.

They were sanctioned under [Executive Order 13848](#), a 2018 order by then-US President Donald Trump that declared a national emergency over alleged attempts by foreign entities to influence US elections.

A [separate notice](#) put out by the US Department of Justice on Thursday said that two of the men, Seyyed Kazemi and Sajjad Kashian, had also been charged "for their involvement in a cyber-enabled campaign to intimidate and influence American voters, and otherwise undermine voter confidence and sow discord, in connection with the 2020 US presidential election."

The accusations stem from the weeks before the November 3, 2020, when then-Director of National Intelligence [John Ratcliffe claimed](#) that Iran and Russia had "taken specific actions to influence public opinion relating to [US] elections," including Iran supposedly sending "spoofed emails designed to intimidate voters, incite social unrest and damage."

However, the metadata from those emails, which purported to be from the pro-Trump right-wing gang Proud Boys and threatened would-be voters for Joe Biden, actually pointed to a number of countries other than Iran, including Saudi Arabia, Estonia, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, according to [the Washington Post](#).

Further, such an operation made little sense politically, as it encouraged voters to support Trump, who had unilaterally withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear deal, reimposed "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran, and taken the two countries to the brink of war by assassinating Gen. Qasem Soleimani, a leading Iranian general and national hero.

Despite this, the US National Security Agency (NSA) and US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) announced on Election Day that they had [undertaken cyber operations](#) against Iran "over the past several weeks and the past several months to make sure that they're not going to interfere in our elections," according to Paul Nakasone, who heads both entities.

Other operations have followed, including the [mass-takedown of media](#) outlets from Iran but also from several other Shiite groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, many of which had no connection to the Iranian government. The DOJ said it had seized the domains under an October 2020 decision by OFAC to designate the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) as part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, which Washington has labeled without evidence as a terrorist entity.

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'Professor or Comrade'? US Senator Asks Biden Nominee Raised in USSR If She 'Resigned'
From Komsomol
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A conservative US senator drew guffaws on Thursday during a confirmation hearing for a Department of Treasury nominee who was raised in the Soviet Union after he repeatedly asserted that she was a communist.

Saule Omarova, a Kazakh-American who was raised in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), has been nominated to lead the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC), a US Department of the Treasury agency. However, the line of questioning at her confirmation hearing before the Senate Banking Committee on Thursday strayed far from her professional qualifications, especially when some senators started asking questions.

Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) in particular was concerned about Omarova's membership as a child in the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, better known as the Komsomol.

The organisation was a youth group tied to the Communist Party that was sort of like the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts: youth were educated in strong ethics, trained in practical skills, and performed community service. They also made important political connections that could help in advancing one's career. Yet, contrary to what Omarova claimed, membership was not compulsory.

"There was a group called the 'Young Communists' and you were a member, is that right?", the senator asked.

"Senator, I grew up in the Soviet Union. Everybody in that country was a member of the Komsomol, which was the communist youth organisation", she answered.

"So, you were a member?", Kennedy then asked.

"That was a part of normal progress in school", she clarified.

"Have you resigned?", he then asked.

"You grow out of it with age automatically", Omarova explained. The oldest age members of the Komsomol could be was 28 years old.

"Did you send them a letter, though?", Kennedy asked. Omarova then tried to explain that one aged out of Komsomol membership, but that answer hardly satisfied him. "Could you look at your records and see if you can find a copy?", he then asked.

At that point, the committee's chairman, Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), then intervened to explain to the inquisitive lawmaker that Omarova had renounced her Soviet citizenship in 1991, when she left that country and moved to the United States.

The Komsomol, it must be noted, dissolved itself in 1991, having previously been greatly reduced in its prestige by other political reforms in the 1980s.

Social media users wasted no time mocking Kennedy's insinuations, joking that they had never resigned from the Boy Scouts of America or from various other social organisations. Others dismissed Americans' lack of knowledge of Soviet history and of contemporary Russian society. However, Kennedy wasn't done. He then turned to Omarova's academic writings, listing off several titles and topics he found objectionable, including a paper on Karl Marx's seminal economic text "Capital" that she had written as part of her undergraduate studies at Moscow State University, from which she graduated in 1989.

"I don't know whether to call you professor or comrade", Kennedy declared when he was done reading off her CV.

"Oh my goodness", another lawmaker could be heard mumbling to herself on an open mic. Omarova then explained that she is not a communist and does "not subscribe to that ideology" and described the suffering her family experienced under the rule of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, saying it was "seared in my mind".

"I came to this country, I'm proud to be an American, and this is why I'm here today, Senator: I'm here today because I'm ready for public service", she answered.

The Cornell Law School professor's ordeal still wasn't yet over, even if Kennedy's time was. Another lawmaker, Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC), gave her [a similar grilling](#), if not quite so eccentric, including about why his colleagues had been accused of "McCarthyism" for their line of questioning and why she hadn't supplied the committee with a copy of her undergraduate thesis paper as requested. She explained that she didn't bring it with her when she came to the US, bringing just a single suitcase of belongings.

Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA), the committee's ranking member, ended the hearing with [another speech](#) about Omarova's political views.

"Prof. Omarova has promoted radical - radical is her description - nationalising the banking system, imposing government price controls, espousing the idea that money is a public, not a private good, curtailing economic innovation, dramatically limiting economic freedom and choice, having the government seize seats on corporate boards", Toomey said.

"These are ideas consistent with the socialist view of a command and control economy... The idea that we would put a person with these views as the chief regulator of America's national banks is deeply disturbing and chilling".

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French Barkhane Forces Leave Far Northern Tessalit Base Amid Continuing Mali Withdrawal
By - Morgan Artyukhina

French forces have quit their second base in northern Mali, where they were embroiled in a highly unpopular eight-year-long war against Islamist rebels that had long since become an ethnic conflict. The pullout is part of a shifting of French policy as President Emmanuel Macron prepares to seek reelection.

Control over Tessalit base in northeastern Mali, near its desertous border with Algeria, was handed over to Malian forces on Wednesday, [according to AFP](#). It was the second northern outpost the French have left amid their force drawdown, after they left their base in Kidal, south of Tessalit, last month.

The French military chief of staff [said in a statement](#) that the transfer was "gradual, controlled and closely coordinated with FAMA [Malian Armed Forces] and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), whose contingent of several hundred soldiers is permanently deployed in Tessalit."

The statement added that "several weeks" of "training sessions" with their Malian counterparts had preceded the transfer of power.

The withdrawal is part of the end of [Operation Barkhane](#), Paris' War on Terror-style campaign across Africa's Sahel region, which began in 2013 as a [mission to save Mali](#) from likely collapse amid another coup d'etat and a rebellion by Tuareg tribes in the north, who declared their own state of Azawagh.

However, only about half of the 5,000-strong Barkhane force is being pulled out. According to AFP, Paris also plans to quit its base in Timbuktu and pull its remaining forces further south, [toward the tri-border region](#) where Mali meets Burkina Faso and Niger, to concentrate on a new counterterrorism mission dubbed the Takuba Task Force.

Backing Off Barkhane

Macron announced the policy shift in June, several weeks after [a military coup](#) in the Malian capital of Bamako removed the civilian president, prime minister, and defense minister, after they attempted to change the structure of the interim government to more favor the military's civilian partners, the June 5 Movement - Gathering of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP). Col. Assimi Goita, then the vice president, made himself interim president in the coup, but promised that scheduled elections to restore democracy would not be altered from their February 2022 date. It was the second coup in less than a year: in August 2020, the military teamed up with M5-RFP to oust democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita amid months of mass protests in a coup that Goita also led, and the tension between the civilian and military factions has been tight ever since.

Macron denounced the May 2021 coup and pledged not to cooperate with Goita's new government, using the situation and the concurrent [loss of confidence](#) in the French mission to the Central African Republic to end Barkhane outright. However, the decision was also made as Macron [announced his bid](#) for a second term as president in the April 2022 French elections.

The war is highly unpopular in both France and Mali, where the sentiment is that French involvement has made the situation worse. Last month, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga accused France of training the terrorists it claims to be fighting, [telling RIA Novosti](#) that French troops have denied Malian forces access to the Tuareg stronghold in Kidal, where he alleged French officers are allegedly training jihadists of the Ansar el-Din front, an offshoot of al-Qaeda*.

"We have proof of this. In our language there is a saying that when you're searching for a needle in your room and the person supposedly helping you to look for it is sitting on it, you will never be able to find it. This is the current situation in Mali, and we do not intend to put up with it," Maiga said.

It's an accusation that goes [back to the beginning](#) of Barkhane. More recently, Yerewolo - Debout sur Les Remparts (The Worthy Sons - Standing on the Ramparts), a group opposing the French presence in Mali, [said in June](#) that French forces were a danger to other nations' troops, such as the Germans, who did actually have Malian interests at heart.

The ill will might also be due to the fact that France once ruled Mali as a colony with an iron fist. Invaded by French forces in the late 19th century, Mali became part of the French Sudan colony, although anti-colonial resistance continued. The irrigable land was used for cotton and nut plantation, while forced labor by Malians was used across the Empire. The country finally became independent in 1958, when the [revolution in neighboring Algeria](#), also a French colony, forced Paris to renegotiate its relationship with its entire empire..

Mali Looks for Plan B

Maïga said in September that after the French forces withdraw to the south, Bamako will have to [look for a "Plan B"](#) - an indirect response to a question from the press about whether Mali was close to finalizing a rumored defense deal with Wagner Group, a Russian private defense contractor that Western media has falsely claimed is tied to the Russian government.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov subsequently confirmed on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings that such a conversation had taken place.

"Since Mali's authorities estimated that their forces were not enough without external support and since external support is reducing from those who pledged to help eradicate terrorism, they turned to a private Russian military company," Lavrov stated, adding that as it's a private matter between a company and its client, "We don't have any connection to that."

Earlier this week, Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye [Diop told Sputnik](#) that construction of a Russian military base in the West African country "is not on the agenda."

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US Says Planning Deeper Defense Ties With Vietnam Including More Training, Ship Visits

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is expecting to have a stronger defense cooperation with Vietnam, including more training and more frequent ship visits to the country, White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Friday.

"I think, given some of the last legislation that Sen. [John] McCain passed, actually helped open the arena for greater cooperation between our defense firms and our governments in the defense realm. I think that will take place over time. I think there's going to be more training, more ship visits and the like," Campbell said during a conversation at the US Institute of Peace. Campbell said the United States considers Vietnam to be a critical "swing state" in terms of technology and commerce, and the ability to work closer with Hanoi will be a decisive factor for Washington moving forward in the region.

Vietnam is currently improving its diplomatic posture in the region by deepening its engagements with a number of countries in the Indo-Pacific, including India, Japan, and Australia, Campbell added.

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US House Approves Biden's \$1.75T In Social, Climate Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday approved President Joe Biden's \$1.75 trillion social safety net and climate spending package, sending the legislation to the Senate for consideration.

House lawmakers erupted into cheers after the bill secured enough support to pass the required threshold of 218 votes. The final tally for the vote was 220 in favor and 213 opposed.

The \$1.75 trillion package, known as the Build Back Better Act, would expand spending on social welfare and climate change programs, if passed. Among other provisions, the bill includes funding for paid family and medical leave, expands the health program known as Obamacare and provides access to universal daycare for 3- and 4-year-old children.

Republican and other critics have said the bill is wasteful in nature and will contribute to increasing taxes and the already rising inflation as well as worsen the economic hardships for the people.

Former President Donald Trump responded by saying the Democrats are getting more done than they ever dreamed possible because of Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's decision to extend the debt ceiling, consequently giving Democrats two months to "get their act together."

Congressman James Comer also released a statement about the legislation, in which he said that the spending package will "pour gas on America's inflation fire" and lead to rising prices of everyday essential items.

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Canada Authorizes Use of Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine for Children 5-11 Years Old

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian authorities have authorized the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine against the novel coronavirus for children 5-11 years of age, Health Canada said in a statement on Friday.

In October, the Canadian authorities received a submission from Pfizer-BioNTech seeking approval of its vaccine for children.

"Today, Health Canada authorized the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech Comirnaty COVID-19 vaccine in children 5 to 11 years of age. This is the first COVID-19 vaccine authorized in Canada for use

in this age group and marks a major milestone in Canada's fight against COVID-19," the statement said.

The vaccine was initially authorized for children 16 years of age and older in 2020 and subsequently for children 12-15 years of age in 2021, the statement said.

"After a thorough and independent scientific review of the evidence, the Department has determined that the benefits of this vaccine for children between 5 and 11 years of age outweigh the risks. Health Canada has authorized a two-dose regimen of 10 micrograms to be administered three weeks apart, which is a lower dose than the 30 micrograms two-dose regimen authorized for people 12 years of age and older," the statement added.

The clinical trials revealed that the immune response in children 5-11 years old was comparable to the response in people 16-25 years old. The vaccine was 90.7% effective, according to the statement.

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Harris to Become 1st Woman With Presidential Power as Biden Undergoes Routine Colonoscopy

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The White House announced that US President Joe Biden will briefly transfer power to Vice President Kamala Harris while he is under anesthesia during a routine medical check on Friday morning, and this is the first time, even if for a brief period, that a woman will be at the helm of the United States.

Biden was due to visit the Walter Reed Medical Center for a routine physical check that includes undergoing a colonoscopy.

"While he is there, the President will undergo a routine colonoscopy. As was the case when President George W. Bush had the same procedure in 2002 and 2007, and following the process set out in the Constitution, President Biden will transfer power to the Vice President for the brief period of time when he is under anesthesia. The Vice President will work from her office in the West Wing during this time," White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

Psaki added that the White House would release later on Friday a written summary of the results of the procedure Biden underwent.

Harris, 57, is the first woman to hold the post of vice president of the United States. She joined the 2020 presidential race but was unsuccessful. Harris was later picked by Biden to be his running mate.

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Biden, Trudeau to Launch Dialogue to Align Policies on China, N. Korea - White House

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden and Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have agreed to launch a strategic dialogue on the Indo-Pacific region in a bid to coordinate their policies on China and North Korea, the White House said on Friday.

"They committed to establishing a Strategic Dialogue on the Indo-Pacific to promote regional security, the rule of law, good governance; to align our approaches on China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK); as well as affirming their strategic dialogue on Arctic cooperation," the White House said in a readout of the two leaders' bilateral meeting on Thursday.

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Biden to Briefly Transfer Power to Harris While Under Anesthesia for Colonoscopy - Psaki

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will briefly transfer power to Vice President Kamala Harris while under anesthesia for a routine colonoscopy on Friday morning, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

Biden was due to travel to Walter Reed Medical Center for a routine physical check.

"While he is there, the President will undergo a routine colonoscopy. As was the case when President George W. Bush had the same procedure in 2002 and 2007, and following the process set out in the Constitution, President Biden will transfer power to the Vice President for the brief period of time when he is under anesthesia. The Vice President will work from her office in the West Wing during this time," Psaki said.

She added that later on Friday, the White House would publicly release a written summary of the physical.

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Pfizer Says US FDA Authorized Its COVID Booster Shot for All Adults

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration has authorized Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 booster shot for all adults, the company announced on Friday.

"Pfizer Inc. (NYSE: PFE) and BioNTech SE (Nasdaq: BNTX) today announced that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has expanded the emergency use authorization (EUA) of a booster dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine to include individuals 18 years of age and older. The booster dose is to be administered at least six months after completion of the primary series, and is the same dosage strength as the doses in the primary series," the statement read.

"With boosters, more adults will now have the opportunity to help preserve a high-level of protection against this disease. We are grateful to the FDA for their rigorous review, and the action taken today that we hope will help accelerate our path out of this pandemic," CEO Albert Bourla said.

In September, the FDA authorized Pfizer booster doses for those already vaccinated against the coronavirus but at high risk of infection, including those over 65 years old and those who are more likely to get exposed to the disease, including health care, emergency and transportation workers.

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US FDA Approves Moderna COVID-19 Booster Shot for Adults - Company

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - American pharma company Moderna announced on Friday that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had approved a booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine for adults 18 years and older.

"Moderna, Inc. (Nasdaq:MRNA), a biotechnology company pioneering messenger RNA (mRNA) therapeutics and vaccines, today announced that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has extended the emergency use authorization of a booster dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at the 50 µg dose level to all adults aged 18 and older. This booster can be used in all individuals 18 years and older who have completed a primary vaccination with any other authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccine," the statement said.

According to Moderna Chief Executive Officer Stephane Bancel, the authorization comes at a critical time as the country is facing a lot of hospitalizations.

"We thank the FDA for their review, and are confident in the robust clinical evidence that a 50 µg booster dose of mRNA-1273 induces a strong immune response against COVID-19," he said.

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Biden to Undergo Routine Physical on Eve of Birthday Saturday - White House

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is due for a routine physical later on Friday, his first since taking office, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday. "This morning, the President will travel to Walter Reed Medical Center for a routine physical," Psaki tweeted.

Biden, the oldest sitting president in US history, turns 79 on Saturday.

He received a medical check-up in December 2019 before the presidential election, with physicians saying that he was "a healthy, vigorous, 77-year-old male, who is fit to successfully execute the duties of the Presidency."

The last update on Biden's health came after he fractured his foot in November 2020 while playing with his dog. Three months later, in February, the president's physician said that his foot was completely healed.

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US Stands With Philippines After Incident With China in South China Sea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States stands with the Philippines after the latter's recent standoff with China in the South China Sea, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"The United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in the face of this escalation that directly threatens regional peace and stability, escalates regional tensions, infringes upon freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as guaranteed under international law, and undermines the rules-based international order," he said.

According to Price, Washington "strongly believes that PRC actions asserting its expansive and unlawful South China Sea maritime claims undermine peace and security in the region."

On Thursday, China said that two supply vessels from the Philippines trespassed the waters of the disputed Nansha Islands without Beijing's consent, prompting Chinese coast guard ships to take necessary measures. China's Coast Guard ships blocked two Philippine boats carrying food to the military on an island in the South China Sea.

The Philippine Foreign Ministry condemned China's actions, which, in its opinion, could threaten relations between Beijing and Manila.

For decades, China has been in disputes with several countries in the Asia-Pacific region over the territorial belonging of a number of islands in the South China Sea, on the shelf of which significant reserves of hydrocarbons have been discovered.

The situation in the region is complicated by regular passages of American warships, which, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, violate international law and undermine China's sovereignty and security. Despite protests from Beijing, Washington has repeatedly said that the United States will sail wherever international law permits.

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RPT - Russian Community Council Hopes FBI Drops Probe Over FARA Concerns - Chair

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC) hopes the American intelligence community drops its investigation of Russian community

members over concerns related to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), Chair Elena Branson told Sputnik.

The RCC announced on Thursday that it was temporarily suspending all activities due to an FBI probe into alleged FARA violations that targeted members of the Russian community in the US. FARA is a US law passed in 1938 requiring anyone representing the interests of foreign powers in a political or quasi-political capacity to disclose their relationship with the foreign government and information about related activities and finances.

In a statement published on their website, RCC notes that FARA has on multiple occasions been criticized for its selective enforcement and targeting of individuals and organizations for engaging with countries that are out of favor with the US government.

"We hope that the intelligence community will sort out the situation and come to the realization that individuals who organize Russian cultural events and openly advocate for more dialogue and people-to-people ties with Russia are not foreign agents," said Branson.

The RCC statement mentions that the FBI questioned several hundred members of the Russian community across the country, including students and seniors, and refers to the measure as "a form of pressure reminiscent of the Cold War era."

Branson says her home was raided by the FBI last fall.

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RPT - US Filed No Charges Against Russian Community Council Over FARA Concerns - Board Member

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US authorities have not filed charges against the Russian Community Council in the USA (RCC) over concerns related to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), Council board member Anton Konev told Sputnik.

The RCC announced on Thursday that it was temporarily suspending all activities due to an FBI probe into alleged FARA violations that targeted members of the Russian community in the US. FARA is a US law passed in 1938 requiring anyone representing the interests of foreign powers in a political or quasi-political capacity to disclose their relationship with the foreign government and information about related activities and finances.

"To date, no charges filed," Konev said on Thursday.

The FBI has conducted searches of the homes of the RCC chair Elena Branson and council's secretary Sergey Gladyshev, Konev added.

"All this is a preliminary, but we decided that it is not safe to continue our operations," he noted. Konev said that FBI also interviewed him, but did not search his house.

"RCC gets no funding from the Russian government and gets no direct orders from anybody in the Russian government. It has a role of expressing the opinions of Russian compatriots in the US to Russian government, but it works only in one direction – toward the Russian government," he said.

In a statement published on their website, RCC notes that FARA has on multiple occasions been criticized for its selective enforcement and targeting of individuals and organizations for engaging with countries that are out of favor with the US government.

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RPT - Russiagate Collapse Could Restrain Team Biden in High-Level Talks With Moscow - Experts

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The ongoing collapse of Russiagate allegations coming just as Washington and Moscow prepare for high-level negotiations could prove timely in restraining the Biden administration from pushing unsubstantiated charges and stoking tensions, analysts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the Russian Security Council said White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and counterpart Nikolai Patrushev held a constructive call that was part of preparation for high-level negotiations.

The phone call comes just weeks after an analyst tied to the Steele dossier, Igor Danchenko, was arrested for lying to the FBI during special counsel John Durham's investigation into the origins of the Mueller probe. In addition, the indictment revealed many of the allegations involving Russia were completely fabricated.

Moreover, earlier in November, FOX news reported, citing unnamed sources, that Sullivan is the person referred to as "foreign policy adviser" in an indictment of a former Clinton campaign lawyer who was also charged in the Durham probe.

"The timing of more of the Russiagate lies collapsing could be fortuitous," World Beyond War Executive Director and Nobel Peace Prize nominee David Swanson told Sputnik. "The US government will never apologize for anything, but it's a bit more wary of pushing things like Havana Syndrome too hard in the absence of evidence."

Biden is perhaps trying to emulate former President John F. Kennedy "in dancing up to but ultimately walking back from Armageddon," Swanson speculated.

"Unfortunately, you can't just keep raising military spending and demanding the same from NATO sidekicks and fueling NATO bureaucracy and keeping an off switch functioning forever," Swanson said.

Former Canadian diplomat Patrick Armstrong, however, warned that the sheer chaos in the Biden administration made any real progress impossible.

"None of these questions can be answered until we have an idea who's in charge in Washington," Armstrong, former Counselor at the Canadian Embassy in Moscow, said. "For example: Are Russian troops massing at the Ukraine border - the State Department says they are, the Pentagon says they aren't."

As for Sullivan himself, Armstrong said Biden's top security adviser is "too deeply involved in the Russiagate nonsense to be credible."

Former senior Pentagon adviser Douglas Macgregor told Sputnik because of its ongoing war against its political opponents inside the US, the Biden Administration can ill afford "simultaneous armed confrontations with Moscow and Beijing."

"The Biden Administration and its supporters on [Capitol] Hill are committed ideologues. Their essential attitudes at home and abroad will not change," he concluded. "Thus, any expectations of meaningful change should be suppressed."

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US Lawmakers Introduce Measure to End Recognition of Putin as Russian President After 2024

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Two members of US Congress introduced a resolution to end the United States' recognition of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia if he remains in power after 2024.

In April, Putin signed a law which gives the Russian head of state the right to seek two more terms in office. In a referendum held last summer, more than 77% of Russians who participated voted in favor of the constitutional amendments, according to Russia's Central Election Commission.

"Congressman Steve Cohen, Co-Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, better known as the Helsinki Commission, along with Ranking Member Joe Wilson of South Carolina, today introduced a Congressional Resolution to end recognition of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia after May 7, 2024, if the autocrat remains in power," Cohen's office said in a press release on Thursday.

The resolution claims irregularities in Russia's elections have kept Putin in power and his continuation in office beyond 2024 would be illegitimate, according to the release.

The amendments envision a limit of two consecutive six-year terms for the President of the Russian Federation. The provision applies to the president at the time the legal changes enter into force, not taking into account the number of terms previously served in this position, thus paving the way for Putin to run again after his current term ends in 2024.

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Russian Community Council Hopes FBI Drops Probe Over FARA Concerns - Chair

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC) hopes the American intelligence community drops its investigation of Russian community members over concerns related to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), Chair Elena Branson told Sputnik.

The RCC announced on Thursday that it was temporarily suspending all activities due to an FBI probe into alleged FARA violations that targeted members of the Russian community in the US. FARA is a US law passed in 1938 requiring anyone representing the interests of foreign powers in a political or quasi-political capacity to disclose their relationship with the foreign government and information about related activities and finances.

In a statement published on their website, RCC notes that FARA has on multiple occasions been criticized for its selective enforcement and targeting of individuals and organizations for engaging with countries that are out of favor with the US government.

"We hope that the intelligence community will sort out the situation and come to the realization that individuals who organize Russian cultural events and openly advocate for more dialogue and people-to-people ties with Russia are not foreign agents," said Branson.

The RCC statement mentions that the FBI questioned several hundred members of the Russian community across the country, including students and seniors, and refers to the measure as "a form of pressure reminiscent of the Cold War era."

Branson says her home was raided by the FBI last fall.

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UPDATE - Pentagon Chief, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Russian Actions in Region - Defense Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov at the Pentagon to discuss a range of security issues including Russia's recent military movements in the region, the Defense Department said in a news post.

"The leaders discussed a range of security issues, including Russia's destabilizing actions in the region, and they agreed to work closely together to advance the shared priorities outlined in the US-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework signed on Aug. 31," the article said on Thursday. Austin said that he looked forward to discussing how the two countries can implement the framework to counter Russian alleged aggression and deepen cooperation in areas such as Black Sea security, cyber defense and intelligence sharing.

Reznikov said Ukraine is determined to further develop the partnership, particularly in countering Russian hybrid attacks.

Later on Thursday, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Twitter that she met with Reznikov, adding that the United States' commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity is ironclad.

Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Washington should understand that Kiev is just waiting for a provocation against Russia, which will inevitably entail the latter's response.

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US Calls on Georgia to Provide Saakashvili With Appropriate Treatment - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is monitoring the situation regarding former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili following his arrest on October 1 and urges the authorities to provide him with fair and appropriate treatment that guarantees his right to a fair trial, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"We are closely following the treatment of former President Mikheil Saakashvili since his arrest on October 1," the statement said on Thursday. "We urge the Government of Georgia to treat

Mr. Saakashvili fairly and with dignity... We also strongly urge the Government of Georgia to ensure Mr. Saakashvili is able to attend all court hearings for his pending criminal cases, in line with international law. Mr. Saakashvili has a right to a fair trial."

The United States welcomes the establishment of an independent medical team to evaluate Saakashvili's health as well as to review the state of medical facilities at the prison he is held, the statement said.

Saakashvili was arrested immediately upon his return to Georgia on October 1. Georgian prosecutors has accused the 53-year-old of illegal entry into Georgia from Ukraine inside a trailer carrying dairy products.

Saakashvili was convicted in absentia on several other charges, including corruption and ordering a police crackdown on a rally. Saakashvili has said he considers himself a political prisoner and went on a hunger strike, which has lasted for more than a month.

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Lopez Obrador Says Biden First US President to Make Clear Vow to Improve Lives of Migrants

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said during remarks at the White House that Joe Biden is the first US president to make a clear commitment to improve the lives of migrants in the United States.

"President Biden, no president in the history of the United States has expressed as you have such a clear and certain commitment to improve the situation of the migrants," Lopez Obrador said at the beginning of the North American Leaders' Summit on Thursday.

Lopez Obrador urged Democrats and Republicans in the US Congress to support Biden's proposal to create a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented migrants who live and work in the United States.

The Mexican president said migrants should not be rejected and highlighted their importance to the work force in the United States and Canada.

Lopez Obrador, Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau participated in a trilateral meeting at the White House on Thursday afternoon to discuss a range of regional and global issues related to immigration, trade, climate change, COVID-19, and security.

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US Vice President Harris' Communications Director Leaving White House - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris' communications director Ashley Etienne will be leaving her position in the Biden administration in December, CNN reported citing a White House official.

Etienne is a valued member of the vice president's team, who has worked tirelessly to advance the goals of the Biden administration, but she is leaving the office in December to pursue other opportunities, the report quoted the official as saying on Thursday.

The news comes amid reports of a conflict between Harris and President Joe Biden.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Sunday denied the reports, calling Harris a vital partner and a bold leader.

Harris said during an interview that she is not currently discussing plans about the 2024 presidential election with Biden.

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Wall Street's S&P 500, Nasdaq See Record Close on US Economic Momentum Bet

NEW YORK, November 18 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite indexes closed at their highest levels ever on Thursday as investors bet on the momentum of recovery in the world's largest economy despite fears of inflation.

The S&P 500 closed up 18 points, or 0.4%, at 4,707. That was the highest close ever for the index comprising the top 500 US stocks. The intraday peak of 4,709, however, fell short of the S&P 500's all-time high of 4,718 notched on November 5.

Nasdaq Composite, which groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished up 72 points, or 0.5%, at 15,994 for what was also its highest settlement. The tech-laced index hit an intraday high of 16,011, versus its all-time high of 16,053 on November 5.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists mostly broad-based industrial stocks, was the laggard of the day, closing down 60 points, or 0.2%, at 35,871.

The S&P 500 and Nasdaq rallied as investors sought quality stocks against the backdrop of the strong US economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, analysts said.

"Wall Street only wants to focus on inflationary themes, the strength of the US consumer (and) possible shifts on pricing pressure views" amid inflation growing at its fastest pace in 30 years, Ed Moya, analyst at the online trading platform OANDA, said.

The United States is expected to show good economic momentum in 2022 and possibly reach maximum employment, Federal Reserve of Chicago President Charles Evan said Thursday.

Weekly US employment data released earlier in the day showed just 268,000 filing for jobless benefits last week, marking a new pandemic-era low.

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Pentagon to Bar Soldiers From Enlisting, Promotion for Refusing to Vaccinate - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US soldiers who refuse to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus will be flagged until fully inoculated, exempted from vaccination, or separated from the Army as required by a new Defense Department policy published in a memorandum.

"I authorize commanders to impose bars to continued service... for all soldiers who refuse the mandatory vaccine order without an approved exemption or pending exemption request," Army Secretary Christine Wormuth wrote in the memorandum that was initially published on Tuesday. "The soldier will remain flagged until they are fully vaccinated, receive an approved medical or administrative exemption, or are separated from the Army."

Besides enlistment and promotion, those flagged for not getting a vaccine shot will also lose their right to receive bonuses, attend service-related schools or tuition assistance, according to the memorandum.

On August 25, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin issued a memorandum for mandatory vaccinations against the novel coronavirus for all Defense Department personnel.

Some 70% of the US military personnel, including active duty, reserve and national guard, have been fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, according to the Defense Department.

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Republican Senators Urge Blacklisting of US Firms Selling AI Technology to China Military

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The Commerce Department needs to emulate the intelligence community by restricting sales of artificial intelligence (AI) technology by US companies to Chinese firms that supply their nation's People's Liberation Army (PLA), a group of Republican Senators said on Thursday.

"Despite the pressing need to restrict the PLA's advancement in key technology areas, our government has done little to impede the flow of US exports and investment to Chinese AI companies with PLA ties," the lawmakers wrote in a letter to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Thursday.

The letter noted that AI was among five technologies recently identified by the US Director of National Intelligence as key to the United States' strategic competition with China.

But of 273 Chinese companies recently identified by Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology from open-sources, only 8 percent are on the Commerce Department's "Entity List," with the remaining 92 percent free to purchase key US technology for use in military applications.

The lawmakers asked why all 273 companies listed as AI suppliers to China's military are not already sanctioned by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security and whether there are any plans to add them to the list.

The letter was signed by US Senators Tom Cotton, Roger Wicker, Bill Hagerty, Marco Rubio and Bill Cassidy.

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Pentagon Chief, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Russian Actions in Region - Defense Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov at the Pentagon to discuss a range of security issues including Russia's recent military movements in the region, the Defense Department said in a news post.

"The leaders discussed a range of security issues, including Russia's destabilizing actions in the region, and they agreed to work closely together to advance the shared priorities outlined in the US-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework signed on Aug. 31," the article said on Thursday. Austin said that he looked forward to discussing how the two countries can implement the framework to counter Russian alleged aggression and deepen cooperation in areas such as Black Sea security, cyber defense and intelligence sharing.

Reznikov said Ukraine is determined to further develop the partnership, particularly in countering Russian hybrid attacks.

Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Washington should understand that Kiev is just waiting for a provocation against Russia, which will inevitably entail the latter's response.

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US Seen Having Good Economic Momentum in 2022, Possibly Maximum Employment - Evans

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is expected to show good economic momentum in 2022 and possibly reach maximum employment, Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago President Charles Evans said.

"I anticipate strong momentum for the US economy well into 2022," Evans said during a live-streamed event on Thursday. "I expect unemployment to go below 4%, possibly around 3.5% next year."

The Federal Reserve defines unemployment at 4% or below as maximum employment.

Economists had widely accepted that the US economy was at full employment in late 2019 and early 2020, with headline unemployment falling to 3.5% for the first time in 50 years - just before the coronavirus pandemic. The jobless rate then quadrupled to a peak of 14.8% in April last year. Following that period, the unemployment rate has improved every month, reaching 4.6% in October.

Evans said he expected the labor market to continue strengthening next year as more people returned to work in the post-pandemic era, although he conceded that the nation could also be "looking at some pretty substantial increases in labor costs."

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to the restrictive measures implemented to deal with the pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the US central bank is inflation as wages and the prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic.

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US Lawmakers Concerned Over Unauthorized Military Strikes in Syria, Iraq – Letter

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – A group of over 30 US lawmakers will send a letter to President Joe Biden expressing their concern over unauthorized military strikes in Syria and Iraq without Congressional approval.

“We write to express our serious concern with the pattern of unauthorized US military strikes and actions in Syria and Iraq,” the lawmakers say in the letter, which was published on Thursday by Politico. “We respectfully request clarification about your legal and policy positions regarding these matters, including by releasing a detailed, unclassified legal memo explaining the administration’s legal justification for US military strikes in Syria and Iraq.”

The lawmakers were reportedly planning to send the letter to Biden by the end of the day.

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UNSC Condemns Houthi Seizure of Former US Embassy in Sanaa, Urges Group to Leave Facility

UNITED NATIONS, November 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the seizure of the former US Embassy in Yemen’s Sanaa by the Houthis and urged the group to immediately leave the diplomatic facility.

“The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the very recent and ongoing seizure of and intrusion into the compound formerly used as the US Embassy in Sanaa, Yemen, by the Houthis, during which dozens of local employees were detained,” the Council said in a statement on Thursday. “The members of the Security Council called for an immediate withdrawal of all Houthi elements from the premises.”

The Security Council also called on the Houthis to immediately release all those who remain in detention.

Earlier in the week, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said two UN employees from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization were detained in Sanaa by Houthis who did not provide any explanation for their arrests.

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US Convicts 2 Neo-Nazi Leaders on Racketeering Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – A US jury convicted two leaders of the Aryan Circle on racketeering charges stemming from attacks they committed as members of the neo-Nazi group, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[William Chunn] used his leadership role to order violent stabbings against rival gang members and other victims, as well as to seek out and retaliate against individuals he believed were cooperating with law enforcement," the department said in a press release.

The second defendant, Jesse Blankenship, participated in the shooting of two victims in their homes and the removal of another Aryan Circle member's gang tattoo by burning the victim's skin. The attacks led to Blankenship's promotion within the gang's leadership ranks, the release said.

Chunn was convicted of racketeering conspiracy and attempted murder while Blankenship was convicted of racketeering and kidnapping, the release added.

Both defendants face maximum penalties of life in prison, according to the release.

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Russian Community Council of USA Temporarily Suspends Activities Over FBI Probe

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – The Russian Community Council of the USA (KSORS) said on Thursday it is temporarily suspending its activities over an FBI probe, pending clarification of Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)-related statutes by American authorities.

"The Russian Community Council of the USA is announcing the temporary suspension of its activities. The decision to suspend activities comes after a year of active and nation-wide FBI measures directed at over 300 Russian community members, from students to seniors, including some members of the Community Council," the statement said.

Over 300 Russian community members, including some KSORS members, have been questioned over "a year of active and nation-wide FBI measures," the statement added.

"Federal agents appear to be searching for violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and the federal statutes relating to it," it read.

Suspended activities will also include the VII Russian Community Forum, which was slated for 2022, KSORS said.

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US Aware American Detained in Ukraine for Ordering Minister to Be Murdered - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports that a US citizen has been detained in Ukraine for ordering the killing of a Ukrainian minister, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We are aware of reports of the detention of a US citizen in Ukraine. We take seriously our responsibility to assist US citizens abroad, and are monitoring the situation. Due to privacy considerations, we have no further comment," the spokesperson said in a statement on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the Ukrainian Interior Ministry announced that several Ukrainians and a US national were arrested on suspicion of giving an order to kill Agrarian Policy and Food Minister Roman Leshchenko, adding that it informed the US embassy about the incident.

Ukrainian media said the US citizen is believed to be the main suspect. Together with a Ukrainian woman, he ordered undercover police agents posing as would-be killers to have the 32-year-old minister beaten up and killed.

Leshchenko told reporters that he and his family had been routinely threatened since he was appointed to a government position in 2020 but he denied that the threats were related to his cabinet job.

Ukraine's National Police chief Ihor Klimentenko said the suspects, including the US citizen, faced life in prison on charges of kidnapping, extortion, causing grievous bodily harm and attempted murder.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) -

REPORTS ON GULEN'S DEATH

* The Turkish Anadolu Agency is evaluating information about the death of opposition Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen in the United States, Washington Bureau Chief Hakan Copur said.

* Police in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, where Gulen has been living since 1999, told Sputnik they have no information about reports of the Turkish cleric's death.

* Vice Chairman of the US-based Golden Generation Worship Sezai Sablak told Sputnik on that recent reports of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen's death are fake news.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The situation in Ukraine and relations with NATO will become topics of discussion during a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* The summit with Biden opened up opportunities for dialogue between Russia and the United States and straightening out relations, something is already being done, Putin said.

- * There are no specific dates for communication between Putin and Biden, but contacts are possible before the new year via video link, Peskov said.
- * A phone conversation between Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was held as part of the preparation of the high-level US-Russia contact, Kremlin Peskov said.
- * There is nothing to preview at the moment about a future call between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin following recent high-level talks between top Russian and American security officials, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * NATO is sending modern weapons systems to Ukraine, and it encourages Kiev to try to solve the problem of Donbass by force, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
- * The French Foreign Ministry called on Russia to "return" to discussions regarding the meeting in the "Normandy format."
- * Washington should understand that Kiev is just waiting for a provocation against Russia, which will inevitably entail the latter's response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * Germany and France do not verbally dispute the significance of the Minsk agreements, but in fact indulge Kiev's course of dismantling them, this leads the negotiations to a dead end, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.
- * The United States is aware of reports that a US citizen has been detained in Ukraine for ordering the killing of a Ukrainian minister, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

NORD STREAM 2 PIPELINE

- * The commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is possible in April or May of 2022, but the European Commission will try to delay the certification process, possibly with the support of environmental organizations, Steffen Kotre from the Alternative for Germany party told Sputnik.

BELARUS-POLAND BORDER CRISIS

- * Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Thursday offered to finance the flights of foreigners who were stranded in Belarus to their homeland.
- * A plane carrying Iraqi migrants from Minsk landed at Erbil airport in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Iraqi Transport Ministry said in a statement.
- * German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer denied reports alleging that Germany declared its readiness to accept part of the migrants from the Polish-Belarusian border.
- * The Belarusian State Border Committee said that all refugees from the spontaneous camp at the Bruzgi checkpoint on the border with Poland voluntarily moved to a logistics center equipped by the authorities to accommodate migrants.
- * Poland delivered an ultimatum to Belarus, promising to close railway checkpoint in Kuznitsa, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

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Vice Chair of US-Based Center Where Gulen Lives Says Reports of Cleric's Death 'Fake News'

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Vice Chairman of the US-based Golden Generation Worship and Retreat Center Sezai Sablak told Sputnik on Thursday that recent reports of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen's death are fake news.

"That's a kind of fake news," Sablak said.

Sablak said he saw Gulen as recently as five days ago and would see him again tonight for a Thanksgiving gathering at the center, where Gulen has lived in exile since 1999.

Turkish media on Wednesday reported that Gulen was poisoned at the sprawling 26-acre compound that houses the center, located in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

Local police in the Pocono Mountains told Sputnik they had no information or reports about the Turkish cleric's alleged death.

Pennsylvania's State Police, when contacted by Sputnik, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Turkish government defines the transnational Islamic movement of Fethullah Gulen as FETO, which is the acronym for Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization and has accused Gulen and his movement of being the main initiator of the failed coup attempt of 2016.

Gulen and members of his movement reject the allegations. They define themselves as the Hizmet (service) movement and oppose being defined as a terrorist organization. The US government refuses to extradite the activist to Turkey.

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White House Says Possible Beijing Olympics Boycott Not Discussed in Recent Biden-Xi Talks
WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday that the possibility of a US diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics was not discussed in the recent virtual summit between President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"They [Biden and Xi] didn't talk about the Olympics during the meeting, it wasn't a topic that was discussed during the meeting," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Biden Negative Poll Ratings 17% Greater Than Approval Figures - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A clear majority of Americans disapprove of President Joe Biden's performance less than a year into his term of office with a gap of those disapproving of him outnumbering his supporters by 17% and the gap is continuing to widen, a Quinnipiac University Poll said on Thursday.

"Americans give President Biden a negative 36 - 53 percent job approval rating, while 10 percent did not offer an opinion," Quinnipiac said in a press release about the poll. It was the lowest job approval rating Biden has so far received in a Quinnipiac University national poll, the release said. In mid-October, the president received a negative 37-52 percent job approval rating from the same organization. In Thursday's results, Republicans disapprove 94% to 4% of Biden, Democrats approve of him by 87% to 7% and independents disapprove of him by 56% to 29%, the release said. Among all registered voters, Biden gets a negative 38% to 53% job approval rating with 9% not offering an opinion, the release added.

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US Aware American Detained in Ukraine for Ordering Mister to Be Murdered - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports that a US citizen has been detained in Ukraine for ordering the killing of a Ukrainian minister, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We are aware of reports of the detention of a US citizen in Ukraine. We take seriously our responsibility to assist US citizens abroad, and are monitoring the situation. Due to privacy considerations, we have no further comment," the spokesperson said in a statement.

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White House Says Nothing to Preview on New Biden-Putin Call After High-Level Security Talk

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - There is nothing to preview at the moment about a future call between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin following recent high-level talks between top Russian and American security officials, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"As you noted, we have held discussions with Russian officials about Ukraine and US-Russia relations recently, and as we announced yesterday, the National Security Advisor spoke with the Secretary of the Russian Security Council about regional and global matters of concern. I don't have anything to preview for you in terms of an additional contact or call or anything like that with President Putin, but certainly after their summit earlier this summer, we agreed there would be continued levels of contact and engagement at a high level, and that has proceeded since that point in time," Psaki told a press briefing.

Psaki added that she is not ruling out the possibility of the two presidents meeting at some point in the future.

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Plurality of US Voters Want Republicans to Regain Control of Congress - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A 46 percent plurality of registered US voters eyeing the 2022 elections at the midpoint of the Biden presidency would prefer that Republicans regain control of both the US House of Representatives and Senate, a Quinnipiac University poll said on Thursday.

"Among registered voters, 46-41 percent say they would want the Republican Party to win control of the US House of Representatives and 46 - 42 percent say they would want to see the Republican Party win control of the US Senate," a press release explaining the poll said. One caveat is whether or how strongly the Republican candidate supports former President Donald Trump.

If a candidate for House or Senate strongly embraces Trump and his ideas, roughly four in ten Americans (42 percent), say they would be less likely to vote for that candidate, the release said.

The poll also examined views of President Joe Biden's performance in office, with respondents giving the president a negative 36-53 percent job approval rating, while 10 percent did not offer an opinion. It was the lowest job approval rating for Biden in Quinnipiac polling, the release added.

Biden also received his lowest rating so far on four separate issues: handling of the pandemic (negative 45-50 percent); climate change (41-48 percent); the economy (34-59 percent) and foreign policy (33-55 percent), according to the release.

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Vice Chair of US-Based Center Where Gulen Lives Says Reports of Cleric's Death 'Fake News'

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Vice Chairman of the US-based Golden Generation Worship Sezai Sablak told Sputnik on Thursday that recent reports of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen's death are fake news.

"That's a kind of fake news," Sablak said.

Sablak said he saw Gulen five days ago and will see him again tonight.

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US Earmarks \$139Mln for Community Safety Grants to Hire More Police - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Local police departments will receive \$139 million in grant funding to hire officers with a focus on community oriented policing, the US Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The grants we are announcing today will enable law enforcement agencies across the country to hire more than 1,000 additional officers to support vitally important community oriented policing programs," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in the release.

Of 183 agencies awarded grants through the program as of Thursday, about half will use the funding to focus on building legitimacy and trust between law enforcement and communities and 41 agencies will seek to address high rates of gun violence, the release said.

The grant program is run by the Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services' (COPS) program, the release added.

Since its creation in 1994, COPS has invested more than \$14 billion to advance community policing, including grants awarded to more than 13,000 state, local and tribal law enforcement departments and agencies, according to the release.

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Local Police in Pennsylvania Say No Information About Reported Death of Gulen

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Police in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, where Fethullah Gulen has been living since 1999, told Sputnik they have no information about reports of the Turkish cleric's death.

A police spokesperson, when asked about reports of Gulen's death, said there was no information in their system to confirm those reports.

The Pennsylvania State Police Department and Gulen's spokesperson Alp Aslandogan have not responded to requests for comment on the matter.

On Thursday, Turkish media reported that US-based cleric Gulen had allegedly been poisoned on his estate in Pennsylvania. Gulen's fellowship denied this information and published a video of the preacher praying. However, Turkish journalists said it was a montage of previously released videos.

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Biden to Skip 2022 World Economic Forum Meeting in Davos - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not planning to attend the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, next year, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

Senior Biden administration officials will represent the United States at the meeting of the World Economic Forum instead of the president, the report said citing two sources familiar with the matter.

The White House did not immediately respond to the media outlet's request for comment, the report said.

US presidents have rarely attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, which is planned to take place in person on January 17-21, 2022, the report said. Former President Bill Clinton attended the meeting in Davos in 2000 and Donald Trump attended in 2018 and 2020.

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Biden Says Considering Diplomatic Boycott of Beijing Olympics

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he was considering a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, according to a member of the White House's pool of reporters.

"Something we're considering," Biden replied to NBC News reporter Peter Alexander, when asked whether he supports a diplomatic boycott of the Games.

A diplomatic boycott will mean that neither Biden nor any other US government officials will attend the Beijing Games, in protest against alleged human rights abuses by the Chinese government.

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US Sanctions 6 Iranian Cyber Actors, 2 Charged for Alleged Meddling in 2020 Election

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned six Iranian hackers and charged two of them for allegedly meddling in the 2020 presidential election, the departments of Justice and Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six Iranian individuals and one Iranian entity pursuant to Executive Order (EO) 13848, 'Imposing Certain Sanctions in the Event of Foreign Interference in a United States Election,' for attempting to influence the 2020 US presidential election," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

The Justice Department announced in a separate press release that two of the six Iranian hackers, Seyyed Mohammad Hosein Musa Kazemi and Sajjad Kashia, have been charged in a US court over their involvement in a cyber campaign to intimidate and influence voters in the 2020 US presidential election.

The United States is offering up to \$10 million for information on Kazemi and Kashia, according to the State Department.

From September to October 2020, according to the Justice Department, Kazemi, Kashia and several other of their accomplices attempted to breach about 11 state voter websites, including state voter registration websites and state voter information websites. They successfully hacked the computer system of a particular US state and downloaded information of more than 100,000 of the state's voters.

In October 2020, several members of the influence campaign claimed to be a group of Proud Boys volunteers sent false election fraud information via Facebook messages and emails to Republican Senators, Republican members of Congress, White House advisers, individuals associated with former President Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and members of the media, the Justice Department said.

The false election messages claimed the Democratic Party was planning to steal the 2020 presidential election by hacking state voter websites, the Justice Department said.

Other Iranian hackers allegedly involved in the influence campaign and sanctioned by the US government include Mostafa Sarmadi, Hosein Akbari Nodeh, Mohammad Bagher Shirinkar, and Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi Toghroljerdi.

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Judge in Charge of Rittenhouse Trial Bans MSNBC From Courthouse After Jury Bus Incident

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - MSNBC News has been banned from the Kenosha, Wisconsin, courthouse where the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse is taking place after an employee of the media outlet was stopped by police while following a bus with the jurors in the case, Judge Bruce Schroeder said from the bench on Thursday.

MSNBC producer James Morrison was apprehended by Kenosha police after running a red light while following a bus transporting the jurors. Morrison told the authorities that he was following the bus at the direction of NBC producer Irene Byon.

"The matter is under further investigation at this point... I've instructed that no one from MSNBC News will be permitted in this building for the duration of this trial. This is a very serious matter and I don't know what the ultimate truth of it is, but absolutely it would go without much thinking that someone who is following the jury bus, that's an extremely serious matter and will be referred to a number of authorities for further action," Schroeder said.

The jurors are transported from a different location to the courthouse in a bus with covered windows in order to avoid exposure to protest signs or media, Schroeder explained.

The jury is currently deliberating Rittenhouse's case and whether to find the teenager guilty on charges including reckless homicide and reckless endangerment for shooting three men, killing two, during riots in Kenosha in August of 2020.

The Wisconsin National Guard has 500 troops deployed near Kenosha in order to assist local law enforcement with public safety responses should they need it following when the jury announces its decision.

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US Lawmakers Seek Change in Infrastructure Bill to Protect Cryptocurrency Investors

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Cryptocurrency reporting requirements in the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill recently signed into law would be altered under bipartisan legislation announced by the US House Financial Services Committee senior Republican Patrick McHenry on Thursday.

"It [the infrastructure bill] includes digital asset reporting requirements that threaten to push innovators and entrepreneurs overseas. This would leave the US as a passive observer of a rapidly evolving industry," McHenry said in a press release.

Language in the bill would require crypto brokers to report transactions to the Internal Revenue Service.

However the law's definition of a "broker" is considered overly broad, critics say, because it could be interpreted to include investors who buy and sell cryptocurrencies and other digital assets, even if they have no clients.

In addition to McHenry, cosponsors include Democrats Tim Ryan, Ro Khanna and Eric Swalwell, as well as Republicans Kevin Brady, Tom Emmer, Warren Davidson, Anthony Gonzalez and Ted Budd, according to the release.

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Oklahoma Governor Commutes Julius Jones' Death Sentence Hours Before Execution - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt commuted the death sentence of inmate Julius Jones to life in prison without the possibility of parole just hours before his scheduled execution, a statement released by Stitt's office said on Thursday.

"Pursuant to Article 6, Section 10 of the Oklahoma Constitution, Governor Kevin Stitt today issued Executive Order 2021-25 to commute the death sentence of Julius Jones, who was tried and convicted for the first-degree murder of Paul Howell, to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, on the condition that he shall never again be eligible to apply for, be considered for, or receive any additional commutation, pardon, or parole," the statement said.

Earlier on Thursday, Jones' attorneys filed a motion to block the execution, which was scheduled to take place at 4:00 p.m. Central Time. Stitt said in the statement that the decision came after "prayerful consideration" and review of the case.

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US Sanctions 6 Iranian Cyber Actors, 2 Charged for Alleged Meddling in 2020 Election

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The Justice Department announced in a separate press release that two of the six Iranian hackers, Seyyed Mohammad Hosein Musa Kazemi and Sajjad Kashia, have been charged in a US court their involvement in a cyber campaign to intimidate and influence voters in the 2020 US presidential election.

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Mideast Quartet Says Concerned Over Ongoing Violence in West Bank, Threats From Gaza

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The envoys of the Middle East Quartet from the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations said in a joint statement on Thursday that they remain concerned about the ongoing violence in the West Bank and the threats of violence from the Gaza Strip.

"The Envoys remain deeply concerned by developments in the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, including ongoing acts of violence in the West Bank, the advancement of new settlement units, the untenable fiscal crisis within the Palestinian Authority and threats of violence from the Gaza Strip," the statement said.

The envoys, who met in-person in Norway, also highlighted the importance of taking constructive steps to advance a two-state solution.

The envoys are urging Israel and the Palestinian Authority to take more steps to address challenges between the parties, such as fiscal and other reforms, as well as avoiding unilateral steps that raise tensions.

The Middle East Quartet envoys also agreed to continue consultations with Israel, the Palestinian Authority and key regional actors to address.

Earlier on Thursday, media reported that at least 57 Palestinians were injured in clashes with Israeli troops in the Al-Issawiya neighborhood of Jerusalem.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Senior Houthi Military Officer Alshaer - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Houthi military officer Saleh Mesfer Alshaer who was allegedly overseeing confiscation of property worth \$100 million from the Islamic rebel movement's opponents in Yemen in 2019 amid the war there, the US Department of the Treasury said in a release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating senior Houthi military officer Saleh Mesfer Alshaer, commander of the Houthi-controlled military logistics support organization," the release said. "Alshaer has overseen the Houthis' seizure of property in Yemen valued at greater than 100 million dollars, using a variety of unlawful tactics, including extortion."

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UN Chief Urges States to Abolish Death Penalty Ahead of US Inmate Jones' Execution

UNITED NATIONS, November 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres continues to emphasize his position against the use of the death penalty ahead of the planned execution of US inmate Julius Jones in the state of Oklahoma later on Thursday, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The Secretary-General's position against the imposition of the death penalty has been stated many times and will continue to be underscored," Dujarric said during a press briefing when asked to provide Guterres' reaction to the planned execution of Julius Jones.

Dujarric said the UN chief is urging all member states to abide by the moratorium on capital punishment and the progressive abolition of the death penalty.

Earlier in the day, Jones' attorneys filed an emergency motion in federal court to block his execution set to take place at 4 p.m. local time.

The Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted to recommend clemency for Jones but Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt has yet to make a decision.

Germany, Spain and other countries and entities have called for clemency for Jones.

Jones, 41, was sentenced to death in 2002 after being convicted for the 1999 murder of Paul Howell, a businessman in the US state of Oklahoma. Jones claims he did not commit the murder and was set up by an acquaintance.

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US Lawmakers Pledge 1,000 Public Events to Sell \$1.75Trln Spending Bill to Voters – Pelosi

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – House Democrats plan to host a series of public events to sell their \$1.75 trillion social spending legislation to American voters, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"The members have committed to a thousand town meeting events one way or another," Pelosi said during her weekly press conference.

"People telling their stories, that's the most eloquent message of all. People telling what it means to have home health care so that they can work, to be assured that their children are learning when they are earning, to have some assurance about what it means to have healthcare so that if someone in your family takes ill, all of those things are again personal stories."

The timing of any campaign remained unclear, since Pelosi has signaled a House vote on the measure could come as soon as this week. If that's the case, the public campaign would presumably come as the Senate takes up the legislation, and likely as Congress recesses during the upcoming holidays.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden signed a separate \$1.2 billion bipartisan infrastructure bill into law. The measure cleared the House after negotiations yielded pledges of support from moderate Democrats, conditioned on a favorable financial impact analysis by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Skeptical Democrats want to know if the legislation will pay for itself and not add to the national debt.

The legislation would expand the social safety net for millions of Americans with programs such as universal preschool, child tax credits, expanded healthcare and subsidized home care. In addition, the measure earmarks more than \$500 billion to combat climate change.

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Blinken to Visit Nigeria, Sign \$2.17Bln Development Assistance Agreement - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Nigeria later on Thursday where he will sign a new assistance agreement worth \$2.17 billion to support the country's economy, the US State Department said.

"Secretary Antony J. Blinken will visit Nigeria November 18-19, where he will meet with President Muhammadu Buhari, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama," the State Department said in a press release. "[T]he Secretary will celebrate the signing of the \$2.17 billion Development Objective Assistance Agreement with the Vice President, which will play a role in supporting a healthier, more educated, prosperous, stable, and resilient Nigeria."

During the meeting with Nigerian officials, Blinken will focus on global health security cooperation as well as on expanding energy access and economic growth and revitalizing democracy, the release said.

According to the release, Nigeria remains the United States' second largest trading partner with trade totaling more than \$10 billion in 2019.

Last week, the State Department said Blinken is also expected to host a roundtable discussion for digital sector entrepreneurs and meet with religious leaders.

Blinken trip to Africa commenced on November 15 with his visit to Kenya and he will conclude the trip with a stop in Senegal the country's role as a democratic, economic and security leader in West Africa.

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Six UN Staff Released in Ethiopia, 5 Others and 1 Dependent Still Detained - UN

UNITED NATIONS, November 18 (Sputnik) - The six local UN employees detained in Ethiopia earlier in the month were released on Thursday, while five others and one dependent remain in custody, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"Six detained UN staff members were released today. Five staff and one dependent remain in custody," Dujarric said.

The official added that the 70 truck drivers who were under contract with the UN to deliver aid across Ethiopia and captured earlier, have been released.

"Our understanding is that the contract drivers were also released earlier this week," he said.

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US Judge Grants Novatek CFO Gyetvay's Request to Lift Curfew Requirement

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – A US court granted on Thursday Novatek chief financial officer Mark Gyetvay's request to lift his curfew requirement.

"The Amended Appearance Bond and Order Setting Conditions of Release is amended and the curfew requirement is removed," US Magistrate Judge Douglas Frazier said in the order.

Instead of curfew, the court has obligated the defendant to keep stand-alone monitoring.

"You have no residential curfew, home detention, or home incarceration restrictions," the judge said. "However, you must comply with the location or travel restrictions as imposed by the court. Stand-Alone Monitoring will require electronic monitoring or location monitoring with global positioning system (GPS) technology."

Gyetvay asked the court to lift an established curfew between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., as well as ease domestic travel restrictions, according to the court papers.

The executive of Russian energy company Novatek was arrested by American authorities on September 23 on tax evasion charges related to \$93 million he had saved in offshore accounts. The Justice Department alleges that Gyetvay was engaged in a scheme to defraud the US government by failing to disclose and pay taxes on those assets.

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Lawyers for US Death Row Inmate Julius Jones File Motion to Halt Execution - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Attorneys for US death row inmate Julius Jones on Thursday filed an emergency motion in federal court to block his execution scheduled to take place in the state of Oklahoma later in the day, court documents revealed.

"A status quo injunction is requested to stay the execution of Julius Jones now scheduled for the 4 p.m. Central [Time] on November 18, 2021," the attorneys said in the court documents.

Jones' attorneys argue that the botched execution of Oklahoma death row inmate John Grant in October via lethal injection should be enough reason to delay his execution. The attorneys added that the botched execution is evidence of severe suffering and pain inflicted on prisoners. Media witnesses at Grant's execution said he convulsed about two dozens times and vomited on himself when he was executed by lethal injection, which included the use of the drug midazolam.

Earlier this month, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted to recommend clemency for Jones but Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt has yet to make a decision.

Germany, Spain and other countries and entities have called for clemency for Jones.

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US Official Says Washington Deported 7 Chinese Nationals - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US government has deported seven Chinese nationals from the United States, a Biden administration official told Reuters on Thursday. However, the report cited the official as saying that the move was done to exchange a US citizen who was related to the virtual summit between US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

The official added that the US citizen was under a Chinese exit ban, but was allowed to return to the United States hours before the two leaders' virtual summit on Monday.

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US Court Sets Next Hearing in Steve Bannon Contempt of Congress Case on December 7

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Former Trump adviser Steve Bannon will appear again before a US court in Washington, DC on December 7 as part of the contempt of Congress

case against him, the involved legal parties decided during a virtual status conference with District Judge Carl Nichols on Thursday.

Bannon faces two counts of contempt of Congress, to which he pleaded not guilty, for refusing to comply with a congressional subpoena that ordered him to provide testimony before the US House Select Committee on the January 6 events at the Capitol.

Prosecutors expressed to the judge their intent to seek a protective order that would prevent the public disclosure of documents the government will use as part of the case. The Bannon legal defense disagreed with the suggestion. Nichols told the Bannon's team to provide written objections to the protective order by Wednesday.

Nichols did not decide on a trial date for Bannon, citing a lack of information, and requested that the legal teams confer prior to the December 7 status conference and produce a list of mutually-agreeable issues.

The judge also said he wants to know what discovery Bannon's team will want, as well as other big-picture questions that could impact the determination of a trial date.

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IMF Expects Supply-Demand Imbalances to Wane in 2022, Easing Inflation

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects supply-demand imbalances will even out in 2022, allowing for inflation to ease, spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"Looking ahead, we expect that supply-demand imbalances will wane next year, and this will help ease inflation pressures," Rice said during a press briefing.

Inflation expectations generally remain anchored in most economies, but continued supply disruptions may change the situation significantly, Rice noted. He called on central banks to be vigilant about the issue.

Speaking of the current state of the economy, Rice noted that inflation pressures have increased in most countries. This was partly anticipated, but in some cases the situation has become more serious than expected, he added.

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RPT - Inflation Increases Make Putting 'Food on the Table' Costlier - Federal Reserve Official

NEW YORK, November 18 (Sputnik) - Broad-based increases in US inflation are making it costlier to "put food on the table," Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said on Thursday.

"We are seeing broader-based increases in inflation," Williams said at a live-streamed event. "Higher inflation is making it more expensive to put food on the table."

Williams made the comment as the Federal Reserve is under pressure to rein in price increases that have reached a fastest pace in 30 years.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to measures implemented amid the coronavirus crisis. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the central bank though is inflation as wages and the prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic.

The Labor Department reported last week that the US Consumer Price Index, which represents a basket of products ranging from gasoline and health care to groceries and rents, rose 6.2% during the year to October. It was the fastest growth of the so-called CPI since November 1990, an acceleration driven mostly by pump prices of fuel running at seven-year highs. The Fed's own preferred tool for inflation, the core Personal Consumption Expenditures index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, also hit a 30-year high in September, expanding at an annualized rate of 3.6%.

Williams said even after accounting for base effects of inflation, price pressures had exceeded expectations.

"Supply restrictions and supply chain bottlenecks are key factors in the labor market," he said, noting that upheavals in both were adding to wages and other costs.

He said short- and medium-term pricing expectations were rising and so were long-run inflation expectations that "have reversed previous decreases and are now at levels observed in 2013 and 2014".

A Fed member who's typically dovish, in favor of easy monetary policy, Williams did not advocate a rate hike to rein in inflation although many of his colleagues at the central bank, who are hawkish, have demanded for one.

"The natural rate of interest is extremely difficult to calculate," he said, in response to the crisis. The Federal Reserve has held rates at between zero and 0.25% since the first major outbreak of the COVID-19 in March 2020. Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this month that the central bank will be "patient" in executing its first post-pandemic rate hike, which would most likely be after the rollback of its monthly asset purchase of \$120 billion by middle of next year. Some hawkish members of the Federal Reserve want faster and stronger rate increases. James Bullard, who heads the St. Louis chapter of the central bank, said earlier this week the Fed must terminate its asset buying program by March and do at least two rate hikes in 2022.

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US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa to Visit Ethiopia Later on Thursday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman is heading to Ethiopia later on Thursday for a visit that will last until the end of the week, the US State Department said.

"US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will travel to Ethiopia from November 18 to November 20. Special Envoy Feltman will meet with senior government officials, African Union representatives, and other international partners to discuss opportunities that advance a negotiated and sustainable cessation of hostilities and an end to the conflict," the statement said.

The State Department emphasized that the United States remains committed to promoting peace in Ethiopia.

This is the second visit to Ethiopia by Feltman in November. During the previous visit, the Special Envoy pressed the warring parties to negotiate a ceasefire.

Earlier in November, the Ethiopian parliament declared a six-month state of emergency throughout the country to protect the population from the rebels of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Tigray (PNLF) who are advancing upon the country's capital Addis Ababa. This development prompted several countries to start evacuating their diplomatic missions from Ethiopia.

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Inflation Increases Makes Costlier Putting 'Food on the Table' - Federal Reserve Official
NEW YORK, November 18 (Sputnik) - Broad-based increases in US inflation are making it costlier to "put food on the table," Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said on Thursday.

"We are seeing broader-based increases in inflation," Williams said at a live-streamed event. "Higher inflation is making it more expensive to put food on the table."

Williams made the comment as the Federal Reserve is under pressure to rein in price increases that have reached a fastest pace in 30 years.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to measures implemented amid the coronavirus crisis. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the central bank though is inflation as wages and the prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic.

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UN Committee to Decide on Afghanistan, Myanmar Representation Will Meet Dec. 1 - Source

UNITED NATIONS, November 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Credentials Committee in charge of deciding on the representation of member states, including Afghanistan and Myanmar, at the world body will meet on December 1, a source in the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday. "The meeting of the Credentials Committee is scheduled for December 1," the source said. The representation of Afghanistan and Myanmar has been a controversial issue at the United Nations after the two countries had their governments toppled earlier this year. As of today, both countries are represented by the ambassadors appointed by the deposed governments.

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IMF Executive Board to Consider Financial Arrangement With Ukraine on Monday

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will consider the first review of its financial arrangement with Ukraine on November 22, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"I can confirm that this discussion with the board will take place on November 22," Rice said during a press briefing.

In June 2020, the Board of Governors - the highest decision-making body of the IMF - approved a new cooperation program for Ukraine. Ukraine is expected to receive a total of \$5 billion under the new program.

Ukraine has already received the first tranche of \$2.1 billion, which is supposed to be followed by transfers of the remaining \$2.9 billion in four tranches, each amounting to about \$700 million. In September, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that Kiev expects to receive the next tranche under the IMF cooperation program in late November or early December.