

**11/26/21 Friday**

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FDA Deems Merck Pill Effective Against COVID-19 as Experts Plan to Review Safety  
By - Evan Craighead

Last month, former Food and Drug administrator Scott Gottlieb said that he believes the COVID-19 "pandemic phase" will come to an end with the approval of antiviral pills and vaccines for children under 12 years old. An oral treatment developed by Merck & Co. and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics has been submitted to the FDA for emergency authorization.

Federal health regulators have revealed that Molnupiravir, an investigational antiviral drug to treat COVID-19, is effective against the contagious disease, but the agency will seek input from experts regarding possible birth defects and other potential pregnancy issues associated with the pill.

Scientists with the federal agency have identified several potential safety issues with the drug, including possible toxicity to developing fetuses and birth defects. This data was collected from trials using the pill in animals.

The FDA's posting comes days before the agency's Antimicrobial Drugs Advisory Committee (AMDAC) is scheduled to meet to discuss Merck and Ridgeback's submission.

The FDA will ask advisers during their November 30 meeting if the drug should be prescribed to all persons, or if exceptions should be made. The agency could decide to make the drug carry a warning about risks during pregnancy, but allow doctors to prescribe it in cases where the benefits outweigh the risks.

"While the clinical safety data base was small, there were no major safety concerns identified," FDA reviewers concluded, [as reported by the Associated Press](#).

Merck has said that the drug should not be used by children, according to the FDA, which agreed with the company.

The pill, billed as a 5-day treatment, targets an enzyme that allows the coronavirus to make copies of itself and introduces errors to the virus' genetic code.

The FDA also raised concerns about the fact that Molnupiravir was found to alter the virus' spike protein, which allows it to penetrate host cells and cause infection. This could theoretically result in the formation of new variants of COVID-19.

Merck has observed a 30% reduction in hospitalizations and deaths with the antiviral pill, according to data from 1,433 patients. Merck previously touted data from 775 patients in October that showed the drug had an approximately 50% efficacy rate.

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## Musk Rails Against State Aid as Tesla Pulls Application for \$1.28 Bln in Subsidies for Berlin Plant

By - Evan Craighead

Back in January, the European Union approved a plan that would grant several companies, including Tesla Inc. and BMW AG, a total of €2.9 billion (\$3.5 billion) in state aid for battery projects that would strengthen the 27-nation bloc's capacity to produce more electric vehicles. The series of projects are slated for completion by 2028.

Tesla announced on Friday that it has withdrawn its application for state aid associated with the [Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg](#), Tesla's first European manufacturing location and the electric vehicle and clean energy company's "most advanced, sustainable and efficient facility yet."

The company was expected to receive around €1.14 billion (\$1.28 billion) in funding from the EU, according to a plan that was in its final stages.

A Tesla spokesperson confirmed to CNBC that the company withdrew its candidacy for funds allocated for the EU's 'Important Projects of Common European Interest.'

"Tesla has informed the Federal Ministry of Economics and the Brandenburg Ministry of Economics... it is withdrawing its IPCEI application for state funding for the battery factory in Grünheide," the spokesperson detailed.

Construction plans for the plant have not been impacted by the decision, the spokesperson clarified.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk responded to the news via Twitter on Friday, replying to a netizen who expressed positive feelings about the electric vehicle and clean energy company not being dependant on government subsidies.

"It has always been Tesla's view that all subsidies should be eliminated, but that must include the massive subsidies for oil & gas," Musk tweeted.

"For some reason, governments don't want to do that ..." he added.

According to the German government, Tesla is investing approximately €5 billion (5.66 billion) in its Berlin-based plant.

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## Alabama AG Threatens to Sue City Officials for Removing Confederate President's Name From Avenue

By - Evan Craighead

Last month, the Alabama capital city of Montgomery moved to rename its 'Jeff Davis Avenue,' a street named after Confederate President Jefferson Davis. The street is now dedicated to Fred D. Gray, the 90-year-old famed civil rights attorney who once represented key figures like Rosa Parks and grew up on the street in question.

The office of Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall has invoked a 2017 law and fined the city of Montgomery \$25,000 for changing the name of the street once known as 'Jeff Davis Avenue,' according to a letter issued to city officials.

Per the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act, cities and counties in the state are prohibited from the removal or alteration of historic memorials and monuments, which includes memorial streets.

However, the law does lay out what constitutes a memorial, or whether a memorial to Confederate troops and the Confederate States of America would be covered.

Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed [told the Associated Press](#) that while many groups across the country have offered to pay the fine, the city official is not quite sure how to proceed with the matter at the moment.

"Should we pay the fine when we see it as an unjust law?" Reed posed to the outlet. "We're certainly considering taking the matter to court because it takes away home rule for municipalities."

Montgomery, a city with a majority Black population and rich historical ties to the US Civil Rights movement, is not the first city in Alabama to potentially violate this recent law.

Just last year, Mobile agreed to pay the \$25,000 fine to remove a statue of Raphael Semmes, a Confederate admiral, from public property within the city. Prior to that, Birmingham was fined for the [removal of the Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monument from Linn Park](#).

Similarly, Montgomery County, which has Montgomery as its county seat, is also facing possible fines for choosing to rename three schools that are presently named after former Confederates. The schools subject to being renamed are Jefferson Davis High School, Robert E. Lee High School, and Sidney Lanier High School.

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P&G Recalls Over a Dozen Old Spice, Secret Sprays After Detection of Cancer-Causing Chemical

By - Evan Craighead

Per the US Department of Health and Human Services, benzene - a sweet-smelling, highly flammable chemical that is colourless or light yellow liquid at room temperature - can cause cancer in humans. The department also says long-term exposure to high levels of benzene in the air can cause leukaemia, cancer of the blood-forming organs.

The Procter & Gamble Company announced this week that it is voluntarily recalling specific Old Spice and Secret aerosol spray antiperspirants "due to the presence of benzene detected" in the products.

The recall impacts a total of 18 products, including eight Old Spice items and 10 Secret items that are labelled with an expiration date through September 2023.

"Old Spice and Secret will also offer reimbursement for consumers who have purchased products impacted by this recall", P&G announced. "Consumers should stop using and appropriately discard the affected aerosol spray products".

P&G has notified retailers to remove the said products from their shelves, according to its recent release.

"To date, The Procter & Gamble Company has not received any reports of adverse events related to this recall and is conducting this recall out of an abundance of caution", the release highlighted.

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UK to Place Six African Nations on Travel 'Red List' Over New COVID-19 Variant  
By - Nevin Brown

The United Kingdom is placing South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini, and Zimbabwe on its travel red-list over a new "super-variant" of Covid-19.

The United Kingdom's Health Minister said that beginning at noon on Friday, these six countries will be placed on the red-list, and flights will be temporarily banned while UK travelers returning from destinations within must quarantine.

BREAKING | South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini and Zimbabwe added to UK red travel list due to new COVID-19 variant. //  <https://t.co/V4yx4XpSp2>  
[pic.twitter.com/wKEi3k7Djo](https://pic.twitter.com/wKEi3k7Djo)

— Your Herefordshire (@YourHereford1) [November 25, 2021](#)

The Scottish government has said that self-isolation will be required for all travellers returning from the six African nations placed on the UK's red-list.

The newly-discovered Covid variant discovered in South Africa is concerning UK health officials. The new variant has double the mutations of the Delta variant.

According to the UK Health Security Agency, the variant, known as B.1.1.529, has a spike protein that drastically differs from that of the original coronavirus, which all current Covid-19 vaccines are based upon.

Some experts fear the variant could reduce the effectiveness of current vaccines to 30%. The new mutations are, according to reports, likely to evade the immune response generated by prior infection. It also has shown characteristics linked with increased infectivity.

At least 100 cases have been confirmed in South Africa, but the country's health minister believes there are far more cases than are currently reported. The new strain may be officially classified by the World Health Organisation on Friday.

There have yet to be any documented cases in the UK, but cases have been reported in Botswana and in Hong Kong. Before the travel ban goes into place, more than 500 people enter the UK from South Africa every day.

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NASA Aims to Establish Lunar Nuclear Reactor Within Next 10 Years  
By - Nevin Brown

Through the US Department of Energy, NASA has released a contract request for designs to build a nuclear reactor capable of making the journey to and functioning on the moon within the next decade.

The nuclear reactor is key to NASA's [Artemis Plan](#), a mission to bring people back to the Earth's lunar satellite and set up infrastructure for a permanent moon base. From there, NASA will then launch the first human missions to Mars.

[According to NASA](#), "Fission surface power – in conjunction with solar cells, batteries, and fuel cells – can provide the power to operate rovers, conduct experiments, and use the moon's resources to produce water, propellant, and other supplies for life support."

NASA is interested in nuclear fission due to its reliability, power generating capabilities, and the ability for the technology to be compact and lightweight. The feasibility of the technology is reliant on its ease in making the 250,000-mile journey from the Earth to the moon.

However, due to shadowy craters and weeklong lunar nights, solar power is not enough to sustain long-term human habitation on the moon.

"NASA and the DOE are collaborating on this important and challenging development that, once completed, will be an incredible step towards long-term human exploration of the moon and Mars," Todd Tofil, who serves as the Fission Surface Power project manager, said.

"We'll take advantage of the unique capabilities of the government and private industry to provide reliable, continuous power that is independent of the lunar location," he added.

The Artemis Plan aims to have people landing on the moon in 2024, a date that NASA has already indicated will be pushed back. Subsequent missions are expected to establish a lunar orbital space station called the Gateway, and slowly bring the infrastructure and robotics necessary to sustain human life.

The mission to send humans to the moon and then Mars is set to be a joint effort made by private industry and space programs around the world.

"The Canadian Space Agency (CSA) has committed to providing advanced robotics for the Gateway, and ESA (European Space Agency) plans to provide the International Habitat (IHab) and the ESPRIT module, which will deliver additional communications capabilities, a science airlock for deploying science payloads and CubeSats, and refueling of the Gateway," reads NASA's Artemis Plan manifesto.

"The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) plans to contribute habitation components and logistics resupply. The Russian Space Agency (Roscosmos) has expressed interest in cooperation on Gateway as well."

[NASA is offering \\$5 million](#) to the company or person(s) who have the technical know-how and imagination to design a fission-based surface power generator. Applications are due by February 17th, 2022.

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Manchester United Edges Closer to Appointing Ralf Rangnick as Interim Manager  
By - Nevin Brown

Manchester United's search for a new manager is set to come to an end. Reports suggest that United and Ralf Rangnick are in advanced talks to bring the German in as an interim manager on a six-month deal.

Rangnick is currently the head of sports and development at FC Lokomotive Moscow in the Russian Premier League. He initially distanced himself from the position but [talks advanced quickly when United offered him a consultatory role](#) with the club following an interim spell managing the club.

Rangnick is often credited with developing gegenpressing. The tactical ideology asks teams to immediately attempt to win the ball back after losing it, instead of retreating back into a defensive shell.

Gegenpressing has become widely implemented by top clubs and managers, such as Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp, Chelsea's Thomas Tuchel, and even Manchester City's Pep Guardiola.

Rangnick's coaching career has exclusively been in Germany. In the 2001-02 season, he led Hannover 96 back to the Bundesliga after a 13-year absence. Following his departure from Hannover, he led FC Schalke to runners-up in the Bundesliga and DFB-Pokal in 2004-05. His stint leading Hoffenheim was widely lauded. When he took over the club in 2006-07 they were in the third tier of German football. He gained promotion in back-to-back seasons and brought Horrenheim to the 2 Bundesliga and the Bundesliga for the first time in club history. In 2012, Rangnick was hired to be the director of football for both Red Bull Salzburg and Red Bull Leipzig. Under his direction, both clubs have had success on the field and commercially. Rangnick will succeed Ole Gunnar Solksjaer as Manchester United manager. It appears, however, that he could be headed for a leadership position at the club. His managerial contract is only for six months but it is rumored that it will include a multi-year consultatory position following the season. With Ed Woodward, United's executive vice-chairman, [set to step down at the end of the season](#), Rangnick could be positioned to move into the front office once his tenure as manager comes to an end.

International

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Powerful Magnitude 5.8 Earthquake Strikes Along Myanmar-India Border - EMSC

By - Nevin Brown

A magnitude 5.8 earthquake struck on Thursday at 11:45 p.m. UTC along the Myanmar-India border.

According to the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre, the earthquake struck at the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of 22.82 N; 93.45 E. The quake was reportedly at a depth of about 30 km.

The earthquake struck the hilly region where India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh share a border. [Testimonies suggest](#) that the earthquake's duration was longer than usual. With reports that regions as far away as Kolkata, India, experienced the movement.

A witness from Lunglei, India, 87 km from the epicenter, said, "It is shocking significantly and long." Another witness from Chittagong, Bangladesh, 185 km from the epicenter, said, "My eight-story building was swaying so much, I woke up from deep sleep."

No injuries or deaths have been reported.

The earthquake was originally reported as a 6.3 magnitude quake, then was downgraded to 6.0 magnitude, before being further downgraded to a 5.8 magnitude quake.

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Sleepless Nights & Constipation: Jeffrey Epstein's Final Days Uncovered

By - Nevin Brown

Jeffrey Epstein's final days were filled with fear, anxiety, and lies. New documents have revealed how the billionaire financier and convicted sex offender spent his last days in a New York detention center.

Jeffrey Epstein's suicide inside a prison cell on August 10, 2019, created a firestorm of conspiracy. A poll from November of 2021, suggests that 45% of Americans believe Epstein was murdered and that only 16% believe he committed suicide.

New documents [obtained by the New York Times](#) from the Federal Bureau of Prisons has revealed Epstein's condition and time behind bars. The evidence paints a picture of an incompetently run prison made to look foolish by an extremely intelligent and manipulative man. Epstein's final days saw a miserable man take his own life as the horrific life he had fashioned for himself deteriorated right before his eyes.

The Beginning

Epstein's stay at the Metropolitan Correctional Center started July 2019. Following his arrival on a private jet from Paris, he was arrested at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey.

Epstein faced charges that over many years he had recruited and paid dozens of teenage girls to engage in sexual activities with him at his residences in New York and Florida. If convicted, he faced up to 45 years in prison. At 66 years of age, that meant a life sentence.

Documents reveal that from day one the detention center was fraught with errors and incompetency. Epstein was initially described at an intake screening as a Black male - he was white, and that he had no prior sex offense convictions when he actually had two from 2008. It seems officials also failed to indicate that he was a high-profile inmate and initially sent him into the general prison population.

It took a day for the warden to realize that Epstein was a high-profile inmate and remove him from the general population. On July, 9th Epstein underwent a formal suicide risk evaluation.

Epstein's Downward Spiral

In his evaluation, the psychologist reportedly found him pleasant, accommodating, coherent and even humorous.

The psychologist wrote in her notes, "Epstein adamantly denied any suicidal ideation, intention or plan," adding, "he was future-oriented" and had recorded him as saying, "being alive is fun."

On July 23, Epstein unsuccessfully tried to take his own life. According to a post-mortem psychological reconstruction of the sex offender, it is believed that being denied bail on July 18 caused him to make an attempt on his own life. However, Epstein was only on suicide watch for 31 hours following his first suicide attempt.

As Epstein's stay in prison continued his psychological state began to deteriorate. He would complain about water running in his toilet, the orange prison attire, difficulty sleeping, dehydration, numbness in his arm, and constipation.

Federal marshals who escorted him to a court hearing believed he had "suicidal tendencies."

The prison psychologist was seemingly swayed by Epstein each time.

Epstein was found dead in his jail cell on August 10, hanged with his bedsheets. The signs that he would try to kill himself had reportedly been there since his arrival.

A post-mortem evaluation read, "The lack of significant interpersonal connections, a complete loss of his status in both the community and among associates, and the idea of potentially spending his life in prison,[...] were likely factors contributing to Mr. Epstein's suicide."

The serial sex abuser's final days were assisted by the ineptitude of the prison staff where he awaited trial. According to some observers, the prison psychologist was unable to see through his lies and the guard's dereliction of duty gave Epstein the chance to escape the repercussions of his crimes.

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#### Developing Vaccine Against Omicron Variant to Take Months - Moderna CEO

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – The development and production of a new vaccine against the Omicron coronavirus variant will take months, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel told CNBC.

"The higher dose could be done right away but it will be months before the Omicron specific variant is ready to ship in massive quantities," Bancel said.

On Friday, the World Health Organization labeled Omicron, recently identified in South Africa, as a variant of concern, since it may be more transmissible and dangerous. Cases of the new variant have already been confirmed in multiple countries, and governments rushed to suspend travel with southern African nations in order to prevent the spread of the new strain.

Bancel noticed that it will take at least two weeks to determine the efficacy of current vaccines against the new highly infectious variant of the novel coronavirus.

"Depending on how much it dropped, we might decide on the one hand to give a higher dose of the current vaccine around the world to protect people, maybe people at very high risk, the immunocompromised, and the elderly should need a fourth dose," he said.

The Moderna CEO expressed concern that Omicron is already present in most countries of the world. When asked about possible travel bans, he noted that restrictive measures can prevent the spreading of the virus.

"I think those actions can save a lot of lives down the road," he said.

Many countries have imposed additional measures, including quarantine for those arriving from regions where Omicron is spreading.

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#### Biden Urged to Get More Assertive With Republicans to Win 2022 Elections - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been urged to exercise a more assertive approach to the Republican Party to win the 2022 midterm elections, Politico reported on Monday, citing sources.

According to three aides not authorized to publicly discuss private conversations, several senior advisers, including White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain, have been calling upon the president to embrace more partisan political combat toward the Republicans.

The report comes as gruesome polls say that over half of registered American voters, or 52%, disapprove of Biden's job performance, with his approval rating hitting a record low since taking the office. A HarrisX poll commissioned by The Hill revealed earlier in the month that a 61% majority of US voters want Biden to stand down at the end of his four-year term and make way for someone new to head the Democratic ticket.

Biden continues to enjoy the widespread approval of Democrats and extremely low approval among Republican voters, according to the polls.

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#### New York Governor Declares State of Emergency Amid Spike in COVID-19 Infections - Order

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Kathy Hochul issued a state of emergency in the state due to a spike in new coronavirus infections and hospitalizations, according to her executive order.

"Whereas, New York is now experiencing COVID-19 transmission at rates the State has not seen since April 2020...Whereas, the rate of new COVID-19 hospital admissions has been increasing over the past month to over 300 new admissions a day...I do hereby declare a State disaster emergency for the entire State of New York through January 15, 2022," the executive order said on Friday evening.

The state of emergency will increase hospital capacity in New York and support vaccination efforts to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus disease.

Hochul issued the state of emergency amid concerns over the new Omicron coronavirus variant detected in southern Africa. The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and many European countries imposed new restrictions on foreign nationals traveling from countries in the region due to the new strain.

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**Pfizer Unsure if Omicron Evades Its Vaccine, Can Launch New One in 100 Days - Statement**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and BioNTech issued a statement that they are not sure whether the new coronavirus variant Omicron is able to escape their vaccine but promise to develop a new vaccine against the variant in about 100 days.

Earlier in the day, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced it identified a new COVID-19 strain, the B.1.1.529 that was initially found on southern Africa. WHO named the variant with the Greek letter Omicron.

"In the event that vaccine-escape variant emerges, Pfizer and BioNTech expect to be able to develop and produce a tailor-made vaccine against that variant in approximately 100 days, subject to regulatory approval," the statement, excerpts from which were published by Fox Business, said on Friday.

Pfizer and BioNTech said they expect more data on Omicron within the next two weeks and noted the variant significantly differs from previously observed ones, according to the statement. The pharmaceutical companies underscored that they started working on making their vaccine adaptable to new possible variants months ago, adding that their vaccine is currently able to adjust itself within six weeks and ship initial batches within 100 days, the statement said. According to WHO, the new variant is more transmissible than the previous strains and has abnormally many mutations.

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**Three People Wounded in Shooting at Mall in US State of North Carolina - Reports**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - Three people sustained gunshot wounds in a shooting at a shopping center in the US state of North Carolina, CBS 17 reported.

According to Durham city councilman Mark-Anthony Middleton, three people were wounded Friday afternoon by gunfire inside Southpoint Mall in Durham, North Carolina.

The report said that the Durham Police Department have detained a suspect in the shooting. Earlier on Friday, a Durham Police Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik that police were responding to a shooting at the mall, but he did not yet have additional information to provide about the incident.

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## Police in North Carolina Responding to Shooting at Shopping Mall - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - Police are responding to a shooting at a shopping mall in the city of Durham, North Carolina in which at least one person was reportedly shot, a Durham Police Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Yes," the spokesperson said on Friday when asked to confirm reports that police were responding to a shooting at the Southpoint Mall in Durham. Local media outlets cited city officials as saying that at least one person was shot in the incident.

The spokesperson said he did not yet have additional information to provide about the shooting, which occurred on one of the busiest shopping days in the US, Black Friday.

Video footage on social media showed shoppers running through the shopping mall in panic.

Other footage on social media showed police officers escorting shoppers out of the mall.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) -

### COVID-19

\* The new coronavirus strain B.1.1.529, identified in South Africa, is considered a variant of concern and was named Omicron, the World Health Organization said in a statement on Friday.

\* US President Joe Biden confirmed that the United States will implement on Monday a travel ban for foreign travelers from eight countries in southern Africa due to the emergence of the new Omicron coronavirus variant in the region.

\* Biden called on the "fully vaccinated" to get booster shots and urged unvaccinated individuals in the United States and around the world to get vaccinated immediately.

\* South African Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the reaction of various countries in Europe and North America is unjustified as currently there is no proof that the new variant is more dangerous or resistant to vaccines.

### US-UKRAINE RELATIONS

\* US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan discussed by telephone with the head of Ukraine's presidential office Andriy Yermak the situation at the Ukraine-Russia border and agreed to pursue diplomacy in a bid to deescalate tensions between Kiev and Moscow, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Friday.

\* US President Joe Biden said on Friday he will "in all probability" speak with both Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin about the alleged unusual military activities on the border between the two countries.

\* US State Secretary Antony Blinken will discuss with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg transatlantic unity and support to Ukraine during his upcoming trip to Latvia and Sweden, US Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried said.

\* The United States has no plans to establish a permanent military presence on NATO's eastern flank in Europe, but will continue to evaluate its posture there, Donfried said.

#### PUTIN-ALIEV-PASHINYAN TALKS

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan agreed to take steps to increase the level of stability and security on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border, as well as to prepare for the creation of a Commission on Border Delimitation, according to a joint statement published by the Kremlin on Friday.

\* The three leaders emphasized the need to launch projects next to unlock the economic potential of Karabakh and agreed to intensify joint efforts to address as soon as possible the remaining challenges listed in two previous documents.

\* Putin praised trilateral talks with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, saying that it provided a deep analysis of the situation.

\* Aliyev said after the talks that Baku was determined to turn the page of the long-term confrontation with Yerevan.

#### US STOCK MARKET

\* The US Dow Jones Industrial Average closed 905 points lower, losing 2.5%, as all sectors slid sharply into negative amid rising concerns over the newly identified COVID-19 variant spreading in South Africa.

\* US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he is not concerned about the plunge in the US stock market and he had expected it over concerns related to the new Omicron coronavirus variant.

#### TERROR ATTACK IN KOSOVO AND METOHIJA

\* Four people have been killed and at least two injured in an attack on a bus carrying students in Kosovo and Metohija in the village of Glogjane near the Serbian spiritual center Decani, Serbia's national television RTS reported on Friday.

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#### Moderna Studying 2 Booster Candidates to Anticipate Omicron-Like Mutations

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – American pharma company Moderna said on Friday it is studying two booster candidates designed to anticipate mutations similar to the Omicron COVID-19 variant discovered in South Africa this week.

"Moderna is already studying two multi-valent booster candidates in the clinic that were designed to anticipate mutations such as those that have emerged in the Omicron variant," the company said in a statement.

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**Moderna Says to Rapidly Advance Omicron-Specific Booster Candidate**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - American pharmaceutical company Moderna said on Friday it plans to rapidly advance work to produce a booster shot that will specifically protect against the new Omicron coronavirus variant.

"Moderna will rapidly advance an Omicron-specific booster candidate," the company said in a press release.

Moderna said the combination of mutations represents a significant potential risk to accelerate the diminishing of natural and vaccine-induced immunity.

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**Biden Says Will 'In All Probability' Speak With Zelenskyy, Putin Amid Border Buildup**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday he will "in all probability" speak with both Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin about the alleged unusual military activities on the border between the two countries.

"In all probability," Biden told reporters when asked whether he plans to speak to the leaders of Ukraine and Russia about the situation near the Ukrainian-Russian border.

Biden added that the US remains concerned over Russia's military activity and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and ability to govern itself.

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**Biden Says Not Concerned About US Stock Market Plunge as He 'Expected It'**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he is not concerned about the plunge in the US stock market and he had expected it over concerns related to the new Omicron coronavirus variant.

"I expected it," Biden told reporters when asked if he is worried about the stock market plunge.

Earlier on Friday, the US stock market fell 900 points over concerns about the new variant of the novel coronavirus detected in southern Africa.

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#### New York State on High Alert for Any Sign of Omicron COVID Variant - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – New York State health authorities are on high alert but have not detected any cases of the new Omicron coronavirus variant yet, Governor Kathy Hochul announced on Friday.

"HealthNYGov [the health authority of New York State] has not found the new Omicron variant in New York State," Hochul wrote on Twitter. "But we are on high alert."

The New York health authorities are cooperating closely with both national and international health authorities to track the spread of the virus, Hochul continued.

"We will continue to actively monitor virus samples and will continue working with CDCGov [the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and WHO [the World Health Organization] to closely follow developments," she added.

The WHO has decided to classify the new coronavirus Omicron variant B.1.1.529 found in South Africa as a variant of concern. It may spread throughout the world in several months, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned.

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#### US Defense Chief Will Travel to South Korea Tuesday for Security Talks - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will travel to South Korea next week for talks with government officials about security matters on the Korean Peninsula and in northeast Asia, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"Secretary Austin will meet with ROK Minister of Defense Suh Wook for the 53rd U.S.-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) and visit U.S. troops on the peninsula," the Defense Department said in a press release. "Both sides are expected to pledge to continue to develop the Alliance—the linchpin of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia—in a mutually reinforcing and future-oriented manner."

Austin will also travel to the state of California to give a speech at the 2021 Reagan National Defense Forum, the release said.

At the forum, Austin will address issues related to China, including deterrence and investments in tech and innovation, according to the release.

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#### Canada Bans Foreign Nationals Who Traveled to Southern Africa in Last 14 Days - Minister

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - Canada is banning entry of foreign nationals that have traveled to the southern Africa region over the last 14 days due to the emergence of the new Omicron coronavirus variant, Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said on Friday.

"Today we are banning entry for foreign nationals that have travelled to Southern Africa in the last 14 days," Alghabra said via Twitter. "We will also make testing mandatory on all Canadians entering into Canada and having travelled to Southern Africa in the last 14 days."

Alghabra said in a press conference foreign nationals will be denied entry into Canada if in the last 14 days they visited Botswana, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, and Mozambique.

Canada currently has no direct flights with the southern Africa region, Alghabra noted.

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, Theresa Tam, said in the same press conference that laboratories in Canada have been alerted about the new Omicron variant and have searched for possible cases but as of Friday there is no indication of the new variant detected in the country.

On Thursday, the South African National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed that the new variant had been detected in 22 infected patients and demonstrated more mutations than any of its predecessors. The United States, the United Kingdom and many other countries began temporarily suspending travel with the southern African region.

South African Health Minister Joe Phaahla said preliminary data acquired by South African scientists does not prove that certified vaccines would not be effective against the new variant. He said that new mutations happen all the time and vaccines have proved to be the most effective way to protect people's health against the coronavirus despite any mutations. However, multiple vaccine makers said they are studying the new variant and may be able to make adjustments to their vaccines if needed to be effective against the new strain.

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**Biden Urges WTO Nations to Waive Intellectual Property Rights on COVID Vaccines Next Week**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday called on member countries in the World Trade Organization to waive intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines next week amid concerns over the new Omicron coronavirus variant.

"I call on the nations gathering next week for the World Trade Organization ministerial meeting to meet the US challenge to waive intellectual property protections for COVID vaccines, so these vaccines can be manufactured globally," Biden said in a press release. "I endorsed this position in April; this news today reiterates the importance of moving on this quickly."

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**Biden Calls for Vaccination, Booster Shots Amid New Omicron Variant**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Friday, in response to the new Omicron coronavirus variant, called on the fully vaccinated to get booster shots and urged unvaccinated individuals in the United States and around the world to get vaccinated immediately.

"[F]or those Americans who are fully vaccinated against severe COVID illness – fortunately, for the vast majority of our adults -- the best way to strengthen your protection is to get a booster shot, as soon as you are eligible," Biden said in a press release. "For those not yet fully vaccinated: get vaccinated today."

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**Biden Confirms New Travel Bans From South Africa, 7 Other Countries Effective November 29**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday confirmed new travel restrictions for foreign travelers from eight countries in southern Africa due to the emergence of the new Omicron coronavirus variant in the region.

"I am ordering additional air travel restrictions from South Africa and seven other countries. These new restrictions will take effect on November 29," Biden said in a press release. "As we move forward, we will continue to be guided by what the science and my medical team advises." The other seven African countries include Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi, according to US media.

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**Novavax Says Recent Data Shows Its Vaccine Likely to Protect Against New COVID-19 Variants**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The recent data from the US biotechnology company Novavax, which is developing a vaccine against the novel coronavirus, said on Friday that its shot is likely to protect against new, emerging variants.

The new variant, B.1.1.529, is reported to carry an exceptionally high number of mutations, many of them in spike proteins that are the target of the vaccines, potentially making it even more transmissible.

"Recent data from our Phase 2 clinical trial showed that wild-type neutralizing antibodies increased more than 4-fold versus primary vaccination series and that cross-reactive functional antibodies to the Alpha (B.1.1.7), Beta (B.1.351), and Delta variant strains increased six- to ten-fold with a booster dose of NVX-CoV2373. These data lead us to believe that our vaccine is likely to provide protection against new and emerging variants," the company said in a statement.

Novavax vowed to continue to work urgently to address the latest variant of the coronavirus.

"Specifically in response to the emerging coronavirus variant tentatively called Nu, Novavax has already initiated development of a new recombinant spike protein based on the known genetic sequence of B.1.1.529 and will have it ready to begin testing and manufacturing within the next few weeks," the statement said.

Novavax also said its recombinant nanoparticle technology allows the vaccine to adapt quickly to the changes in strains.

Earlier in the day, the World Health Organization (WHO) named the new strain Omicron and said the existing PCR diagnostic tools are able to detect this variant.

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US Bans Foreign Travelers From Southern Africa Over Omicron Variant Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The United States next week will ban entry to foreign travelers from countries in southern Africa, including South Africa and Mozambique, over risk concerns about the new Omicron coronavirus variant that emerged in the region, CNBC reported on Friday.

The report said, according to a senior Biden administration official, that the US government beginning on Monday will deny entry to foreign travelers from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi.

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Sullivan, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Situation on Border With Russia – White House

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a phone call with the head of Ukraine's presidential office, Andriy Yermak, discussed situation near the Ukrainian-Russian border and agreed to pursue diplomacy in a bid to deescalate tensions between Kiev and Moscow, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Friday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke today with Head of Presidential Administration Andriy Yermak of Ukraine about recent events. They discussed their shared concerns about ongoing Russian military activities near Ukraine's border and its harsh rhetoric towards Ukraine. They agreed that all sides should pursue diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions," Horne said in a statement.

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### UN General Assembly President Calls for Early Vaccination Amid New COVID Strain

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The spread of COVID-19 and its variants can only be halted by early vaccination of the unvaccinated, UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid said in regards to the situation with the new South African strain of the coronavirus.

"The only way to halt the spread of COVID-19 and its variants is to push for early vaccination of the unvaccinated. I am convening a high-level event on vaccines on 13 January with the aim of galvanizing political momentum to get vaccines delivered where they are most needed," Shahid said.

The new variant, known as B.1.1.529 and initially discovered in South Africa, has mutations that could hamper the body's immune response and increase its spread. The Biden administration will discuss today whether to implement travel restrictions on southern African countries in response to the variant's emergence.

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### Biden Briefed on New COVID-19 Variant Circulating in S. Africa - White House

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been briefed on the new Omicron coronavirus variant, a White House official said on Friday.

"The President was briefed on the new variant circulating in Southern Africa," the official said as quoted by the White House Press pool.

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Canada Bans Foreign Nationals That Traveled to Southern Africa in Last 14 Days - Minister  
WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - Canada is banning entry of foreign nationals that have traveled to the southern Africa region over the last 14 days due to the emergence of the new Omicron coronavirus variant, Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said on Friday.

"Today we are banning entry for foreign nationals that have travelled to Southern Africa in the last 14 days," Alghabra said via Twitter. "We will also make testing mandatory on all Canadians entering into Canada and having travelled to Southern Africa in the last 14 days."

Alghabra said in a press conference foreign nationals will be denied entry into Canada if in the last 14 days they visited the African countries Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, and Mozambique.

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## US Officials Discuss Travel Restrictions Amid New COVID-19 Variant Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has been discussing the possibility of imposing travel restrictions on passengers from southern Africa amid concerns over a new coronavirus variant emerging in the region, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

White House officials are expected to discuss the matter with agency officials on Friday afternoon to make a recommendation on whether to impose travel restrictions, the report said. On Friday, infectious disease official Anthony Fauci said the US government will decide on whether to ban travel from South Africa once enough data has been collected. There is no indication that the virus variant has reached the United States yet, but anything is possible, Fauci added.

Some countries, including Austria, Morocco and the Philippines, have announced travel bans on passengers from South Africa due to the new variant, known as B.1.1.529. The variant reportedly has mutations that could hamper the body's immune response and increase its spread.

The World Health Organization held an emergency meeting on Friday and expressed concern over the new variant. However, some virologists have pointed out that as viruses mutate they become less deadly and the coronavirus' replication mechanism remains the same therefore allowing continued use of the existing and proven treatments.

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## Biden Administration Suggests Increasing Royalty Rates on Federal Oil, Gas Leases - Report

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The US Department of the Interior on Friday issued a report suggesting that royalty rates for the federal government's onshore oil and gas leases should be increased.

"The BLM [Bureau of Land Management] should improve the return to taxpayers and create an oil and gas program that is more consistent with BLM's multiple-use and sustained yield mandates," the report said. "Consideration should be given to raising royalty rates and, to the extent allowed by statute, to increasing the current minimum levels for bids, rents, royalties and bonds."

US President Joe Biden issued an executive order in January that directed the Department of Interior to conduct a review of federal oil and gas leasing and permitting practices.

The Interior Department report also suggests increasing safety and environmental regulations on oil and gas companies by requiring them to meet a new criteria before they are allowed to operate in US offshore drilling sites.

Moreover, the Interior Department said it wants to end the practice of issuing bids for vast swaths of territory on the US continental shelf and instead move to a leasing model where smaller areas are offered. The department claims the federal government loses billions in revenue when vast offshore drilling sites are leased.

In addition, the Interior Department also suggests the BLM should avoid leasing land with low potential and prioritize issuing leases in areas with moderate or high potential for oil and gas resources as well as facilitate more meaningful engagement with Tribal communities when it seeks public input in the leasing and permitting process, the report said.

The report noted that as of September, the oil and gas industry has more than 9,600 approved permits that are available to drill. In fiscal year 2021, BLM approved more than 5,000 drilling permits and more than 4,400 are still being processed.

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#### **Blinken Discusses Ethiopia With Kenyan President - State Department**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta discussed Ethiopia in a phone call on Friday, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a readout.

"Secretary Blinken expressed grave concern about worrying signs of military escalation in Ethiopia and emphasized the need to urgently move to negotiations," Price said. "President Kenyatta and Secretary Blinken agreed on the importance of unhindered humanitarian access for all communities affected by the conflict and reiterated their support for an inclusive political dialogue."

Blinken also thanked Kenyatta for his "warm and productive" visit to Nairobi on November 17-18, Price added.

Ethiopia is currently facing an outbreak of violence linked to the advance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front rebels toward Addis Ababa. The situation prompted several countries to start evacuating their diplomatic missions from Ethiopia.

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#### **US Dow Plunges More Than 900 Points, Losing 2.5% on COVID Variant Fears**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The US Dow Jones Industrial Average closed 905 points lower, losing 2.5%, as all sectors slid sharply into negative amid rising concerns over the newly identified COVID-19 variant spreading in South Africa.

The new variant, B.1.1.529, is reported to carry an exceptionally high number of mutations, many of them in spike proteins, the main target of COVID-19 vaccines, potentially making it even more transmissible.

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UPDATE - United Airlines Monitoring Situation After New COVID-19 Variant Detected - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - United Airlines is monitoring the situation after scientists detected a new coronavirus variant in several regions in Africa, but the company does not consider making changes in its services schedule at this time, spokesperson Nicole Carriere told Sputnik on Friday.

"We're monitoring the situation, but don't have any changes to our service to share at this time," Carriere said.

Another major US air carrier, Delta Air Lines, also confirmed that the company is monitoring the situation but acknowledged that the government ultimately responds with travel regulations.

"Delta and our partners have worked closely with government partners throughout the pandemic, as they ultimately set travel regulations," spokesperson Emily Cashdan told Sputnik. Cashdan also said Delta Air Lines will evaluate any changes to existing US government policies should they occur.

On Friday, US infectious disease official Dr. Anthony Fauci said the US government will decide on whether to ban travel from South Africa over the risk posed by the new variant as soon as data is collected.

The new variant, known as B.1.1.529, has more mutations to the spike protein than past variants, meaning that it could hamper the body's immune response and spread more easily. It was initially discovered in South Africa. Later it was diagnosed among two travelers in Hong Kong's Regal Airport Hotel.

Some virologists have pointed out that as viruses mutate, they become less deadly. In addition, they say the virus' replication mechanism remains the same and it is therefore subject to the tested existing treatments.

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US Diplomat to Visit Southeast Asia to Engage Allies on Pressuring Myanmar – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel J. Kritenbrink will depart for Southeast Asia on Saturday to engage regional allies on a range of issues, including ways to pressure the Myanmar military government into ceasing ongoing violence and allowing humanitarian access, the State Department said.

"Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink will travel to Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Bangkok from November 27 to December 4," the State Department said in a press release. "He will engage allies and partners on regional democracy and human rights challenges; and discuss ways to pressure the Burmese military regime to cease the violence, allow for unhindered humanitarian access, and restore Burma's path to democracy."

Kritenbrink will meet with senior government officials to reiterate the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the regional architecture and the Indo-Pacific, the release said.

The situation in Myanmar remains a point of concern for Washington in light of ongoing clashes between the military and civil protesters following the coup on February 1. The military takeover started a wave of civil protests, and more than 1,180 people have died in clashes with the authorities.

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**Senior US Official to Visit Guatemala Next Week to Inaugurate Migration Resource Center**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Uzra Zeya will head to Guatemala next week for meetings with government officials and to inaugurate a new Migration Resource Center, the US State Department said in a release on Friday.

"Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya will visit Guatemala City, Antigua, and Quetzaltenango during her November 28 - December 1 visit to Guatemala," the release said. "She will represent the US government at the annual meeting of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) and inaugurate a Migration Resource Center (MRC) in Quetzaltenango, which will provide protection services and referrals to vulnerable migrants."

During her stay in Guatemala City, Zeya will meet with government, civil society and private sector leaders and will visit US government-funded programs, the release said.

"Through these engagements, Under Secretary Zeya will underscore the United States' commitment to working with Guatemalan partners to address the root causes of irregular migration, advance the rule of law, and provide protection services to vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum seekers," the release added.

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**Blinken Trip to Europe Good Opportunity to Assess Situation at Ukraine Border- State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's planned trip to Europe next week is a great opportunity to assess the situation at the Ukraine-Russia border together with NATO and OSCE, Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried said on Friday. Blinken will head to Latvia and Sweden next week where he will meet with the senior officials and participate in NATO and OSCE ministerial events.

"It is a very good opportunity for him to assess this [situation at the Ukrainian border] with our allies in NATO and OSCE," Donfried said during a press briefing.

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Blinken to Talk Transatlantic Unity, Ukraine With Stoltenberg on Europe Trip - State Dept.  
WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US State Secretary Antony Blinken will discuss with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg transatlantic unity and support to Ukraine during his upcoming trip to Latvia and Sweden, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Karen Donfried, said on Friday.

Blinken will head to Latvia and Sweden next week where he will meet with the countries' officials and participate in NATO and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) ministerial events.

"Secretary Blinken will engage with Secretary General Stoltenberg to underscore the importance of strengthening of transatlantic unity, and working together with allies to discuss a range of challenges in today's environment from the support of Ukraine ... to strategic competition," Donfried said.

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Blinken to Focus on Belarus, Russia During Upcoming Trip to Latvia, Sweden - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will focus during his upcoming trip to Latvia and Sweden on the issue of working together to respond to challenges posed by Belarus and Russia, among other topics, Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried said on Friday.

Blinken will head to Latvia and Sweden next week where he will meet with senior officials and participate in NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) ministerial events.

"A key focus will be how we can work together in responding to challenges like Belarus and Russia and other topics such as economic cooperation and Holocaust issues," Donfried said.

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US Has No Plans to Announce Permanent Presence on NATO's Eastern Flank – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – The United States has no plans to establish a permanent military presence on NATO's eastern flank in Europe, but will continue to evaluate its posture there, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Karen Donfried, said on Friday.

"[T]here are no announcements that we are poised to make about a permanent US presence on NATO's eastern flank," Donfried said during a press briefing. "[W]e will continue to revisit and evaluate how we are postured on NATO's eastern borders."

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**US Aware of Zelenskyy's Statements on Coup Plot, Remains in Touch With Kiev – Official**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – The United States is aware of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's statements regarding an alleged coup plot in his country and remains in contact with Kiev on the matter, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Karen Donfried, said on Friday.

"[W]e are aware of the [Zelenskyy's] statements that were made this morning. We are in touch with the Ukrainian government to discuss this further and we're working to obtain additional information," Donfried said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that he was informed that a coup is being planned in Ukraine, and that business magnate Rinat Akhmetov is involved in it.

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**Senior US Diplomat Will Travel to Jordan to Discuss Refugees – State Department**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – Senior US diplomat Nancy Izzo Jackson will travel to Jordan this week to discuss Syrian refugees, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"Senior Bureau Official for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) Nancy Izzo Jackson will travel to Amman, Jordan, from November 27 to December 2, 2021, as Head of Delegation to the United Nations Relief Works Agency's (UNRWA) Advisory Committee (AdCom)," Price said.

Jackson will reaffirm the US commitment to partner with Jordan and its support for refugees and vulnerable Jordanian host communities, he added.

"She will also meet with Syrian refugees and other beneficiaries of PRM-funded programs that provide life-saving assistance to refugees and vulnerable host communities in Jordan, and that promote resiliency and self-reliance," Price noted.

During the meetings with Jordanian government officials, diplomats and non-government organizations, Jackson will discuss the refugee response in Jordan. She also will underscore the US commitment to supporting affected individuals and communities, Price said.

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**United Airlines Monitoring Situation After New COVID-19 Variant Detected - Spokesperson**

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - United Airlines is monitoring the situation after a new coronavirus variant has been detected in several regions in Africa, but does not consider making changes in its services schedule at this time, spokesperson Nicole Carriere told Sputnik on Friday.

"We're monitoring the situation, but don't have any changes to our service to share at this time," Carriere said.

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US Food, Drug Administration Says Molnupiravir Pill Significantly Reduces COVID-19 Risks

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The molnupiravir (MOV) pill significantly reduces the risk of hospitalization or death following infection with the novel coronavirus, the FDA said in a briefing document on Friday ahead of an expert committee safety review of the drug.

"Treatment with MOV significantly reduces the risk of hospitalization or death through Day 29 by approximately 50%. The efficacy of MOV was demonstrated in a Phase 2/3 clinical study... in non-hospitalized adults with mild to moderate COVID-19, at least 1 risk factor for severe illness, and symptom onset within 5 days prior to initiating treatment," the FDA said.

The FDA Antimicrobial Drugs Advisory Committee is scheduled to meet on November 30 to discuss the Emergency Use Authorization application submitted by MOV's manufacturer, Merck & Co. Inc. to treat adults with mild to moderate infections who are at risk of being hospitalized. Several identified risks, such as reproductive toxicity and other harmful side effects, will be subject to review by the FDA committee during their meeting. However, the briefing document concluded that the MOV safety profile "supports short-term clinical use" in the target population. Switzerland's Federal Office of Public Health on Tuesday announced that they secured more than 8,000 MOV doses, with the drug expected to enter their market as early as January. On November 19, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved the use of MOV, also known as Lagevrio, for emergency use.

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International Air Transport Association Urges Europe to Extend Validity of COVID Passport

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) – The European Union's Digital COVID Certificate (DCC) should remain valid for significantly longer than the only nine month period recommended by the European Commission, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Friday.

"The IATA called for caution in response to a European Commission Recommendation that the EU DCC should only remain valid for up to nine months after the second vaccination dose, unless a booster jab is administered," the Montreal-based trade association said in a statement.

The EU DCC had already proved to be a great success in driving a common continent-wide approach to managing the COVID-19 health crisis and in facilitating the freedom of people to travel again, IATA said.

The certificate "underpins a fragile recovery in the travel and tourism sector. And it is critical that any changes to it have a joined-up approach that recognizes the impact of divergent policies by individual member states and promotes further harmonization across Europe," IATA Regional Vice President for Europe Rafael Schwartzman said.

If booster shots are mandated to maintain the validity of the DCC, it is vital that states harmonize their approach to the length of time allowed between the point of full vaccination and administering the additional dose and the nine months proposed by the Commission could be insufficient, IATA cautioned.

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UNICEF Shocked By Migrant Boat Tragedy in English Channel, Urges Prevention - Coordinator

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - UNICEF is appalled by the the deadly migrant boat accident near the French shore, which became the biggest single loss of life in the English Channel, and has called on the prompt collective action to avoid similar tragedies in the future, Afshan Khan, Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe, said in a statement on Friday.

"I am shocked by the news of the recent shipwreck off the French coast, which claimed the lives of at least 27 people, including children and a pregnant woman," Khan said. "This tragedy - the deadliest on record along the English Channel - is a stark reminder that urgent collective action is needed to stop the avoidable loss of life at sea and prevent similar events from happening again in the future."

Khan noted that at least 744 migrants have died in Europe since 2014, with some 200 of them in an attempt to cross the English Channel.

"This figure jumps to more than 23,000 if we include deaths recorded in the Mediterranean since 2014, including countless children," he said. "Many of the children and families arriving in Europe flee war and conflict. Others escape poverty, violence, discrimination, and abuse, in search of a safer and better future."

Khan went on to say that UNICEF is urgently calling on all member states to boost search and rescue operations at sea, including safe disembarkation.

"To provide safe legal pathways to protect children on the move and prevent them from being exposed to dangerous journeys and to violence, abuse and exploitation by traffickers and smugglers," he said. "Not to return asylum seeking and refugee children to any country unless this is determined to be in their best interest, as per legal standards. To end child immigration detention and keep families together."

Khan pointed out that UNICEF is ready to increase its efforts with governments, UN organizations and EU institutions to provide urgent humanitarian support and protection to migrant children.

"The death of one child at sea is one too many. We can - and must - work together to protect every child fleeing from conflict, violence, and poverty, everywhere," he added.

On Wednesday, a boat with migrants sunk in the Strait of Dover. France had initially reported 31 deaths, but the number was later revised down to 27, including five women and a young girl.

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#### Ex-US Marine Whelan Requests Probe of Corruption in Russian Prison – Family

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - American citizen Paul Whelan, convicted for espionage in Russia, is asking the Russian prosecutor general and the investigative committee to probe corruption in the prison where he is serving his sentence, his brother David Whelan said on Friday.

Whelan informed his parents during a recent phone call that he has "requested investigations by the general prosecutor and the special investigative committee of the Russian Federation into corruption taking place here on an all too common basis," Paul Whelan said in a message he conveyed to his parents, as quoted by his brother.

Paul noted that a prison warden was arrested for multiple charges of corruption after allegedly threatening Whelan with retaliation for reporting violations and human rights abuses, while another official has been disciplined.

"Corruption here knows no bounds. Concerns include theft, extortion, retaliation, fabricated disciplinary charges, blocking lawyer and consular access, obstructing legal processes, fabricated documents, discrimination as well as rats in the building," Paul further said.

David Whelan noted that his brother was able to call their parents on Thanksgiving Day on Thursday for the first in a long time. "Paul said that he had been barred from making phone calls because of complaints he'd made about his treatment," he stated.

US ambassador John Sullivan visited Paul on November 23, his brother said.

Whelan is serving a 16-year jail term in Russia's Mordovia region in line with a Moscow court ruling last June. Whelan denied the charges against him but did not challenge the verdict in the hope of being part of a potential prisoner exchange between the United States and Russia.

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#### US, Allies Concerned Over New Wave of Violence in Myanmar - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The United States issued a joint statement with its partners and allies, including the United Kingdom and Australia, expressing concerns over a new wave of violence in Myanmar and is calling on the international community to suspend all kinds of arms sales and assistance to the military in the country, the US State Department said on Friday.

"We reiterate our grave concern over reports of ongoing human rights violations and abuses by the Myanmar Security Forces across the country, including credible reports of sexual violence and torture," the joint statement said. "[W]e call on the international community to suspend all operational support to the military, and to cease the transfer of arms, materiel, dual-use equipment, and technical assistance to the military and its representatives."

Besides the United States, the statement was signed by the governments of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom.

The statement urges the international community to work together to prevent any future violence in Myanmar and hold those responsible for it accountable, according to the statement.

The signatory states believe there is a credible risk of future violence and atrocities across Myanmar following the reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the country, the statement said.

The military came to power in Myanmar on February 1, under the pretext that the National League for Democracy rigged the November election. The military coup triggered a wave of civil protests, and more than 1,180 people have died in clashes with the authorities.

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US Dow Drops 800 Points, or More Than 2% on New COVID-19 Variant Fears

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - The Dow Jones industrial average on Friday plunged at open by about 800 points or 2.2 percent amid concerns over a newly detected variant of COVID-19.

The sell-off comes after the discovery of the new COVID-19 variant, known as B.1.1.529 in southern Africa, which has more mutations to the "spike protein" than past variants, meaning that it could hamper the body's immune response and spread more easily.

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Canada Urges Nationals to Leave Ethiopia Over Security Concerns - Top Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 26 (Sputnik) - Canada calls on its nationals currently in Ethiopia to leave the country due to security concerns, Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly said in a statement on Friday.

"Canada is very concerned by the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Ethiopia," Joly said.

"Since November 18, we have been asking Canadians to avoid all travel to Ethiopia. We are now asking Canadians who are already there to leave immediately if it is safe to do so."

Joly warned that if the situation in Ethiopia continues to worsen, commercial flights could soon become limited.

"Ultimately, Canadians abroad are responsible for their own safety and should make the best decisions for themselves and their families, based on their individual situations," she noted. The minister added that while the Canadian embassy in Addis Ababa remains open, its ability to provide consular assistance in Ethiopia is limited, including in the capital.

"Canadians should make their own travel arrangements now and should not count on evacuation flights," she said.

Ethiopia is currently facing an outbreak of violence linked to the advance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front rebels toward Addis Ababa. The situation prompted several countries to start evacuating their diplomatic missions from Ethiopia.