

11/29/21 Monday

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'We Will Not Go Away': Twitter Suspends Ethiopian, Eritrean Accounts After Global #NoMore Protests

By - Morgan Artyukhina

On Monday, Twitter disabled the accounts of at least a dozen Ethiopians and Eritreans and their related groups without justification. The accounts had recently helped promote the #NoMore hashtag campaign decrying US intervention in the two nations' affairs, which led to worldwide protests.

Among the disabled accounts was Horn of Africa Hub, a page started in October 2021 with 18.8 thousand followers that describe itself as "combating false, deadly narratives about the Horn of Africa," including in Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, "and beyond." The page had been instrumental in promoting the #NoMore hashtag campaign, which became immensely popular with the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities both inside those countries and around the globe. [As Sputnik reported](#), several large protests involving tens of thousands of participants, took place in Washington, DC, Addis Ababa, and more than 30 countries around the globe thanks to organizers using [the #NoMore hashtag](#), demanding the US stop sanctioning Ethiopia and Eritrea, stop demonizing Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and for Western media to stop spreading misinformation about the conflict between the two governments and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Another account taken down was that of Simon Tesfamariam, executive director of the New Africa Institute and one of the administrators of the Horn of Africa Hub page. Speaking to Sputnik on Monday, he said that "today, Twitter suspended every account associated with my phone without any prison warning. This includes accounts that I do not even use. Eleven other accounts associated with fighting imperialism in the Horn of Africa were also taken down without warning."

"Coming on the heels of the massive #NoMore global demonstration against intervention in the Horn, this Twitter crackdown is clearly politically motivated and has little to do with Twitter's 'rules and regulations,'" Tesfamariam said in his statement.

"In fact, today's suspensions are seen as part of a second wave of repression against the #NoMore movement. Earlier this month, Twitter shut down a number of accounts immediately after the start of the #NoMore campaign on November 1. The suspensions will likely continue, especially as #NoMore spreads like wildfire beyond the Horn to other parts of Africa, including [Burkina Faso and Niger](#) where Africans are saying "no more" or "pas plus" to French troops."

"Twitter's attempts to silence one of the most robust and active anti-imperialist communities on Twitter will only grow the movement in both the digital and physical world. We will not go away silently," he added. His account, which was 12 years old, had more than 36,800 followers.

Cover for US Foreign Policy

US-based social media giants like Twitter have a long history of policing accounts on their platforms that are used to counter US foreign policy aims. Twitter has taken down thousands of [accounts in vast sweeps](#) that sometimes claim to be targeting state-directed disinformation operations - with little evidence that their popularity is anything other than people with a different perspective than Washington's - as well as many sweeps for which no justification at all is given. For example, in September 2019, Twitter [disabled dozens of Cuban](#) accounts for government ministries, government officeholders, and even Cuban journalists, just minutes before Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel addressed the nation about ways to mitigate the country's fuel shortage. Other targets have included accounts from Iran, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Russia, and China.

On the other hand, Twitter has looked the other way when the disinformation campaigns push a pro-US narrative, [as they did in July](#), when an astroturfed campaign promoted anti-Cuban government messages just as the US government sought to fan and amplify protests in Cuba, as well as claims that the Cuban government was violently repressing the demonstrations. Similarly, users have claimed that Twitter has strictly moderated the behavior of pro-Abiy users while giving generous leeway to threats and attacks by pro-TPLF accounts.

When it comes to Ethiopia, Twitter's Monday takedowns fall perfectly in line with US interests. [As Sputnik reported](#) last week, US and European diplomats have been meeting secretly with leaders of the TPLF to express their support for the Tigrayan offensive and for a "transition government" following their prospective capture of Addis Ababa and removal of Abiy. However, [new gains made](#) by the Ethiopian military over the weekend have cast that outcome in even greater doubt.

One meeting captured on video was hosted by the Peace and Development Center International (PDCI), a think tank [reported to have connections](#) with the TPLF. According to investigative journalist [Jeff Pearce](#), one of the founding members of the PDCI was Mimi Alemayehou, a business mogul who rallied support among the Ethiopian-American diaspora for now-US President Joe Biden's 2020 election campaign and who sits on Twitter's board of directors.

However, Alemayehou has since sought to downplay the report, distancing herself from the PDCI in [a Saturday statement](#) that called Pearce's article about her involvement in setting up the think tank a "defamatory accusation." She also said in her role at Twitter she is "not involved in any content moderation decisions."

The conflict in Ethiopia began in November 2020 when the TPLF, which was the US' most reliable regional partner during the three decades it was in power, attacked Ethiopian military units stationed in the northern Tigray state. Abiy, whose political reforms since 2018 have weakened the once-dominating power of the TPLF in Ethiopian affairs, has long been hated by them. After he postponed elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the TPLF held its own in defiance.

After early setbacks, the TPLF pushed the Ethiopian military and their Eritrean allies out of Tigray and launched their own offensive into neighboring Afar and Amhara regions, making an already massive humanitarian crisis worse.

According to United Nations data, [more than 70,000](#) people have fled the violence, heading across the border into neighboring Sudan, and an [estimated 4 million](#) more have been internally displaced. There is no reliable death toll for the conflict. Tigrayans have alleged Abiy's

government has orchestrated a genocide in Tigray, which have been widely [echoed in Western media](#). However, while the UN Human Rights Office and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission documented human rights abuses by all sides in the conflict, their [report published earlier](#) this month found no evidence of a genocide.

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Photos: Ethiopian Army Recaptures Strategically Important Town of Chifra, on Edge of Tigray State

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) have recaptured the town of Chifra from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), state media reported on Sunday. The victory puts Ethiopian forces on the edge of Tigray state as the TPLF's drive southward toward the capital stalls out.

A tweet by the state-owned network Fana Broadcasting on Sunday showed the Ethiopian national flag and the flag of Afar state flying above the town, noting that Afar Special Forces helped with its capture.

Other photos showed some of the results of the battle, including several wrecked Soviet-built T-62 tanks and Zu-23 anti-aircraft cannons used by Tigrayan forces.

"What you see behind me is a mountain area that was a stronghold for the enemy until yesterday," Ethiopian Prime Minister [Abiy Ahmed told Oromia](#) Broadcasting Network on Friday on the front lines in Afar. "Now we have managed to clear the area fully. The morale of the defense force is really great. The battle is underway with a great feat. Now we have taken Kasagita. Today, we will take over Chifra and Burka. We will continue until Ethiopia's Freedom is ensured."

He arrived on the front last week after pledging to [take personal control](#) over the struggle against the TPLF and its allies after they captured the town of Debre Sina, just 190 kilometers from the capital of Addis Ababa.

The victory means the TPLF has been almost totally pushed out of the lowlands and the path of advance eastward toward Mile, which sits on the A1 highway toward Djibouti and which the TPLF has been trying to press toward for weeks, is now blocked. The TPLF has also [encountered stiff resistance](#) by the ENDF and Afari forces east of Bati, to the south of Chifra, blocking its advance on Mile from the southwest.

[Unconfirmed reports](#) on Monday suggested the ENDF had also recaptured Bati, which is in eastern Amhara state, but there had been no official declaration of the victory by the government when this story went to publication.

According to local media, the TPLF, which is composed of mostly Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, pillaged mosques in Chifra and other towns in Muslim-majority Afar. Qafar Media shared images of a charred library and mosque, including burned Qurans, which they said were torched by the Tigrayan forces.

A Rebellion With US Support

The TPLF, which also calls itself the Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF), launched an uprising against Abiy's government in November 2020, attacking ENDF forces in the northern Tigray state after Tigrayan elections held in spite of a nationwide postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic were declared illegal. Although the ENDF made quick gains into Tigray, the TPLF regrouped in the countryside and drove them out of Tigray before launching their own offensive into neighboring Afar and Amhara regions in July.

The TPLF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years after leading the insurgency against the Marxist Derg military government, during which time Ethiopia became a key US partner in the War on Terror. However, Abiy's rise to power in 2018, after other ethnicities in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) political alliance rejected further Tigrayan rule, set the stage for the present crisis. Political reforms by Abiy further weakened the TPLF's leading power, including combining the alliance of ethnic-based parties into a single national Prosperity Party. In 2019, Abiy received a Nobel Peace Prize for signing a peace treaty with Eritrea, ending a 20-year-long border war launched by the TPLF that killed some 120,000 people.

The present conflict has created a massive humanitarian crisis, with [more than 70,000](#) people fleeing across the border into neighboring Sudan and an [estimated 4 million](#) more internally displaced, according to United Nations data. There is no reliable death toll for the conflict.

Tigrayans have alleged Abiy's government has orchestrated a genocide in Tigray, which have been widely [echoed in Western media](#). However, while the UN Human Rights Office and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission documented human rights abuses by all sides in the conflict, their [report published earlier](#) this month found no evidence of a genocide.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported earlier this month that [hundreds of aid trucks](#) were stuck in Semera, the capital of Afar, unable to proceed to the Tigray capital of Mek'ele due to airstrikes. The UN has said the TPLF is the primary cause, as does the government, while the TPLF blames the government. However, [the office says](#) that as of November 24, flights to Mek'ele have resumed.

Publicly, Washington has maintained a position of neutrality, demanding an immediate peace and placing [economic and political sanctions](#) on Ethiopia and its Eritrean allies for actions they say have "contributed to the crisis and conflict, which have undermined the stability and integrity of the Ethiopian state." However, last week, [Sputnik reported that US](#) and European diplomats had been secretly meeting with leading TPLF members, praising the TPLF's gains and openly speaking of a "transition government" if and when the TPLF captures Addis Ababa.

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Videos: Two Killed in Niger by French Army Convoy in Latest Protest Against Paris' Forever War  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

At least two people are dead in western Niger after a French military column en route to eastern Mali was halted by protesters opposed to the French presence in West Africa. The same convoy was accused of shooting four demonstrators in Burkina Faso just a week earlier.

According to [Agence France-Presse](#), the convoy of some 100 French military vehicles had previously arrived in Cote D'Ivoire and was en route to the French garrison in Gao, Mali, where the French Army is regrouping forces used in Operation Barkhane as Paris downsizes its operations and shifts them southward.

"The convoy of the French Barkhane force escorted by the national gendarmerie was blocked by very violent protesters in Tera in the Tillaberi region, where it had spent the night," the Nigerien Interior Ministry said in a statement.

"In its attempt to break free, it used force," leading to "the deaths of two people and 18 wounded", including 11 seriously, the ministry added. "An investigation has been opened to determine the exact circumstances of this tragedy and determine responsibility."

Video from the protests showed a crowd several dozen yards from the vehicle column chanting "we don't want you" and "go home." Smoke can be seen billowing from beside the convoy, originating from an unknown source.

"No French soldier was wounded," French army spokesperson Pascal Ianni told AFP on Saturday. However, "two civilian drivers in the convoy were hurt by stones and some civilian trucks were damaged," he added.

"The convoy halted last night at Tera. This morning, when they wanted to continue the road to Niamey, they were stopped by 1,000 demonstrators and a violent group among them tried to take over the trucks," Ianni said, adding that Nigerien gendarmes had fired tear gas to disperse the protesters. However, he said that after that, "tensions soared again" and the gendarmes and French soldiers "fired warning shots."

Video uploaded onto social media shows three people with bloody chest wounds being carried away from the protests. Warning: the video might offend the sensibilities of some viewers. [See it here](#).

Other videos posted on social media seemed to show a French Mirage 2000 strike aircraft dropping either flares or tear gas bombs in a high-speed, low altitude pass over the protesters. This wasn't the first time the massive convoy had encountered protests on its journey - or the first time it was accused of deploying deadly force to escape them. The demonstrations have taken inspiration from another protest movement on the other side of Africa - the #NoMore campaign against US intervention in Ethiopia and Eritrea - with locals translating it into French as the #PasPlus hashtag.

#### Convoy Protested Across Burkina Faso

In the week prior, the convoy also encountered protests in Burkina Faso's capital of Ouagadougou and the western city of Bobo Dioulasso before being met on November 19 by a human barricade of thousands of people outside the northern city of Kaya. They carried signs that said "French army get out," "Free the Sahel," and "No more French invasion and recolonization military convoy," [according to AFP](#). Four of the protesters were allegedly shot by the French troops guarding the convoy.

"Today they shot at us with heavy weapons. They first shot in the air and after they shot and wounded people. Is that normal?" protester Mahamadi Sawadogo told the [Associated Press](#). "You're in our country, even though you colonized Africans there are things you must not do." However, the French military denied responsibility for the deaths.

"A group of protesters tried to cut through the fence to enter the area and the Burkinabe soldiers fired tear gas to disperse the crowd," a [French military source](#) told AFP. "The French soldiers

fired a few warning shots over the crowd. Nobody was wounded because of the actions of the French military personnel. We do not know of any person who was wounded, even after tear gas was fired."

The French defense ministry isn't exactly known for owning up to African civilian deaths, though. [A French airstrike](#) on January 3, 2021, on the Malian village of Bounti was found by a United Nations investigation to have killed 22 people. The defense ministry claimed the strike had hit a terrorist camp and killed 40 people, but the probe revealed the target to have been a wedding. Even after the UN report was published, Paris [continued to deny](#) civilian deaths had occurred at Bounti, saying its own fact-finding methods were superior.

#### A Withdrawal, But Not Really

In June, after a military coup in Mali removed the civilian president and vice president of an interim government put in power by a previous coup, French President Emmanuel Macron announced an end to the eight-year War on Terror-style campaign across West Africa known as Operation Barkhane. The campaign began in the aftermath of yet another coup in Mali, which enabled Tuareg rebels in the northeast to take over nearly half the country.

However, the war was already [immensely unpopular](#) in both France and Africa by that time, which didn't help Macron's popularity as he announced his intent to seek a second term as head of the Fifth Republic.

France once ruled most of West Africa, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, as its colonies, before they won independence in the mid-20th century. Still, France remains the dominant economic and military partner for most countries in the region, with [French companies dominating](#) Niger's uranium mines, which supply [40% of the uranium](#) used in French nuclear power plants.

Last week, the French Army [turned over control](#) of a second base in northern Mali to Malian forces as part of its consolidation of forces in southern Mali, near the tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Niger - including the area where the protests against the convoy took place. The new mission, with about half of the 5,000 troops used in Barkhane, is called the [Takuba Task Force](#) and is still aimed at Islamic terrorist groups.

A protest movement in Mali calling itself "Yerewolo ["the worthy sons"] Standing on the Ramparts" has [long opposed](#) the presence of French forces, and demonstrations [have only intensified](#) since the transition from Barkhane to Takuba was announced.

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#### US Revokes Terrorist Designation for Colombia's FARC - Blinken

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has removed its designation of Colombia's FARC rebel group as a foreign terrorist organization, but designated the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) and Segunda Marquetalia as well as their respective leaders, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The Department of State is revoking the designations of the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) pursuant to Executive order (E.O.) 13224, as amended," Blinken said.

Blinken went on to say that Washington is designating FARC-EP and Segunda Marquetalia.

"We are also designating the respective leaders of those organizations, Luciano Marin Arango, Hernan Dario Velasquez Saldarriaga, Henry Castellanos Garzon, Nestor Gregorio Vera Fernandez, Miguel Santanilla Botache, and Euclides Espana Caicedo, as SDGTs under E.O. 13224, as amended," he added.

The State Department said earlier in November that it started consultations with Congress on forthcoming actions regarding the FARC. Last week, Colombian President Ivan Duque said he has not been formally notified by the US government of plans to remove the group from its list of foreign terrorist organizations.

"Following a 2016 Peace Accord with the Colombian government, the FARC formally dissolved and disarmed. It no longer exists as a unified organization that engages in terrorism or terrorist activity or has the capability or intent to do so," Blinken said.

Blinken stressed that the decision does not change Washington's position concerning any charges or potential charges in the United States against former FARC leaders.

"However, it will facilitate the ability of the United States to better support implementation of the 2016 accord, including by working with demobilized combatants," the secretary added.

Blinken explained that the newly-announced designation of FARC-EP and Segunda Marquetalia targets those who refused to demobilize and those who are engaged in terrorist activity.

In August 2019, ex-FARC commanders, including Luciano Marin Arango, created Segunda Marquetalia after abandoning the 2016 peace accord.

"Since then, Segunda Marquetalia has engaged in terrorist activity and is responsible for the killings of former FARC members and community leaders," Blinken said. "Segunda Marquetalia has also engaged in mass destruction, assassination, hostage-taking, including the kidnapping and holding for ransom of government employees. Segunda Marquetalia is also responsible for the attempted killings of political leaders."

FARC was created in 1964 as a left-wing armed force operating against the Colombian government. In 2017, after the disarmament process, it became the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force political party.

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US Translator to Release Pushkin's 'Eugene Onegin,' 'Fairy Tales' in English in 2022

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Fans of the Russian national bard Alexander Pushkin will likely have a chance early next year to read new verse translations into English of Pushkin's masterpiece "Eugene Onegin" as well as Pushkin's beloved "Fairy Tales," translated by US poet Julian Henry Lowenfeld.

"I have nearly completed my translation of 'Eugene Onegin' and I just finished the 'Fairy Tales.'" Lowenfeld told Sputnik. "The 'Fairy Tales' will be coming out by January or February. I hope 'Eugene Onegin' will come out next year by Pushkin's birthday - June 6th."

Lowenfeld added that his translation of another Pushkin masterpiece, the epic poem 'The Bronze Horseman,' is also complete and almost ready for publication as well.

Besides translations, Lowenfeld is undertaking other activities to promote Pushkin's literary legacy. Some projects are planned in cooperation with Moscow's Alexander Pushkin Sheremetyevo International Airport; others with the State Kremlin Orchestra, the Botanical garden of Moscow State University, the State Pushkin Museum.

In addition, Lowenfeld is working with foundations dedicated to celebrated English language poets such as America's national poet Walt Whitman and the celebrated Irish poet William Butler Yeats Foundation.

"All three great poets celebrated common themes - love, freedom, compassion, honor, and human dignity," he said.

Lowenfeld explained that translating Pushkin's masterworks requires the translator to be a poet too, in order to convey what lies beyond the words themselves.

"The music in the words is vital" Lowenfeld said. "In order to do a translation really well, it is not enough to just translate the meaning of the words. You really do have to recreate the feeling. So, you literally, in fact, have to put the energy that was felt by the poet into yourself and allow it to come out in a new language."

Lowenfeld compared such a state of mind with "opening the window of my soul" and "allowing Pushkin to walk in." It is both amazing and humbling," he said.

The acclaimed American poet pointed out that as a translator he must completely put aside who he is, but in doing so actually reveal who he is.

"It is a very strange thing, but when you do that, when you are true to the music of the poetry, it is actually easier to be literal. And in all cases the music will guide you and let you know when you are allowed to elaborate or evoke through synonyms whatever may be necessary in certain spots. That is the challenge and the joy of this work for me," he said.

Asked about his upcoming projects in Russia, Lowenfeld - a dual US and a Russian citizen - said his desire is "to criss-cross Russia by Pushkin" from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad and from Sochi to Murmansk, and also to bring some treasures of American and English-language poetry that share Pushkinian values.

"Possibly we will have a concert with the Kremlin Orchestra, possibly at the Sheremetyevo airport, which is named after Pushkin, and in the Moscow Conservatory. Another project involves the Botanical Garden in Moscow," he said.

Lowenfeld suggested that other planned activities may include an English-language performance of "Mozart and Salieri," likely to be staged as a "dinner theater" with subtitles.

"I think it would be a very unique experience for the diners," he said.

Lowenfeld explained numerous other activities have been planned, including the Pushkin festival in Ireland in cooperation with the William Yeats Foundation and a possible event at the Pushkin State Memorial Museum in Boldino in Russia's Nizhny Novgorod province. However, many of them remain conditional on obtaining support from local partners and subject to existing and future COVID-19-related restrictions.

"I am superstitious and don't want to say anything until we do something, but people can be assured that this is my life, this is my passion and I care about it very deeply," he said. "I will be definitely doing as many possible activities next year as I can."

In addition to Pushkin, Lowenfeld has translated into English the verses of other renowned Russian poets, including Mikhail Lermontov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelshtam.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden, Dems May Need to Start Worrying About Losing Congress Amid Growing Voter Discontent

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Soaring inflation, high gas prices, and concerns over mental fitness have sent President Joe Biden's poll numbers spiraling downward - a trend that spells trouble for Democrats with the 2022 congressional elections a year away.

The swoon comes as the president is two months away from wrapping up his first year in office and less than twelve months before voters go to the polls in the midterm elections to determine if Biden's party will continue to control both chambers of Congress. Although the Democrats currently have an 8-seat majority in the House, the Senate is split evenly across party lines with Vice President Kamala Harris, for now, holding the tie-breaking vote.

**TROUBLING INDICATORS**

In nearly every poll released in the course of the past month Biden's approval ratings have fallen dramatically - to as low as 36% in some polls - with voters expressing disappointment over his

performance across a wide range of issues including inflation, gas prices, the border crisis, and foreign policy.

Biden's approval rating in the RealClearPolitics.com (RCP) average of the ten most recent polls sank to 41.3% last week, representing a 13-point drop in six months and a new low since taking office. In addition, within the same six-month time period, Biden's disapproval rating per the RCP average soared by more than 10 points to a new high of 52.5%.

Earlier in November, a Hill-HarrisX Poll revealed that more than 60% of US voters want Biden to step aside after his first term in office ends.

Biden is even being dogged by growing concerns about his cognitive acuity: A

POLITICO/Morning Consult poll revealed last week that an alarming 48% of American voters do not believe Biden is "mentally fit."

Recent polling also shows a clear plurality of voters turning against Biden's Democratic Party overall, even after they finally managed to pass their \$1.9 trillion infrastructure spending bill in November. For example, a recent Quinnipiac University poll revealed some 46% of US registered voters want the Republican Party to win control of both houses in the midterms. In addition, candidates Biden backed in recent local races lost or fared poorly - including in states regarded as safe strongholds that voted for him in 2020. The Democrats lost the governor races in Virginia and control of both state legislature chambers at the beginning of November. At the same time, they only retained control of the governorship of New Jersey by a hairsbreadth.

Meanwhile, former President Donald Trump has a supposed "shadow" campaign operating targeting 2024, with internal polling showing him ahead of Biden in key swing states such as Georgia (+3%), Arizona (+8), Michigan (+12), Pennsylvania (+6), and Wisconsin (+10), according to a memorandum obtained by Politico.

#### PERFECT STORM: POCKETBOOK CRISES ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

Although the US has seen a drop in unemployment numbers under Biden and the stock market and vaccination rates are up, these developments have been offset by crises that have directly affected the household budgets of most Americans.

The annual rate of inflation per the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) reached 6.2% in October, the highest level in more than three decades.

A major problem for the White House is that voters see the administration as responsible.

According to a Yahoo News/YouGov poll released last week a clear majority (57 percent) blame Biden for the dramatic inflation spike.

In addition to steep prices, Americans are suffering from lack of items on shelves as the US continues feeling the pain from global supply chain issues.

Not to mention, gas prices have soared to seven-year highs, which prompted the Biden administration to release 50 million barrels from the strategic petroleum reserve.

Critics have also slammed Biden for the ongoing immigration crisis. A record 1.7 million illegal migrants were encountered on the southern border with Mexico in fiscal year 2021, according to government data released last month, which has forced Biden to revert to some of the Trump administration's tougher policies.

TIME FOR DEMS TO WORRY

Some experts believe the Democrats are headed for landslide losses in the 2022 midterms, although others say it is too soon to declare a Republican victory. However, there does seem to be consensus that it is time for the party of Jefferson to wake up and heed the warning signs. Some of the crises driving the poor performance perception one could argue are not of Biden's own making, yet some argue the president and Congress bear a significant amount of responsibility for what is ailing many voters right now.

"As mainstream 'experts' ridicule the notion that the Biden administration uncorked inflation, workers, retirees and the unemployed are in shock at checkout counters and gas pumps suffering mammoth price increases for goods and services," Political analyst and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel told Sputnik.

The trajectory pushed by Biden and the Democrats - in addition to Republicans in Name Only (RINOs) - is setting up an economic crash and more conflicts along numerous flashpoints, Ortel said. The analyst expressed doubts that anyone really believes "Team Biden and its enablers" are competent.

"Only DC insiders are likely still of this view whereas calls mount ever more fervently for an authentic renewal of broad-based economic opportunity here and sensible protection of America's remaining foreign interests abroad," Ortel said.

While underscoring that a truly representative sample of likely 2022 voters would terrify politicians in both parties, Ortel said current polling signals a rout is coming for the Democrats. He indicated that Democrats may be losing ground among independent voters, most of whom work in the private sector and are opposed to costly large-scale government initiatives.

University of Houston Professor of African-American History Gerald Horne said the crisis was "real" and the Democrats and Republicans alike had brought it on. However, the bottom line is the alarm bells are ringing louder for Biden's party.

"Yes, it is time for the Dems to worry about losing control," Horne warned.

What does not help, Horne added, is that both parties continued to obsess over narrow social issues pushed by their extreme wings.

"It is a bitter pill to swallow but a good deal of the Euro-American electorate cares more about trans-gender bathrooms, Critical Race Theory and depriving women of reproductive freedom, as opposed to subsidized child care, expansion of health care benefits, and saving the climate," Horne said.

However, Richard Winger, editor of Ballot Access News, said it was too soon for Democrats to panic. Now that the Build Back Better (BBB) infrastructure spending bill has finally passed into law, there is plenty of time for its provisions to make a positive impact in the months ahead and boost the Democrats' fortunes, he said.

California State University Professor Emeritus of Political Science Beau Grosscup cautioned that it is still too early to know how effective Republican voter suppression efforts are. There was also time for the Democrats to revise their national campaign strategy and present their legislative successes to the US public in a more effective light, Grosscup maintained.

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## US Senate Fails to Advance Defense Budget Bill, Lawmakers Mull Adding Anti-Russia Measures

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate failed to end debate on the updated version of the 2022 defense budget bill.

The US Senate vote failed 45-51 on Monday.

Five Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent, joined all Republicans in voting against advancing the defense spending bill. Sixty votes were needed to advance the legislation.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Jim Inhofe voted against advancing the bill in order to give Senators more time to try to include more amendments in the bill.

McConnell in earlier remarks on the Senate floor said the upper chamber should debate about Russia's military activities near the border with Ukraine and consider measures against Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

According to US media, President Joe Biden is urging Democrats in the Senate to reject new sanctions in defense budget that target Nord Stream 2 in order to avoid isolating Germany as tensions build on the Russia-Ukraine border.

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## Canada's Omicron Variant Case Count Rises to Five

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Canada now has at least five confirmed cases of omicron covid variant infections after another two were found in Ottawa, public officials have said.

"Yesterday the government of Ontario announced two individuals in Ottawa tested positive for the COVID-19 omicron variant with recent travel to Nigeria. We are now aware of two other returned travelers who have tested positive for the omicron variant," Ottawa Public Health said in a statement as quoted by CP24 on Monday.

The new announcement raises the total in Ottawa alone to four and Canada overall to five.

Earlier in the day, the Canadian province of Quebec reported the first case of infection with the newly discovered novel coronavirus variant Omicron.

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## California Man Charged With Conspiracy in January 6 Events at US Capitol - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US federal authorities have charged a California resident with conspiracy and obstruction of official proceedings during the events at the US Capitol on January 6 and with other offenses, the Justice Department said.

"Edward Badalian, 27, of Los Angeles, California, is charged in an indictment with conspiracy, obstruction of an official proceeding and aiding and abetting, tampering with documents or proceedings, and other offenses," the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday. Badalian was arrested on November 17 in Los Angeles and made his initial court appearance in the Central District of California. He was arraigned on November 23 in Washington, the release said.

"According to the indictment, in the fall of 2020, Badalian ... and others created a Telegram group chat, called the 'Patriots 45 MAGA Gang,' and used it as a platform to advocate violence against certain groups and individuals that supported the 2020 Presidential election results," the release added.

The group's activities included collecting weapons and tactical gear to bring to Washington on January 6 and storming past barricades to gain unlawful access to the Capitol, according to the release.

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US Senate Fails to Advance \$768Bln Defense Budget Bill to Final Vote

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate failed to end debate on the updated version of the 2022 defense budget bill.

The US Senate vote failed 45-51 on Monday.

Five Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent, joined all Republicans in voting against advancing the defense spending bill. Sixty votes were needed to advance the legislation.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Jim Inhofe voted against advancing the bill in order to give Senators more time to try to include more amendments in the bill.

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Russia Urges US to Stop Spreading 'Fake News' About Responses in OPCW Over Navalny Case

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in the United States urges the US government to review more carefully documents provided to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) regarding accusations about the alleged poisoning of blogger Alexei Navalny.

Earlier on Monday, the US State Department accused Russia of failing to address questions from member states of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) regarding the alleged poisoning of Navalny with the use of Novichok nerve agent.

"We call on StateAVC [State Department Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance] to review more carefully documents provided by Russia at the OPCW instead of spreading fake news," the Russian Embassy said via witter on Monday. "Russia is committed to CWC [Chemical Weapons Convention] and urges the United States to fulfill its obligations under the Convention and eliminate its CW [chemical weapons]."

The 26th session of the Conference of the States Parties to the OPCW is being held in The Hague from November 29 to December 3.

Russian Permanent Representative to the OPCW Alexander Shulgin said earlier on Monday that Russia has provided comprehensive answers to the questions posed by the OPCW members.

In August 2020, Navalny was allegedly poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent and was airlifted to Berlin for medical treatment. After Navalny returned to Moscow in January 2021, he was arrested on charges of violating the conditions of his his parole. Later, his suspended sentence was replaced with a prison sentence.

The United States and other countries sent a list of questions to Russia about the Navalny case through the OPCW. In October, Moscow sent a counter request addressed to Germany, France, Sweden and the technical secretariat of the organization.

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Pentagon Global Posture Review Strengthens Deterrence Against Russia, China - Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department's Global Posture Review strengthens deterrence against Russia and China, Mara Karlin, who performs the duties of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, said.

"The Global Posture Review directs additional cooperation with allies and partners across the region to advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter potential military aggression from China and threats from North Korea," Karlin said on Monday.

Karlin explained that these initiatives include seeking greater regional access from military partnership activities, enhancing infrastructure in Australia and the Pacific Islands and planning rotational aircraft deployments in Australia.

Karlin said the Global Posture Review strengthens the combat-credible deterrent against Russian in Europe and enables NATO forces to operate more effectively.

The Global Posture Review assessed evolving counterterrorism requirements following the end of the US military presence in Afghanistan and approach toward Iran, she said.

With respect to Iraq and Syria, the Global Posture Review directs the Defense Department to continue to support the campaign to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) and build the capacity of partner forces, Karlin said.

Moreover, the Global Posture review directs the Defense Department to conduct additional analysis concerning enduring posture requirements in the Middle East, she also said. In Africa, the Global Posture Review analysis suggests supporting several ongoing interagency reviews to ensure the Defense Department has an appropriately-scoped posture to monitor threats from regional violent extremist groups, partners, Karlin added. In Central and South America and the Caribbean, the Global Posture Review directs the Defense Department to continue to support US efforts on transnational challenges, including counternarcotics missions, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, according to Karlin.

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#### **Pentagon Plans to Boost US Military Bases in Australia, Guam Against China - Reports**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) The US Defense Department plans to modernize military bases it operates from in Australia and on the western Pacific island of Guam as part of its strategy to counter-balance China, but does not plan to shift any additional forces to the area, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The base upgrades follow a Defense Department review of US military resources around the world, but the plans do not include any provisions to move additional military forces to those areas, the report said.

US forces will continue in other deployments aimed at deterring Russia while combating terrorist threats in the Middle East and across Africa, the report added.

An unclassified version of the new assessment, known as the Global Posture Review, was due to be released later on Monday and it includes provisions to modernize and expand airfields at the Australian and Guam bases, according to the report.

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#### **CDC 'Strengthening Recommendation' on COVID-19 Vaccine Booster Doses for Adults - Director**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is strengthening its recommendation on COVID-19 vaccine booster doses for adults, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said.

"Today, CDC is strengthening its recommendation on booster doses for individuals who are 18 years and older," Walensky said in a statement on Monday. "Everyone aged 18 and older should get a booster shot either... six months after their initial Pfizer or Moderna series or two months after their initial J&J vaccine."

Walensky said the recent surge of the novel coronavirus Omicron variant has highlighted the importance of immunization along with other protective measures.

Early data from South Africa suggest increased transmission of the Omicron variant and scientists in the United States and around the world are examining vaccine effectiveness related to this variant, she said.

The CDC director encouraged people to get vaccinated and take a test if they feel sick. On Friday, the World Health Organization identified the new strain of the coronavirus first reported in South Africa, as one of concern, since it may be more transmissible and dangerous. However, local doctors and officials have reported that the reported cases are mild. Cases have been confirmed in multiple countries and some governments rushed to suspend travel with southern African nations slow the spread of the new variant.

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Omicron Poses Greater Risks to US Economy, Inflation - Powell

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The new COVID-19 strain, the Omicron, could bring greater threat to US economic recovery and inflation, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in Senate testimony.

"The recent rise in COVID-19 cases and the emergence of the Omicron variant pose downside risks to employment and economic activity and increased uncertainty for inflation," Powell said in a speech prepared for delivery during his testimony to the Senate on Tuesday. "Greater concerns about the virus could reduce people's willingness to work in person, which would slow progress in the labor market and intensify supply-chain disruptions."

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.0% in the third.

The Fed 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 due to supply chain disruptions.

The Labor Department reported earlier this month 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.

Powell and Fed officials who share his thinking have described current price pressures in the economy as "transient", meaning things could return to normal once pandemic-related disruptions in labor and materials supply get sorted out. The Fed's own tolerance for inflation is supposed to be at just 2% per annum. It is not known if the Omicron will change the central bank's view of transitory inflation.

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US Talks With Russia on Space Crew Exchange Going 'Very Well' - NASA Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Talks between NASA and Roscosmos Russian Federal Space Agency officials about carrying out a cosmonaut-astronaut crew exchange program starting in fall 2022 are going well, NASA International Space Station (ISS) Deputy Manager Dana Weigel said at a press conference.

"We've had a lot of good discussions with our Russian colleagues about doing a crew exchange," Weigel told a press conference at the Johnson Space Center in Houston on Monday. "Those discussions are moving along very well. We are targeting next fall to start that exchange... Those discussions are still progressing."

The hope and goal on both sides is to fly a Russian cosmonaut on the fifth US SpaceX vehicle and for an astronaut to fly up to the ISS on a Soyuz flight, Weigel explained.

"Hopefully we'll get something signed very shortly," Weigel said.

NASA has started initial planning for cooperative missions with the Russian federal space agency Roscosmos to fly US astronauts on Soyuz vehicles and Russian cosmonauts on SpaceX ones, agency Associate Administrator for Space Operations Kathy Lueders said on October 30.

However, on November 9, Sputnik reported that before such cross flights could be approved, Roscosmos officials will ask NASA why one of the SpaceX Crew Dragon parachutes failed on a recent mission. The four astronauts on board returned safely as the other parachutes successfully deployed.

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Fed's Powell Warns Omicron Poses Risks to US Economy, Increases Uncertainty for Inflation

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The new COVID-19 strain, the Omicron, could bring greater threat to US economic recovery and inflation, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in Senate testimony.

"The recent rise in COVID-19 cases and the emergence of the Omicron variant pose downside risks to employment and economic activity and increased uncertainty for inflation," Powell said in a speech prepared for delivery during his testimony to the Senate on Tuesday. "Greater concerns about the virus could reduce people's willingness to work in person, which would slow progress in the labor market and intensify supply-chain disruptions."

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## US Stocks Recover Bulk of Omicron-Triggered Panic Selling

NEW YORK, November 29 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's three major indexes rebounded strongly on Monday from last week's panic selling sparked by the disclosure about the new coronavirus strain - the Omicron.

"US stocks are rebounding as optimism grows that the Omicron variant is a cause for concern, but not a 'cause for panic' and could potentially be the catalyst needed to get more of the country vaccinated," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said on Monday.

"Investors will learn over the next couple of weeks if the Omicron variant causes more severe disease than the other variants."

Nasdaq Composite, the pandemic-era go-to index that provides investors the assurance of steady revenues from stay-home stocks, led gains, closing up 291 points, or 1.9%, at 15,783.

Nasdaq, which groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, fell 2.2% on Friday for its sharpest one-day decline since September 28.

The S&P 500 finished up 57 points, or 1.2%, at 4,652. The index, which consists of the top 500 US stocks, lost 2.3% on Friday for its biggest one-day tumble since January 27.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average settled up 237 points, or 0.7%, at 35,136. The Dow, a blue-chip index grouping mainly industrial stocks, fell 2.5% on Friday for its worst one-day since October 28, 2020.

The World Health Organization said on Monday the Omicron potentially carried a high risk of infection, casting a shadow over economic recovery from the near two-year long COVID-19 pandemic. But some experts said the strain might prove milder than initially feared.

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## Pentagon Says US Does Not Want to See Aggressive Action From Russia-Belarus Drills

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States does not want to see any aggressive or destabilizing actions during the military drills of Russia and Belarus near the Ukrainian border since the situation there is already tense, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"We don't want to see actions that are unnecessarily aggressive or destabilizing to what is already a very tense situation [on the Russian-Ukrainian border]," Kirby said on Monday.

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## US Defense Chief Orders Inquiry Into 2019 Civilian Casualty Airstrike Incident - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered an inquiry into a 2019 airstrike in Syria that led to dozens of civilian casualties, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"The Secretary has directed today a review of the civilian casualty incident that occurred on March 18, 2019 in Baghuz, Syria," Kirby said on Monday. "The inquiry will include an assessment of the following things: the civilian casualties that resulted from the incident, compliance with the law of war, record keeping and reporting procedures, whether mitigation measure identified in previous investigations into the incident were in fact implemented effectively, whether accountability measures would be appropriate, and finally, whether authorities, procedures or processes should be altered."

US Army Forces Command chief Michael Garrett will lead the effort and has been given 90 days to complete the inquiry, Kirby added.

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Over 30 Hospitals in New York to Cease Elective Procedures Amid COVID-19 Surge - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - More than 30 hospitals in New York State will cease elective procedures as a result of the insufficient bed capacity amid the COVID-19 surge, Governor Kathy Hochul said.

"We are talking about approximately 32-36 hospitals that have fallen in that category of having 10 percent or less bed capacity," Hochul said during a virtual press briefing on Monday.

The hospitals will cease non-essential procedures beginning on December 3, Hochul said, adding that the state authorities will reassess the situation on January 15.

"Currently, we have 2,829 people in hospitals right now. We know that the trend is continuing in a bad direction," Hochul also said.

The governor noted that more than 95 percent of the residents received at least one vaccine shot, but pointed out that the overall immunization rate in upstate New York is worse than in other areas.

Wadsworth Center Laboratory of Viral Diseases head Kirsten St. George reassured residents that the new Omicron variant had not reached the region yet.

"We just checked international databases, and still nothing reported in New York and anywhere in the United States," she explained during the same press briefing.

On November 27, Hochul issued a state of emergency in the state due to a spike in new coronavirus infections and hospitalizations, according to her executive order.

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Pentagon Global Posture Review Strengthens Deterrence Against Russia in Europe - Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department's newly-completed Global Posture Review strengthens deterrence against Russia in Europe, Mara Karlin, who performs the duties for Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, said.

"Turning to Europe, the Global Posture Review strengthens the combat credible deterrent against Russian aggression in Europe and enables NATO forces to operate more effectively," Karlin said during a press briefing on Monday.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) -

#### JCPOA TALKS

\* Iran is still not ready to speak directly with the United States as part of the process of restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said on Monday.

\* The process of restoring the JCPOA will not be easy, the contradictions between Iran and the Western participants are quite large, Ulyanov said.

\* The Iranians agreed to work on the nuclear track, which implies Tehran's return to the original parameters of the deal from 2015, Ulyanov said.

\* The United States' goal of full return to compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement JCPOA has not changed, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* The order for 27 Russian diplomats to leave the United States by late January is not an expulsion, as Moscow can assign other diplomatic members instead of those departing ones, State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Monday, calling it a measure to ensure greater parity,

\* The work on preparing a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, is at the advanced stage, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

\* Moscow will surely respond to Washington's decision to expel more Russian diplomats, Ryabkov said.

\* A meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Stockholm on the sidelines of the OSCE foreign ministers' summit is being prepared, Ryabkov said.

\* The Kremlin believes it is very important that the United States will refrain from pressuring anyone during the certification of the Nord Stream 2 project, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

#### CORONAVIRUS VARIANT OMICRON

\* The Canadian province of Quebec has reported the first case of infection with the newly discovered novel coronavirus variant Omicron, Provincial Minister of Health and Social Services Christian Dube said on Monday.

\* The development of a vaccine against the omicron coronavirus strain will take no more than 10 days, another 45-50 days are needed for regulatory procedures, Alexander Gintsburg, the director of Russia's Gamaleya Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology, said.

\* US President Joe Biden said that he does not anticipate additional travel restrictions over the newly-identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

\* Russia's Federal Biomedical Agency is ready very quickly, in a few days, to make a test system for detecting the omicron coronavirus strain, FMBA chief Veronika Skvortsova said.

\* Johnson & Johnson said on Monday that it is starting the development of a new COVID-19 vaccine against the newly discovered variant Omicron while evaluating the effectiveness of its current single dose vaccine.

#### BELARUSIAN-POLISH BORDER CRISIS

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko discussed the situation on the Belarusian-Polish border by phone, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

\* Lukashenko said that Western countries are using the situation with migrants to contain the Belarusian military in case of a conflict against Russia.

#### TWITTER LEADERSHIP CHANGES

\* Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey is due to step down, CNBC reported on Monday, citing sources.

\* Twitter chief technology officer, Parag Agrawal, is due to replace Jack Dorsey as CEO, Twitter announced.

\* Trading in shares of the microblogging service Twitter was temporarily suspended amid talks that Dorsey was stepping down.

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US to Expand Military Infrastructure in Australia, Pacific Islands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The newly-completed Global Posture Review will seek to enhance US military infrastructure in Australia and the Pacific islands to boost deterrence capabilities against China, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Mara Karlin said on Monday.

"The Global Posture Review directs additional cooperation with allies and partners across the region to advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter potential military aggression from China and threats from North Korea," Karlin said on Monday. "These initiatives include seeking greater regional access from military partnership activities, enhancing infrastructure in Australia and the Pacific Islands and planning rotational aircraft deployments in Australia."

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#### Nine Large US Retailers Ordered to 'Find Causes' Behind Supply Disruptions - FTC

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Federal Trade Commission said it has ordered nine large US retailers, wholesalers and consumer goods suppliers to provide detailed information on what might be behind the continued supply chain disruptions from the COVID-19 crisis.

"The orders are being sent to Walmart Inc., Amazon.Com, Inc., Kroger Co., C&S Wholesale Grocers, Inc., Associated Wholesale Grocers, Inc., McLane Co, Inc. Procter & Gamble Co, Tyson Foods, Inc., and Kraft Heinz Co," the FTC said in a statement. "The companies will have 45 days from the date they received the order to respond."

The firms have been authorized to conduct wide-ranging studies that do not have a specific law enforcement purpose, the commission noted.

Under the mission, they are "to help shed light on the causes behind ongoing supply chain disruptions and how these disruptions are causing serious and ongoing hardships for consumers and harming competition in the US economy," the FTC said.

The orders require the companies to detail the primary factors disrupting their ability to obtain, transport and distribute their products; the impact these disruptions are having in terms of delayed and canceled orders, increased costs and prices; the products, suppliers and inputs most affected; and the steps the companies are taking to alleviate disruptions; and how they allocate products among their stores when they are in short supply.

The FTC is requiring the companies to provide internal documents regarding the supply chain disruptions, including strategies related to supply chains; pricing; marketing and promotions; costs, profit margins and sales volumes; selection of suppliers and brands; and market shares. "The study will examine whether supply chain disruptions are leading to specific bottlenecks, shortages, anticompetitive practices, or contributing to rising consumer prices," the commission said.

In addition, the FTC said it was soliciting voluntary comments from retailers, consumer goods suppliers, wholesalers, and consumers regarding their views on how supply chain issues are affecting competition in consumer goods markets. These comments provide an opportunity for market participants to surface additional issues and examples of how supply chain disruptions are affecting competition, it said.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.1% in the third.

The Fed 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 due to supply chain disruptions.

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#### Pentagon Chief Orders New Inquiry Into Deadly 2019 US Airstrike in Syria - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin ordered a new investigation into a deadly US airstrike that killed dozens of women and children in Syria in 2019, The New York Times reported on Monday citing a defense official.

US Army Forces Command chief Michael Garrett will lead the investigation and have 90 days to review the handling of previous inquiries into the incident and further probe other reports of civilian casualties, possible violations of laws of war, accountability issues, and record-keeping errors, the report said.

The US Defense Department will announce plans about the investigation later on Monday after Congress has been notified.

The airstrike, which purportedly took place on March 18, 2019 during the battle of Baghuz, is reported to have killed up to 80 people. It was said to have been called in by Task Force 9, a secret US special operations unit responsible for ground operations in Syria.

An investigation into the incident never occurred, and mentions of it were removed from a recent Defense Department report on the civilian casualties reporting process, according to the report.

The US Central Command is reported to have said the strike killed 16 militants and four civilians, while the status of another 60 people was unclear, as the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) occasionally uses women and children as fighters too.

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#### US Accuses Venezuelan Diplomat of Food and Drug Contract Bribery Scheme - Court Filings

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab bribed government officials in Venezuela for multi-million dollar food and medicine contracts, US government prosecutors alleged in court filings published Monday.

"In addition, the government may introduce under Rule 404(b) evidence underlying [Alex Saab's] past bad acts ... Those prior bad acts also include post indictment bribing of Venezuelan officials to obtain and retain contracts and other business advantages, including obtaining multi-million dollar food and medicine contracts with entities and instrumentalities owned and controlled by the Venezuelan government," the filing said.

Saab is currently detained in the US, where he faces charges for financial crimes related to violation of sanctions against Iran, to which he has pleaded not guilty. The US earlier in November dropped the most serious money laundering charges against Saab.

The government of President Nicolas Maduro has said that Saab was kidnapped and vowed to seek the help of international organizations to fight for his release. The arrest led to the suspension of Venezuelan participation in talks with political opposition.

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**Blinken Says Discussed Belarus, Ukraine With Austrian Counterpart**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday he had a telephone call with Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Linhart to discuss security matters linked to Ukraine and Belarus.

"Good phone call today with Foreign Minister [Linhart] about Belarus, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans," Blinken wrote on Twitter. "Austria is a key partner, and we agreed on the vital importance of the transatlantic relationship for the security and prosperity of Europe, the US, and the world."

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a separate press release that Blinken also conveyed US support for the European Union as it deals with migration issues from Belarus. Moreover, Blinken highlighted Austria's support for the eventual EU membership for the six Western Balkan countries Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia.

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**Iran Enriching Uranium to 90% Would Be Provocative Act - US State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Iran enriching uranium to 90% will be a provocative step amid ongoing negotiations to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), US State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Monday.

"The enrichment to 90% obviously would be a provocative act," Porter told a press briefing. Earlier in the day, Axios reported that Israel has shared with the United States and several European allies of Washington intelligence that Iran is already taking technical steps to enrich uranium to 90%, a level that is only useful for making nuclear weapons.

US and Israeli intelligence analysts have suggested that Iran could produce its own nuclear weapons within the next one to two years, according to the report.

The seventh round of negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear deal started on Monday. Recently, Iran stated that the lifting of US sanctions will be on the agenda of the talks.

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**REVIEW - Biden, Dems May Need to Start Worrying About Losing Congress Amid Growing Voter Discontent**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Soaring inflation, high gas prices, and concerns over mental fitness have sent President Joe Biden's poll numbers spiraling downward - a trend that spells trouble for Democrats with the 2022 congressional elections a year away.

The swoon comes as the president is two months away from wrapping up his first year in office and less than twelve months before voters go to the polls in the midterm elections to determine if Biden's party will continue to control both chambers of Congress. Although the Democrats currently have an 8-seat majority in the House, the Senate is split evenly across party lines with Vice President Kamala Harris, for now, holding the tie-breaking vote.

#### TROUBLING INDICATORS

In nearly every poll released in the course of the past month Biden's approval ratings have fallen dramatically - to as low as 36% in some polls - with voters expressing disappointment over his performance across a wide range of issues including inflation, gas prices, the border crisis, and foreign policy.

Biden's approval rating in the RealClearPolitics.com (RCP) average of the ten most recent polls sank to 41.3% last week, representing a 13-point drop in six months and a new low since taking office. In addition, within the same six-month time period, Biden's disapproval rating per the RCP average soared by more than 10 points to a new high of 52.5%.

Earlier in November, a Hill-HarrisX Poll revealed that more than 60% of US voters want Biden to step aside after his first term in office ends.

Biden is even being dogged by growing concerns about his cognitive acuity: A

POLITICO/Morning Consult poll revealed last week that an alarming 48% of American voters do not believe Biden is "mentally fit."

Recent polling also shows a clear plurality of voters turning against Biden's Democratic Party overall, even after they finally managed to pass their \$1.9 trillion infrastructure spending bill in November. For example, a recent Quinnipiac University poll revealed some 46% of US registered voters want the Republican Party to win control of both houses in the midterms.

In addition, candidates Biden backed in recent local races lost or fared poorly - including in states regarded as safe strongholds that voted for him in 2020. The Democrats lost the governor races in Virginia and control of both state legislature chambers at the beginning of November. At the same time, they only retained control of the governorship of New Jersey by a hairsbreadth.

Meanwhile, former President Donald Trump has a supposed "shadow" campaign operating targeting 2024, with internal polling showing him ahead of Biden in key swing states such as Georgia (+3%), Arizona (+8), Michigan (+12), Pennsylvania (+6), and Wisconsin (+10), according to a memorandum obtained by Politico.

#### PERFECT STORM: POCKETBOOK CRISES ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

Although the US has seen a drop in unemployment numbers under Biden and the stock market and vaccination rates are up, these developments have been offset by crises that have directly affected the household budgets of most Americans.

The annual rate of inflation per the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) reached 6.2% in October, the highest level in more than three decades.

A major problem for the White House is that voters see the administration as responsible. According to a Yahoo News/YouGov poll released last week a clear majority (57 percent) blame Biden for the dramatic inflation spike.

In addition to steep prices, Americans are suffering from lack of items on shelves as the US continues feeling the pain from global supply chain issues.

Not to mention, gas prices have soared to seven-year highs, which prompted the Biden administration to release 50 million barrels from the strategic petroleum reserve.

Critics have also slammed Biden for the ongoing immigration crisis. A record 1.7 million illegal migrants were encountered on the southern border with Mexico in fiscal year 2021, according to government data released last month, which has forced Biden to revert to some of the Trump administration's tougher policies.

#### TIME FOR DEMS TO WORRY

Some experts believe the Democrats are headed for landslide losses in the 2022 midterms, although others say it is too soon to declare a Republican victory. However, there does seem to be consensus that it is time for the party of Jefferson to wake up and heed the warning signs. Some of the crises driving the poor performance perception one could argue are not of Biden's own making, yet some argue the president and Congress bear a significant amount of responsibility for what is ailing many voters right now.

"As mainstream 'experts' ridicule the notion that the Biden administration uncorked inflation, workers, retirees and the unemployed are in shock at checkout counters and gas pumps suffering mammoth price increases for goods and services," Political analyst and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel told Sputnik.

The trajectory pushed by Biden and the Democrats - in addition to Republicans in Name Only (RINOs) - is setting up an economic crash and more conflicts along numerous flashpoints, Ortel said. The analyst expressed doubts that anyone really believes "Team Biden and its enablers" are competent.

"Only DC insiders are likely still of this view whereas calls mount ever more fervently for an authentic renewal of broad-based economic opportunity here and sensible protection of America's remaining foreign interests abroad," Ortel said.

While underscoring that a truly representative sample of likely 2022 voters would terrify politicians in both parties, Ortel said current polling signals a rout is coming for the Democrats. He indicated that Democrats may be losing ground among independent voters, most of whom work in the private sector and are opposed to costly large-scale government initiatives.

University of Houston Professor of African-American History Gerald Horne said the crisis was "real" and the Democrats and Republicans alike had brought it on. However, the bottom line is the alarm bells are ringing louder for Biden's party.

"Yes, it is time for the Dems to worry about losing control," Horne warned.

What does not help, Horne added, is that both parties continued to obsess over narrow social issues pushed by their extreme wings.

"It is a bitter pill to swallow but a good deal of the Euro-American electorate cares more about trans-gender bathrooms, Critical Race Theory and depriving women of reproductive freedom, as opposed to subsidized child care, expansion of health care benefits, and saving the climate," Horne said.

However, Richard Winger, editor of Ballot Access News, said it was too soon for Democrats to panic. Now that the Build Back Better (BBB) infrastructure spending bill has finally passed into law, there is plenty of time for its provisions to make a positive impact in the months ahead and boost the Democrats' fortunes, he said.

California State University Professor Emeritus of Political Science Beau Grosscup cautioned that it is still too early to know how effective Republican voter suppression efforts are. There was also time for the Democrats to revise their national campaign strategy and present their legislative successes to the US public in a more effective light, Grosscup maintained.

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US State Dept. Says Upcoming Departure of Russian Diplomats 'Not An Expulsion'

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The order for 27 Russian diplomats to leave the United States by late January is not an expulsion, as Moscow can assign other diplomatic members instead of those departing ones, State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Monday, calling it a measure to ensure greater parity,

On Saturday, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said that 27 Russian diplomats will leave the country on January 30.

"What's happening is not an expulsion. The Russian government has been informed of course, and it can replace those who are departing by assigning other members of its diplomatic corps," Porter told a press briefing. "These procedures are not punitive, but they've been introduced to enable greater parity between US and Russian bilateral missions."

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UN Says Blanket Barring of Citizen Over Omicron Variant 'Form of Collective Punishment'  
UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations views the restrictions on the travel of citizens from southern African nations imposed by the United States and several other countries over concerns about the new coronavirus variant Omicron as a form of collective punishment, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was deeply concerned about the isolation of southern African countries due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions.

"We think there are more science-based solutions... increased testing and even if people need to go into quarantine, but blanket barring of certain citizens is a form of collective punishment in a way," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric also noted the uncertainties expressed earlier by the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding the transmissibility of the new variant and the efficacy of vaccines against it.

"We need to be guided by science," he said.

Last week, the WHO labeled the new COVID-19 variant, first identified in South Africa, as one of concern, as it is reported to carry a high number of mutations which possibly make it more transmissible and dangerous. The WHO has dubbed it Omicron, the 15th letter of the Greek alphabet.

Cases of the new variant have already been confirmed in multiple countries, and governments, including the United States, Israel, Japan, Chile and the United Kingdom, rushed to suspend travel with southern African nations in order to prevent the spread of the new strain. -

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Subject:

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US House Panel to Vote to Cite Former Official for Criminal Contempt in January 6 Probe

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the events at the Capitol on January 6 said it will vote on Wednesday to cite former President Donald Trump's Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey Clark for criminal conduct for refusing to cooperate with the probe.

"Wednesday, December 1st at 7:00 p.m. the Select Committee will vote on a report recommending that the House of Representatives cite Jeffrey Clark for criminal contempt of Congress and refer him for prosecution," the panel said via Twitter on Monday.

Clark, who alleged fraud in the 2020 presidential election, is declining to cooperate with US House investigation, according to his attorney Harry MacDougald.

MacDougald said in early November that the information the panel is trying to obtain from Clark appears to be unrelated to the events that occurred at the US Capitol on January 6.

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

Former Trump adviser Steve 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.

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US Ready to Give South Africa More COVID-19 Shots - White House

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to give South Africa additional doses of COVID-19 vaccines once the country is ready to receive them, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We are prepared to provide [South Africa] with additional doses when they're prepared to receive them," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The US has sent close to 8 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to South Africa so far, and over 93 million to the African continent as a whole, Psaki said.

The World Health Organization on Friday identified a new strain of the coronavirus first reported in South Africa, Omicron, as a variant of concern. Cases of the Omicron variant have already been confirmed in multiple countries, prompting governments around the world to suspend travel with southern African nations in order to prevent its spread.

The Biden administration was among those who announced new travel restrictions on southern African countries in order to slow the spread of the Omicron variant. The decision was not meant to punish any country, but to protect the American people, Psaki said.

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Israel Shares Intel With US, Allies on Iran Moving to Enrich Uranium to 90% - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Israel has shared with the United States and several European allies of Washington intelligence that Iran is already taking technical steps to enrich uranium to 90%, a level that is only useful for making nuclear weapons, Axios reported on Monday, citing sources.

Israel issued the warnings as talks to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which restrains Iran's nuclear program, restart in Vienna on Monday after a five month gap. Iran is already enriching uranium to 60%, far above the levels allowed in the deal, the report said.

The Axios report, if confirmed, provides more alleged details to confirm a speech that Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz gave on Monday acknowledging that Israel had already shared intelligence with its allies pointing to Iran's continued race toward a nuclear weapon in violation of the JCPOA, Axios noted.

US and Israeli intelligence analysts have reportedly suggested that Iran could produce its own nuclear weapons within the next one to two years.

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Seven UN Staffers in Unexplained Detention as Ethiopia Arrests UNICEF Employee - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Ethiopian authorities on Monday detained a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) employee, bringing the total of United Nations staff members arrested to seven, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"We were advised this morning that a UNICEF colleague was detained, which means that seven UN staff remain in unexplained and unacceptable detention," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Another three UN dependents also remain in detention "in the same conditions," Dujarric added. Earlier in November, at least 16 local UN staff and dependents and 70 truck drivers contracted by the United Nations were detained across Ethiopia. According to Dujarric, the truck drivers were released last week.

Earlier this month, the Ethiopian government declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide, allowing authorities to detain everyone suspected to have ties with terrorists. In May, Ethiopia designated the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a terrorist organization.

Ethiopia has been embroiled in a domestic conflict since last November when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in the country's northern parts.

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#### Ex-US Capitol Police Officer Appears in Court for January 6 Related Charges - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Former US Capitol Police officer Michael Riley made his first court appearance on Monday for charges related to the events at the Capitol on January 6, BuzzFeed News reported.

In October, a US grand jury charged Riley with two counts of obstructing justice for initiating contact with an unnamed person and urging them to take down social media posts that showed their presence inside the US Capitol complex during the January 6 events.

US Judge Amy Berman Jackson said Riley's defense team needs more time to prepare before setting a trial date and set a status hearing for January 14.

Federal prosecutors have made a tentative plea offer to Jackson, the report said.

In the ten months since January 6, more than 675 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 US states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol.

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#### UN Urges Philippines Allowing Ressa to Travel to Oslo for Nobel Prize Ceremony - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on the Philippine government to allow journalist Maria Ressa to travel to Oslo, Norway, to receive her Nobel Peace Prize award next month, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

Ressa, a Filipino-American journalist known for her reporting on Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war, was awarded Nobel Prize in October along with Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov for "their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression."

"We are indeed very concerned about the travel restrictions placed by the government of Philippines on Maria Ressa, preventing her from traveling in person to receive the Nobel Peace

Prize," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "We urge the government of the Philippines to immediately withdraw any such restrictions and allow her to travel to Oslo."

In 2020, a Manila court convicted Ressa of libel and she is currently facing other charges, including evasion of taxes. The charges are preventing her from traveling to Oslo for the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony scheduled to be held on December 10.

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**White House Says US Not Reconsidering Release of Oil From Strategic Reserve**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not reconsidering its decision to release oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserves, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We are not reconsidering, no," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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**White House Says US Objective of Return to Mutual Compliance With JCPOA 'Has Not Changed'**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States' goal of full return to compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has not changed, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

Negotiations to restore the nuclear agreement with Iran and return the United States to comply with it resumed in the Austrian capital of Vienna earlier in the day.

"Our objective has not changed," Psaki said. "It remains a mutual return to full compliance with the JCPOA."

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**US Pending Home Sales Up in October Amid Rising Interest Rates Concern - Realtors Group**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US pending home sales, or signed contracts to buy existing homes, rose 7.5% in October from a decline the previous month as purchasers sought to get ahead of a widely anticipated hike in interest and mortgage rates, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said.

"Motivated by fast-rising rents and the anticipated increase in mortgage rates, consumers that are on strong financial footing are signing contracts to purchase a home sooner rather than

later," NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said in a news release. "This solid buying is a testament to demand still being relatively high, as it is occurring during a time when inventory is still markedly low."

Pending home sales fell an unexpected 2.3% in September, according to NAR's records. October's surge was probably the result of the desire of home buyers to try and lock in a purchase before the year ended as many continued to find very limited homes listed for sale, NAR said.

Total housing inventory at the end of October was down 0.8% from September, when it stood at 1.25 million units, and down 12.0% from one year ago, when it was at 1.42 million, NAR said. At October's sales pace, what was sold represented a 2.4-month supply. A balanced market would be represented by sales of 4 to 6-month supply, NAR said.

Dire housing shortages in the United States since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and last year's coronavirus outbreak have pushed up existing home prices to beyond the means of many Americans.

The median selling price for existing-homes in the United States rose 17.8% in July from a year earlier to hit a record high of \$359,900.

To compound the housing problem, the Federal Reserve is expected to raise interest rates anywhere between the middle and end of 2022 in what would be the first hike of its kind since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

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Canada's Quebec Discovers First Case of COVID-19 Omicron Variant - Health Minister

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Quebec has reported the first case of infection with the newly discovered novel coronavirus variant Omicron, Provincial Minister of Health and Social Services Christian Dube said on Monday.

"We can confirm that at this moment first case of the new variant has been confirmed in Quebec this morning," Dube said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says New Omicron Variant 'Cause for Concern, Not for Panic'

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The newly-identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus is a cause for concern but not for panic, US President Joe Biden said on Monday. "This variant is a cause for concern, not a cause for panic ... We have more tools today to fight the variant than we've ever had before," Biden said.

Biden noted that the Omicron coronavirus variant is expected to reach the United States soon and urged the public to get fully vaccinated or have booster shots, adding that the vaccines available should provide some protection against the new strain.

The US administration will reveal on Thursday its strategy to fight the anticipated surge of coronavirus cases this winter, but the strategy will not include imposing lockdowns, Biden said. The strategy will focus on facilitating more widespread vaccinations, boosters, testing, among other efforts, he added.

Moreover, Biden said he does not anticipate additional travel restrictions due to concerns over the Omicron variant.

Biden said he will direct the Food and Drug Administration as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to use the quickest process available to approve any modified vaccines designed to protect against the Omicron variant. Biden said his administration is already working with officials at Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson to develop contingency plans to make and deploy modified vaccines or boosters if needed.

On Friday, the World Health Organization identified the new strain of the coronavirus first reported in South Africa, Omicron, as one 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.

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#### **Biden Says Does Not Anticipate Additional Travel Restrictions Over Omicron Variant**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he does not anticipate additional travel restrictions over the newly-identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

"The degree of the spread impacts on whether or not there is a need for travel restrictions, but I do not anticipate that at this point," Biden told reporters at the White House.

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#### **Biden Says Lockdowns Not Part of COVID-19 Strategy This Winter, Will Detail Plans Thursday**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that later this week he will reveal his administration's strategy to fight the anticipated surge of the novel coronavirus cases this winter, but the strategy will not include imposing lockdowns.

"On Thursday, I'll be putting forward a detailed strategy outlining how we're going to fight COVID-19 this winter; not with lockdowns or shutdowns, but with more widespread vaccinations, boosters, testing and more," Biden said during a press conference.

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**Biden Ready to Release More Oil From Strategic Reserve to Keep Prices Down- Energy Adviser**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and his administration are prepared to release more oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve to markets to prevent global oil prices from soaring, US State Department Senior Adviser for Global Energy Security Amos Hochstein said on Monday.

"Absolutely. This is a tool that was available to us and will be available again," Hochstein told CNBC in Dubai.

The Biden administration has said it will release millions of barrels of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in order to compensate for the refusal of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to expand its own production to meet rising global demand.

Hochstein noted the 30 million barrels release was an exchange where companies and traders can take the oil now and return it over a scheduled period of time.

"That means the Strategic Petroleum Reserve will be replenished," Hochstein said.

The US government retained enough oil reserves to repeat its current planned action in the future if the need to do so arose, Hochstein added.

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**US Court Halts Biden Administration's Vaccine Mandate for Healthcare Workers - Order**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – A US court halted on Monday a vaccine mandate imposed by the Biden administration on all healthcare workers.

"For the foregoing reasons, Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Injunction is granted," judge Matthew Schelp from the US district court for the Eastern District of Missouri said in an order related to a lawsuit filed by 10 US states, namely Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

The court ordered the defendants immediately cease all implementation or enforcement of the mandate with Comment Period as to any Medicare and Medicaid certified providers and suppliers within those 10 states. The judge also said that defendants are preliminarily enjoined from the implementation and enforcement of this mandate.

On November 4, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued an Interim Final Rule with Comment Period that requires nearly every employee, volunteer, and third-party contractor working at 15 categories of healthcare facilities to be vaccinated against COVID-19, the court filing said. Five days later, 10 US states filed a complaint challenging this mandate.

The attorneys generals of several US states announced earlier in November their intention to sue the Biden administration over the new COVID-19 vaccine mandates for businesses with at least 100 employees.

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**Biden Says Will Direct FDA to Quickly Approve Vaccines for Omicron Variant 'If Needed'**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday he will direct the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to use the quickest process available to approve any modified vaccines designed to protect against the novel coronavirus variant Omicron.

"So that we are prepared, if needed, my team is already working with officials at Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson to develop contingency plans for vaccines or boosters if needed and I will also direct the FDA and CDC to use the fastest process available without cutting any corners for safety to get such vaccines approved and on the market if needed," Biden said during a press conference.

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**Biden Urges People to Get Vaccinated, Says Omicron Will Eventually Get to US**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The newly-identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus will eventually get into the United States, which is why it is important to get vaccinated, US President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"Sooner or later we gonna have these cases in the United States ... You have to get your vaccine," Biden said in an address to the nation.

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**Biden Says New Omicron Variant 'Cause for Concern, Not for Panic'**

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The newly-identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus is a cause for concern but not for panic, US President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"This variant is a cause for concern, not a cause for panic ... We have more tools today to fight the variant that we've ever had before," Biden said.

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#### Miss Universe Contestant Tests Positive for COVID-19 Days Before Event in Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - A contestant set to participate in the 2021 Miss Universe competition in Israel tested positive for the novel coronavirus just 13 days before the event is held, the Jerusalem Post reported on Monday, citing the Miss Universe organization. The contestant, whose name has not been released, was fully vaccinated and tested positive after arriving in Israel, the Miss Universe organization said.

"The Miss Universe competition is under a number of strict COVID-19 protocols and restrictions, developed in accordance with Israeli officials and through best-in-class industry standards," the organization said. "We continue to cooperate with the Israeli authorities and will share more information as it is appropriate."

Other contestants who came in contact with the infected individual were notified of the exposure and advised to isolate, the organization noted.

Israel announced a two-week border closure as a result of the emerging coronavirus variant Omicron in southern Africa. It is currently unclear whether the Miss Universe contestant is infected with the Omicron variant, but further testing is being conducted, the organization said. The event is set to go forward as expected in the city of Eilat despite the border closure and positive test result, the organization added.

The majority of the competition's 80 contestants have already arrived in Israel, according to the organization.

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#### Twitter CTO Parag Agrawal to Replace Jack Dorsey as CEO - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Twitter chief technology officer, Parag Agrawal, is due to replace Jack Dorsey as CEO, Twitter announced on Monday.

"Twitter, Inc. (NYSE: TWTR) today announced that Jack Dorsey has decided to step down as Chief Executive Officer and that the Board of Directors has unanimously appointed Parag Agrawal as CEO and a member of the Board, effective immediately. Dorsey will remain a member of the Board until his term expires at the 2022 meeting of stockholders," the statement said.

Agrawal has been with the company for more than a decade and has served as CTO since 2017, Twitter added.

"I've decided to leave Twitter because I believe the company is ready to move on from its founders. My trust in Parag as Twitter's CEO is deep. His work over the past 10 years has been transformational. I'm deeply grateful for his skill, heart, and soul. It's his time to lead," Dorsey said.

Agrawal took to Twitter to express his gratitude to Dorsey for leading the company through challenges.

"I joined this company 10 years ago when we were fewer than 1,000 employees. While it was a decade ago, those days feel like yesterday to me. I've walked in your shoes. I've seen the ups and downs, the challenges and obstacles, the wins and mistakes. But then, now and above all else, I see Twitter's incredible impact, our continue progress, and the exciting opportunities ahead of us," he wrote.

After the news about the change in the Twitter leadership, trading in its shares was halted on New York's technology-dominated exchange Nasdaq for a short period of time as the shares rose 3.4% on the day to \$48.68. By 11:04 a.m. ET (16:04 GMT), they were up 4.9%, trading at \$49.38.

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Trading in Twitter Shares Briefly Suspended on Talk of CEO Stepping Down

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-8)

NEW YORK, November 29 (Sputnik) - Trading in the shares of the microblogging service Twitter was briefly suspended on Monday on talk that the company's Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey was stepping down.

Trading in Twitter was halted on New York's technology-dominated exchange Nasdaq as the shares rose 3.4% on the day to \$48.68. By 11:04 AM ET (16:04), they were up 4.9%, trading at \$49.38.

The 45-year-old Dorsey, who is also CEO of digital payments firm Square Inc., will step down from his role at the social media company, CNBC reported earlier on Monday.

Twitter did not immediately issue a statement on the matter.

Dorsey founded Twitter in 2006 and served as CEO until 2008 before being pushed out of the role. He returned to run Twitter in 2015 after former CEO Dick Costolo stepped down.

Dorsey again faced an ousting from Twitter last year when the influential stakeholder Elliott Management had sought to replace him. Elliott Management founder and billionaire investor Paul Singer had wondered then whether Dorsey should run both Twitter and Square, calling for him to step down as CEO of one of them, before the investment firm reached a deal with the company's management.

According to Monday's report, it was unclear who would succeed Dorsey or when his replacement might be named.

Whoever steps in, will have to meet Twitter's aggressive internal goals of expanding its monetizable daily active users from 211 million to 315 million by the end of 2023 and doubling its annual revenue.

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### Nasdaq Resumes Trading in Twitter After Brief Suspension

NEW YORK, November 29 (Sputnik) - Trading in the shares of microblogging service Twitter resumed on Monday after being suspended briefly on talk that Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey is stepping down.

Trading in Twitter was halted on New York's technology-dominated exchange Nasdaq as the shares rose 3.4% on the day to \$48.68. By 11:04 a.m. ET (16:04 GMT), they were up 4.9%, trading at \$49.38.

The 45-year-old Dorsey, currently CEO of both Twitter and digital payments firm Square Inc, is to step down from his role at the social media company, CNBC reported earlier in the day.

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### Jack Dorsey Says Will Leave Twitter Board Around May After Departure as CEO

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Former CEO of Twitter Jack Dorsey said on Monday he will be serving on the company board through the spring after announcing his resignation from the lead corporate position.

"After almost 16 years of having a role at our company... I decided it's finally time for me to leave... I'm going to serve on the board through my term (May-ish) to help Parag [Agrawal] and Bret [Taylor] with the transition," Dorsey said in an internal email shared on Twitter.

Agrawal and Taylor were selected to take over as CEO and Board Chair respectively following Dorsey's departure. Agrawal has been with the company for more than a decade and has served as CTO since 2017, Twitter said on Monday in a press release about the change in management.

There are not many company founders that choose their company over their own ego, but the decision will be proven right over time, Dorsey said. It's critical that a company can stand on its own without the founder's influence or direction, he added.

Dorsey ended his email to Twitter staff by noting that his one wish for the company is to be "the most transparent company in the world."

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### UN Chief Says Deeply Concerned About Isolation of Southern African Countries Over Omicron

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday that he is deeply concerned about the travel restrictions imposed on southern African nations in an attempt to stem the spread of the coronavirus variant Omicron that was first identified in South Africa.

The United States, Israel, Japan, the United Kingdom and the European Union announced travel bans on South Africa and several other southern African countries in response to the new COVID-19 variant first detected on November 24.

"I am now deeply concerned about the isolation of southern African countries due to new COVID-19 travel restrictions," Guterres said in a statement. "The people of Africa cannot be blamed for the immorally low level of vaccinations available in Africa - and they should not be penalized for identifying and sharing crucial science and health information with the world."

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#### Twitter CTO Parag Agrawal to Replace Jack Dorsey as CEO - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Twitter chief technology officer, Parag Agrawal, is due to replace Jack Dorsey as CEO, Twitter announced on Monday.

"Twitter, Inc. (NYSE: TWTR) today announced that Jack Dorsey has decided to step down as Chief Executive Officer and that the Board of Directors has unanimously appointed Parag Agrawal as CEO and a member of the Board, effective immediately. Dorsey will remain a member of the Board until his term expires at the 2022 meeting of stockholders," the statement said.

Agrawal has been with the company for more than a decade and has served as CTO since 2017, Twitter added.

"I've decided to leave Twitter because I believe the company is ready to move on from its founders. My trust in Parag as Twitter's CEO is deep. His work over the past 10 years has been transformational. I'm deeply grateful for his skill, heart, and soul. It's his time to lead," Dorsey said.

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#### Johnson & Johnson Develops News COVID-19 Vaccine Against Omicron Variant - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Johnson & Johnson said on Monday that it is starting the development of a new COVID-19 vaccine against the newly discovered variant Omicron while evaluating the effectiveness of its current single dose vaccine.

"In collaboration with academic groups in South Africa and around the world, the Company has been evaluating the effectiveness of its COVID-19 vaccine across variants, including now the new and rapidly spreading Omicron variant," Johnson & Johnson said in a statement. "We have begun work to design and develop a new vaccine against Omicron and will rapidly progress it into clinical studies if needed."

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#### Nasdaq Suspends Trading in Twitter After Reports of CEO Stepping Down

NEW YORK, November 29 (Sputnik) - Trading in shares of microblogging service Twitter was suspended on Monday amid talk that Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey is stepping down. Trading in Twitter was halted as it rose 3.4% on the day to \$48.68. Dorsey, currently CEO of both Twitter and digital payments firm Square Inc, is to step down from his role at the social media company, CNBC reported earlier in the day.

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#### US Reaffirms Support for NATO Aspirations of Ukraine, Georgia Ahead of Riga Meeting

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States backs Georgia and Ukraine in their aspirations to become NATO members, the State Department said on Monday ahead of the alliance's meeting in Riga.

From November 30-December 1, NATO foreign ministers will meet in Latvia to address the alleged build-up of Russian forces near Ukraine and the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. They will also discuss "the situation in the region with NATO's close partners Georgia and Ukraine." Afghanistan will be on agenda as well.

"NATO leaders are committed to NATO's Open Door Policy, which provides a path to membership for any European country that shares our values and meets the necessary responsibilities and obligations," the State Department said in a fact sheet.

"The United States continues to support NATO's decision in the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration, reaffirmed ever since, including in the June 2021 Brussels Summit, that Georgia and Ukraine will become NATO members," it added.

Commenting on prospects for Ukraine's NATO membership in October, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin confirmed Washington's support for Kiev's aspirations and emphasized that third countries have no right to veto the accession.

Ukraine's NATO accession would be an extremely dangerous step and would force Moscow to react, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko told Sputnik last month, noting that the alliance has been warned about possible consequences.

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#### Top NATO Diplomats to Discuss Operations in Afghanistan at Latvia Meeting - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The foreign ministers of NATO countries will discuss the alliance's operations in Afghanistan during their meeting in Riga on November 30-December 1, the US State Department said on Monday.

"In Riga, Allies will discuss NATO's operations in Afghanistan, reflecting on lessons learned to strengthen our unity and willingness to commit effectively to necessary operations and to inform the Alliance's future political-military engagements, including in the global fight against terrorism," the State Department said in a fact sheet.

Afghanistan has been under the rule of the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) since mid-August, when the militants entered Kabul, which led to the collapse of the US-backed government. By late August, the United States and allies had withdrawn their troops from the country, ending the 20 year-long military presence.