

**12/1/21 Wednesday**

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California Health Officials Identify First Case of Omicron Covid Variant in United States  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Scientists have few firm answers about the properties of the new Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, including how long it's been in circulation. As a result, African officials like South African President Cyril Ramaphosa have condemned travel bans against their nations as "scientifically unjustified."

The first case in the United States of the Omicron variant has been identified in California, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported on Wednesday.

According to the joint statement by the CDC and the San Francisco Department of Public Health, the person detected with the variant "was a traveler who returned from South Africa on November 22, 2021. The individual, who was fully vaccinated and had mild symptoms that are improving, is self-quarantining and has been since testing positive. All close contacts have been contacted and have tested negative."

After the variant was first identified by South African scientists last month and named Omicron by the World Health Organization, the US and several other countries instituted travel bans on eight southern African nations, including South Africa. However, there are significant indications that it has been circulating for much longer, as [Dutch authorities said](#) they had detected the variant before the subsequent wave of flight bans from southern African nations took effect, and [Nigerian scientists claim](#) to have found Omicron-positive blood tests taken in October.

Both the WHO and the CDC have classified Omicron as a Variant of Concern.

The Omicron variant has aroused concerns by health officials due to the unusually large number of mutations found in its spike protein, the device the virus uses to infect the host's cells - 32, far more than any other known variant. Since mutations have helped variants like Delta to become far more transmissible than regular SARS-CoV-2, some fear Omicron could have a similar capability, or be able to [evade some immune](#) defenses created by prior SARS-CoV-2 infection or by vaccines. However, [others have pointed out](#) that not every mutation is necessarily a beneficial one, meaning it might not be easier to spread after all.

So far, indications seem to be that Omicron [causes a milder form](#) of COVID-19, with some symptoms being less severe and others not appearing at all, and significantly fewer hospitalized cases. Nonetheless, the [CDC has strongly recommended](#) that all eligible Americans get vaccinated or get a booster shot.

White House Response to Omicron

Speaking about supply chain issues on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden said that "we are going to know in the next several weeks that not just how transmissible the disease is, but how extensive it is, how dangerous it is and what damage it does and most importantly whether the vaccines we have are capable of dealing with this virus. I think it's a little early to make that judgement, but am I concerned, of course I am, until we get the final answers."

Because such "final answers" don't exist, African leaders have pushed back on the putative travel bans imposed by the US, European Union, and others.

"We call upon all those countries that have imposed travel bans on our country and our southern African sister countries to immediately and urgently reverse their decisions," [Ramaphosa said](#) on Sunday. Nations from which the US has restricted entry include South Africa, as well as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi.

"The prohibition of travel is not informed by science," he added. "The only thing the prohibition on travel will do is to further damage the economies of the affected countries and undermine their ability to respond to, and recover from, the pandemic."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and Biden's chief medical adviser, defended the ban on Wednesday, despite admitting that "no one feels, I certainly don't, that a travel ban is going to prevent people who are infected from coming to the United States, but we needed to buy some time to be able to prepare, understand what's going on."

"So, we look at this as a temporary measure," he added.

White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said in a statement following Wednesday's news that the administration is "prepared to meet this challenge with science and speed."

"The President's medical team continues to believe that existing vaccines will provide some level of protection against severe illness from Omicron, and individuals who have gotten boosters have even stronger protection. As such, we urge all adults to get their booster shots and to get themselves and their kids vaccinated, if they haven't already," Zients said. "This new variant is cause for continued vigilance, not panic. We know what it takes to limit the spread of COVID: Get vaccinated, get boosted, and take public health measures like masking and distancing."

Moderna, the pharmaceutical company responsible for manufacturing one of the three COVID-19 vaccines administered in the US, also responded to the news, saying they had "already started" on a program to adapt their shot to the emergence of the Omicron variant. Moderna President Stephen Hodge said Wednesday they expected to have a booster shot targeting Omicron ready to file for US authorization as soon as March of 2022.

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DPRK's New Nukes & Missiles Force US, South Korea to Rethink War Plans - Report  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

US and South Korean defense chiefs are expected to propose beginning to draw up new war plans in case of a conflict with the North that takes into account its advances in nuclear weapons and missiles made in recent years.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [landed at Osan](#) Air Base south of Seoul on Wednesday for a three-day visit that will include the 53rd Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), an annual meeting between defense chiefs of the US and the Republic of Korea (RoK), South Korea's

formal name. Austin is expected to float the idea of revising the operation plan (OPLAN) with his counterpart, Defense Minister Suh Wook.

Also on Wednesday, the RoK Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Won In-choul will hold the 46th Military Committee Meeting (MCM) with his American counterpart, Gen. Mark Milley.

“The DPRK has advanced its capabilities. The strategic environment has changed over the past few years,” a senior defense [official told reporters](#) during an in-flight press gaggle on Tuesday, using North Korea’s official name, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). “It’s appropriate and necessary that we have an OPLAN that is updated.”

Another defense official said that while the review isn’t in response to any new threat, a new OPLAN will need to address “advances in North Korean capabilities, particularly with respect to missile delivery capability.”

Those advances include tests of a new [cruise missile](#), a new [hypersonic glide vehicle](#), a [submarine-launched](#) ballistic missile, and a [railcar-launched](#) short-range ballistic missile, all of which have occurred in the last three months. However, other advances need to be considered as well, since the existing plan is 10 years old, dating to a time when the DPRK didn’t have thermonuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles, or short-range ballistic missiles it [claims can evade](#) US air defense systems.

However, the new plan will also take into account South Korea’s considerable weapons advances, including its own ballistic missiles and [submarines to launch](#) them from, air defense systems, and an [F-35 lookalike](#).

Washington and Seoul have a number of OPLANs prepared for possible situations on the peninsula, ranging from an invasion of the South by the North to a sudden internal collapse of the DPRK’s socialist government, as well as the possibility that China might or might not join the DPRK in a given conflict, as it did when the US-led invasion of the North neared the China-DPRK border [in November 1950](#).

Getting Control Over its Own Army

One of the primary purposes of Austin’s visit is to draw up plans for evaluating if [Seoul can be given](#) wartime operational control (OPCON) - that is, the right to command its own troops in battle, [Yonhap News Agency reported](#). When the US joined the Korean War in 1950, then-South Korean President Syngman Rhee handed control over the fledgling South Korean military to the Pentagon, and the ceasefire agreement in 1953 saw the US retain that control after the shooting stopped.

A permanent peace treaty has never been signed with the DPRK, which Pyongyang cites as one of [the primary reasons](#) it needs nuclear weapons: to guarantee its safety from a US-RoK attack.

The US - technically United Nations Command, which served as a front for the US intervention in Korea - retained control until 1978, when the Combined Forces Command was created as part of then-US President Jimmy Carter’s plans to eventually pull US troops out of South Korea. Those plans were scrapped by Ronald Reagan, who increased US troop numbers as part of an across-the-board strategy to ramp up tensions with the Soviet Union and its socialist allies. The CFC gave Seoul operational control during armistice conditions beginning in 1994, but under the agreement that remains in force at present, that control would revert to Washington in the event of a shooting war.

The first steps of that transfer were taken in 2019, but the COVID-19 pandemic put them on hold. However, the DPRK isn't the only concern: Seoul must demonstrate it could also handle its own forces in the event of a war with China, too.

According to the defense officials, one of the remaining worries is whether Seoul can take over issues "related to ballistic missile defense" from the United States.

Seoul has bought Patriot air defense systems from the United States and developed its own [KM-SAM or Cheolmae-2](#) system using technology borrowed from Russian arms makers Almaz-Antey and Fakel, which produce the 9696 missile used on the S-350E and S-400 air defense systems. They have also worked to develop their own analogue to Israel's Iron Dome system for intercepting expected North Korean rocket and artillery barrages, which maker [LIG Nex1 unveiled](#) in October as the low-altitude missile defense system (LAMMD).

However, Seoul remains dependent on the US' Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, which [got an upgrade](#) in May. THAAD has a much longer and higher range than the Patriot, with its radar capable of seeing up to 3,000 kilometers away, giving it the ability to help Patriots prepare to engage targets before their own radars could see them when the [two systems are linked](#).

Separately, the Biden administration has also approved a new Global Posture Review which, while classified, reportedly calls for shifting more US military resources from other theaters into the Indo-Pacific, [according to Defense One](#). That is in line with the [strategy laid out](#) by the prior Trump administration, which described a shift from the War on Terror toward great power competition with Russia and China while addressing other challenges from the DPRK, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, among other nations that refuse to cooperate with US foreign policy.

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Turkish Finance Minister Elvan Resigns Amid Record Drop in Value of Lira  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has fought a yearslong battle against central bank economists seeking to raise interest rates in a bit to head off inflation, which he fears will stifle foreign investment in the west Asian country and ultimately hurt the economy.

Turkish Finance Minister Lutfi Elvan announced his resignation on Wednesday following his dismissal by Erdogan, according to the Official Gazette.

Elvan was replaced by his deputy, Nureddin Nebati, making him the country's third finance minister in a year's time. In November 2020, Elvan's predecessor, Berat [Albayrak, also resigned](#) amid a contracting economy and plunging value of the Turkish lira. Albayrak, Erdogan's son-in-law and a wealthy conglomerate owner, had been finance minister for five years.

Nebati is a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s Central Executive Board and is a member of the central board of the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD) and the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce's Disciplinary Board. He studied international relations at Istanbul University and received his Phd. in Political Science and Public Administration at the Kocaeli University Social Sciences Institute..

Elvan has similarly requested his leave after the lira's exchange rate saw a record drop on Wednesday. The central bank intervened by selling off foreign reserves, but the lira has still registered a 40% drop in value in 2021, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#). Turkey's economy actually did remarkably well in the third quarter of 2021, expanding by 7.4% [according to numbers](#) released on Tuesday, helped enormously by the return of tourism. However, inflation has also continued to mount, [hitting nearly 20%](#) in October as the central bank continued to slash interest rates - something typically seen as likely to increase inflation. The bank has cut borrowing rates by 4% since September. Still, Erdogan has cast the issue as a national struggle, criticizing opponents of continued rate slashes as opponents of economic prosperity, as well. "As we struggled in the past against tutelage, coup plotters, terrorist organizations and money barons, today we struggle in the same manner against the interest rate lobby and the enemies of production and employment," he told AKP lawmakers on Wednesday. In March, Erdogan [shocked observers](#) by firing longtime central bank governor Naci Agbal after months of rising interest rates, replacing him with Sahap Kavcioglu, a longtime critic of Agbal's tight monetary policy. Anxiety over the sharp change ironically [helped push inflation](#) even higher. Erdogan, 67, has been president since 2014, having served 11 years as prime minister before that. He [said last week](#) that there would be no snap elections before 2023. He has laid out lavish political goals for the country's centennial year, including major improvements in the country's economy, energy, health care, and transportation. However, Erdogan's popularity and that of the AKP have been steadily slipping in recent years. A [September survey](#) of popular opinion by Metropoll shows Erdogan's approval rating fell from 47.7% in 2018 to 41.4% in September 2021, and approval of the AKP fell from 42.6% in 2018 to 31.8% in September 2021.

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Ethiopian Army Recaptures Historic Lalibela, Eight Other Towns in Counteroffensive Against TPLF

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) said on Wednesday it had recaptured more than eight towns from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), including the historic town of Lalibela, helping push the TPLF further back from the capital. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's office announced on Wednesday that Lalibela had been liberated, as well as several other towns in Amhara state, including Shewa Robit, the latter of which reversed an attempted drive on Addis Ababa by the TPLF last month. On November 22, Abiy announced he was [heading to the front](#) to take personal control over the military's effort after the TPLF captured Debre Sina, a town just 190 kilometers from the capital, and the TPLF [openly weighed the option](#) of marching on the capital; Shewa Robit is 30 kilometers to the north of Debre Sina.

The capture of Lalibela is also notable because of its great historic value: the city was reportedly intended to serve as a “new Jerusalem” by a Zagwe emperor named Gebre Meskel after the Ayyubid Egyptians captured the City of David in 1187. Its churches are hewn from living rock and it’s regarded as one of the holiest Christian sites in Ethiopia, as well as being designated a UN World Heritage Site.

"The East Command secured an unimaginable victory in just one day of planning and a day and a half long fighting," [Abiy said in a broadcast](#) on Ethiopian television Tuesday evening. "Now we will repeat that victory on this front."

The gains follow others made earlier this week in eastern Afar region, where the ENDF blocked the TPLF’s eastward advance by recapturing several important towns, including Chifra, Kasagita, Burka, and Bati, [Sputnik reported](#).

The TPLF launched its offensive into Afar and Amhara states in July after pushing ENDF forces out of the northernmost Tigray state itself. The fighting in Tigray started in November 2020 when Abiy’s government declared elections held in spite of a Covid-induced suspension to be illegal and the TPLF launched a sneak-attack on ENDF forces stationed there, seizing equipment and putting government forces on their heels. Neighboring Eritrea soon joined the conflict on Abiy’s side and continues to occupy part of northern Tigray.

The TPLF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years until its erstwhile political allies rallied to nominate Abiy, an Oromo, to head the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) political alliance in 2018 instead. Political reforms under Abiy, who became prime minister, have weakened the TPLF’s once-dominating power, and [experts told Sputnik](#) the group now seeks to turn back the clock.

The US, for whom the TPLF served as a major military partner in Africa, has called for a ceasefire and [sanctioned both Eritrea](#) and Ethiopia for supposedly prolonging the conflict. However, [secretly recorded video](#) revealed last week that at the same time as the US was calling for peace, its diplomats were meeting with TPLF leaders behind closed doors where they praised the TPLF’s military gains and spoke of a post-Abiy “transition government.”

A political movement among the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora has staged worldwide protests in recent weeks under [the #NoMore hashtag campaign](#) calling for an end to US intervention in the Horn of Africa and to misreporting of facts about the conflict in western media, which they say presents a one-sided view of the conflict that demonizes Abiy’s government while ignoring the long history of human rights abuses by the TPLF.

By contrast, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Addis Ababa on Wednesday, reiterating both Beijing’s hands-off policy with regard to Ethiopian affairs, as well as opposition to meddling in those affairs by other countries.

However, Wang also called for dialogue, a truce, and a political solution to the crisis and pledged China’s support for restoring peace under the premise of respect for Ethiopia’s sovereignty, [according to CGTN](#).

The 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.

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Suspected Michigan School Shooter Charged With Terrorism, Four Counts of Murder

By - Evan Craighead

Four teenage students are dead after a gunman opened fire at Oxford High School in Oxford, Michigan, on Tuesday. The suspect, a 15-year-old sophomore enrolled at the school, is in police custody after he allegedly fired more than 30 shots from a 9mm semi-automatic handgun.

The Oakland County Prosecutor's Office announced on Wednesday that the 15-year-old suspect has been charged with one count of terrorism causing death; four counts of first-degree murder; seven counts of assault with intent to murder; and 12 counts of firearm possession in the commission of a felony.

A Michigan judge has ordered that the suspect, identified as Ethan Crumbley, be held without bond. Crumbley has pleaded not guilty to the charges of murder and terrorism, according to the teen suspect's lawyer.

Evidence recovered from the crime scene suggests "this was not just an impulsive act," noted Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald during a Wednesday news conference.

She also asked that the victims, 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana; 16-year-old Tate Myre; 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin; and 17-year-old Justin Shilling, who died from injuries sustained [during the shooting spree](#), be remembered.

Additional charges may be leveled against the 15-year-old.

McDonald is also considering bringing charges against Crumbley's parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley.

Earlier on Wednesday, Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard declared that the suspect was shooting to kill.

"He was shooting people at close range oftentimes towards the head or chest," the Sheriff told reporters. "It's just absolutely cold-hearted murderous."

He also noted that 30 shell casings were recovered by the forensics team.

According to Bouchard, Crumbley had posted photos of a 9mm Sig Sauer that authorities believe was used to carry out the attack.

The 15-year-old had posted footage of him firing the gun prior to the Tuesday shooting. While some reports have suggested that Crumbley may have been bullied prior to the incident, authorities have not determined a motive and the teenage suspect was reportedly not cooperative with authorities upon arrest.

If convicted, Crumbley faces up to life imprisonment.

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Trump May Reportedly Self-Publish Memoir Over Fears of Lowball Advance by Top Publishing Firms

By - Evan Craighead

In 2017, former US President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, reportedly signed a book deal with Penguin Random House worth over \$60 million, beating previous records for US presidential memoirs. At the time, the former two-term US president and his wife had already published books through Crown Publishing Group, a subsidiary of PRH.

While [several former officials from the Trump administration](#) are cashing in on their time via book deals and new media careers, the 45th president of the US will likely pursue a self-publishing deal, according to an unnamed publishing executive.

[They explained to Politico](#) that Trump's decision is likely due to a lack of interest from the 'Big Five' publishing houses in the US: Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, Harper Collins, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan.

"My suspicion is Trump is self-publishing because he doesn't want the humiliation of getting a smaller advance than he has before or anyone finding out that it is smaller than Obama's," said the unnamed executive.

"I imagine that's as big a part of it as anything," they added.

The executive's theory comes not long after Trump launched his own private media venture: [Trump Media and Technology Group](#).

Despite current reports about a poor relationship with publishers, Trump - with the help of multiple ghostwriters - is said to have authored more than a dozen books on business and real estate that bear his name.

While [former US Vice President Mike Pence has secured a multi-book deal](#) with Simon & Schuster, it was reported earlier this year that the 'Big Five' publishers had concerns about the ethics behind Trump's potential to disseminate conspiracy theories and his spread of misinformation about the 2020 US presidential election.

"If he can't even admit that he lost the election, then how do you publish that?" questioned a publishing industry official.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), a US lawmaker who also contested the results of the election, [also missed out on a book opportunity](#) after he was dropped by Simon & Schuster. The US senator from Missouri had been set to release a book on antitrust.

At the time, Hawley described the cancellation of his writings as "Orwellian" and a "direct assault on the First Amendment" of the US Constitution.

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Jan. 6 Panel Unanimously Votes to Hold Trump-Era DoJ Official Jeffrey Clark in Contempt of Congress

By - Evan Craighead

Back in November, Jeffrey Clark, who served as Assistant Attorney General for the Environment and Natural Resources Division from 2018 to 2021, and his attorney argued to the House Select

Committee that certain legal privileges granted him immunity from answering various questions associated with the deadly January 6 riot on the US Capitol.

With a unanimous vote, the House Select Committee has moved in favor of holding Jeffrey Clark criminally accountable for his failure to cooperate with the panel's probe.

The former DoJ official will appear before the Select Committee on Saturday, December 4, and will be given the opportunity to invoke his Fifth Amendment right to avoid incriminating himself via testimony. Clark has signaled that he will appear to enter his plea.

"As legislators charged with finding truth about an attack on our democracy and sworn to support and defend the Constitution—we put Mr. Clark on our witness list ... he refused to cooperate," read a [statement issued by Select Committee Chair](#) Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS).

"Mr. Clark has left us no other choice," the statement concluded.

The Select Committee is set to convene at 9:30 a.m. on Thursday to prep the resolution recommending the House find Clark in criminal contempt of Congress.

Speaking to reporters, Select Committee member Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) declared that the 9-person panel's probe into the "violent assault" on the US Capitol "is not a game."

She noted that any communications former US President Donald Trump had in the days surrounding the January 6 event will be parsed by the panel.

Cheney declared that if Trump "persists in lying, then he will be accountable under the laws of this great nation and subject to criminal penalties."

[In an October letter issued to Clark](#), the Select Committee asserted that its probe revealed credible evidence that he tried to involve the DoJ in efforts to block a peaceful transfer of power between administrations.

Prior to that, a nearly [400-page report produced by the Senate Judiciary Committee](#) claimed that Clark repeatedly violated the DoJ-White House contacts policy when he met with Trump on multiple occasions in late 2020.

Clark, being both a US Senate-confirmed assistant attorney general for the DoJ's Environment and Natural Resources Division and an assistant attorney general for the DoJ's Civil Division, was prohibited from meeting with the US president without prior authorization.

The report claimed that Clark proposed the delivery of a letter to Georgia state lawmakers and other government officials to push for a delay in the certification of 2020 election votes. He also recommended a news conference in which the DoJ would announce a probe into allegations of widespread voter fraud, despite the lack of evidence supporting this.

Clark is not the first to be charged in relation to the January 6 riot, as the panel recommended that conspiracy theorist Steve Bannon, a former adviser of Trump, be referred for criminal prosecution after he failed to appear before the Select Committee back in October.

Bannon has since [surrendered himself to federal authorities](#).

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'It's Embarrassing': Chris Cuomo Breaks Silence After Indefinite Suspension From CNN

By - Evan Craighead

CNN revealed on Tuesday that 'Cuomo Prime Time' host Chris Cuomo had been suspended indefinitely after documents published earlier this week by New York Attorney General Letitia James showed "a greater level of involvement" in brother Andrew Cuomo's efforts to defend himself amid a slew of sexual harassment allegations.

While Cuomo has been suspended from his duties at CNN, the 51-year-old was able to take to the airwaves on Wednesday to provide his perspective to listeners of 'Let's Get After It,' his Sirius XM satellite radio show.

"Quick note about the obvious—I've been suspended from CNN," Cuomo remarked.

"It hurts to even say it. It's embarrassing. But I understand it. And I understand why some people feel the way they do about what I did. I've apologized in the past, and I mean it," he said, referring to an apology he delivered during an [August broadcast of his CNN show](#).

"It's the last thing I ever wanted to do, was compromise any of my colleagues and do anything but help," he said, noting that he respects the "process" that CNN is following in regard to his suspension.

"So, I'm not going to talk about this any more than that," he noted.

CNN has claimed that the network was "not privy" to the full extent of Cuomo's involvement in public relations sessions with New York state government staffers and his brother, who has several allegations of sexual assault and other misconduct leveled against him.

Then-New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ultimately resigned from office in August, amid the developing scandal.

It was revealed earlier this week that, at one point during the scandal, Cuomo texted Melissa DeRosa, a top aide of his governor brother, who asked him to probe his press sources to assist the governor's team in forming a public relations defense against the mounting allegations.

"On it," Cuomo replied to DeRosa's query, according to transcripts.

The 51-year-old confirmed to investigators that he sought out more information about a story by journalist Ronan Farrow. Cuomo asserted the practice was "completely business-as-usual."

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Will Ralf Rangnick Bring an End to Ronaldo's Days at Manchester United?

By - Nevin Brown

Manchester United's newly-appointed interim manager, Ralf Rangnick, has pundits pondering whether Cristiano Ronaldo's days at Old Trafford are numbered. Rangnick is known for his highly-effective gegenpressing system, while Ronaldo has won every trophy as the system. Can a footballing zealot and messiah co-exist?

Cristiano Ronaldo remains an elite goal scorer, but at 37, that remains his lone contribution to a side. Provide him service and you'll be rewarded with goals.

Ronaldo's player archetype demands that the team system be built around them, which is where the controversy between him and Ralf Rangnick begins.

Rangnick is the grandmaster of gegenpressing. Concepts from the highly-aggressive pressing system have been adopted by nearly every top coach in the world. The core principle of gegenpressing is to press the ball carrier with a numerical advantage.

For gegenpressing to be successful, it must be carried out by all 10 outfield players. If executed properly, a side can routinely win the ball near their opponent's goal with a disorganized defense. The beauty of gegenpressing is that a relatively untalented side with incredible industry can generate offense at an elite level.

Ronaldo does not press, and at 37 it's unlikely that he will begin. It isn't a question of ability, but rather a reality of the fragility of an aging human body. Ronaldo has been able to maintain his fitness and goal scoring but only by directing all of his energy into that singular endeavor.

Since 2018-19, his first season with Juventus, his pressures per 90 minutes have gone down every season. If Ronaldo started out as one of the best pressing forwards, then a decline would be fine. But Ronaldo's decline started in the bottom one percent for forwards. When it comes to pressing, Ronaldo started at the bottom and has stayed there.

This season, he has averaged 6.45 pressures per 90 minutes, which is in the first percentile for all Premier League forwards. Going back to Rangnick's final season at Red Bull Leipzig in 2018-19, it looks like Ronaldo will have a hard time earning the German's trust.

RB Leipzig's two most-used forwards, Yussuf Poulsen and Timo Werner, both trounce Ronaldo in pressing statistics. In 2018-19, Werner attempted 13.13 pressures per 90 minutes and Poulsen averaged 26.11 pressures per 90 minutes.

The total number of pressures Ronaldo may be able to handle, but the lightning-quick transitions between attack and defense could cause him problems. Rangnick wants his teams, when they lose the ball, to regain it in under eight seconds through pressing. Once they have regained it, he wants his sides to get an attempt on goal within 10 seconds.

Ronaldo cannot flourish in a high-pressing system, nor should he be asked to. Rangnick could try to build a pressing system around Ronaldo's abilities, but that means more work for others. The reality is that Ronaldo cannot play in Rangnick's system. Unless Rangnick makes wholesale adjustments to his system, Ronaldo's role at Manchester United will be diminished. If Ronaldo is fine with not being a guaranteed starter then he can play out his contract at United and probably add some memorable moments along the way.

It is unlikely, however, that Ronaldo will take a diminished role from a manager whose greatest accomplishment is earning back-to-back promotions with Hoffenheim to reach the Bundesliga. Ronaldo's happy days at United may be over. His time there, however, may not be. There are only so many clubs that have a spot for him and the ability to pay his wage. Come the January transfer window, Ronaldo may be looking for another move.

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US Stocks Drop Nearly 500 Points After Omicron Case Emerges in California  
By - Nevin Brown

The Dow Jones Industrial Index (DJI) fell 461.68 points at closing on Wednesday after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the first case of the omicron COVID-19 variant within the states.

The collapse on Wednesday undid much of the 520-point gain the index saw earlier in the day. The S&P 500 fell by 1.2% as the Nasdaq plummeted by 1.8%.

Travel stocks were hit particularly hard following the news. Three US-based airlines, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and United Airlines dropped between 7% and 8% on Wednesday. Aircraft manufacture Boeing also saw a loss of 4.9%.

Cruise lines also bore the brunt of the news. Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings fell by 8.8% and Carnival dipped 7%. Two of the world's largest hotel groups also saw losses. Wynn Resorts sank by 6.1% and Hilton Worldwide dropped 3.8%.

The plunge wasn't limited to travel stocks with retailers also being hit hard. Nordstrom, Kohl's, Best Buy, and Macy's all dropped between 4% and 6% on Wednesday.

Steve Massocca of Wedbush Securities believes that the omicron news isn't the only factor causing the drop, he relayed to [CNBC](#).

Massocca mused that, "I think a lot of it is tax loss selling. I think a lot of the poor names are doing worse because people are taking tax losses because they have so many gains elsewhere."

The discovery of omicron, a highly mutated variant of covid first located in South Africa, has caused markets to swing wildly over the past few days. The Dow Jones dipped 905 points on Friday, the day after omicron was identified, only to rebound by 236.5 points on Monday. However, as omicron was detected outside of South Africa, it caused the index to dip an additional 652 points on Tuesday, before Wednesday's 461-point drop.

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Alec Baldwin Claims He 'Didn't Pull the Trigger' in Tragic Death on Set of 'Rust'

By - Nevin Brown

US actor Alec Baldwin has claimed that he "didn't pull the trigger" on the gun that led to the death of the cinematographer and injuries to the director while on the set of the film 'Rust.' In an upcoming interview with George Stephanopoulos, Baldwin talks about the fateful day that live ammunition was discharged from a gun he held while on the set of the film 'Rust.' The bullet hit and killed the film's cinematographer, Halyna Hutchins, also seriously injuring the film's director, Joel Souza.

In clips released ahead of the interview's scheduled airing on Thursday, Baldwin discusses on the incident in-depth, the emotional toll it has taken, and the woman who was killed.

Baldwin, answering how a live bullet got on set, is seen saying, "I have no idea," later adding, "a bullet that wasn't even supposed to be on the property."

Later in the interview, Stephanopoulos and Baldwin have a revealing back-and-forth on why the gun was discharged.

Stephanopoulos says to Baldwin, "It wasn't in the script for the trigger to be pulled." To which Baldwin responds, "The trigger wasn't pulled, I didn't pull the trigger," which then prompts Stephanopoulos to ask, "So you never pulled the trigger?" Baldwin responds emphatically, "No, no, no, I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger."

When asked about Hutchins' death, the actor began to weep, saying Hutchins, "was someone who was loved by everyone, who loved by everyone, who worked with, liked by everyone who worked with, and admired."

The fatal accident occurred on October 20 and put the indie-film production under a microscope. [Criticism has been directed towards the production's rookie armorer](#), Hannah Gutierrez Reed, for allegedly loading the gun with live ammunition instead of blanks.

As a result of the accident, the [production has been under investigation](#) and [multiple lawsuits have been filed](#). The film has been described as a passion project by Baldwin, who is a producer and star of the film. The \$7 million production has been suspended indefinitely.

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'Something Will Happen': Trump Suggests China Will Strike Taiwan After 2022 Beijing Olympics  
By - Nevin Brown

Former US President Donald Trump offered an ambiguous personal prediction that the People's Republic of China would attack Taiwan sometime in 2022, after the Beijing Winter Olympics. In an interview with a former UK MEP, Nigel Farage, Trump dished on America in his absence and his perception of a heightening of aggression from Beijing. When asked by Farage where he, Trump, feels that America stands in the world at the moment, the latter responded harshly. "I think it's at the lowest point it's ever been at," Trump stated, adding, "I don't think it's ever been in a position like this. We're not respected anymore."

The 45th commander-in-chief elaborated on his belief that the United States was no longer respected by pointing to what he suggested was a change in Beijing's behavior towards Taipei since he left office.

"I will tell you, there were no planes flying over Taiwan -- and the name wasn't even mentioned," Trump offered, adding, "you didn't talk about Taiwan when I was president -- it wasn't going to happen what they're doing now."

The Chinese Army flew into Taiwan's airspace during his presidency on two occasions, both in September 2020. Following Trump's opinions on a change in behavior by China towards Taiwan, he then insinuated that Beijing would soon make a military move on Taipei.

"[China] wait until after the Olympics I assume, and perhaps something will happen," he remarked, before adding that "it's not good if you're [in Taiwan if China attacks], and you have bombers flying over your country constantly...which is constant."

The 2022 Winter Olympics will be hosted in Beijing from February 4 to 20. Later in the interview Trump offered his belief that, "a lot of people say I'm very good at the prediction business."

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China Summons Japanese Ambassador Over Shinzo Abe's 'Erroneous' Taiwan Comments  
By - Nevin Brown

On Wednesday night, China's foreign ministry called an "emergency meeting" with Japan's ambassador to Beijing, Shui Hideo, following former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's comments that neither Japan nor the United States would remain idle if Taiwan were attacked by China.

Shinzo Abe, who stepped down as Japan's prime minister last year, said at a virtual forum organized by a Taiwanese think tank that an armed invasion of Taiwan would represent a threat to Japan's security.

The comments spurred China's assistant foreign minister, Hua Chunying, to hastily rebuke and condemn the remarks. According to a statement from China's Foreign Ministry, Hua suggested that Abe's remarks "openly challenged China's sovereignty and gave brazen support to Taiwan independence forces," and added that the comments were "erroneous."

Beijing believes that Tokyo is in violation of the norms of their diplomatic relationship and made what China believes to be "stern representations" in response.

Hua said of Abe's remarks that "China is resolutely opposed to this." Abe, while no longer Japan's prime minister, remains influential in Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

China has long claimed Taiwan as part of its own territory, with officials previously reiterating that use of force remains an option in bringing the self-governing island back into its fold.

Incidentally, the self-governing island was a Japanese colony until the early 1950s.

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Omicron Variant Could Slow US Economic Recovery From COVID-19 Pandemic - Yellen

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The Omicron variant could slow US economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told a discussion hosted by the news outlet Reuters on Thursday.

"I think we're very uncertain at this point just how significant it is," Yellen said when asked about the threat to the US economy posed by the newly-discovered coronavirus variant. "There's a lot of uncertainty, but it could, it could cause significant problems."

The first Omicron case in the United States was reported in a California on Wednesday and concerns a fully vaccinated resident who had returned from South Africa, where the variant was first discovered about a week ago. Leong Hoe Nam, a Singapore-based infectious diseases doctor, said Omicron will likely "dominate and overwhelm" the world in 3-6 months. South African health official have said the Omicron cases are mild.

Yellen compared the potential impact of the Omicron to that of the coronavirus' Delta variant that caused a resurgence in infections and deaths.

"It's accumulating, but hopefully it's not something that's going to slow economic growth significantly, like, you know, the Delta variant did unexpectedly prove," she said. "This could again exacerbate supply chain and inflation problems. It could depress demand and cause slower growth which would impact inflation the other way."

The US economy shrank 3.5% in 2020 forced by lockdowns and other pandemic measures. Disruptions in supply chains and the labor market have restrained this year's recovery, capping growth at an annualized 3.5% in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.1% in the third. Inflation itself has reached more than 30-year highs, with the Consumer Index representing a basket of products ranging from gasoline and health care to groceries and rents rising 6.2% during the year to October - its fastest growth since November 1990.

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UN Staff Requested to Shelter in Place Amid Police Activity - Security Service

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - All UN staff and diplomats at the world body's headquarters in New York City have been requested to shelter in place amid the ongoing police activity responding to a man armed with a shotgun, the UN Security and Safety Service said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Security and Safety Service of UNDSS wishes to inform that there is ongoing police activity at 1st Avenue between 42nd and 43rd streets," the statement said. "All personnel and delegates at UNHQ are hereby requested to shelter in place."

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UN Headquarters in New York Surrounded by Police Responding to Man Armed With Gun

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - The United Nations headquarters complex in New York City is surrounded by police responding to a man armed with a shotgun, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene on Thursday.

First Avenue and streets around the United Nations headquarters are blocked for traffic and a helicopter is seen flying over the building in midtown Manhattan.

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US State of Minnesota Reports Second Case of COVID-19 Omicron Variant - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The second case of infection with the coronavirus Omicron variant in the United States has been reported in the US state of Minnesota one day after the first case was confirmed in the state of California.

"Lab testing confirms the state's first COVID-19 case involving Omicron variant," the Minnesota Department of Health (MHD) said in a message via Twitter.

The MHD said in a subsequent press release that the Omicron variant was detected in a Minnesota resident who recently traveled to New York City.

The person is an adult male and had been fully vaccinated, the release said, adding that he developed mild symptoms on November 22 and sought testing on November 24.

On Wednesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed that the first case of the Omicron variant infection in California in a fully vaccinated traveler who returned from South Africa on November 22.

The Omicron variant was first reported in South Africa last week. Although little is known about the variant's transmissibility or severity, health officials are concerned because of the large number of mutations on the virus' surface.

South African health officials have said the initial cases were discovered in four fully vaccinated individuals are the symptoms are mild. They characterized the reaction to the variant in the United States and other Western countries as "a storm in a tea cup."

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US to Respond to Belarus Violations by Raising Costs of Business With Lukashenko - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will respond to the Belarus' "intransigence" by raising the costs of doing business with the government of President Alexander Lukashenko, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the US government unveiled Belarus-related sanctions on 20 individuals, including President Lukashenko's son - Dmitry. The US government also added 12 entities, including the Belarusian Potash Company, and three aircraft on its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list.

"Standing with the people of Belarus in support of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, we will respond to Belarus' intransigence by directly raising the costs of doing business for and with the Lukashenko regime," Blinken said.

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Chinese Hackers Breached Four More US Defense, Tech Companies in November – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Chinese hackers are suspected of having breached four more US defense and technology companies in November, while several hundred firms use a vulnerable type of software that has already been targeted in the attacks, CNN reported on Thursday, citing a report by Palo Alto Networks.

The breaches were a part of more extensive espionage activity, which the US National Security Agency has been investigating over the past several months, the report said. In early November, Palo Alto Networks reported only one victimized US organization.

Globally, a total of 13 organizations operating in such sectors as defense, health care, energy and transportation have been breached, according to the new report by the cybersecurity firm. In the US, the firm has identified approximately 600 cases of systems using vulnerable software, including installations at 23 US universities, 14 state or local governments, and 10 health care organizations.

"This adversary has aggressively targeted organizations in the United States and elsewhere in defense, technology and other critical sectors," Ryan Olson, vice president of Palo Alto Networks' Unit 42 division, told CNN.

Palo Alto Networks researchers believe the hackers' aim was to acquire permanent access to computer systems and networks in order to download sensitive data from US companies.

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**IMF Leaders Urge G20 Nations to Accelerate Debt Restructuring to Avoid Economic Collapse**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Creditors from the G20 nations should accelerate debt restructurings in order to avoid economic collapse in some countries, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva and IMF Director of the Strategy, Policy and Review Department Ceyla Pazarbasioglu said on Thursday.

"We may see economic collapse in some countries unless G20 creditors agree to accelerate debt restructurings and suspend debt service while the restructurings are being negotiated. It is also critical that private sector creditors implement debt relief on comparable terms," Georgieva and Pazarbasioglu said in a blog post.

The two IMF officials urged the G20 nations to step up a common framework for debt treatments.

"Despite significant relief measures brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, about 60 percent of low-income countries are at high risk or already in debt distress," they said.

In 2015, that number was less than 30 percent, Georgieva and Pazarbasioglu said.

Recent experiences of Chad, Ethiopia, and Zambia show that the Common Framework for debt treatments must be improved, they noted, calling on the G20 nations to make a "quick action" to build confidence in the framework.

The IMF officials warned that 2022 will be much more challenging with regard to the tightening of international financial conditions seen on the horizon.

"Countries will need to transition to strong programs, and for low-income countries that need comprehensive debt treatment, the Common Framework will be critical to unlock IMF financing," they said.

However, Georgieva and Pazarbasioglu warned, the implementation of essential measures remain slow. Chad, Ethiopia, and Zambia already have made requests for debt relief under the Common Framework, but faced significant delays, they added. In part those problems are caused by coordination issues between Paris Club and other creditors, multiple government institutions and agencies within creditor countries, which can slow down decisions.

At the same time, all three countries should solve their domestic challenges, which slows the progress, Georgieva and Pazarbasioglu said.

They urged the international community to take urgent steps to improve the situation. IMF is ready to work with all partners to help ensure the framework delivers for the people it was put in place to help.

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US State of Minnesota Confirms Case of COVID-19 Omicron Variant – Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – A second US case of the COVID-19 Omicron variant has surfaced in the state of Minnesota, one day after an initial case was confirmed in California, health officials said on Thursday.

"Lab testing confirms state's first COVID-19 case involving Omicron variant," the Minnesota Department of Health said in a Twitter message.

The person is an adult male resident of Hennepin County, had been vaccinated, and experienced mild symptoms that have resolved. The person reported traveling to New York City before becoming infected, the department said.

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Canada Joins US, EU, UK in Imposing Sanctions Against Belarus

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Canada has joined the United States, the EU and the United Kingdom in imposing new sanctions against Belarusian individuals and entities, the joint statement said on Thursday.

"Today, in response to the continuing attacks on human rights and fundamental freedoms in Belarus, the disregard for international norms and the repeated acts of repression, we have again taken coordinated sanctions action against certain individuals and entities," the statement said.

The signatories urged Minsk to halt "its orchestrating of irregular migration" across its borders with the EU. "Those -in Belarus or in third countries - who facilitate illegal crossing of the EU's external borders should know this comes at a substantial cost," they said.

The statement also calls on Belarus to release about 900 political prisoners immediately and without any conditions. "The regime should promptly enter into comprehensive and genuine political dialogue with representatives of the democratic opposition and civil society, facilitated by the OSCE, leading to new, free and fair presidential elections under international observation," it added.

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#### US Imposes Belarus-Related Sanctions on 12 Companies - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Belarus-related sanctions on 12 companies - 11 Belarusian and 1 Ukrainian - including on the Belarusian Potash Company, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The following entities have been added to OFAC's SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List: AGAT ELECTROMECHANICAL PLANT OJSC..., AGROROZKVVIT LLC..., CJSC BELTECHEXPORT..., FOREIGN LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY SLAVKALI..., JOINT STOCK COMPANY 140 REPAIR PLANT..., JSC TRANSAVIAEXPORT AIRLINES..., KIDMA TECH OJSC..., OOO GARDSERVIS..., OPEN JOINT STOCK COMPANY BELARUSIAN POTASH COMPANY..., PELENG JSC..., REPUBLICAN STATE PUBLIC ASSOCIATION PRESIDENTIAL SPORTS CLUB..., REPUBLICAN UNITARY ENTERPRISE TSENTRKURORT," the statement said.

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#### Blinken Says Recent Rhetoric, Moves by Iran Do Not Give US Optimism About Nuclear Talks

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that latest moves and statements by Tehran do not give the United States a lot of optimism about the nuclear talks that have recently resumed in Vienna.

"As you know, our team led by [Special Envoy] Rob Malley is in Vienna right now. I think in the very near future, the next day or so we'll be in the position to judge whether Iran actually intends now to engage in good faith," Blinken said. "I have to tell you recent moves, recent rhetoric don't give us a lot of cause for optimism."

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#### US Issues Directive Restricting Transactions in Belarusian Sovereign Debt - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Thursday issued a directive to restrict transactions in Belarusian sovereign debt with with a maturity period of more than 90 days.

"[T]he following activities by US persons or within the United States are prohibited... : all transactions in, provision of financing for, and other dealings in new debt with a maturity of greater than 90 days issued on or after December 2, 2021 by the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus or the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus," the directive said. The directive also prohibits any activities aimed at evading its provisions while all other activities with the listed Belarusian government bodies are permitted.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 20 People in Belarus Including on Lukashenko's Son - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions on 20 Belarusian citizens, including on Dmitry Lukashenko, the son of President Alexander Lukashenko, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

In addition, the US government also added 12 Belarusian entities and three aircraft to its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list.

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Blinken Says Had Good Conversation With Lavrov on Iran, Russia Shares US View

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he had a good conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Iran, noting that Moscow shares Washington's view on the need to revive the nuclear deal.

"I have to say I had a good conversation as well with Foreign Minister Lavrov about this. I think Russia shares our basic perspective on this and we'll see what happens over next couple of days," Blinken said.

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Legislative Wins Fail to Boost Biden With 45% Voter Disapproval of Job Performance - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Legislative victories, including recent passage of a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, have failed to boost the popularity of President Joe Biden, with over half

of US voters critical of his performance so far, a new Morning Consult poll revealed on Thursday.

"In polling conducted Nov. 28-30, 45 percent of voters approved of Biden's job performance and 52 percent disapproved, marking a low in his net approval rating in daily tracking after a gradual decline that was accelerated by the chaotic American withdrawal from Afghanistan in mid-August," a press release explaining the poll said.

Neither Biden's November 15 signing of the bipartisan infrastructure bill nor US House Democrats' November 19 passage of the Build Back Better Act, his social spending and climate legislation, yielded any sustained boost to public sentiment about the president, the release said.

In addition to the latest poll, surveys in recent weeks reflect rising voter concerns over inflation and the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, the release added.

The share of voters who approve of Biden's performance is just 3 percentage points higher than the share who approved of Trump (42 percent) in Morning Consult polling conducted November 28-30, 2017.

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**Blinken Says Had 'Good Conversation' With Lavrov on Iran, Russia Shares US View**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he had a good conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Iran and added that Russia shares the US position on the issue.

Earlier on Thursday, Blinken and Lavrov met in Stockholm on the margins of an OSCE ministerial meeting.

"I had a good conversation with foreign minister Lavrov about this [Iran], think Russia shares our basic perspective on this, we'll see what happens over the next couple of days," Blinken said.

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**Blinken Says Had Candid Exchange With Russia's Lavrov on Different Perspectives on Ukraine**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he discussed the different perspectives on Ukraine with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the two officials agreed to report back to their respective presidents who may engage in direct talks soon.

"Foreign Minister Lavrov and I had candid exchanges on our different perspectives [on Ukraine]. We agreed to report those back to our presidents who may have the opportunity to speak directly in the near future," Blinken said during a press briefing following a OSCE ministerial meeting in Stockholm, Sweden.

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#### Over 6 in 10 Lebanese Want to Leave Country, Record High in 12 Years of Surveys - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) -The quality of life in Lebanon has deteriorated in the nation's current economic crisis to the point where 63 percent saying they want to leave permanently, a Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"The desire to leave Lebanon cuts across major Lebanese communities. Notably, more Muslims than Christians in Lebanon tell Gallup they would like to leave the country (67% vs. 57%)," a press release explaining the poll said.

Declining economic conditions in Lebanon come at a time when the country continues to be hit by extended blackouts and a fuel crisis that has put both the cost of fuel and food out of reach for many families, the release said.

The percentage of people wanting to flee the country set a new record for Gallup surveys that began in 2007.

In 2021, 85 percent of people in Lebanon say they are finding it "difficult" or "very difficult" to get by on their income, including 62 percent who say it is "very difficult." The latter figure has nearly doubled since 2019, when 32% said the same, the release said.

Just three years ago, before the onset of Lebanon's recent crisis, just 14 percent Lebanese adults said there were times in the previous year when they lacked money for food, a figure that shot up to 45 percent in 2020 after the Beirut port explosion and COVID-19 pandemic, the release added.

Today, slightly more than half of adults (53%) say they have lacked money for food, a nearly fourfold increase since 2018, according to the release.

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#### Ukraine Poses No Threat to Russia Despite Latter's Disinformation Campaign - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Ukraine in no way poses a threat to Russia despite the latter's massive disinformation campaign claiming to the contrary, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"[D]espite a massive Russian disinformation campaign, Ukraine is in no way posing a threat to Russia, or seeking a confrontation that would justify a Russian military intervention," Blinken said during a press briefing following an OSCE ministerial meeting in Sweden.

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## US Weekly Jobless Claims Up 28,000 From Pandemic Low

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 222,000 for last week, some 28,000 above the previous week's pandemic low, as the employment market appeared to consolidate from a stretch of dynamic recovery, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending November 27, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 222,000, an increase of 28,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said. The previous week's tally for claims was revised to 194,000, from an initial 199,000 stated by the department. That was the lowest number of filings for weekly unemployment benefits since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020.

Economists polled by US media had expected 240,000 claims on the average for last week. The weekly jobless claims are one of three employment statistics due this week on the labor market picture in the United States.

Earlier on Thursday, a report from labor market surveyor Challenger, Gray & Christmas showed that job cuts by US-based employers plummeted 34.8% in November to 14,875, from an October count of 22,822. That was the lowest job cuts for a month since a reduction of 14,086 in May 1993.

The more important job statistic for this week will be the November non-farm payrolls report, due from the Labor Department on Friday. Economists are expecting 545,000 job additions for last month versus October's 531,000.

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At last count, officials said some 5 million of those jobs have not returned.

The American economy itself shrank 3.5% in 2020. 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.

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## Twitter Removes 3,500 'State-Backed' Accounts From China, Russia, Venezuela

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Twitter said on Thursday that it has deleted almost 3,500 "state-linked" accounts from China, Mexico, Russia, Venezuela and several other countries.

"Today, we're disclosing an additional 3,465 accounts to our archive of state-linked information operations — the only one of its kind in the industry," Twitter said in a statement. "The account sets include eight distinct operations we've attributed to six countries — Mexico, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Venezuela, respectively. Every account and piece of content associated with these operations has been permanently removed from the service."

In particular, Twitter deleted over 2,000 Chinese accounts that amplified pro-Beijing narratives concerning the treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, as well as more than 270 pro-government accounts in Venezuela.

The company also removed 16 accounts allegedly linked to Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA). Those accounts were allegedly related to an information operation in the Central African Republic.

"The operation relied on a mix of inauthentic and real accounts to introduce a pro-Russia viewpoint into Central African political discourse," it added. "We also removed a network of 50 accounts that attacked the civilian Libyan government and actors that support it, while voicing significant support for Russia's geopolitical position in Libya and Syria."

In Mexico, Twitter cracked down on 76 "inauthentic accounts" supportive of government initiatives related to public health and political parties.

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#### US Astronauts Performing Spacewalk to Replace Antenna System - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - American astronauts Thomas Marshburn and Kayla Barron are performing a spacewalk on Thursday to replace an antenna system, NASA said. The astronauts exited the International Space Station at 6:15 a.m. EST (11:15 GMT). The spacewalk was initially scheduled for Tuesday, but was delayed due to a debris threat.

"Task complete! @AstroMarshburn and Kayla Barron successfully removed a failed S-band antenna from the @Space\_Station's P-1 truss. Next, they'll stow it and retrieve the spare antenna for installation," NASA later wrote on Twitter.

The spacewalk is expected to last for 6.5 hours.

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#### Nearly Half of US Households Feel Inflation Bite, Report Hardship From Price Hikes – Poll

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Sticker shock from inflationary price increases is hitting US shoppers at the onset of the holiday shopping season, with 45% of American households reporting financial hardship, a Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"45% of Americans report financial hardship triggered by increased prices; 10% describe the hardship as threatening their current standard of living [and] Seven in 10 lower-income Americans experiencing hardship," a press release summarizing the poll said.

The impact is especially severe for lower-income households, with 71% of those making less than \$40,000 a year saying that recent price increases have caused their family financial hardship, the release said.

For middle-income households 47% report financial hardship, along with 29% of upper-income households, the release added.

The Biden administration has described inflation as "transitory," at least until earlier this week when Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell urged officials to stop using the word because rising prices are likely to persist.

In October, consumer prices were more than 6% higher than in October 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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US Jobless Claims at 222,000 vs Estimated 240,000 for Week Ending November 27

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 222,000 for last week, some 28,000 above the previous week's pandemic low, as the employment market appeared to consolidate after a stretch of dynamic recovery, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending November 27, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 222,000, an increase of 28,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said.

The previous week's tally for claims was revised to 194,000, from an initial 199,000 stated by the department. That was the lowest number of filings for weekly unemployment benefits since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020. Economists polled by US media had expected 240,000 claims on the average for last week.

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Blinken in Meeting With Lavrov Reiterates Call to Pull Back Troops From Ukraine Border

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US State Secretary Antony Blinken in meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated the call to pull back Russian forces from the Ukrainian border and return to a peacetime posture, the State Department said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Blinken and Lavrov met in Stockholm on the margins of an OSCE meeting.

"Secretary Blinken addressed Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, including its military movements near Ukraine's borders. The Secretary reiterated the United States' call for Russia to pull back its forces and return to a peacetime posture and to adhere to the Minsk agreements and a ceasefire in the Donbas," the statement said.

Blinken underscored that the best path forward is diplomacy in conjunction with the full implementation of the Minsk agreements, something that Washington is willing and ready to support, the State Department noted

"Should Moscow choose the path of military escalation, the Secretary made clear that the United States and our allies are prepared to impose significant costs," it added.

The officials noted the importance of continued coordination on issues in the bilateral relationship and areas of mutual interest, "including when it comes to blocking Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon," according to the State Department.

"The two also discussed the Caucasus, and the Secretary welcomed the resumption of direct dialogue between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Secretary also raised the unjust detentions of Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed and underscored the priority we attach to their prompt release," the statement concluded.

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#### Harris' Chief Spokeswoman to Leave White House in Latest Departure - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Symone Sanders, chief spokeswoman for Vice President Kamala Harris, is leaving the White House at the end of the year, CNN reported on Thursday, citing a source in the know.

"Symone has served honorably for three years. The President and vice president are grateful for Symone's service and advocacy for this White House. She is a valued member, a team player, and she will be missed. We are grateful to have her working through the end of the year," the source said.

If confirmed, this will be the second departure among Harris' staff in recent weeks. In November, a White House official told CNN that Ashley Etienne, Harris' communications director, was leaving to pursue "other opportunities."

According to the second source, Harris was aware of the exit.

Sanders, 31, joined the White House team during Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign. She also worked as press secretary for Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders during his presidential campaign in 2016.

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#### RPT: ANALYSIS - US Posture Review Demonizes Other States to Justify Defense Spending, High-Tech Weapons

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The new Pentagon Global Posture Review (GPR) released this week is a bid to justify even more increased military spending in addition to demonizing Russia, China and other nations as aggressive US rivals, analysts told Sputnik. The review comes as the US and its Western allies repeatedly accuse Russia of preparing to launch aggressive action against Ukraine - allegations Moscow has refuted. Earlier in the day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he plans to tell Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Thursday that Russia needs to pull back troops from Ukraine's border.

Meanwhile, Congress is preparing to pass a \$768 billion annual defense budget, although the proceedings have been stalled as lawmakers debate over whether to add anti-Russian measures to the bill.

The US Defense Department said the GPR, released on Monday, strengthens "the combat credible deterrent" in Europe against Russia and enables NATO forces to operate more effectively. The Pentagon also said Biden's decision in February to rescind the 25,000 US force cap the Trump administration imposed in Germany was based on GPR assessments. In addition, the GPR directs the US to boost cooperation and advance initiatives with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region to deter China and North Korea.

"It is another round of self-referencing claptrap to justify an out of control defense budget - particularly the high tech acquisition program," former Pentagon analyst Chuck Spinney told Sputnik.

#### HYPOCRITICAL 'AGGRESSION' DISCOURSE

Although the GPR does not substantially expand the US worldwide footprint itself, some experts believe the review reveals the aggressive activities the US is conducting in every region of the globe.

Political commentator and historian Dan Lazare advised that the document was a transparent attempt to project US aggressive behavior against nations around the world onto the heads of its intended victims.

"What is immediately striking about a document like the 2021 Global Posture Review is the rhetoric. Each time it uses the word 'aggression,' it's always in terms of things that other countries do to the United States and never the other way around," Lazare told Sputnik.

The document repeatedly put the blame for aggressive global deployments on nations like China and Russia which in reality had been on the receiving end of aggressive and destabilizing US policies for years, Lazare pointed out.

"Nowhere is any thought given to the possibility that maybe Chinese 'aggression' wouldn't exist if the United States didn't insert itself in Chinese territorial waters or that Russian troops would not be on stand-by alert if NATO didn't pursue an obvious strategy based on encirclement and... even dismemberment as Zbigniew Brzezinski recommended in his 1997 [book], 'The Grand Chessboard,'" he said.

Americans always viewed themselves as guiltless and as innocents abroad or boys in a Mark Twain classic floating down the Mississippi River amid a world of adult corruption, Lazare explained.

"It is a distorted view of reality that's going to get the United States in trouble again and again until its overseas adventures finally collapse in a heap," he said.

The United States, Lazare added, was clearly locked in a cycle of imperial decline as traced by the Yale historian Paul Kennedy 30 years ago, sending in more troops as resistance mounts then preparing themselves for a last great effort before they collapse from exhaustion.

"This is what the United States is doing as it engages in military provocations against two nuclear powers. It's traveling halfway across the world in search of trouble and is all too likely to find it," Lazare said.

However, these policies would not make Americans at home any safer, Lazare cautioned.

"To the contrary, economic and social policy at home will grow more inept and erratic as military policy grows more unrealistic abroad. Americans will wind up poorer and more unsafe as a

consequence, not to mention more divided and torn. Imperialism backfires - not some of the time, but always," Lazare concluded.

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RPT - US Court Sentences Russia's Grichishkin to 60 Months, 1 Year of Supervised Release - Clerk

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan sentenced Russian national Aleksandr Grichishkin to 60 months in prison and to a one year of supervised release, the clerk of the court told Sputnik.

"He [Grichishkin] got 60 months in prison, supervised release one year, a special assessment of \$100. He also has restitution," the clerk of the court said on Wednesday.

The court of the court could not clarify the exact amount of the restitution and the associated time he served.

"The BOP [Bureau of Prisons] will calculate how much time he's already served and then how much time he has to go forward. I do not know how long he is in custody," the clerk of the court said.

The US authorities convicted Grichishkin on charges of conspiring to engage in racketeering, influence or corrupt organization as well as bank fraud conspiracy. He reached a plea agreement with the US government in March.

In a sentencing memorandum issued in August, the US government described Grichishkin as a leader of an organization that helped criminals deploy malware and steal money for approximately seven years. The US Justice Department said Grichishkin operated under a variety of online aliases and instructed other members of the group on how to change IP-addresses and what to do in order to "clean up" their history.

During a court hearing on August 18, Grichishkin expressed remorse for his crimes and asked the court to allow him early deportation to Russia in order to reunite with his family as soon as possible.

Grichishkin and Andrei Skvortsov from Russia, Aleksandr Skorodumov from Lithuania and Pavel Stassi from Estonia were members of a hosting organization that allegedly helped a number of cybercriminals to evade detection by US law enforcement after they caused millions of dollars in losses to victims in the United States, according to the Justice Department.

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RPT - IMF Says Will Meet With Argentine Officials in Washington to Discuss New Program

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Delegations of the International Monetary Fund and the Argentine government will meet in Washington later this week to advance talks on a new program, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

"An IMF staff team led by Julie Kozack and Luis Cubeddu will meet with an Argentine delegation from the Ministry of Economy and the Central Bank in Washington, D.C. starting this weekend to deepen technical discussions toward an IMF supported program," the spokesperson said on Wednesday.

The South American nation, which suffered a major default in 2001, has been experiencing a currency crisis and economic depression.

With the situation deteriorating during the coronavirus pandemic, the country laid out a proposal to restructure its debt in April 2020.

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**US House Capitol Attack Panel Seeks Contempt Charge Against Ex-Trump-Era Official Clark**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US House committee probing the January 6 attack on the Capitol has voted in favor of seeking a contempt charge against former Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark.

"The Select Committee has unanimously voted to adopt the report recommending Jeffrey B. Clark for criminal contempt," the panel said in a tweet on Wednesday.

In the subpoena issued in October, the panel accused Clark of reportedly being involved in efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

According to the subpoena, Clark recommended holding a press conference to announce a Justice Department investigation into allegations of voter fraud - a recommendation that was rejected by the Department leadership due to its lack of a "factual basis" and its inconsistency with its institutional role.

Clark's defense said he has refused to provide information requested by the panel because it was 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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**WFP Seeks \$2.6Bln to Reach Some 23Mln Afghans in Need of Urgent Food Assistance**

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - There are roughly 23 million Afghans in need of urgent food assistance and \$2.6 billion is required to reach them in the coming year, the UN World Food Program (WFP) said in a statement.

"Humanitarian needs in [Afghanistan] have increased... with all 34 provinces facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. As a result, some 23 million Afghans require urgent food assistance, a figure never seen before. This includes more than three million children who are at risk of severe hunger and the life-threatening consequences of malnutrition," the UN program said on Wednesday. "The WFP is seeking \$2.6 billion for its operations in Afghanistan over the coming year."

Remote areas of Afghanistan have been facing food insecurity due to a combination of prolonged drought, economic collapse, conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN said. This has led to an 80% rise in the cost of bread – a staple food for many families in the country – the release noted.

WFP Afghanistan Director Mary-Ellen McGroarty called on the international community to separate humanitarian imperative from political discussions.

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US Court Dismisses Ex-Yukos Shareholders' Lawsuit Against Russia

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A US court of appeals dismissed a lawsuit filed by former shareholders of the now defunct Yukos oil company against Russia, a court ruling revealed.

"Upon consideration of appellants' consent motion to dismiss, it is ORDERED that the motion be granted, and this case is hereby dismissed," the ruling said on Wednesday.

Hulley Enterprises, Yukos Universal, and Veteran Petroleum were demanding a remuneration of \$50 billion with collateral for alleged expropriation.

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**Biden Transmits AUKUS Agreement to US Congress, Urges 'Favorable Consideration'**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he has transmitted to Congress the text of the proposed agreement to exchange nuclear submarine information between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS) and urged lawmakers to consider it favorably.

"I am pleased to transmit to the Congress... the text of an Agreement between the Government of the United States of America, the Government of Australia, and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the 'United Kingdom') for the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information," Biden said. "I have approved the agreement, authorized its execution, and urge that the Congress give it favorable consideration."

The proposed deal sparked tensions between France and the AUKUS partners due to the cancelling of the previously-existing agreement for Paris to supply Canberra with submarines. The countries' leadership have since dispelled the tensions in a series of diplomatic meetings. Biden said the AUKUS governments are seeking to engage in an 18-month consultation period to seek an optimal pathway for delivery of nuclear-powered submarines to the Royal Australian Navy as soon as possible. The proposed agreement would allow the countries to exchange certain restricted info as may be needed, he added.

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**US Man Gets 33 Months for Threatening Lawmakers for Not Backing Trump - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A New Hampshire man has been sentenced to 33 months in federal prison for threatening to kill six members of US Congress and a state lawmaker, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Ryder Winegar, 34, of Amherst, was sentenced to 33 months in federal prison for six counts of threatening members of Congress and one count of transmitting interstate threatening communications," the release said on Wednesday.

Winegar, who has been in custody since January and pleaded guilty on August 6, was also ordered to pay a \$15,000 fine, the release said.

According to court documents and statements, in voice messages left at their offices in December of last year, Winegar threatened to hang the six members of Congress if they did not "get behind Donald Trump."

The Justice Department said the US Capitol Police visited Winegar on December 20, 2020 to interview him but he refused to talk to them. The following day, Winegar fled to Brazil without his family, before investigators could return with search and arrest warrants.

Following Winegar's January arrest, investigators learned that on December 14, 2021, Winegar e-mailed a threat to a member of the New Hampshire State House of Representatives. Winegar threatened to drag the representative from his bed and hang him.

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#### Global Flight Cargo Demand Soared by 9% in October - International Air Transport Body

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Global demand for cargos flown by air soared by more than 9 percent in October compared with the same month last year, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) in Geneva said.

"Global demand, measured in cargo tonne-kilometers (CTKs), was up 9.4% compared to October 2019 (10.4% for international operations)," IATA said in a press release on Wednesday. "Capacity constraints have eased slightly but remain 7.2% below pre-COVID-19 levels (in October 2019)."

IATA explained that the data for global air cargo markets showed that demand continued to be well above pre-crisis levels and that the capacity constraints had eased slightly, the release said.

"Economic conditions continue to support air cargo growth but are slightly weaker than in the previous months. ... Supply chain disruptions and the resulting delivery delays have led to long supplier delivery times. This typically results in manufacturers using air transport, which is quicker, to recover time lost," the release added.

The global Supplier Delivery Time Purchasing Managers Index reached an all-time low of 34.8 in October and values below 50 are favorable for air cargo, according to the release.

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#### US Offers \$5Mln Reward for Information About Jalisco Drug Cartel Member - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US government is offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information that will led to the arrest of Juan Carlos Valencia Gonzalez, a senior member of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said. "Today, the US Department of State is announcing a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of Juan Carlos Valencia Gonzalez, an alleged high-level member of the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG - Jalisco New Generation Cartel)," Price said in a statement on Wednesday.

Gonzalez was charged with conspiracy and distribution of a controlled substance for unlawful importation to the United States and use of a firearm during a narcotics transaction, the statement said.

CJNG is a Mexico-based organization that is responsible for trafficking a significant proportion of the fentanyl and other deadly drugs destined for the United States, the statement added. Since the inception of the Narcotics Rewards Program in 1986, the State Department has paid more than \$155 million in rewards for information leading to apprehensions and other qualifying outcomes, according to the statement.

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US Earmarks \$13M In For Energy Efficient Technologies in Federal Buildings - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US government budgeted \$13 million to reduce emissions at 17 federal facilities through retrofits and storage technologies, the Energy Department said.

"The projects will use energy performance contracts at no additional up-front cost to the government and will lower energy and water utility bills by more than \$30 million annually while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by over 200,000 metric tons," the Energy Department said a press release explaining the initiative on Wednesday.

Agencies participating in the program will install both traditional energy-efficiency measures and renewable energy technologies, such as solar photovoltaics, while deploying innovative energy-conservation measures like battery energy storage systems, lighting efficiency, electric vehicle supply equipment, and biofuels, the release said.

In recent years, the federal government has prioritized the energy efficiency of federal property. In 2018, it spent \$16.6 billion for energy used in more than 350,000 buildings and 600,000 over-the-road vehicles, as well as aircraft, ships, and other equipment, the release added. Agencies in the latest effort include the US Coast Guard, the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Aviation Administration and US Customs and Border Protection, according to the release.

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Russia Anti-Satellite Test Shows Need For Rules on Responsible Use of Space - Harris

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris opened the Biden administration's inaugural meeting of the National Space Council on Wednesday by citing Russia's recent anti-satellite test as illustrating the need for global rules for outer space.

"Without clear norms for the responsible use of space we stand a real risk of threats to our national and global security," Harris said on Wednesday. "Just last month we saw what can happen. Russia launched an anti satellite missile to destroy one of its satellites. By blasting debris across space this irresponsible act endangered the satellites of other nations as well as astronauts in the International Space Station."

In November, Russia successfully conducted an anti-satellite weapon system test by destroying the old Russian spacecraft Celina-D.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said the test was not directed at anyone and was carried out in accordance with international law, including the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. The Foreign Ministry also said because of the satellite's location, the debris poses no threat to other spacecraft, including the International Space Station.

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#### Wall Street Tumbles in December Debut After First US Case of Omicron Variant Reported

NEW YORK, December 1 (Sputnik) - Wall Street made its December debut on an ominous note after the first US reported case of the novel coronavirus Omicron variant led stocks to close down more than 1% for a second day in a row.

"We've seen this movie before and Wall Street will likely remain COVID-19 variant headline driven until a clear assessment over this wave can be made," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said on Wednesday.

Wall Street's Dow Jones Industrial Average, which consists largely of industrial and leisure stocks that performed badly during most of the near two-year long pandemic, closed down 1.3%, extending the previous session's drop of 1.9%.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 US stocks, finished down 1.2%, adding to its near 2% decline on Tuesday.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite index, which shone during most of the pandemic due to the relative outperformance of Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, did worse than the Dow and S&P500 on Wednesday. Nasdaq lost 1.8%, compounding the previous session's drop of 1.6%.

Notwithstanding Wednesday's declines, US stock indexes are still up substantially for the year. The Dow shows an 11% gain for all of 2021, while the S&P 500 and Nasdaq are up 20% and 18%, respectively.

The first US individual infected with the Omicron variant was a California resident who had traveled home from South Africa on November 22, Dr. Anthony Fauci told a news conference. The person was fully vaccinated, has mild symptoms and is self-quarantining, Fauci said.

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#### Higher US Business Costs Pressure Led to Higher Inflation in November - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US economy came under renewed pressure from supply chain disruptions, labor shortages and higher costs in November, forcing businesses to

raise prices of goods and services that led to overall inflation, the Federal Reserve said in its Beige Book report.

"Economic activity grew at a modest to moderate pace in most Federal Reserve Districts during October and early November," the report, which is based on anecdotal information collected by the central bank's 12 regional units, said on Wednesday.

Higher costs from supply disruptions and wage pressures "generally allowed firms to raise prices with little pushback" from the public, the report said.

Labor shortages remained acute, driven by "ongoing pandemic concerns, child care and a reduced urgency to work due to fiscal support and accumulated savings," the report added.

The Beige Book report came after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell told Congress on Wednesday that he expected the pace of US wage growth to subside going forth and inflation to cool as well while economic expansion remains steady.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the 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 last month that the US Consumer 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 said on Tuesday that the Federal Reserve might end its pandemic-era stimulus support for the US economy faster than anticipated due to high inflationary pressures and relatively strong growth.

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#### US-UK Talks on Steel Tariffs Removal Stalled Over Northern Ireland Clause - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Talks between Washington and London that were supposed to result in removal of the Trump-era tariffs on the UK steel have been stalled over US concerns about new post-Brexit trading rules and their effects on Northern Ireland, the Financial Times reported.

The United Kingdom has threatened to trigger Article 16 of the post-Brexit Northern Ireland protocol to suspend checks of goods delivered to Northern Ireland from the rest of the union, the report said on Wednesday.

The Biden administration has already informed the United Kingdom about the reason for the delay while sources people familiar with the matter have said the talks stalled due to pressure from Congress after the United Kingdom threatened to use the clause, the report said.

As part of the Brexit agreement that came in force in January, there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but all goods and animal-based products coming

from the rest of the United Kingdom must be checked upon arrival to see if they comply with EU sanitary regulations.

The UK government has argued that the protocol is not working, as it causes delays and interruptions to goods moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and irritates loyalists of the British crown who believe their place within the union could be affected.

In October, the United States and the European Union agreed to resolve their steel and aluminum dispute that left UK steelmakers at a disadvantage because they continue to face high tariffs on exports.

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Michigan School Shooting Suspect Pleads Not Guilty to Murder, Terrorism Charges - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The teen accused of perpetrating a shooting at a high school in Michigan pleaded not guilty to charges including murder and terrorism, defense lawyer Scott Kozak said during the arraignment.

The 15-year old suspect, Ethan Crumbley, is facing a total of 24 charges including first-degree murder and terrorism. Four students were killed in the shooting, and seven others were injured on Wednesday.

Judge Nancy Carniak ordered that the suspect be held without bond due to the serious nature of the allegations. Carniak also ordered that the teen be transferred to an adult detention facility.

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Current Myanmar, Afghanistan Envoys to UN to Keep Posts For Now - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - The current ambassadors of Afghanistan and Myanmar to the United Nations, appointed by the toppled governments in those countries, will keep their posts until the UN Credentials Committee decides on the nations' representations at the world body, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gennady Kuzmin told reporters.

On Wednesday, the UN Credentials Committee convened a meeting to decide whether Myanmar's Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun and Afghanistan's Ghulam Isaccai should continue serving as ambassadors. The Tatmadaw and the Taliban had requested that their envoys occupy seats at the United Nations following their seizing power in the two states.

"The current envoys of Afghanistan and Myanmar will continue to serve as permanent representatives until the final decision of the Committee is issued," Kuzmin said after the meeting on Wednesday.

The Russian ambassador said the Credentials Committee considered the candidate named by the Taliban in September to represent Afghanistan at the United Nations, Mohammad Suhail Shaheen.

The Credentials Committee's failure to reach an agreement on the representation was due to differences among the Committee members and challenging political context in the two states, Kuzmin said.

"There were differences, and these are quite sensitive political situations in these countries... Therefore, the Committee at this stage was unable to issue a substantial decision," he added. Kuzmin also said the decision represents a "middle ground" that will allow in the future to settle the controversial situation.

The Credentials Committee did not schedule its next meeting; however, on December 9, it will submit a report on the meeting results to the UN General Assembly.

The General Assembly will affirm in a resolution every delegation's representation at the United Nations but defer the decision on Afghanistan and Myanmar, Kuzmin said.

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Russia Blocks UK Diplomat Nicholas Kay for UN Libya's Special Envoy Post - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - Russia has blocked UK diplomat Nicholas Kay from becoming the new UN Special Envoy for Libya, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

"The candidature of Nicholas Kay for the post of the UN envoy for Libya was blocked by Russia," the source said on Wednesday.

The former UK Ambassador to Afghanistan and earlier to Sudan, Kay was considered to replace Jan Kubis ahead of the elections in Libya on December 24.

In November, Kubis handed his letter of resignation to the UN Secretary-General after serving for less than a year, since January 2021.

Diplomatic sources at the UN said Kubis cited personal reasons, including health, that prompted him to step down.

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Meta Removes Accounts in Belarus, China, Poland for 'Inauthentic Behavior' – Official

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Meta, formerly known as Facebook, said on Wednesday that it has removed six adversarial networks from Palestine, China, Vietnam, Belarus, Poland and several other European countries for coordinated inauthentic behavior, brigading and mass reporting.

"We removed four networks from Palestine, Poland, Belarus, and China for violating our policy on Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB). Each of these networks targeted people in multiple countries at once," Nathan Gleicher, head of security policy, said.

Another deleted network of accounts originated in Italy and France and targeted medical professionals, journalists, and elected officials with mass harassment.

"Our investigation linked this activity to an anti-vaccination conspiracy movement called V\_V, publicly reported to engage in violent online and offline behaviors," the company said.

In addition, Meta removed a network of accounts in Vietnam for mass reporting. The network allegedly targeted activists and other people critical of the government.

Gleicher said the global threats the company tackles have significantly evolved since 2017 when it began sharing its findings about CIB. To account for this constantly shifting threat environment, Gleicher said, the social media giant builds its defenses with the expectation that these issues will not stop, adapts and tries new tactics. The company is adding new layers of defense to address potential gaps from multiple angles, he added. With the goal being that over time the security measures will make these behaviors more costly and difficult to hide, and less effective.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA'S POSITION ON AUKUS

\* Russia is in no hurry to draw conclusion regarding the Australia-United States-United Kingdom (AUKUS) partnership, but is concerned that a challenge to nuclear nonproliferation has been

thrown in, Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said on Wednesday.

\* The refusal of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to provide information on the AUKUS project is not normal and Russia expects more clarity going forward, Ulyanov said.

#### OMICRON VARIANT IN US

\* The first case of the coronavirus Omicron variant in the United States has been detected and confirmed in California by public health officials, Medical Adviser to the US President Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday.

\* The travel ban the US government recently imposed on eight countries is a temporary measure to enable extra time to analyze the new coronavirus variant Omicron, Fauci said.

\* The new Omicron coronavirus variant has been confirmed in 23 countries and their number is expected to rise, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

#### IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

\* Iran's technical steps to enrich uranium are a response to the US decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, told reporters on Wednesday.

\* None of the parties to the JCPOA participating in the Vienna talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal has officially come forward with a proposal for an interim agreement, Ulyanov told reporters.

#### MICHIGAN SCHOOL SHOOTING

\* The teen gunman in the recent high school shooting near Detroit, Michigan will be charged with one count of terrorism and four counts of first degree murder, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald told reporters on Wednesday.

\* McDonald told reporters that charges are being considered against both parents of the teen suspected of killing four in the recent high school shooting in Michigan.

\* A 15-year old sophomore who killed four in the recent high school shooting near Detroit is facing life behind bars, Prosecutor Karen McDonald told reporters.

\* A fourth victim has died a day after a high school shooting near Detroit, Michigan, the Oakland County Sheriff's Office said.

#### BELARUS-POLAND BORDER CRISIS

\* On December 2, the Iraqi authorities will organize a flight to evacuate 420 people from Minsk, Iraqi consul in Russia and Belarus, Majid Kinani, told RIA Novosti.

\* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said in an interview with RIA Novosti that among the organizers of the delivery of Middle Eastern migrants to the Belarusian border were Russian citizens, including the Chechens.

\* Lukashenko told RIA Novosti that the acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel in phone conversations had promised him EU assistance to solve the problem of refugees in the camp on the Polish-Belarusian border, and called it "a big step forward."

\* There are 400 women and children among migrants at the Belarusian-Polish border, Lukashenko told Ria Novosti, adding that humanitarian corridors to the European Union is required.

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#### Biden Says US Within Striking Distance of Eliminating HIV Transmission

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that the United States has come very close to eliminating human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) transmission.

"We are within striking distance of eliminating HIV transmission, within striking distance," Biden said during remarks on World AIDS day.

Biden noted that since President George W. Bush launched the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program in 2003, more than 20 million lives have been saved.

At this time, the United States has a roadmap to end the ongoing HIV epidemic by the year 2030, Biden added.

According to HIV.gov data, about 1.2 million people in the United States have contracted HIV while 13% of them do not know about it. In 2019, the US authorities estimated 34,800 new HIV infections in the United States.

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#### US, EU to Discuss Energy, Taiwan During Dialogue on China Thursday - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US and EU senior diplomats will discuss energy, security and Taiwan during their bilateral dialogue on China, a senior State Department official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Tomorrow, Deputy Secretary [of State Wendy] Sherman and Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) Stefano Sannino will lead the second high-level meeting of the US and EU dialogue on China," the official said during a press briefing.

The discussion will focus on key areas, including technology, human rights, multilateralism, disinformation and security, the official also said.

"Certainly, Taiwan will be the topic of discussions," the official added.

Both sides will issue a joint statement at the conclusion of the bilateral dialogue, according to the official.

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### Alec Baldwin Says He 'Didn't Pull Trigger' in Fatal Shooting of Movie Cinematographer

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Hollywood actor Alec Baldwin said he did not pull the trigger in the fatal shooting of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins while filming his new movie "Rust" in his first ever interview since the tragedy.

"The trigger wasn't pulled. I didn't pull the trigger," Baldwin said in the released preview of his interview with ABC News, which is scheduled to be broadcast in full on Thursday. "I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger: Never."

Baldwin, a major Hollywood star for more than 30 years, said he had no idea how the bullet got into the gun in the accidental fatal shooting on October 21.

"I have no idea. Someone put a live bullet in the gun, a bullet that wasn't even supposed to be on the property," he said.

Baldwin noted that the shooting was the worst thing that had ever happened to him in his entire life.

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### UN Committee Defers Decision on Issuing Credentials to Taliban, Myanmar Military - Chair

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - The UN Credentials Committee decided on Wednesday to defer its final decision on whether to issue credentials to the envoys of the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) and the Myanmar military to represent their countries at the world's body, the chair of the committee, Swedish Ambassador to the United Nations Karin Enestrom, told reporters.

"I can confirm that the Credentials Committee has held its meeting to consider credentials of the UN member states, including Afghanistan and Myanmar," Enestrom said. "The committee has decided to defer its position of the credentials in these two situations. The report of the committee will be made public once it has been issued for the consideration of the General Assembly."

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### US State of Georgia Man Pleads Guilty to Assaulting Officer on January 6 - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A Georgia man pleaded guilty today to striking, pushing and kicking police officers during the riot that occurred at the US Capitol on January 6, the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Kevin Douglas Creek, 47, of Alpharetta, assaulted two law enforcement officers. He pleaded guilty in the US District Court for the District of Columbia to assaulting, resisting, or impeding

certain officers. He faces up to eight years in prison as well as three years of supervised release and a \$250,000 fine. Sentencing was scheduled for March 10, 2022," the release said.

The statement said Creek struck the left hand of an officer from the Metropolitan Police Department then pushed and kicked an officer with the Capitol Police. The assaults are alleged to have taken place in the West Terrace area of the Capitol.

Creek, who was arrested in Georgia on June 9, remains released pending sentencing, according to the statement.

The Justice Department said Creek was part of the riot which interrupted a joint session of the US Congress that was in session to count and certify the electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election.

In the 10 months since January 6, more than 675 people have been arrested in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol, including more than 210 who have been charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement. The investigation continues.

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IMF Says Will Meet With Argentine Officials in Washington to Discuss New Program  
WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) – Delegations of the International Monetary Fund and the Argentine government will meet in Washington later this week to advance talks on a new program, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"An IMF staff team led by Julie Kozack and Luis Cubeddu will meet with an Argentine delegation from the Ministry of Economy and the Central Bank in Washington, D.C. starting this weekend to deepen technical discussions toward an IMF supported program," the spokesperson said.

The South American nation, which suffered a major default in 2001, has been experiencing a currency crisis and economic depression. With the situation deteriorating during the coronavirus pandemic, the country laid out a proposal to restructure its debt in April 2020.

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UN Chief Urges States to Avoid 'Travel Apartheid' of Africa Over Omicron Strain

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on the international community to avoid "travel apartheid" of African countries over the new Omicron variant of coronavirus.

"We have the instruments to have safe travel, let's use those instruments to avoid this kind of, allow me to say, travel apartheid, which I think is unacceptable," Guterres said in a press briefing.

The UN chief appealed to countries to consider testing for travelers which, he said, will allow for safe international traveling.

South Africa was the first country to identify Omicron on November 24 and notify other governments about the new strain.

A number of states, including the United States and the United Kingdom, in response announced travel restrictions on the southern African region.

Meanwhile, Guterres pointed out, the region has one of the lowest rates of vaccination with only 6% of the population in Africa being fully vaccinated.

"We have seen low vaccination rates combined with the deeply unequal access to vaccines creating a breeding ground for variants," Guterres said.

He said the people of Africa cannot be blamed for the "immorally" low level of vaccinations available to them and should not be "collectively punished" for sharing the data on Omicron with the rest of the world.

"With a virus that is truly borderless, travel restrictions that isolate one country or region are not only deeply unfair and punitive, they are ineffective," Guterres stated.

The World Health Organization (WHO) designated the new coronavirus strain, which was originally detected in South Africa, as a variant of concern during an emergency meeting last week. The WHO dubbed the new coronavirus strain B.1.1.529 Omicron, the 15th letter of the Greek alphabet.

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#### Michigan Prosecutor Says May Charge Parents of Teen Who Killed 4 in School Shooting

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald told reporters on Wednesday that charges are being considered against both parents of the teen suspected of killing four in the recent high school shooting in Michigan.

"We are considering charges against both parents," McDonald announced. "We will be making decision swiftly."

On Tuesday, a 15-year old sophomore opened fire in a high school near Detroit. Four students were killed and seven other individuals were injured. Police allege the teen used a gun his father had bought days earlier.

The suspect will be arraigned later on Wednesday.

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#### Teen Gunman in Michigan School Shooting Facing Life in Prison - Prosecutor

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A 15-year old sophomore who killed four in the recent high school shooting near Detroit is facing life behind bars, Prosecutor Karen McDonald told reporters on Wednesday.

When asked to confirm whether he is facing life in prison, McDonald stated, "That is correct."

On Tuesday, a teen opened fire in a high school near Detroit. Four students were killed and seven other individuals were injured.

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Michigan School Shooter Charged With 1 Count of Terrorism, 4 Counts of Murder - Prosecutor  
WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The teen gunman in the recent high school shooting near Detroit, Michigan will be charged with one count of terrorism and four counts of first degree murder, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald told reporters on Wednesday.

"Today is the start of the legal process," McDonald said. "We are charging this individual with one count of terrorism causing death, four counts of first-degree murder, seven counts of assault with intent to murder and 12 counts of possession of a firearm in the commission of the felony."

The suspect will be arraigned later today. Additional charges may be announced soon, McDonald noted.

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#### Fauci Says Was Not Aware of Alleged Trump Positive COVID Test Prior to Debate With Biden

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Chief Medical Advisor to the President and top US infectious disease official Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday that he was not aware of the results of the COVID-19 test taken by then-President Trump prior to his first debate with Joe Biden.

Former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows alleged in a new book that Trump tested positive for COVID-19 prior to the September 2020 debate, did not reveal the result, and then received a negative result shortly thereafter.

"I certainly was not aware of his test positivity or negativity," Fauci said during a press briefing at the White House.

When asked whether Trump may have put Biden at risk, Fauci said broadly that anybody who tests positive should quarantine themselves.

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#### Fauci Says California Authorities Confirmed First Case of Omicron Variant in US

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The first case of the coronavirus Omicron variant in the United States has been detected and confirmed in California by public health officials, Medical Adviser to the US President Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday.

"The California and San Francisco Departments of Public Health and the CDC have confirmed that a recent case of COVID-19 among an individual in California was caused by the Omicron variant... The individual was a traveler who returned from South Africa on November 22 and tested positive on November 29," Fauci said.

The infected individual, who was fully vaccinated, is experiencing mild symptoms, Fauci said. However, inferences about the Omicron variant cannot be made from the single case, he added. Fauci also noted that people who came into contact with the individual have been notified and all have tested negative for the virus.

The Omicron variant has prompted countries around the world, including the US, to implement new travel restrictions in an effort to slow its spread. Fauci said that the new US travel policy will require air travelers to get a COVID-19 test within 24 hours of boarding the inbound plane. South African health officials have said the Omicron variant was discovered in fully vaccinated individuals, is more transmissible, but the cases have been mild.

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#### Rate of US Wages Rise Not Seen as Too Worrying, Inflation Could Fall - Powell

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The pace of wage increases in the United States is not expected to be too worrying and inflation could fall as well, though that is not a given, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

"We have seen wages moving up significantly," Powell said during a second day of hearings in Congress on the US economic recovery. "We don't see them moving up at a troubling rate that would tend to spark higher inflation, but that's something we're watching very carefully."

Powell said inflation is expected to subside from current highs, though that was not a given.

"We have to balance those two goals when they are in tension, as they are right now," Powell said. "But I assure you we will use our tools to make sure that this high inflation we are experiencing does not become entrenched."

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

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

The Labor Department reported last month that the US Consumer 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 told Congress on Monday that the Federal Reserve might end its pandemic-era stimulus support for the US economy faster than anticipated due to high inflationary pressures and relatively strong growth.

Under its original schedule, the Federal Reserve is scheduled to taper \$15 billion each month beginning November from the monthly purchase of \$120 billion of bonds and assets it has carried since the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020. The central bank has also planned its first pandemic-era rate hike once the stimulus ends.

In terms of employment, the United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns and other restrictive pandemic measures. Some 3-5 million of those jobs have not returned, according to labor market estimates, putting pressure on wages due to the mismatch in supply-demand of labor.

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**Fauci Says Everyone Entering US Must Get COVID-19 Test Within 24 Hours of Boarding Plane**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The new policy for air travelers entering the United States requires COVID-19 tests to be performed within 24 hours of boarding the inbound flight, Medical Adviser to the US President Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday.

"The new regulation, if you want to call it that, is that anybody and everybody who is coming into the country needs to get a test within 24 hours of getting on the plane to come here," Fauci said during a press briefing at the White House.

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**US Travel Ban Temporary Measure to Allow Time to Analyze Omicron Variant - Fauci**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The travel ban the US government recently imposed on eight countries is a temporary measure to enable extra time to analyze the new coronavirus variant Omicron, Chief Medical Adviser to the President Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday. "[N]o one feels, I certainly don't, that a travel ban is going to prevent people who are infected from coming to the United States, but we needed to buy some time to be able to prepare, understand what's going on," Fauci said during a press briefing. "So, we look at this as a temporary measure."

Starting on Monday, the US government restricted entry to foreign travelers from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi given that the new variant emerged from southern Africa. South African health official said the variant was detected in fully vaccinated individuals, was more transmissible but the cases have been mild.

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**Pennsylvania Man Charged With Assault on Officer During US Capitol Breach - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A Pennsylvania man was charged for assaulting a law enforcement officer with a metal flagpole during the January 6 breach of the US Capitol, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Howard Charles Richardson, 71, of King of Prussia, is charged with engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds, civil disorder, and assaulting, resisting, or impeding certain officers with a dangerous weapon, among other charges," the department said in a statement.

According to court documents, video footage shows Richardson striking the officer with a metal flagpole three times while yelling "here it comes." He only stopped swinging after the flagpole broke in his hands, the documents said.

He made his initial court appearance today in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania after surrendering in Philadelphia on Tuesday, the release added.

Richardson was part of the breach that interrupted a joint session of the US Congress that was in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election.

In the 10 months since January 6, more than 675 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol, including more than 210 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement. The investigation remains ongoing.

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**US Capitol Police Say Arrested 33 People for Blocking Traffic Amid Abortion Case Protests**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A total of 33 individuals have been arrested for blocking traffic amid demonstrations by pro- and anti-abortion demonstrators sparked by the beginning of oral arguments in the US Supreme Court case against a Mississippi state abortion law, the US Capitol Police said on Wednesday.

"We arrested a total of 33 people for Crowding, Obstructing or Incommoding (DC Code § 22-1307). They were blocking traffic on Constitution Avenue. This does not affect the lawful demonstrators who are in front of the US Supreme Court," the Capitol Police said in a statement via Twitter.

The US Capitol Police warned some 40 demonstrators three times earlier on Wednesday for blocking traffic, the statement said.

The Supreme Court heard opening arguments in a case challenging a Mississippi state abortion law that restricts abortions starting at 15 weeks of pregnancy. Should the Supreme Court, which has a 6-3 conservative majority, side with the state of Mississippi, it would overturn its previous *Roe v. Wade* decision.

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US Identifies First Case of Coronavirus Omicron Variant in California - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have identified the first case of the coronavirus variant Omicron in the United States - in the state of California, CNN reported on Wednesday.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified the United States' first confirmed case of the Omicron coronavirus variant in California, the report said citing a source familiar with the situation.

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UN Chief Sounds Alarm on How Int'l. Community Deals With Africa on Pandemic, Climate

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday raised the alarm regarding the way the international community is dealing with the African continent regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, urging putting an end to "injustice."

"I'm sounding the alarm about how the international community is dealing with Africa today, in this period marked by pandemic and the climate crisis," Guterres said during a press conference. "We must put an end to this injustice, immorality. We must absolutely ensure that conditions are equitable in terms of economic growth and political relations within the international arena. There must be a relationship of equality between us and Africa."

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Russia, Terrorism Remain Main Concerns in NATO's New Strategic Concept Draft - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Russia and terrorism remain the two main concerns for NATO as the alliance works on producing a draft of its new strategic concept, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"Russia remains very much front and center in our concerns, so does terrorism," Blinken said during an interview. "[T]he Strategic Concept will reflect the world that we're living in now, not the world we were living in 2010."

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Biden Says Optimistic Omicron Variant Not to Exacerbate Supply Chain Problems

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he is optimistic that the new coronavirus variant Omicron will not exacerbate existing supply chain issues but remains concerned until relevant information is obtained.

"Well, you know me, I am an optimist," Biden said, when asked whether he was concerned that Omicron would be exacerbating supply chain problems. "What we have seen so far does not guarantee that's the outcome. As a matter of fact, we are going to know in the next several weeks that not just how transmissible the disease is, but how extensive it is, how dangerous it is and what damage it does and most importantly whether the vaccines we have are capable of

dealing with this virus. I think it's a little early to make that judgement, but am I concerned, of course I am, until we get the final answers."

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**Blinken Says Held Constructive Talks With Lithuanian Counterpart to Reaffirm Defense Ties**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he held a constructive meeting with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis to reaffirm the defense and economic ties between the two countries.

"Constructive meeting with Lithuanian Foreign Minister @GLandsbergis to reaffirm our strong defense and economic ties," Blinken said in a tweet.

As a NATO and European Union member, Blinken added, Lithuania is a strong, effective partner and together the two will continue promoting democracy and human rights globally.

According to a State Department release on Monday, Blinken is attending the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Foreign Ministerial in Riga, Latvia, November 30-December 1, 2021.

During a Tuesday press briefing, Blinken said the United States is very concerned about Russian troop movements along the border with Ukraine and warned Russia against taking any escalatory actions because any renewed aggression would trigger serious consequences. Moscow has refuted similar accusations of planning to take aggressive action by saying that it is moving troops within its own territory and at its own discretion.

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**Russia in No Hurry With Conclusions on AUKUS Partnership - Ulyanov**

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - Russia is in no hurry to draw conclusion regarding the Australia-United States-United Kingdom (AUKUS) partnership, but is concerned that a challenge to nuclear nonproliferation has been thrown in, Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said on Wednesday.

Ulyanov said that the international community needs to understand how the creation of AUKUS relates to Australia's commitments to the South Pacific Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone.

"So far we do not have this clarity. We do not seek to stigmatize anyone without understanding it. We want to get more clarity, more information, and then we will draw our conclusions. And our position will probably evolve as more information is received," Ulyanov said.

Ulyanov pointed out to the existence of certain risks and noted it is up to the AUKUS parties to dispel concerns by providing requisite information.

"When we receive it, we will judge," he said. "We are not rushing to conclusions, yet we express serious concern: a certain nuclear non-proliferation regime has been challenged, and we need

to make sure that it does not entail serious negative consequences. Information is needed for this. A certain precedent is being created. We are talking about a non-nuclear state."

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#### Biden Expands National Space Council to Discuss Climate Change, Education - Order

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday that he issued an executive order to extend the National Space Council in order to discuss issues like climate change, emerging technologies and education.

"This order sets forth the Council's membership, duties and responsibilities," Biden said in the executive order.

The cabinet-level National Space Council, presided by the US Vice President, will now include the secretaries of Education, Labor, Agriculture and Interior. Biden also added the national climate adviser to be a member as well.

"The Council shall advise and assist the President on space policy and strategy," the executive order said.

Members are expected to meet at least once per year to review, develop and provide recommendations on space policy and strategy, coordinate their implementation and provide advice on any aspect concerning space, the order added.

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#### Refusal of AUKUS Partners to Provide Data on Project Not Normal - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - The refusal of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to provide information on the AUKUS project is not normal and Russia expects more clarity going forward, Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said on Wednesday.

"First of all, this concerns not the United States, but Australia, because we are talking about the transfer of submarines into Australia and the possible construction of submarines in Australia. The elementary question is - what fuel will this nuclear reactor operate on? This is almost certainly going to be over 90% weapon-grade highly enriched uranium," Ulyanov told reporters. The Russian ambassador pointed out that the United States and the United Kingdom do not possess the technologies to ensure the operation of a nuclear reactor using low-enriched uranium.

"As I understand it, only France has such technologies, but even this elementary question has not yet been answered. And during the session of the [IAEA] Board of Governors, at the end of last week, we and the Chinese partners and a number of other countries raised the question that information is required, more clarity is needed on this matter," he said.

Ulyanov noted that during the session of the IAEA Board of Governors, the representative of Australia spoke, while the US and UK representatives did not even take the floor.

"And he once again didn't say anything. This is abnormal. This suggests that there is no elementary transparency. There is an information vacuum. And it's up to these three countries to fill this vacuum and correct the situation," Ulyanov said.

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#### Death Toll From Michigan High School Shooting Rises to 4 - Sheriff's Office

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - A fourth victim has died a day after a high school shooting near Detroit, Michigan, the Oakland County Sheriff's Office said on Wednesday.

"We are saddened to announce a fourth victim has died as a result of their injuries," the statement said. "Justin Shilling, a 17-year-old student of Oxford High School has passed. Tate Myre, 16, Hana St. Juliana, 14, and Madisyn Baldwin, 17, all students of Oxford High School, succumbed to their injuries yesterday."

On Tuesday, a 15-year old sophomore opened fire in a high school near Detroit. Initial data said that three students were killed and eight other individuals were injured.

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#### US Supreme Court Hears Oral Arguments in Mississippi Abortion Case

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Wednesday heard oral arguments in the case concerning a Mississippi abortion law that has the potential to overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade decision in favor of a woman's right to have an abortion without excessive restrictions.

The representatives of the two parties in the case - Mississippi State Health Officer Thomas Dobbs and the Jackson Women's Health Organization - delivered arguments in favor of their respective positions on the questions presented to the court, namely, whether all pre-viability restrictions on elective abortions are unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court, which currently has a 6-3 conservative majority, will have to decide whether to uphold a Mississippi state law that bans abortions starting at 15 weeks of pregnancy. A decision is expected by the end of June 2022.

The Justices questioned the attorneys about a variety of issues, including stare decisis, the legal principle of adhering to precedents set in previous court rulings. Some expressed concerns about how overturning a landmark decision such as Roe v. Wade could harm the public's perception of the court and its legitimacy as an institution.

In November, the Supreme Court heard arguments in a similar case regarding a Texas state law that prohibits abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, but have yet to make a ruling.

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**NATO Chief Exceeds Authority Stating Nuclear Weapons May End Up in E. Europe - Ulyanov**

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg exceeded his authority by making a statement about the possibility of moving nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe if Germany refuses to keep hosting them, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, told reporters on Wednesday. Last month, Stoltenberg said NATO would need to consider relocating nuclear weapons in other countries east of Germany if the new government changes the policy on nuclear sharing. "I have a feeling that the NATO Secretary General has significantly exceeded his powers," Ulyanov said. "In addition, within the framework of the alliance, there is not everything in order with discipline if the chief administrative person allows himself to speak on serious political issues contrary to the official position of the alliance." Ulyanov recalled the existence of the Russia-NATO fundamental act about which he noted that "NATO colleagues look back less and less." "Nevertheless, it explicitly provides a ban on the deployment of significant military forces and nuclear weapons on the territory of new NATO members. The alliance has not officially renounced these obligations. And when the chief bureaucrat begins to speak on this topic, it makes a strange impression, since it goes far beyond his competence," Ulyanov said.

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**Nobody Has Officially Proposed Interim Iran Nuclear Deal - Russian Envoy**

UNITED NATIONS, December 1 (Sputnik) - None of the parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) participating in the Vienna talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal has officially come forward with a proposal for an interim agreement, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna told reporters on Wednesday. "Nobody has officially come forward with such a proposal yet," Mikhail Ulyanov said when asked to comment on media reports about the possibility of reaching an interim agreement. "As I understand, there were certain leaks in US media, and they were rather vague. Nobody officially expressed any ideas on this matter. If you ask my opinion, I will say that it is possible, theoretically, probably, if there is a readiness from Iran and the United States as a partial solution that does not replace the need to achieve the main goal of the negotiations, namely, the complete restoration of the JCPOA," he said.

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#### Four US Executives Plead Guilty in \$4.5Mln Fraud Against Small Business Administration

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Three former executives of a defunct US bank plus the president of a financial services firm admitted defrauding the Small Business Administration (SBA) in a scheme that saddled the agency with \$4.5 million in losses, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"[The executives] conspired to and did fraudulently obtain loan guarantees from the SBA on behalf of Valley Bank borrowers, knowing that the loans did not meet SBA's guidelines and requirements for the guarantees," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Defendants Michael Slater, Larry Henson, Andrew Erpelding and Susan McLaughlin altered loan payment histories, renamed businesses and hid past loan defaults by borrowers in applying for SBA loan guarantees, the release said.

When the fraudulently guaranteed loans defaulted, the defendants submitted requests to the SBA to purchase the defaulted loans, thereby shifting the majority of losses on the ineligible loans to the SBA, the release said.

In all, the defendants attempted to obtain guarantees on over \$14 million in loans, were successful in obtaining guarantees on over \$9 million in loans, and caused the SBA losses of over \$4.5 million, the release also said.

The defendants, all of whom have pleaded guilty, face maximum sentences of 30 years each, the release added.

The SBA offers COVID-19-related loan and grant programs intended to help small business pay furloughed employees and also meet expenses to survive the pandemic, according to the release.

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#### Iran Moving to Enrich Uranium in Response to US Withdrawal From JCPOA - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, November 30 (Sputnik) - Iran's technical steps to enrich uranium are a response to the US decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, told reporters on Wednesday.

"It is important to understand that this happened not because of Tehran's ill will, but as a reaction to the irresponsible US policy of maximum pressure with extraterritorial sanctions and other forms of pressure on Tehran. Tehran is resisting. And this could have been expected. It is no surprise," Ulyanov said.

"This is an extremely difficult matter. This can be seen when communicating with the Americans and Iranians. And it is clear that the differences are very large - both in previous rounds and

now. But we proceed from the fact that there are real chances through negotiation, diplomatic methods to settle everything," the diplomat added.

Negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear deal resumed in Vienna on Monday following a five-month break.

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US Used 12.7Mln Barrels of Oil Reserve Since Mid-October Before Biden Sought More - EIA

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The United States used up almost 13 million barrels of its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) since mid-October to meet supply disruptions, even before the 50 million barrels committed by President Joe Biden to bring down runaway fuel prices, government data showed on Wednesday.

The amount of crude held by the SPR fell by 12.7 million barrels in the seven weeks to November 26, amounting to an average weekly use of 1.8 million barrels, according to Sputnik calculations of weekly data released by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Biden announced last month that the United States will release 50 million barrels from the SPR from mid-December, under a coordinated action with other major oil consuming countries, to tamp down fuel prices at US pumps that were retailing at seven-year highs averaging at just under \$3.40 per gallon.

Biden has been criticized by rival Republicans for using the US oil reserves to fight inflation when such supplies are typically used to fill shortages in times of crisis in oil supply. Inflation in the United States has grown by its fastest pace in more than three decades this year, the Consumer Price Index indicated, as the economy rebounded from the 2020 lockdowns and other coronavirus pandemic measures.

Republicans have introduced legislation that would prevent the Biden administration from opening the SPR for non-emergency reasons until it develops a plan to boost oil and gas production on federal lands.

The EIA said last week that based on the scheduled releases of the SPR, the US crude reserves could be halved by 2032, bringing it to the lowest level since 1983.

Aside from special allocations, like those announced by Biden, the SPR is commonly used to fill crude oil shortages forced by production outages related to hurricanes and other natural calamities. The United States has had a string of hurricanes this year, mostly notably Ida, which shut down more than 90% of oil and gas production in September.

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Ted Cruz to Move Biden Nominees Forward if Vote Held on Nord Stream 2 Sanctions - Office

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Ted Cruz will allow confirmation votes to move forward on nominees to the Biden administration in exchange for a vote on a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) amendment to apply sanctions over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Cruz's press secretary said on Wednesday.

"Sen. Cruz's holds [on nominees] are meant to ensure that the Biden administration applies immediate, mandated sanctions to Nord Stream 2. He's lifted holds throughout the year for that progress, including and especially amendment votes. For the NDAA, Sen. Cruz has negotiated to lift more holds in exchange for advancing immediate sanctions," Dave Vasquez said.

Cruz alongside fellow Republican senators Jim Risch, Rob Portman, John Barrasso, Ron Johnson and Tom Cotton in November introduced the NDAA amendment, which would impose mandatory sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG, the company responsible for the pipeline's construction.

The US House of Representatives in September passed the \$768 billion NDAA in a vote of 316-113.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators have to make a decision on certification by January 2022.

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US House Republicans Urge McConnell to Deny Funding Bill Over Vaccine Mandates - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - The US House Freedom Caucus on Wednesday urged Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to deny a continuing resolution (CR) to fund the government over money allocated for implementing the Biden administration's vaccine mandates.

"Today, the House of Representatives will pass, over our objection, a continuing resolution to fund government without ending any of President Biden's very damaging, un-American, and in the worst cases, unlawful vaccine mandates," the Freedom Caucus said in a letter addressed to McConnell. "We therefore write to request that you use all procedural tools at your disposal to deny timely passage of the CR unless it prohibits funding - in all respects - for the vaccine mandates and enforcement thereof."

On Tuesday, the Congressional Budget Office warned that if Congress does not raise the debt ceiling by December 15, the Treasury Department could run out of authorized government funding before January.

McConnell and Democratic counterpart Chuck Schumer said during a press conferences on Tuesday that they had good discussions with one another on raising the debt ceiling. McConnell said the government will not default or shutdown.

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**Survivors of Severe COVID-19 Twice as Likely to Die Within 1 Year - Report**

WASHINGTON, December 1 (Sputnik) - Patients who have recovered from severe cases of COVID-19 face twice the risk of dying within one year following the illness than those without the disease, the University of Florida (UF) said in report on Wednesday.

"These findings reinforce that the internal trauma of being sick enough to be hospitalized with COVID-19 has a big consequence for people's health. This is a huge complication of COVID-19 that has not been shown before," lead investigator and professor in the university's Department of Health Services Arch Mainous said in a press release.

The UF team analyzed data from electronic health records of 13,638 adult patients at one health system who were tested for COVID-19. Among the group, 178 had severe COVID-19 requiring hospitalization and 246 patients had mild or moderate COVID-19. The rest tested negative for COVID-19, the release said.

Among patients who had severe COVID-19 and later died, deaths attributed to cardiovascular, respiratory and clotting problems - common complications of COVID-19 infection - only accounted for 20% of deaths - a finding that the report called a critical area for further study, the release said.

After adjusting for factors including age, race, gender and select existing medical conditions, patients who had recovered from severe COVID-19 were 233 percent more likely to die within a year after infection than patients who had tested negative for COVID-19, the release added.

The researchers also found that patients younger than 65 who recovered from severe COVID-19 were at greater risk of dying than patients over 65, when compared with COVID-19 negative counterparts, according to the release.