

12/2/21 Thursday

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Pentagon Chief Slams Chinese Hypersonic Weapons During Visit to Shore Up South Korean Alliance

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has developed extensive missile capabilities, including ballistics and hypersonic weapons, but maintains only a very small nuclear arsenal, as well as a no-first-use policy. The US, which lags behind Beijing and Moscow on hypersonics, has claimed their advances are a threat.

Speaking at a US Air Force base 250 miles from Chinese territory on Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin criticized China's push to develop a new array of hypersonic weapons, claiming they are increasing tensions in the region.

"[W]e have concerns about the military capabilities that the PRC continues to pursue, and the pursuit of those capabilities increases tensions in the region, and we know that China conducted a test of a hypersonic weapon on the 27th of July," Austin said at a [Wednesday press conference](#) with his South Korean counterpart, Suh Wook, at Osan Air Base.

"It just underscores why we consider the PRC to be our pacing challenge. And we'll continue to maintain the capabilities to defend and deter against a range of potential threats from the PRC to ourselves and to our allies," Austin added.

Osan serves as the headquarters for the US-South Korean Combined Forces Command, the joint command under which the 28,500 US troops deployed in South Korea would fight alongside their South Korean allies in the event of a war with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to the north. Austin's visit this week was part of the [CFC's annual Security Consultative Meeting](#), at which Austin and Suh discussed developments in their alliance.

In the [joint communique](#) the SCM released on Thursday, they for the first time mentioned "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," the 80-mile-wide waterway separating the PRC on the mainland from the Republic of China (RoC), the government that rules Taiwan.

The strait has been the site of increased tensions in recent months, as the US sails ships through waters China claims to be internal and [pens new deals](#) to support Taiwan's military against China, while Chinese aircraft perform regular drills in airspace off the coast. While the air drills are legal, Taiwan unilaterally claims the right to police the airspace and western media [falsely reports them](#) as "incursions."

China sees Taiwan as a province in rebellion that's destined to be reunited with the mainland - a position the US supports by way of three communiques in the 1970s and 1980s that laid out the terms of its recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate Chinese government and not the RoC, which is the last remnant of the Chinese republican government that ruled from 1912 until 1949.

Chinese Hypersonics

The PRC has developed several hypersonic weapons, which can travel faster than five times the speed of sound and often have maneuvering capabilities that make it nigh-impossible for air defenses to intercept. These include cruise missiles and rocket-boosted glide vehicles, neither of which has successfully been tested by the US, but also allegedly a fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS), according to a [Pentagon analysis](#) of two tests in July and August.

Beijing has denied the tests were of a FOBS-style weapon, saying they were for a [reusable space plane](#) that would save launch costs for its burgeoning space flight program.

A FOBS poses [a unique threat](#) to a country like the US because it would allow China to put a warhead into a fractional orbit - which travels less than one full trip around the Earth - before deorbiting it at the desired location. With US ballistic missile defenses pointed at the northern and western approaches to the country over the North Pole and the Pacific, a FOBS could slip in the "back door" by traveling over the South Pole before coming around to strike its target from the south, where the US has no missile defenses to speak of.

At least, that's how the system [developed by the Soviet Union](#) in the 1960s would have worked. However, the Soviet system suffered from many limitations, including being much less accurate than an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and having to carry a much smaller warhead. It was discontinued in the late 1970s after Soviet strategists determined it wasn't worth the extra trouble, since the US missile defense net wasn't nearly as good as Washington claimed it was. Washington has looked to rally regional nations into a grand alliance against Beijing ever since it prioritized great power competition with Russia and China in strategy documents published in late 2017 and early 2018. That has included pushing the [Quad alliance](#) with Japan, India, and Australia, as well as the new [AUKUS defense bloc](#) between the US, Australia and the United Kingdom. It's also meant to be urging members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to "raise the pressure, frankly, on Beijing," as US Vice President [Kamala Harris put it](#) in September, by wooing them with trade, defense, and vaccine deals.

Biden's administration, which took office in January, [released a summary](#) of its own updated global strategy earlier this week in which it pledged to "advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter potential Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea." Wednesday's joint communique also noted "efforts to establish the conditions for the stable stationing of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery at Camp Carroll." The stationing of the long-range air defense system in South Korea has [long been opposed](#) by both locals and China, due to the system's high-powered AN/TPY-2 X-band radar which, [according to one](#) US official, can track a "baseball from about 2,900 miles (4,600 kilometers) away," or most of the way across China.

A second THAAD system is also deployed on Guam, on the far side of the Philippine Sea from China.

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US Congress Passes Spending Bill to Stave Off Government Shutdown, Measure Heads to Biden

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US House of Representatives approved earlier on Thursday a bill to avoid a US government shutdown, which was set to begin at midnight on Friday evening without additional funding. The measure now heads to US President Joe Biden who will sign it into law and avert the crisis.

The US Senate joined the House of Representatives late Thursday in passing a continuing resolution to fund the government for the next 11 weeks. The measure cleared the congressional chamber with a vote of 69 to 28.

Among the [19 Republicans](#) to join Democrats in the funding passage are Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Sens. Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC). Once signed into law by US President Joe Biden, the bill will provide the government with spending through February 18, 2022. Similarly, the previous spending bill, which expires on December 3, was only [passed on September 30](#).

The House's final vote on the Further Extending Government Funding Act earlier came down with 221 voting for the bill and 212 voting against it. Just one Republican crossed the aisle to support the Democrats: Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL).

House and Senate leaders [agreed on the terms](#) of the bill earlier on Thursday with the hopes of speeding its passage through Congress. Although almost no Republicans have supported the bill, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) opposes a shutdown, saying it "makes no sense."

However, even one senator held the power to gum up the works and prevent a quick passage on Friday, thanks to the filibuster rule that allows senators to talk continuously in order to prevent a bill from coming to a vote.

Controversy over the appropriations bills usually happens when one side hopes to gain leverage over the other by refusing to pass the bill in time, resulting in a political game of chicken. This time, the issue was vaccine mandates.

Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) [told Politico](#) earlier that the upper chamber would attempt to hold a vote on the bill as early as 7 pm on Thursday, a little over an hour after the House vote, and would also allow a vote on an amendment by Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) that would bar the Biden administration from imposing a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine mandate on private employers.

However, in the end, the GOP vaccine amendment fell short of the simple majority needed for it to be added to the funding bill with a 48-50 vote.

A shutdown wouldn't have meant all government functions would [grind to a halt](#). Police, military, air traffic controllers, postal workers, and other essential government services would continue and their workers would receive backpay. However, other less essential workers would be furloughed without pay during the duration of the shutdown, receiving backpay after a new funding bill is passed.

Ten major shutdowns have occurred since the US began requiring them for funding gaps in 1980, with the longest being the 35-day shutdown of 2018-2019, precipitated by a feud between then-US President Donald Trump and Congressional Democrats over funding for Trump's pet domestic project, the US-Mexico border wall.

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Newly Disclosed Docs Reveal DoJ Investigating Andrew Cuomo Over Sexual Harassment Claims

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A newly published document by the New York state government on Thursday has revealed that the US Department of Justice has opened an inquiry into sexual harassment claims against former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who resigned in August.

The document, [published on the state](#) Comptroller's website after being obtained by the [New York Post](#) via a Freedom of Information Act request, is a contract between the office of New York Governor Kathy Hochul and with the law firm Wilkie Farr & Gallagher covering the period from September 10, 2021, until September 9, 2022. However, the signatures by the two parties are dated October 28, 2021.

In the contract, it notes that the DOJ has opened inquiries into Cuomo on a number of matters, including his administration's response to COVID-19 outbreaks in nursing homes, his publications of a book about his COVID-19 response, "and other pandemic related matters," as well as the sexual harassment claims against him made by 11 women.

The DOJ has not yet publicly commented on any investigation into Cuomo. He has denied that any of the incidents, which include forcible touching and lewd comments, took place.

A [damning investigation](#) into the accusations by New York Attorney General Letitia James found he had "violated multiple state and federal laws, as well as the Executive Chamber's own written policies" and effectively ended Cuomo's 10-year career in the Empire State's top political office, forcing him to resign in disgrace in August 2021. Hochul, his deputy, replaced him as governor. Cuomo was charged by the Albany County Sheriff's Office with a misdemeanor sex offense charge and is scheduled to [appear on court](#) on January 7, 2022.

However, it was revealed earlier this week that he has continued to [collect a monthly pension](#) of \$4,219, for a total annual dispensation of 50,629.32.

James' office released a [massive dossier](#) from the investigation on Monday, including tens of thousands of emails, text messages, and interview transcripts. Shortly after their release, CNN [indefinitely suspended](#) one of its prime time news hosts, Andrew Cuomo's younger brother Chris Cuomo, as the documents revealed he had coordinated public relations strategy with the governor's staff and used his position as a journalist to investigate his brother's accusers.

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Iranian Scientists Recruited by Israel's Mossad Behind Explosions at Natanz Nuclear Plant - Report

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The sabotage operation at Iran's Natanz Nuclear Fuel Enrichment Facility in April was carried out by top Iranian nuclear scientists working as agents for Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, Israeli media reported on Thursday.

On April 11, 2021, as Iranian and European diplomats met in Vienna to discuss how the US might return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) now that a new US president with a new Iran policy had taken office, an explosion ripped through the Natanz facility 2,100 miles away.

At the time, Iran reported that the blast had knocked out the power and that only a relatively simple centrifuge had been damaged. Behrouz Kamalvandi, a spokesperson for Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, [described the incident](#) as a "small explosion" that had "damaged sectors [which] can be quickly repaired." The Israeli government didn't publicly comment on the attack aside from acknowledging that it had happened.

Despite US and Israeli intelligence officials telling the [New York Times](#) on the day of the attack that it had been an explosion, the assumption that it had been a cyberattack proliferated throughout the media. Natanz had previously been the target of a US-Israeli computer worm called Stuxnet, which caused extensive damage to uranium purification centrifuges in 2009 and 2010.

In August, the [Times reported](#) that Jerusalem had given the US less than two hours' notice of the attack - an impropriety that damaged their relationship.

The story published by [the Jewish Chronicle](#) on Thursday rewrites much of that narrative, claiming that 90% of the centrifuges at Natanz were destroyed by the operation, which had been carried out by collaborators and not Israeli agents.

According to the report, as many as 10 Iranian scientists were recruited by Mossad, which led them to believe they were acting on behalf of Iranian dissident groups outside the country. Some of the explosives had been planted as early as 2019, the London-based Jewish paper claimed, which noted they had been dropped into the facility by a drone and smuggled inside of a catering truck.

"The scientists' motivations were all different," one source told the paper. "Mossad found out what they deeply wanted in their lives and offered it to them."

"There was an inner circle of scientists who knew more about the operation, and an outer circle who helped out, but had less information," they added.

The paper also says the Iranian agents were responsible for a previous explosion at [Natanz in July 2020](#) that caused extensive damage to an above-ground facility and a missile drone attack on [the Karaj research facility](#) in June.

The news comes as Israel is once again [seeking to interrupt](#) a US-Iran rapprochement on the 2015 nuclear deal, which would remove economic sanctions imposed against Tehran by the Trump administration when it unilaterally withdrew from the deal in 2018. In exchange, Tehran would accept strict limitations on the quality and quantity of nuclear material it can possess. After the Trump administration pulled out of the deal, Iran began backing away from its own commitments made under the deal, too, refining uranium-235 to higher and higher purities, but saying they are ready to return to the deal's limitations once it reenters force.

Jerusalem, which always hated the deal, has consistently accused Iran of secretly circumventing its restrictions and continuing to attempt to develop a nuclear weapon, which it claims Iran would use against it. However, Iran's religious [authorities have decreed](#) nuclear

weapons, along with all weapons of mass destruction, are against Islamic law. Tehran says it only wants uranium for electrical generation and medical research.

Last month, the Israeli government approved a \$1.5 billion budget to draw up and rehearse [plans for a potential attack](#) on Iran's nuclear facilities, which are heavily guarded and many of which, like Natanz, lay deep underground.

Despite the political rhetoric about an imminent nuclear weapon, Israeli intelligence has also openly [dismissed reports](#) Iran might be close to a nuclear weapon, noting there were no indications of new weapons-level work alongside the new refinement efforts.

Earlier this week, [Israeli intelligence reportedly](#) gave the US evidence that Iran was preparing to refine uranium to a purity of 90% U-235, which is weapons-grade. Iran has so far only admitted to refining up to 60% U-235. The intelligence sources who spoke with Axios noted that it could still take Iran one to two years to develop adequate weapons technology to turn such high-purity uranium into a useable bomb, though.

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The Harris Shuffle - Cartoon

A report earlier published by CNN alleged that chaos and dysfunction were rampant between the West Wing and US Vice President Kamala Harris' camp as the two parties reportedly clashed over differing opinions. The White House has since rejected the claims.

Symone Sanders, who serves as the US vice president's spokesperson and senior adviser, late Wednesday, became the latest individual to [reportedly](#) make her way toward a White House exit, renewing speculation of disorder within the second-in-command's office.

Sanders' departure marks the second high profile exit from the Harris camp within the last two weeks, after Communications Director Ashley Etienne announced that she would be stepping down from the role at the end of the month.

And yet, that's not all folks. The Hill has also [reported](#) that two more aides within Harris' office - Peter Velz and Vince Evans - are expected to leave in the next few weeks. It is believed that the pair will be taking on new positions "in or close to the Biden administration."

The latest employee shuffles come on the heels of a [CNN report](#) that both the Biden and Harris camps were not seeing eye-to-eye, and that tensions had recently reached an all-time high.

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'I Know It's Not Me': Alec Baldwin Says He's Not to Blame for Fatal 'Rust' Shooting

By - Gaby Arancibia

American actor Alec Baldwin recently sat down for an in-depth interview with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos in which the pair discussed a variety of topics regarding the fatal "Rust"

shooting that claimed the life of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and injured director Joel Souza. The interview aired on Thursday.

Actor Alec Baldwin has spoken out on the fatal shooting that took place on the set of his film "Rust," underscoring that he has nothing to hide and does not feel guilty about the incident.

"I feel that someone is responsible for what happened, and I can't say who that is, but I know it's not me," the actor said in his first TV interview since the October shooting. "If I felt I was responsible, I might have killed myself."

The Thursday-aired interview saw Baldwin sift through the series of events that took place moments before Hutchins' death, explaining at one point that the cinematographer had directed him to point the gun in her direction.

"This is a marking rehearsal," he said. "She's next to the camera. The camera is here. She's guiding me through how she wants me to hold the angle. I draw the gun out – the gun wasn't meant to be fired in that angle."

"I'm not shooting to camera lens. I'm holding the gun where she told me to hold it, which turned out to be below her armpit," he noted. "But we kept doing this.... I start to cock the gun. She said, just 'cheat it down, could you see that, could you see that.' I let go of the hammer of the gun, the gun goes off."

The actor went on to relay to Stephanopoulos that he had no idea that Hutchins' had been shot, and that he had believed she was experiencing a heart attack or similar ailment when she collapsed to the ground.

"No one could understand – did she have a heart attack? The idea that there was a live bullet in the gun did not occur," he reiterated.

Baldwin indicated that he wasn't aware that she had been injured for another 45 minutes, with him only finding out that the shot had been fatal once he was interviewed by law enforcement officials several hours later.

While Baldwin stressed that he didn't care if the October shooting ended his career, he did emphasize that he remained seriously concerned about how live ammunition wound up on the set. "Where did that bullet come from?" he posed.

"I don't know how that bullet arrived in that gun. I don't know," Baldwin said. "But I'm all for doing anything that will take us to a place where this is less likely to happen again."

To date, no charges have been filed as a result of the shooting, but Santa Fe County District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies has indicated that "all options are on the table at this point."

Baldwin stated during the interview that insiders have told him it's "highly unlikely" he would face any charges over the killing.

Production for "Rust" has remained shuttered since the October shooting. The incident has since renewed focus on safety measures for production crew and actors, with some individuals, including wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne Johnson, vowing to stick to only props and CGI techniques to fill in for any weapons.

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## Biden Admin Finalizes Plan to Reinstate Trump-Era 'Remain in Mexico' Policy at Southern Border

By - Evan Craighead

In March 2020, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden criticized US President Donald Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' policy as a "dangerous" and "inhumane" immigration program that goes against US values. While the Biden administration has since suspended the program, the SCOTUS upheld a lower court order calling for its reinstatement.

Beginning next week, non-Mexican asylum seekers at the southern US border will be returned to Mexico via a Trump-era policy, according to remarks from the Biden administration on Thursday.

"All individuals from the Western Hemisphere will potentially be eligible," a senior US official said, [as reported by CBS News](#).

The Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), informally termed the 'Remain in Mexico' program, allows US officials to block non-Mexican or other foreign individuals from entering the US from Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings.

The MPP calls for the individual to return to Mexico, where the government will give them "appropriate humanitarian protections."

[According to the US Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#), a number of changes were made to the MPP program to address humanitarian concerns raised by the [Mexican government on Friday](#).

Per the memo, the Mexican government requested COVID-19 vaccine support, assistance with general medical care and additional resources to improve living conditions for migrants awaiting their court date in the US. Access to attorneys was another concern raised by Mexico City. Mexico's government declared in a Thursday statement that those concerns were addressed and, as a result, the country vows to "not return to their countries of origin certain migrants who have an appointment to appear before an immigration judge in the United States to request asylum in that country."

The reinstatement comes in accordance with an August decision by Trump-appointed US District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk. The federal judge in Texas argued that the Biden administration and DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas "failed to consider several critical factors" before halting the program.

The Biden administration agreed to comply with the order after both a federal court [and the Supreme Court of the US](#) moved to uphold the Texas court ruling.

The move has been opposed by a number of refugee and human rights groups, such as the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and Human Rights First.

Eleanor Acer, senior director for refugee protection at HRF, [argued that](#) "a policy that returns people seeking refuge to a place where they are targeted for kidnappings, torture and persecution is by definition a violation of our refugee and torture convention legal obligations."

Acer's comments align with those tweeted by Biden a little over a year ago, describing the program as "against everything [the US] stands for as a nation of immigrants."

The policy will initially be reimplemented at seven US entry points, including San Diego, California, and the Texas border cities of El Paso, Laredo and Brownsville.

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US Midterms 2022: Democrats Fear Congressional Shakeup as 19 House Dems Will Not Seek Reelection

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR), chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the longest-serving congressman in his state's history, became the 19th House Democrat to reveal he would not seek reelection in 2022. The pileup of Democratic departures has fueled doubts about the party's ability to maintain majority. Renewed conversations about abortion and the [possible overturning of Roe v. Wade](#) have triggered a cascade of political opinions and questions about the talking point's impact on the upcoming midterm elections in the US, slated for Tuesday, November 8, 2022.

"A woman's right to make our own health care choices will be a defining issue in the 2022 midterms," Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee spokesperson Jazmin Vargas [said to the Washington Post](#).

Debate around the polarizing issue of women's rights could be used to Democrats' advantage in their efforts to maintain a majority in the House of Representatives, where the party presently holds a narrow 221-213 majority.

As of this article's publication, 19 House Democrats have declared they will not run for reelection in the 2022 midterms.

Of the departures, 11 House Democrats have announced they will retire from public office: Reps. Peter DeFazio (D-OR); G.K. Butterfield (D-NC); Jackie Speier (D-CA); Michael Doyle (D-PA); David Price (D-NC); John Yarmuth (D-KY); Ron Kind (D-WI); Cheri Bustos (D-IL); Filemon Vela (D-TX); Ann Kirkpatrick (D-AZ); and Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX).

Additionally, 11 House Republicans have announced they will not seek reelection in 2022. DeFazio's is the most recently announced departure. The 74-year-old congressman from Oregon announced in a Wednesday statement that he intends to "pass the baton to the next generation" after 36 years in the House.

"Chairman DeFazio is known and respected by all as a champion of sustainable, smart and green infrastructure, whose progressive values, passion and persistence have helped rebuild America and the middle class," noted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) in a same-day statement.

While serving as chair of the Transportation Committee, [DeFazio made headlines](#) when he, House Oversight Chair Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Rep. Gerald Connolly (D-VA) called out the Trump administration's interference in oversight investigations.

He notably took then-Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and then-Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to task in May 2020 over Trump's firing of Mitch Behm, a 17-year veteran who was overseeing a probe into allegations of ethics violations for the Transportation Department's Office of Inspector General.

While DeFazio's district will likely remain blue (Democrat) following the 2022 Midterms, the 74-year-old's retirement signals that Democrats are not confident they will retain House majority,

National Republican Congressional Committee spokeswoman Courtney Parella suggested to the Washington Post.

"Committee Chairs don't retire unless they know their majority is gone," Parella offered, adding, "Nancy Pelosi's days as Speaker are numbered."

Because House Democrats (unlike their Republican counterparts) do not have term limits, DeFazio could have remained as head of the Transportation Committee if Democrats maintain the House majority.

DeFazio is not the only committee leader making an exit, as Reps. Johnson, chair of the House Sciences Committee, and Yarmuth, chair of the House House Committee on the Budget, have also announced they will not seek reelection in 2022.

Meanwhile, four House Dems - Reps. Tim Ryan (D-OH), Conor Lamb (D-PA), Peter Welch (D-VT), and Val Demings (D-FL) - are aspiring to switch to the other legislative chamber following the November election.

Ryan, who ran a failed 2020 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, has represented the Youngstown, Ohio, area since 2003, and plans to fill the vacant senate seat, despite Ohio turning red in the past three election cycles.

Ryan told reporters in April that he intended to make his campaign less about his political affiliation and more about the needs of workers and families.

Former Secretary of State and 2016 Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton notably called on Ryan to run for the US Senate seat back in January.

Meanwhile, five Republicans and a single Democrat in the Senate have announced they will not seek reelection: Sens. Richard Burr (R-NC); Pat Toomey (R-PA); Rob Portman (R-OH); Richard Shelby (R-AL); Roy Blunt(R-MO); and Patrick Leahy (D-VT).

Reps. Tom Suozzi (D-NY) and Charlie Crist (D-FL) have signaled that they will be entering the gubernatorial races of their respective states.

Suozzi, a Long Island resident in his third US congressional term, recently termed himself a "common-sense Democrat" offering every voter a break from the extreme views of far-left and far-right politicians.

While the US lawmaker from New York is set to face off against four other Democrats, his Floridian colleague is prepping to go up against Florida Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried and Florida State Sen. Annette Taddeo for the Democratic nomination.

Crist has already taken aim at incumbent Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, arguing earlier this year that DeSantis' response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows that he values "personal political fortunes" over the lives of the state's residents.

Additionally, Reps. Anthony G. Brown (D-MD) and Karen Bass (D-CA) have announced that they would be running for Maryland Attorney General and Mayor of Los Angeles, California, respectively.

With 19 House Democrats either singing their public service swan song or launching new campaigns, the party is not guaranteed that it will be able to maintain its majority in the chamber.

Sean Patrick Maloney, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said that Democrats will be on the "offense," touting their major policy accomplishments.

"The lesson is: People don't know if you don't tell them. And no matter how popular your policies, people have to know you did it and they have to understand in most cases, every Republican voted against it," [Maloney said in an interview last month](#).

According to the DCCC chairman, House Democrats will each hold five events on the infrastructure and spending packages, amounting to at least 1,000 events by the year's end. Biden will also work to support the election of House Democrats while touring the US this year.

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America's Epidemic: The US's Massive Mass Shooting Problem

By - Nevin Brown

The Oxford High School shooting in Michigan that killed four teens and wounded seven others has reignited the debate over how to combat mass shootings in the United States. The shooting was the sixth major mass shooting this year, and raises the question, can it stop?

There was a time in the United States when mass shootings and school shootings were singular events. From 1982 through 1989, eight mass shootings, [as defined by Mother Jones](#), occurred. The publication includes shootings involving as few as three deaths but excludes drug and gag-related murders.

In the 1980s a mass shooting was an annual event, but nothing more.

Over the next two decades, the yearly average of mass shootings roughly doubled. In the 1990s, there were 23 mass shootings, and in the first decade of the 2000s, there were 20. The upward trend did not abate in the 2010s. For the decade there were another 67 mass shootings. In a span of ten years, there were 16 more mass shootings than there had been over the previous 28. In the 2020s, there have been eight mass shootings and counting.

Identifying Mass Shootings

The way Mother Jones defines and tracks mass shootings is highly specific. They track shootings of more than four people done in public spaces. These events are highly publicised mass shooting events, but their growth correlates with the overall increase in all mass shootings. To present the scope of the problem, according to the Gun Violence Archives, there were 611 mass shootings in 2020 alone.

The steady increase in mass shootings raises a serious question. How has the wealthiest country on Earth allowed mass shootings to grow unabated for nearly four decades?

At a fundamental level, a mass shooting cannot occur without a firearm. The number of yearly [F.B.I. firearm background checks](#) has grown from 9.1 million in 1999 to 39.7 million in 2020.

F.B.I. background checks don't represent a one-to-one correlation for the number of firearms being bought, but they act as a reliable baseline for the number of gun purchases in the United States.

Zooming in on a year-by-year basis, there is a correlation between the number of F.B.I. background checks conducted and the number of mass shootings in the years between 1999 and 2019. 2019 had the highest number of background checks (28.3 million) and the most mass

shootings (11), while 2002 had the lowest number of background checks (8.45 million) and the fewest mass shootings (0).

Due to the fact that mass shootings are rare events and gun purchases are incredibly common, it is better to compare three-year rolling averages of F.B.I. background checks and mass shootings to ease the impact on outliers. When looking at three-year rolling averages, two clear trends emerge.

#### Three-Year Rolling Averages Per Year of Mass Shootings and F.B.I. Background Checks

3 Year Period	Average FBI Background Checks per year (in millions)	Average Mass Shootings per year
1999-2001	8.86	2.3
2002-2004	8.54	0.67
2005-2007	10.06	3
2008-2010	13.72	2.67
2011-2013	19.05	5
2014-2016	23.88	5.67
2017-2019	26.60	11

The first trend is that the more guns that are purchased over a three-year period the more mass shootings there are. The second trend is that the rate at which mass shootings occur is relatively stable in relation to the number of firearms. From 1999 to 2019, for roughly every 3.65 million F.B.I. background checks there was one mass killing.

What this indicates, is that the increase in mass shootings is largely a result of increased opportunity. While there are other factors to consider in the growth of mass shootings, such as improved mental health treatment, increased population density, and extreme localized economic despair, the smoking gun remains the smoking guns.

Joe Biden [touted a comprehensive and expansive gun control agenda](#) while on the campaign trail. The reforms and regulations his campaign promised have not come to fruition, and the reason has to do with American politics.

#### A game of politics

[According to a PEW research poll from September 2021](#), 48% of Americans believe gun violence is a very big problem. That had it in a virtual tie with illegal immigration, violent crime, and the federal budget deficit. The only issue more Americans viewed as a very big problem was the affordability of health care.

While gun violence is a pressing concern for Americans at large, the level of concern changes dramatically based upon an individual's party affiliation. 73% of Democrats or Independents that lean Democratic believe gun violence is a very big problem, but only 18% of Republicans or Independents that lean Republican do.

The same trend emerges when you poll Democrats and Republicans over whether gun laws should be stricter than they are today. In a PEW poll from April of 2021, 81% of Democrats believed gun laws should be stricter, while only 20% of Republican respondents thought the same. The partisan chasm over whether gun violence is a serious problem contributes to the lack of legislation designed to curb it.

The divide between Democrats' and Republicans' views on gun violence largely explains Biden's gun-regulating rhetoric on the campaign trail and his apprehension to pull the trigger on legislation while President. Gun reform rallies the Democratic base as a core concern, but once President it puts off prospective swing voters.

The only two gun measures that have broad support from both Republicans and Democrats are measures to prevent those with mental illnesses from obtaining a firearm and making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks.

As President, Biden has tried to push measures to [limit suicides by guns](#), [increased punishment on gun dealers who fail to conduct background checks](#), and [cracking down on ghost guns](#).

However, it appears that Biden views gun legislation as too politically dangerous to push any serious reforms. Even in the wake of another mass shooting, it's unlikely any serious legislation is coming.

When it comes to mass shootings, the nation is divided over whether limiting the number of guns will lead to fewer mass shootings. In a PEW research poll, 49% of respondents said they believed there would be fewer mass shootings if it was harder for people to obtain guns legally, 42% said it would make no difference, and 9% believe that fewer guns would lead to more mass shootings.

Americans want there to be fewer mass shootings but they're unsure of how to achieve that end. There's a statistical relationship between fewer guns and fewer mass shootings, but restricting guns hasn't gained enough bipartisan support to be viable. Improved mental health flagging could stop some of the worst instances, but that too has its limits.

America's massive mass shooting problem isn't going anywhere until Americans push for reforms. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result. The more guns there are, the more shootings there will be.

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Manchester United's Michael Carrick Steps Down as First Team Coach  
By - Nevin Brown

Michael Carrick, Manchester United's caretaker manager, has decided to leave the club as his spell as the first team manager concludes. The club will install Ralf Rangnick as the first team manager, on a six-month interim basis to see out the season.

[Michael Carrick said of his decision to step down](#), "After a lot of thought and deliberation, I have decided that now is the right time for me to leave the club." He added, "I am, and will always be, a Manchester United fan and will come to as many matches as possible. I would like to wish Ralf, the staff, the players and the fans all the best for the future and I look forward to being in the stands and supporting the boys as a fan."

No specifics have been given over Carrick's decision to leave the club. Some speculate that his lineup decisions following United's pursuit of Ralf Rangnick were in fact dictated by the incoming manager.

Carrick leaves Manchester United a legend. He played for the club from 2006 to 2018, made 464 appearances and secured five Premier League titles, an FA Cup, and a UEFA Champions League trophy.

Following his retirement, he joined Jose Mourinho's staff at United for the 2018-19 season. Mourinho was fired in December of 2018, but Carrick was retained by Ole Gunnar Solksjaer. Carrick was subsequently appointed manager and served as an assistant coach through the Norwegian's tenure.

Following Solksjaer's dismissal, Carrick was handed the first-team job on a caretaker basis as United searched for an interim manager to finish the season.

On Monday, Rangnick was officially named United's interim manager. Due to a work visa problem, he has yet to hold a training with the club. However, he was spotted at Old Trafford watching United's 3-2 win over Arsenal.

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About 25Mln People Subjected to Human Trafficking, Forced Labor Annually - White House

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Some 25 million people fall victims to human trafficking and forced labor every year in a global criminal enterprise that earns crime syndicates profits of about \$150 billion, a senior Biden administration official said during a press briefing.

"An estimated 25 million people are subjected to human trafficking and forced labor which is responsible for an estimated \$150 billion dollars annually in illicit profits," the official said on Thursday. "It erodes the safety and health of our communities and transportation networks, the security of our borders, the strength of our economy and the rule of law."

The Biden administration will publish its updated National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking later in the day, the official said. The plan envisions 61 priority actions that will be taken over the years to come, the official added.

Among other tools, the revised plan will contain a broader range of non-criminal tools to fight human trafficking, including civil forfeiture actions, sanctions, travel restrictions and export controls, the official noted.

The new National Action Plan will update the previous one that was released in October 2020, according to the official.

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US, Russia Close to Deal on Granting Visas to US Embassy Staff in Moscow - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia and the United States have neared a deal on granting visas to American embassy staff in Moscow, The Washington Post reported on Friday, citing US officials.

The sides agreed on the deal, which still needs to be finalized, during a meeting in Vienna.

The deal would prevent a situation forecast by US officials in which the embassy would no longer be able to effectively perform main diplomatic functions, the newspaper said.

Moreover, it would allow for an end to the US mission's present "authorized departure" status, meaning a voluntary departure for the family members of diplomats and non-emergency direct-hire employees, the report added.

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US Adds 210,000 Jobs In Nov, Unemployment Rate Moves Down to 4.2% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US employers added 210,000 jobs in November, underperforming forecasts by more than 300,000, Labor Department data showed on Friday, but the jobless rate still moved down to 4.2% and near the Federal Reserve's target for maximum employment.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 210,000 in November, and the unemployment rate fell by 0.4 percentage point to 4.2 percent," the Labor Department said in a news release.

An unemployment rate of 4.0% is defined by the Fed as maximum employment. Economists polled by US media had anticipated an addition of 550,000 jobs for November.

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RPT: FEATURE - Mother of Addicts Says US Could Avert Record Overdose Deaths if Issue Treated as Epidemic

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - For years the United States has been battling substance abuse, but has so far failed to address it as an epidemic, which led to record overdose deaths during the first year of COVID-19 lockdowns, Garnet Druhot-Close, a mother of three addicts and an activist, told Sputnik.

In November, an alarming report revealed that over 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in the twelve month period ending in April 2021, which is the highest annual death toll from

drugs. Deaths from drug overdose thus surpass deaths from gun violence, pneumonia and car crashes. Reacting to the report, President Joe Biden pledged to continue battling the US drug overdose epidemic by strengthening prevention and treatment.

Druhot-Close, from Pennsylvania, is no stranger to the tragedy mentioned in the report. Three of her five children were involved in drug abuse and one of them — a son — died due to complications from intravenous drug use. His story is included in a book entitled "Ripples: Effects of Addiction," to which she contributed and which was released this June.

"My oldest daughter is in jail for selling drugs. My middle son just completed his first rehab and I am worried he is slipping. My youngest two have watched their siblings die and go to jail. We also lost a grandson who was murdered by his father's brother because my oldest daughter was running from the police and not at home being a mommy," she shared in her heartbreaking story.

Druhot-Close hopes to save her younger son from the ravages of drug abuse, as well as many others who are suffering from the same addiction. She believes that the deaths from drug overdose mentioned in the recent report were preventable.

"If we stopped criminalizing addiction, and started treating it. It is a sad state when you cannot convince a law officer that addiction is very much a disease. I would bet that 40 percent if not more Americans believe addiction is a moral breakdown, not a mental health issue," she said.

#### EPIDEMIC WITHIN PANDEMIC

Speaking of how the pandemic affected the drug abuse problem, at least in the small rural community where she lives, Druhot-Close said that substance abuse had "skyrocketed."

"We have so many young people that got lots of money and had nothing but time on their hands. I speak to many of them that say their habit rose by at least half during the pandemic. Now they are homeless and trying to find a way to fight their habit. Most commit non-violent crimes (steal from family and friends...)," she said.

Druhot-Close believes that the official numbers are significantly watered down.

"If you added obvious drug-related deaths the numbers would be mind-numbing," she explained.

American society, she continued, needs to address substance abuse as a mental health issue. If the person did not have a mental health issue before using, they definitely will when trying to find sobriety, she added.

"The problem with this question is that too little had been done before the pandemic. If we had looked at addiction as an epidemic before this I would have more hope. We don't do enough research to really address substance abuse. For far too many years we have battled it instead of trying to understand and fix it," she said.

The US needs "tons more" housing for those trying to find recovery, Druhot-Close stated.

"We need to make navigating the health care system for substance abuse easier. We also need to make recovery part of our criminal institutions. You can't just take away their drug of choice and think they are fixed. Make them start recovery from day one of being arrested," she said.

Synthetic opioids such as fentanyl continue to be most commonly available on the street and are wreaking havoc in many states. According to the CDC, these substances caused about 64% of all drug overdose deaths in the 12-month period ending April 2021, which is up 49% from the previous period.

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#### US House Passes Funding Bill to Avoid Shutdown, Senate Vote Expected Tonight

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a continuing resolution (CR) that will fund the government through February 18 and avoid a government shutdown if their Senate counterparts pass the CR as well by Friday at midnight.

The House passed the continuing resolution, known as the Further Extending Government Funding Act, in a vote of 221 to 212 on Thursday, with 1 Republican and all Democrats voting in favor.

House Republicans asked Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell in a letter on Wednesday to use all tools at his disposal to block the CR in his chamber unless it removes funding for the enforcement of vaccine mandates. McConnell said on Tuesday following a meeting with Democratic counterpart Chuck Schumer that the government will not default or shutdown. After the House vote, Schumer said the Senate would schedule a vote for Thursday night. "It is looking good that we are going to pass the CR tonight and make sure that the government stays open," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters as quoted by Politico. Some Republican senators want to add amendments to curtail the Biden administration's vaccine mandates for workers at larger businesses.

However, the report said those measures are unlikely to make it through the Senate.

At around a quarter to 8:00 p.m. EST on Thursday evening (1:00 a.m. GMT Friday), the Senate was in session but awaiting the next speaker with the anticipation that voting will start soon.

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#### SpaceX Launches Falcon 9 Rocket Carrying 48 Starlink Internet, Two BlackSky Satellites

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk's aerospace company SpaceX successfully launched a Falcon 9 rocket carrying 48 Starlink internet satellites and two BlackSky satellites as payload from the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida.

"Liftoff!" SpaceX said from its official Twitter account, featuring a video of the rocket's initial launch phase on Thursday.

The Falcon 9 rocket, which is partially reusable, has had its first-stage boosters launched into space as part of several missions, including five Starlink missions.

The array of Starlink satellites, operated by SpaceX, offer low-latency internet coverage in remote areas of several countries to participants of their test program.

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#### New York Confirms 5 Cases of Omicron Variant, Bringing Total to 8 in US - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Kathy Hochul said on Thursday that five more cases of the coronavirus Omicron variant transmission have been reported in the state, bringing the total number of cases in the United States to eight.

"New York State has confirmed five cases of the Omicron variant. Let me be clear: This is not a cause for alarm. We knew this variant was coming and we have the tools to stop the spread. Get your vaccine. Get your booster. Wear your mask," Hochul said via Twitter.

Omicron cases have also been confirmed in California, Minnesota and Colorado since public health officials in the United States began testing for the new variant, which originated in southern Africa.

South African health officials have said the cases there were all among fully vaccinated people but the symptoms were mild. The officials said they were surprised by the reaction in the United States and other primarily Western countries to the Omicron variant and characterized it as a "storm in a tea cup."

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#### US to Join Gender Equality Pact at WTO Ministerial Meeting - US Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will join the World Trade Organization's (WTO) gender equality pact at the organization's ongoing ministerial meeting in Switzerland, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) announced.

"The Office of the United States Trade Representative today announced the United States' intention to join the Joint Declaration on the Advancement of Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment Within Trade for the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference," the USTR said in a statement on Thursday.

The announcement reflected the Biden administration's commitment to its guiding slogan "Build Back Better" by advancing gender equity, the statement said.

It was also consistent with the Biden-Harris administration's strategy of advancing "the full participation of all people – including women and girls – in the United States and around the world," the statement added.

The WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference is being held between November 30 and December 3 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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#### United Airlines Committed to Safe Repatriation Efforts During Pandemic - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - United Airlines remains committed to providing repatriation efforts during the global pandemic to support those people in need, the company said in a statement provided to Sputnik.

United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby warned earlier on Thursday that the Omicron coronavirus variant may harm transatlantic travel significantly. Air carriers may face the decrease of passenger traffic between the US and Europe or Africa in January, he told the Financial Times. "Throughout the pandemic we've maintained service to places like Australia, Europe and South America and United remains committed to maintaining a safe and vital link for repatriation efforts as well as the transport of essential supplies like vaccines between Africa and the US," the statement read on Thursday.

The air carrier follows all US directives to international travel, including requirements for passengers to provide necessary vaccination records, contact tracing information and proof of negative COVID-19 tests results upon re-entering the US, it added.

However, there is no anticipation that the new variant will change United's overall outlook, he added. The company plans to start five new flights from the US to London next Monday, and will extend flights to Lagos, he added.

The new Omicron variant has prompted increased travel restrictions and public health measures by governments around the world, including the US. President Joe Biden on Thursday announced a five-point plan to help combat the virus and variant this winter, during which time case numbers are expected to rise.

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US House Passes Legislation Funding Government Through February 18 to Avoid Shutdown

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The House passed the continuing resolution, known as the Further Extending Government Funding Act, in a vote of 221 to 212, with 1 Republican and all Democrats voting in favor. House Republicans asked Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell in a letter on Wednesday to use all tools at his disposal to block the CR in his chamber unless it removes funding for the enforcement of vaccine mandates. McConnell said on Tuesday following a meeting with Democratic counterpart Chuck Schumer that the government will not default or shutdown.

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US, EU Diplomats Emphasize Need to Cooperate With China Where Possible - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Senior US and EU officials have underscored the need to cooperate with China where possible and manage competition in a responsible manner, a joint statement by the US Department of State and the European External Action Service said. "They reiterated that the United States' and EU's respective relations with China are multifaceted and emphasized the importance of the United States and EU maintaining continuous and close contacts on our respective approaches as we invest and grow our economies, cooperate with China where possible, and manage our competition and systemic rivalry with China responsibly," the statement said on Thursday.

The statement was issued after the second high-level meeting of the US-EU Dialogue on China that was held by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and European External Action Service Secretary General Stefano Sannino.

Sherman and Sannino spoke about human rights violations in China and expressed a shared interest in continued cooperation on human rights issues there, the statement said.

"Noting the harmful effects of disinformation on democratic societies, they expressed their readiness to deepen US-EU information sharing on disinformation sponsored or supported by China," the statement said.

The two senior officials also stressed the importance of diversifying and enhancing supply chains, and addressing economic coercion, the statement said.

"They reiterated the importance of close US-EU cooperation to uphold the rules-based international order, including securing a level playing field for all countries," it said. "They also emphasized the importance of protecting intellectual property rights, critical infrastructure, and sensitive technologies, as well as information-sharing on tools to strengthen economic resilience, reduce loopholes and vulnerabilities, and shield against risks, including from non-market practices."

Moreover, the two sides talked about China's activities in the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, the statement also said.

"They debriefed on recent US and EU high-level meetings with Chinese government officials, including in support of common goals in Iran and the Korean peninsula, and stressed the importance of results-oriented engagement on key transnational challenges, such as the climate crisis, health security, and trafficking in persons and drugs," it added. "Building on the recent US-China and EU-China statements on climate action, they discussed working with Chinese government counterparts on policy matters such as reducing methane emissions and decarbonization, as well as sharing the results of these meetings."

Sherman and Sannino agreed to continue meetings in this dialogue and are expected to hold the next high-level meeting in mid-2022, according to the statement.

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**US Sets Up 1st Production Unit to Extend Life of 'Gravity Bomb' Nuclear Weapons - NNSA**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US government has successfully set up its First Production Unit (FPU) to extend the operational life of the nation's arsenal B61 directly dropped

or "gravity bomb" nuclear weapons, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) announced in a press release.

"The US Department of Energy's NNSA successfully completed the B61-12 Life Extension Program (LEP) FPU on November 23, 2021," the release said on Thursday. "The B61-12 LEP helps modernize America's nuclear weapons stockpile and sustain the Nation's air delivered nuclear deterrent capability."

The nuclear security enterprise, in close coordination with the US Air Force, worked together to deliver the B61-12 FPU after more than nine years of design, development, qualification, and component production, the NNSA said.

"With this program, we're delivering a system to the Department of Defense that improves accuracy and reduces yield with no change in military characteristics, while also improving safety, security and reliability," Energy Under Secretary for Nuclear Security and NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby said.

The B61-12 LEP reuses or replaces all of the bomb's components to extend its service life by at least 20 years. The NNSA anticipates starting full-scale production in May 2022 and completing all needed production in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026," Deputy NNSA Administrator for Defense Programs Charles Verdon said.

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Ex-Ohio Sheriff Deputy Charged With Murder in 2020 Shooting of Black Man - Court Document

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - A grand jury issued an indictment charging former Ohio Sheriff's Deputy Jason Meade with murder and reckless homicide for his role in the shooting death of Casey Goodson, a court document said.

The indictment document charged Meade with two counts of murder and one count of reckless homicide for shooting and killing Goodson at his residence in December 2020.

Meade turned himself in on Thursday and will enter a not guilty plea and ask for a reasonable bond during an arraignment hearing on Friday, Meade's attorney Mark Collins said in a statement following the indictment.

Collins said Meade lawfully shot Goodson in fear of his life and the lives of others around him. Meade pursued Goodson after purportedly seeing him point a gun at him and others while driving a car, Collins said. The gun was recovered from the scene of the incident, Collins added. Meade's ties to the community, his decorated military record and his lack of a criminal record demonstrate that his release does not pose a danger to the public, according to Collins.

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Wall Street Rebounds as Heat Fades on Omicron, Dow Jones up Almost 2%

NEW YORK, December 2 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rebounded on Thursday from the week's lows, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average rising almost 2% on the day, after a lack of follow-through news on the coronavirus Omicron variant encouraged investors to push US share prices up for the first time in three days.

Analysts said the rebound was not surprising, but cautioned that there were far too many unknowns in the situation concerning Omicron to expect an extended upside for equities. "Investors may continue to be attracted to the dips but one thing is clear; rallies so far have been short-lived," said Craig Erlam of online trading platform OANDA. "Perhaps they're hoping for positive news on the vaccine effectiveness against the new strain and taking advantage of these levels before it's too late. If they don't get the news they're hoping for, we could see another sharp move lower."

US stocks were pummeled in two previous sessions, with the Dow losing a combined 3.2%, amid fears about the Omicron's impact on the world and, especially, the United States after reports of the first American infected with the variant in California.

In Thursday's session, however, Wall Street recovered ground. The Dow, which comprises mostly industrial stocks, rose 618 points, to close at 34,640.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 US stocks, finished up 64 points, or 1.4%, at 4,577. The S&P had lost about 3% in total over the past two sessions.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite index, which lists Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, settled up 127 points, or 0.8%, at 15,381. Nasdaq lost almost 3.5% in the two previous sessions put together.

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## FTC Sues to Block \$40Bln Merger of US Chipmaker Nvidia With UK's Arm Ltd

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Trade Commission said on Thursday that it was suing to block a \$40 billion merger of US chipmaker Nvidia and UK chip design provider Arm Ltd, saying the combined firm would have the means and incentive to stifle innovative next-generation technologies.

"The FTC is suing to block the largest semiconductor chip merger in history to prevent a chip conglomerate from stifling the innovation pipeline for next-generation technologies," Holly Vedova, director of the bureau of competition within the trade commission, said in a statement on Thursday. "This proposed deal would distort Arm's incentives in chip markets and allow the combined firm to unfairly undermine Nvidia's rivals."

The FTC complaint specifically centers on the dominance the combined firm would have on technologies that are used to run data centers and driver-assistance systems in cars.

"Semiconductor chips power the computers and technologies that are essential to our modern economy and society," the statement said. "The proposed vertical deal would give one of the largest chip companies control over the computing technology and designs that rival firms rely on to develop their own competing chips."

The FTC noted that the California-based Nvidia was one of the world's largest and most valuable computing companies. It said Nvidia develops and markets computer chips and devices used widely for artificial intelligence processing and graphics processing.

The firm also develops and markets products for advanced networking, datacenter central processing units and computer-assisted driving. In these areas, both Nvidia and important competitors to Nvidia rely on Arm's technology to develop their own competing products, the statement said.

Arm, owned by Tokyo-based Softbank Group Corp, creates and licenses microprocessor designs and architectures that other technology companies rely on to make their own chips, the statement added.

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## US Signs \$415Mln Deals With 3 Companies to Design Commercial Space Stations - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has signed business agreements worth \$415 million with three high tech space technology companies to design new space stations and other commercial activities in low earth orbit (LEO), NASA announced in a press release.

"NASA has signed agreements with three US companies to develop designs of space stations and other commercial destinations in space," the release said on Thursday. "The agreements are part of the agency's efforts to enable a robust, American-led commercial economy in low-Earth orbit."

NASA said the total value for all three funded Space Act Agreements is \$415.6 million. The companies that received the awards are Blue Origin of Kent, Washington, for \$130 million;

Nanoracks of Houston for \$160 million and Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation of Dulles, Virginia, for \$125.6 million, the space agency added.

"Building on our successful initiatives to partner with private industry to deliver cargo, and now our NASA astronauts, to the International Space Station, NASA is once again leading the way to commercialize space activities," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said in the release.

NASA seeks to maintain an uninterrupted US presence in LEO orbit by transitioning from the International Space Station to other platforms. The awards will stimulate US private sector development of commercial, independent space stations for both government and private-sector customers, the release said.

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US Issues Cybersecurity Directives for Surface Transport Operators - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has issued two new security directives to boost cybersecurity for surface transportation systems across the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release.

"DHS's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) today announced two new Security Directives and additional guidance for voluntary measures to strengthen cybersecurity across the transportation sector in response to the ongoing cybersecurity threat to surface transportation systems," the release said on Thursday.

The new directives target higher-risk freight railroads, passenger rail and rail transit. They require owners and operators to designate a cybersecurity coordinator and to report cybersecurity incidents to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) within 24 hours, the release said.

"These new cybersecurity requirements and recommendations will help keep the traveling public safe and protect our critical infrastructure from evolving threats. DHS will continue working with our partners ... to increase the resilience of our critical infrastructure nationwide," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said.

The new security directives target higher-risk freight railroads, passenger rail, and rail transit, based on a determination that these requirements need to be issued immediately to protect transportation security, the release added.

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Son of Former Panama President Pleads Guilty to Laundering \$28Mln - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – Louis Enrioque Martinelli Linares, son of the former president of Panama, has pleaded guilty to his role in a \$28 million money laundering and

bribery scheme that involved a major Brazil construction company, the US Justice Department said.

"Luis Enrique Martinelli Linares, 39, a citizen of Panama and Italy, pleaded guilty today in the Eastern District of New York before US District Judge Raymond J. Dearie for laundering \$28 million in connection with a massive bribery and money laundering scheme involving Odebrecht S.A., a Brazil-based global construction conglomerate," the US Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

It is alleged that Martinelli took part in a scheme that involved the payment of more than \$700 million in bribes to Panamanian government officials as well as in other countries to obtain and retain business for the construction company, the release said.

The defendant along with his brother and other co-conspirators established offshore bank accounts to disguise more than \$28 million in bribes for the benefit of his close relative, a high-level official in Panama, the release said.

In July 2020, the brothers tried to depart Guatemala on a private airplane but were arrested and extradited to the United States, the release added.

Martinelli has pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering and agreed to pay a forfeiture of about \$18.9 million. He will be sentenced on May 20 and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, according to the release.

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#### US Government Actions Urgently Needed to Better Protect Critical Infrastructure - Report

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Recent events such as the May 2021 ransomware attack that shut down a pipeline supplying gasoline to much of the US East Coast illustrate the need for national cybersecurity plan and a greater government role protecting the United States' infrastructure, the General Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"To address critical infrastructure cybersecurity, key actions the federal government needs to take include (1) developing and executing a comprehensive national cyber strategy and (2) strengthening the federal role in protecting the cybersecurity of critical infrastructure," the report said on Thursday.

If the federal government does not act with greater urgency, "the security of our nation's critical infrastructure will be in jeopardy," the report said.

Shortcomings cited in the report included Federal Aviation Administration inaction as of November 2021 on a year-old recommendation to prioritize oversight of and implement periodic testing of systems connecting pipelines to jet fuel deliveries.

Another example involved the Energy Department's failure to implement plans to more fully protect the nation's electricity grid, also as of November 2021, the report said.

Looking back at the May 2021 ransomware attack on the Colonial Pipeline, which supplies supplying gasoline to the Eastern United States, the report questioned the company's decision to close the pipeline despite advice from the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security

Agency (CISA) and the FBI that the attack had been limited to the corporate information network but had not compromised pipeline control systems, the report added.

Overall, federal agencies have not addressed about 50 of the 80 recommendations made in GAO public reports dating back to 2010 including 14 of 11 priority recommendations as of November 2021, according to the report.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) -

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- \* The United States may use its bilateral ties with Kiev to help Donbas settlement without undermining Normandy format, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- \* The consultations with the United States on diplomatic property could take place before the end of the year or early next year, Lavrov said.
- \* Russia does not intent to withdraw from any contacts on the settlement in Ukraine, including with the United States, Lavrov said.
- \* The United States has not shown yet that it is ready to begin constructive dialogue on the work of embassies, Lavrov said.
- \* US President Joe Biden believes in diplomacy, however, there is nothing to announce with regards to a possible call or meeting with his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

- \* The United States 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.
- \* The European Union imposed new sanctions against Belarus that come into force on Thursday and they target Belava, Syrian airline Cham Wings, Belarusian judges and employees of the border service.
- \* 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.
- \* The Belarusian Foreign Ministry said that it would take tough but adequate retaliatory measures to the new sanctions.

#### COVID-19

- \* The German authorities agreed to toughen restrictive measures throughout the country, access to cultural events and retail stores, with the exception of food stores, will be only for those vaccinated or those recovered from COVID-19, acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

\* The US plan to fight the COVID-19 pandemic this winter does not include shutdown or lockdowns, President Joe Biden said on Thursday in remarks on his administration's efforts against the coronavirus.

\* 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.

#### OIL MARKETS

\* OPEC+ confirmed the current strategy of the alliance and decided to continue to increase oil production by the planned 400,000 barrels per day in January, the alliance said in a communique following the meeting on Thursday.

\* The OPEC+ countries decided to maintain the current strategy of the alliance and in January to increase oil production by the planned 400,000 barrels per day, a source in one of the delegations told Sputnik.

\* The overall compliance of OPEC+ with oil production cut deal was 116% in October, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

#### UN HEADQUARTERS INCIDENT

\* The New York Police Department (NYPD) on Thursday detained the man armed with a shotgun in front of the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, the NYPD told Sputnik.

\* The UN security services have reopened the 46th street entrance to the UN headquarters amid the ongoing police activity as law enforcement responds to a man armed with a shotgun, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

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#### Gunman at UN Headquarters Not Terrorist Threat, Came to Deliver Documents - Police

UNITED NATIONS, December 2 (Sputnik) - The man who came with a shotgun to the United Nations headquarters in New York on Thursday did not have a terrorist motive and arrived from the state of Florida to deliver documents to the United Nations, New York Police (NYPD) First Deputy Commissioner Benjamin Tucker said.

"We're not going to identify the individual at this time, but I will say that he does not have a criminal record or criminal history either here in New York, nor elsewhere around the country... He is originally from Florida," Tucker said during a press conference.

NYPD Special Operations Chief Harry Wedin said the individual had hundreds of pages of paperwork, including medical documents, which he wanted delivered to the United Nations.

"They didn't have any specific meaning related to anything, related to terrorism. But they were medical papers and some other documents," he said.

Wedin also said as soon as police officers handed the documents over to the United Nations, the individual agreed to put the weapon down, loaded with one round and was taken into custody.

Tucker said police traced the route of the man and determined he checked in into the Millennial Hotel on 44th Street on Manhattan on Wednesday, which was "swept" by the bomb squad along with a truck connected to the individual.

"There are no outstanding threats connected to any of those items at this time," Tucker said. NYPD Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence and Counterterrorism John Miller said the arrested man is 64 years old and charges against him are pending.

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**IMF's First Deputy Chief to Resign Next Year, Chief Economist Gopinath to Replace Him**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - IMF's First Deputy Managing Director Geoffrey Okamoto will resign next year, and Chief Economist Gita Gopinath will replace him, the fund announced on Thursday.

"The IMF said today that First Deputy Managing Director (FDMD) Geoffrey Okamoto will leave the Fund early next year and that Gita Gopinath, currently the IMF's Chief Economist, is proposed to be the Fund's new First Deputy Managing Director," the press release said. Although Gopinath had been scheduled to return to her academic position at Harvard University in January next year, she decided to stay and accepted the new position, according to the release.

"In particular, the FDMD will take the lead on surveillance and related policies, oversee research and flagship publications and help foster the highest quality standards for Fund publications," the release noted.

Gopinath will start in her new role on January 21, 2022.

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**Third National Case of Omicron COVID-19 Variant Found in US State of Colorado - Governor**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The third case of the Omicron coronavirus variant in the US has been confirmed in the state of Colorado, Governor Jared Polis said during a press conference on Thursday.

"Just moments ago, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment confirmed the first Colorado case of the Omicron variant. It is somebody who just travelled to southern Africa and returned. She is experiencing mild symptoms and is isolating at home. She was vaccinated but had not been boosted," the governor said.

Two other cases have so far been detected in California and Minnesota. All three individuals were vaccinated.

The new Omicron variant has prompted increased travel restrictions and public health measures by governments around the world, including the US. President Joe Biden on Thursday

announced a five-point plan to help combat the virus and variant this winter, during which time case numbers are expected to rise.

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Russian Prosecutors Launch Probe Into Whelan's Complaints of Prison Corruption - Brother

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russian prosecutors have launched an investigation into American citizen Paul Whelan's allegations of prison corruption and other violations of Russian law in the facility in which he is being held, his brother David Whelan said on Thursday in a statement.

"In a call to our parents, Paul said that he had met with a representative from the 'general prosecutor's' office ... The Prosecutor has launched an investigation into Paul's complaints of corruption at the prison. Paul says that the Prosecutor acknowledged that Paul's complaints comprised human rights abuses and violations of Russian law," David said.

Paul is currently serving a 16-year prison sentence in Russia for espionage. Whelan denied the charges against him but did not challenge the Moscow court's ruling last June, in hopes of being part of a potential prisoner exchange between the US and Russia.

Paul told his parents during a recent phone call that he requested an investigation into corruption taking place at the facility, noting that a prison warden was arrested for corruption after allegedly threatening Whelan with retaliation for reporting human rights abuses.

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

Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday during a meeting with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov raised "the unjust detentions of Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed" and underscored the priority the US attached to their prompt release, the State Department said. US citizen Reed was sentenced to nine years in July 2020 for assaulting police officers who were called to respond during his drunken row with two women in a Moscow street.

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FEATURE - Mother of Addicts Says US Could Avert Record Overdose Deaths If Issue Treated as Epidemic

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - For years the United States has been battling substance abuse, but has so far failed to address it as an epidemic, which led to record overdose deaths during the first year of COVID-19 lockdowns, Garnet Druhot-Close, a mother of three addicts and an activist, told Sputnik.

In November, an alarming report revealed that over 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in the twelve month period ending in April 2021, which is the highest annual death toll from drugs. Deaths from drug overdose thus surpass deaths from gun violence, pneumonia and car crashes. Reacting to the report, President Joe Biden pledged to continue battling the US drug overdose epidemic by strengthening prevention and treatment.

Druhot-Close, from Pennsylvania, is no stranger to the tragedy mentioned in the report. Three of her five children were involved in drug abuse and one of them — a son — died due to complications from intravenous drug use. His story is included in a book entitled "Ripples: Effects of Addiction," to which she contributed and which was released this June.

"My oldest daughter is in jail for selling drugs. My middle son just completed his first rehab and I am worried he is slipping. My youngest two have watched their siblings die and go to jail. We also lost a grandson who was murdered by his father's brother because my oldest daughter was running from the police and not at home being a mommy," she shared in her heartbreaking story.

Druhot-Close hopes to save her younger son from the ravages of drug abuse, as well as many others who are suffering from the same addiction. She believes that the deaths from drug overdose mentioned in the recent report were preventable.

"If we stopped criminalizing addiction, and started treating it. It is a sad state when you cannot convince a law officer that addiction is very much a disease. I would bet that 40 percent if not more Americans believe addiction is a moral breakdown, not a mental health issue," she said.

#### EPIDEMIC WITHIN PANDEMIC

Speaking of how the pandemic affected the drug abuse problem, at least in the small rural community where she lives, Druhot-Close said that substance abuse had "skyrocketed."

"We have so many young people that got lots of money and had nothing but time on their hands. I speak to many of them that say their habit rose by at least half during the pandemic. Now they are homeless and trying to find a way to fight their habit. Most commit non-violent crimes (steal from family and friends...)," she said.

Druhot-Close believes that the official numbers are significantly watered down.

"If you added obvious drug-related deaths the numbers would be mind-numbing," she explained.

American society, she continued, needs to address substance abuse as a mental health issue. If the person did not have a mental health issue before using, they definitely will when trying to find sobriety, she added.

"The problem with this question is that too little had been done before the pandemic. If we had looked at addiction as an epidemic before this I would have more hope. We don't do enough research to really address substance abuse. For far too many years we have battled it instead of trying to understand and fix it," she said.

The US needs "tons more" housing for those trying to find recovery, Druhot-Close stated.

"We need to make navigating the health care system for substance abuse easier. We also need to make recovery part of our criminal institutions. You can't just take away their drug of choice and think they are fixed. Make them start recovery from day one of being arrested," she said. Synthetic opioids such as fentanyl continue to be most commonly available on the street and are wreaking havoc in many states. According to the CDC, these substances caused about 64%

of all drug overdose deaths in the 12-month period ending April 2021, which is up 49% from the previous period.

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Canada's Ontario Province Reports 5th Case of Omicron Coronavirus Variant

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – The Durham Region Health Department in the Canadian province of Ontario reported on Thursday a fifth case of the Omicron coronavirus variant in a person who had close contact with an individual recently returned from a southern African country.

"Durham Region Health Department has received confirmation of one individual who has tested positive for the COVID-19 Omicron variant. The case is a close contact of a returning traveler from one of the identified countries in southern Africa," the department said in a press release. The health department is monitoring all other cases of the Omicron variant based on recent travel history, the press release added.

Following the announcement, the total number of confirmed Omicron infections in Canada rises to seven, with five cases reported in the province of Ontario, and one each in Alberta and Quebec.

On Tuesday, the Federal Health Ministry barred foreign travelers from Egypt, Nigeria, and Malawi from entering Canada after it banned visitors from seven other African countries on Friday, namely South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini.

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Blinken Briefed Israeli Prime Minister on Iran Nuclear Talks in Vienna – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett discussed the ongoing talks in Vienna on the Iran nuclear deal, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett today. Secretary Blinken and Prime Minister Bennett affirmed the strong U.S.-Israel partnership and discussed regional security issues, including Iran and the ongoing talks in Vienna concerning Iran's nuclear program, as well as the global challenge posed by COVID-19," Price said in a press release.

During the call, Blinken underscored that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority should refrain from any actions that may exacerbate the already tense situation, including Israel's settlement activity in disputed territories.

The call took place following the start of the seventh round of talks on the Iran nuclear deal in Vienna on Monday. The same day, media reported that Israel shared intelligence with the United States and several European allies that Iran is allegedly taking technical steps to enrich uranium to 90%, a level that is only useful for making nuclear weapons.

On Wednesday, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said that Israel had been trying to "poison" the negotiation process in Vienna by publishing fake news about Iran.

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SEC Warns US Delisting of Chinese, Other Foreign Firms That Ignore Information Requests  
WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Foreign firms that are publicly-traded in the United States, including those from China, may be delisted under amended rules if their auditors do not comply with requests for information from US regulators, the Securities and Exchange Commission said on Thursday.

"If you want to issue public securities in the US, the firms that audit your books have to be subject to inspection by the PCAOB," SEC official Gary Gensler said in a statement, referring to the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board. "This final rule furthers the mandate that Congress laid out and gets to the heart of the SEC's mission to protect investors."

The so-called Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act was originally passed in 2020 after Chinese regulators repeatedly denied requests from the PCAOB to oversee the audits of Chinese firms that list and trade in the United States.

The SEC on Thursday said it has finalized amendments to the act to enhance its enforcement and allow the commission to delist firms that do not comply.

"The Commission and the PCAOB will continue to work together to ensure that the auditors of foreign companies accessing US capital markets play by our rules," Gensler said. "We hope foreign governments will, working with the PCAOB, take action to make that possible."

The SEC could prohibit about 270 Chinese companies from trading on US exchanges by 2024 if the companies do not allow inspections of their auditors, Mr. Gensler said in September in an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal.

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US Budgets \$35M In for 12 Research Projects to Reduce Methane Emissions - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Twelve projects focused on developing technologies to cut methane emissions from oil, gas and coal production will receive \$35 million over the next three years, the Energy Department said on Thursday.

"Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that is more than 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide," Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release. "By creating new technologies, we are working to mitigate climate change and minimize the cost of methane abatement."

Funding for the program will be released in two stages spanning a total of three years, with the first tranche focused on lab-based testing and the second stage for field-tests, according to the release.

The program focuses on three sources of methane emissions: engines powered by natural gas, flares from oil and gas wells, and emissions from coal mine shafts, the release said.

Examples of the 12 projects cited in the release include \$1.5 million for Colorado State University to develop hardware that sends engine exhaust to a turbocharger to burn off excess methane.

In addition, the University of Michigan will receive \$2.9 million to help develop a new flare system, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology will receive \$2 million to develop a low-cost copper-based catalyst to reduce methane emissions from coal mines.

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#### Biden Says US Launching Hundreds of Family Vaccination Clinics to Get Shots in One Stop

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is launching hundreds of family vaccination clinics across the country to provide locations where families can get COVID-19 vaccine and booster doses all in one place, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"Today I'm announcing that we're going to launch hundreds of new family vaccination clinics across the country. These sites will offer vaccinations for the whole family in one stop. Children can get vaccinated, parents can get vaccinated and get their first or second shots, or their booster shots," Biden said during remarks at the National Institute of Health.

The clinics will be located in community health centers and other trusted locations, Biden said. Some will be mobile in order to serve hard-to-reach communities, Biden added.

Biden announced the effort as part of a broader federal government plan to combat COVID-19 and the new Omicron variant over the winter months, during which time cases are expected to rise.

The five-point plan also included measures to expand nationwide vaccine and booster outreach, expand COVID-19 testing access, bolster the government's response teams and accelerate efforts to vaccinate the rest of the world, Biden said.

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#### Biden Says Plan to Battle COVID This Winter Does Not Include Shutdown, Lockdowns

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US plan to battle the COVID-19 pandemic this winter does not include shutdown or lockdowns, President Joe Biden said on Thursday while delivering remarks on efforts against the coronavirus.

"Our plan doesn't include shutdown or lockdowns, but widespread vaccinations and boosters," the president said.

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Puerto Rico Mayor Pleads Guilty in Nearly \$10Mln Bribes Case - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The mayor of Catano in Puerto Rico has entered a guilty plea to a charge of accepting bribes in exchange for receiving nearly \$10 million for awarding municipal contracts, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A mayor pleaded guilty yesterday in Puerto Rico on a criminal charge related to his involvement in a bribery conspiracy in which he received weekly cash payments in exchange for awarding municipal contracts to 'Company A,'" the Justice Department said in a press release. "In a separate indictment, a businessman was arrested ... on criminal charges related to his alleged involvement in a scheme to bribe the mayor."

Félix Delgado-Montalvo, 40, was the mayor and highest-ranking government official in the municipality of Catano, the release said. According to court documents, he unjustly enriched himself by accepting things of value, including cash payments. He pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy, the release said.

Delgado-Montalvo "is scheduled to be sentenced on March 8, 2022, and faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison," the release added.

A separate indictment returned on Wednesday alleges that around June 2017, Mario Villegas-Vargas, 42, of Gurabo, who owned an asphalt and paving company in Puerto Rico paid kickbacks and bribes to Delgado-Montalvo to receive municipal contracts, according to the release.

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New York Police Detains Man Armed With Shotgun Near UN Headquarters

UNITED NATIONS, December 2 (Sputnik) - The New York Police Department (NYPD) detained the man armed with a shotgun in front of the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, the NYPD told Sputnik on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, the man arrived to the world body's headquarters and was holding a shotgun against his head while police officers attempted for several hours to establish dialogue with him.

"He is in custody," the NYPD said.

The NYPD later issued a message via Twitter confirming that the man was taken into custody and there was no threat to the public.

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**Nikitin's Deportation From US to Russia Delayed Due to Problem With Flight - Lawyer**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russian national Oleg Nikitin, who was sentenced in the United States for violating export regulations, was escorted to an airport to be deported but reverted back to prison due to an unspecified problem with his flight, Nikitin's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Oleg Nikitin was supposed to have been deported today from the United States to Russia, but it appears there was a problem with the flight," Tarasov said. "Once he was taken to the airport, he was then turned around and taken back to the facility because the flight, unfortunately, is not going to take off today."

Tarasov described the situation as dynamic and developing, noting that he does not know when his client will be able to leave the United States.

In September, Nikitin was sentenced to 28 months in prison, which is nearly equivalent to the time he served in custody.

Nikitin served as general director of the St. Petersburg-based energy company KS Engineering (KSE). The US authorities accused him of conspiring with his business partner Anton Cheremukhin as well as three foreign nationals to purchase a US-made power turbine worth \$17.3 million in violation of US trade regulations. The turbine was to be employed on a Russian Arctic deep water drilling platform, according to the US Justice Department.

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**Two US Federal Reserve Officials Call for Faster Asset Taper, One Calls for Restraint**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Two Federal Reserve bankers said on Thursday that the US central bank needs to taper its pandemic-era economic stimulus more quickly and raise interest rates to curb runaway inflation, while a third cautioned that price pressures could also drop unexpectedly.

Raphael Bostic and Mary Daly, presidents of the Federal Reserve banks of Atlanta and San Francisco, respectively, called for prompt monetary tightening while Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond President Tom Barkin advocated for more diligence over the matter.

The central bank should taper its bond-buying program, which has supported the US economy since the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, "sooner rather than later," Bostic said. "If necessary, the Fed needs to be able to raise interest rates sooner," he said, adding that this should ideally be done by the first quarter of 2022.

Daly also said the Federal Reserve might need to taper its asset purchases more quickly than expected and "develop a strategy" for raising rates.

Under a schedule announced in November, the Federal Reserve is to taper \$15 billion each month from its monthly purchase of \$120 billion of bonds and assets. The central bank has also planned its first pandemic-era rate hike once it rolls back the stimulus program.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, however, told Congress this week that due to runaway inflation, he might be open to doing a faster taper of the asset buying than the original eight-month schedule laid out by the central bank.

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.

Barkin said the Federal Reserve must be prepared for both scenarios in which inflation rises, and well as falls against expectations.

"Long-term inflation expectations are always a concern", he said, adding that inflation readings for 2022 "are likely to be messy."

The Federal reserve is due to make a decision on the pace of its asset-buying program at its next policy meeting to be held between December 14 and 15.

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#### Omicron Threatens to Reverse Modest October Recovery in Air Travel - Trade Group

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – A fledgling recovery in both domestic and international air travel in October faces a new threat amid a spate of new restrictions imposed by governments due to the Omicron coronavirus variant, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Thursday.

"October's traffic performance reinforces that people will travel when they are permitted to. Unfortunately, government responses to the emergence of the Omicron variant are putting at risk the global connectivity it has taken so long to rebuild," IATA's Director General Willie Walsh said in a press release.

International passenger demand in October was 65.5% below October 2019, compared to a 69% decline for September versus the 2019 period, with all regions showing improvement, the release said.

Domestic markets were down 21.6% compared to October 2019, compared to the 24.2% decline recorded in September versus September 2019, it added.

IATA bases its comparison on 2019 to avoid comparisons between 2021 and 2020 monthly results, which are highly affected by the heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the release.

Many governments have moved to limit international travel with the emergence of Omicron. For example, the United States has banned arrivals from eight nations in Southern Africa, the region where Omicron first surfaced.

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Incident at UN Headquarters Ongoing, But Poses No Threat to Public - New York Police

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The incident in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York City involving an individual armed with a shotgun is ongoing but there is no threat to the public, the New York Police Department (NYPD) said on Thursday.

"The incident at 42nd Street and 1st Avenue in Manhattan is ongoing at this time. Please continue to stay clear of the area and expect traffic delays. There is currently NO THREAT to the public," the NYPD said in a statement via Twitter.

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UN Security Services Reopen 46th Street Entrance Amid Ongoing Police Activity Outside HQ

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - UN security services have reopened the 46th street entrance to the UN headquarters amid the ongoing police activity as law enforcement responds to a man armed with a shotgun, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"Our security services in discussions with NYPD [New York City Police Department] have reopened the 46th street entrance for anyone in the building which we feel is safe to use, and for vehicles the entrance on 42nd and the FTR Drive," Dujarric said.

Media Accreditation & Liaison Unit has been updating the press via emails, and in the last email sent it noted that NYPD continues to negotiate with the individual armed with a shotgun on 1st Avenue.

"The area of concern is secured by the Police and no UN staff or associates are in danger," the email said. "Personnel may continue to safely exit by vehicle at 42nd Street or enter/exit by foot at 46th Street."

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US Targets 20 Individuals, 12 Entities in New Round of Belarus-Related Sanctions

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – The United States has added 20 Belarusian citizens and 12 entities to its Specially Designated Nationals list over alleged human rights abuse and violation of international law amid the ongoing migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in response to the Lukashenka regime's blatant disregard for international norms and the wellbeing of its own citizens, is designating 20 individuals and 12 entities and identifying three

aircraft as blocked property," the Treasury said in a press release. "The persons designated today have enabled the regime's migrant smuggling into the European Union (EU), have taken part in the ongoing crackdown on human rights and democracy, and have propped up the regime financially."

On the list of sanctioned Belarusian individuals is one of President Alexander Lukashenko's sons, Dmitry, who is being targeted as a family member of an official engaged in public corruption, as well as 10 security officials from the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Alexander Lukashenko himself, and Dmitry's older brother Viktor, have been under sanctions since 2006 as individuals allegedly engaged in public corruption and human rights abuse in Belarus.

The Treasury has also restricted transactions in Belarusian sovereign debt sold on primary and secondary markets, according to the release.

The list of designated entities contains 11 companies from Belarus and one from Ukraine, including defense industry companies, major potash producers Belarusian Potash Company and Slavkali, and airline company Transaviaexport, along with two of its aircraft, which have allegedly transported ammunition and weapons to a foreign conflict zone, such as Libya. Another designated entity in Belarus is a state-owned tourism company, Republican Unitary Enterprise Tsentrkurort, which is believed by US authorities to have played a key role in the migration crisis on the border with Poland, the release said.

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#### US Layoffs Near 30-Year Low as Firms 'Spread Thin' Amid COVID-19 Variants - Survey

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US corporate layoffs are near three-decade lows, with employers stretching themselves to retain employees amid the protracted labor crisis caused by the COVID-19 and its multiple variants, jobs market surveyor Challenger, Gray & Christmas said in a report Thursday.

"With the Omicron variant emerging and the unknowns that come with its spread, coupled with the ongoing difficulty hiring and retaining workers, it's no surprise job cuts are at record lows," Andrew Challenger, senior vice president of the firm, said in the November survey of the US corporate jobs sector.

Job cuts by US-based employers plummeted 34.8% in November to 14,875 from an October count of 22,822, Challenger, Gray & Christmas said in its latest monthly survey. That was the lowest for layoffs in a month since the 14,086 cuts recorded in May of 1993, the firm added.

On Wednesday, the first case of the coronavirus Omicron variant was reported in California and concerned a fully vaccinated resident who had returned from traveling to South Africa, where the variant was 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. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday the variant could slow the country's economic recovery from the pandemic. However,

South African health officials said the cases have been mild and they were surprised at the pronounced reactions in the United States and other primarily Western countries. Challenger, Gray & Christmas said in its survey that employers were also in a limbo over legal challenges to the Biden administration's mandate that required companies with at least 100 employees to ensure their workers were either vaccinated against COVID-19 or tested regularly. The firm said vaccine refusal accounted for 7,227 job cuts so far this year, with 384 occurring last month alone.

"Employers are spread thin, planning best- and worst-case scenarios in terms of COVID, while also contending with staff shortages and high demand," Challenger said.

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 report from Challenger, Gray & Christmas came ahead of Friday's scheduled release of the US non-farm payrolls report for November by the Labor Department, which is expected to say that some 545,000 government and corporate jobs were added last month versus October's 531,000.

Earlier on Thursday, the Labor Department reported that 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.

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**UN Says Has No Evidence of Any Criminal, Political Motive of Armed Man Near Headquarters**

UNITED NATIONS, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has no evidence that the armed man outside the organization's headquarters has any criminal, terrorist or political motives, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"At this point, we have no such evidence," Dujarric said.

"The NYPD [New York Police Department] is on the ground, they are trying to talk to the man, they are diffusing the situation. But we are not aware of any sort of political or other motives," he added.

Earlier in the day, all staff and diplomats at the UN headquarters in New York were requested to shelter in place amid ongoing police activity.

According to the NYPD, the man is armed with a shotgun and officers at the scene are attempting to engage in a dialogue with him.

At the moment, police are pushing the press farther away from the UN headquarters and police dog units have appeared on the scene.

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## Second US Omicron Infection Follows Anime Convention in New York City - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The second American with a confirmed case of the Omicron variant infection attended a convention of Anime enthusiasts in New York City before returning home in the state of Minnesota, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) said on Thursday.

"The individual traveled to New York City and attended the Anime NYC 2021 convention at the Javits Center from November 19-21, 2021," the CDC said in a press release. "The person has since recovered."

The Minnesota Health Department reported earlier that the victim, who was fully vaccinated, developed mild symptoms on November 22 and was tested two days later.

On Wednesday, the US authorities reported the first confirmed case of Omicron in the state of California who recently traveled from South Africa, where the coronavirus variant was first detected.

The World Health Organization has named Omicron a variant of "concern" due to a large number of mutations on the virus' surface. South African health officials, however, have said the Omicron cases are mild and likened the reaction to them in the United States and other primarily Western countries to a "storm in a tea cup." The officials also said that all cases involved fully vaccinated individuals.

The United States and other nations have restricted international travel on travelers from southern Africa and imposed additional mitigation measures as scientists attempt to gauge the transmissibility and severity of Omicron infections.

Both the California and Minnesota victims were fully vaccinated, health officials have said.

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## US Trying to Prevent 1970s Style High Inflation Endemic - Treasury Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to stop a 1970s-style high inflation endemic from returning to its economy, with the Federal Reserve tasked with preventing a wage price spiral that could lead to that, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"What we don't want to develop is wage price spiral, in which inflation becomes a self-enforcing kind of phenomenon that would become chronic in the US economy, something endemic," Yellen told a discussion on the economy hosted by the Reuters news agency.

She said that it was the Federal Reserve's job "to make sure that we don't experience that again, the kind of thing we had in the 1970s."

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 2.1% in the third.

The Fed announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for

the central bank though is inflation as wages and the prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to supply chain disruptions.

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.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell told Congress this week that the central bank 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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Biden Administration to Restart Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' Policy on December 6 - DHS

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will reactivate former President Donald Trump's "remain in Mexico" policy on illegal immigration on or around December 6, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"Following the government of Mexico's independent decision to accept individuals returned pursuant to MPP [migrant protection protocols], the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice will work out final operational details and begin the court-ordered re-implementation of the program on or around Monday, December 6," the DHS said in a press release.

Changes in the policy include a commitment that proceedings will generally be concluded within six months of an individual's initial return to Mexico and opportunities for enrollees to secure communication with counsel before and during immigration court hearings, the release said.

The DHS will exclude particularly vulnerable individuals from being enrolled in migrant protection protocols and the Homeland Security Department will offer COVID-19 vaccinations for all persons enrolled in the program, the release added.

The migrant protection protocols policy, which requires asylum-seeking migrants to wait in Mexico during their immigration court proceedings, will first be reinstated in the Texas border cities of El Paso and Brownsville and the California border city of San Diego, US media reported on Wednesday.

In August, a US District Court in Texas ordered the Biden administration to restart the policy that was followed by the Biden administration's failed attempt to fight that order in the US Supreme Court, which ruled against the bid to end the policy.

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US Appreciates Coordination With OPEC+, Welcomes Decision to Boost Output - White House

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States appreciates the close coordination with OPEC+ producers in recent weeks and welcomes the decision to increase oil production, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We appreciate the close coordination over the recent weeks with our partners - Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other OPEC+ producers - to help address price pressures," Psaki said. "We welcome the decision today to continue the 400,000 barrel barrels per day increase. Together with our recent coordinated release from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. We believe it should help facilitate the global economic recovery."

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**Biden Believes in Diplomacy But Nothing to Announce on Meeting With Putin - White House**

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden believes in diplomacy, however, there is nothing to announce with regards to a possible call or meeting with his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We are hardly refusing to have discussions with the Russians considering our Secretary of State and the foreign minister of Russia had a discussion today, and we've had ongoing discussions at a high level with the Russians. The President continues to believe in the benefit of diplomacy at a high level, at a leader level," Psaki said. "But I don't have anything to preview or announce as it relates to a call or engagement between President Biden and President Putin."

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

WASHINGTON, December 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 TRANSVIAEXPORT 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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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 2 (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.