

12/10/21 Friday

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Videos: Explosions Rock Lebanese City of Tyre At Alleged Hamas Weapons Depot
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A series of massive explosions rocked the Burj al-Shemali refugee camp near Tyre, Lebanon, late on Friday night, a source in the Palestinian Fatah movement told Sputnik.

"Some blasts are occurring in Mazza Abou-Kaab, in the area where our Hamas brothers are. We hope that there will be no dead and injured. No exact data are available yet. Until precise data are revealed, we will not make any announcements," the Fatah source told Sputnik.

Earlier, the Lebanese broadcaster Al Jadeed reported the explosion had taken place inside a weapons depot believed to be operated by Hamas.

Rescue personnel were reported responding to the scene, and residents from nearby neighborhoods were being evacuated. Officials have not yet offered any information about potential casualties.

Video posted on social media late Friday night showed a series of explosions and a raging fire. Regular smaller explosions can be heard in the videos in addition to the massive explosion, suggesting the blaze is setting off individual munitions as it rages.

Sky News Arabia reported that the fire began in a nearby mosque and spread to the warehouse. According to the UN's Palestinian relief agency, UNRWA, the Burj al-Shemali refugee camp is home to nearly 25,000 Palestinian refugees and was founded in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, during which nearly 700,000 Palestinians were exiled from the country and denied the right to return after hostilities ceased.

Another, far more [massive explosion](#) destroyed much of the Lebanese capital of Beirut on August 4, 2020, when a large amount of ammonium nitrate that was improperly stored at the port went off. The explosion killed at least 218 people, injured another 7,000, and left 300,000 people homeless. It caused \$15 billion in damage.

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Xiomara Castro Won't Immediately Switch Honduras' Recognition From Taiwan to China - Report
By - Morgan Artyukhina

After southern neighbor Nicaragua switched its recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, Honduras was widely expected to follow suit. However, recent comments by the incoming administration suggest that won't immediately be on the agenda.

"The new government will maintain relations with Taiwan," Gerardo Torres, secretary of international relations for Honduras' Libre Party and a member of President-elect [Xiomara Castro's](#) transition team, told [Reuters on Friday](#).

"President-elect Xiomara Castro has been clear, these ties will be maintained. Nobody in the party wants to enter government distancing ourselves from the United States," he added. That's a big reversal of one of her [campaign pledges](#), which was to "immediately open diplomatic and commercial relations with mainland China."

However, Rodolfo Pastor, another member of Castro's transition team, also told the news agency that Honduras could still recognize China in the future, because the country of 1.4 billion is a "new superpower." He said the new government would study the matter.

The Central American nation is just one of 14 that still recognize Taiwan, formally the Republic of China (ROC), as the legitimate government of China. The ROC nominally ruled all of China from the 1912 liberal revolution that forced the last Chinese emperor from power until the 1949 foundation of the socialist People's Republic of China (PRC), which displaced its power on the mainland. However, much of the republican period was marred by warlordism, civil war, and a devastating invasion by Imperial Japan, meaning the ROC rarely got to exercise real power over the land.

The Red Army that defeated the ROC in the civil war in 1949 was unable to invade the island of Taiwan, leaving the US-backed government intact. Both governments claim to be the legitimate government of China and require other nations to accept their position before establishing relations. The US made the switch in 1979, as have the vast majority of the world's nations. However, the US also continued to maintain informal ties with Taipei, funneling their weapons and giving them diplomatic cover and a pressure point against Washington's rivals in Beijing. Nicaragua, to Honduras' south, was the latest to go over to Beijing, announcing the switch [on Friday morning](#) from Tianjin, where Chinese and Nicaraguan diplomats put the final touches on the deal. The remaining 14 states are mostly small other Caribbean nations or small Pacific island countries, all of which the US is able to dominate.

The few states that remain have become areas of tight competition, as each side seeks to woo them with promises of economic investment and trade. In the Pacific, the US and its ally Australia have [tried to use fears](#) of imminent Chinese military bases to keep nations on Taiwan's side - even though Washington is [building its own](#) in the region anyway.

Pastor told Reuters that Castro would like to maintain good relations with Washington, provided they are based on mutual respect and sovereignty, and is eager to work with the Biden administration on addressing the country's migration crisis. According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), in 2019, an estimated 1% of Honduras' population attempted to enter the United States.

The aide added that Castro's administration would focus on issues like [reducing its debt](#) burden, which would require negotiating with the International Monetary Fund.

Castro's husband, Manuel Zelaya, saw his own presidency end in a US-backed coup in June 2009 that was motivated by the country's increasingly close association with other socialist-led governments in the region, including Cuba and Venezuela. The regime that followed instituted heavy [neoliberal reforms](#) and militarized its police forces, creating a regime close to the US but [marred by corruption](#) and violence that sent hundreds of thousands of Hondurans fleeing north. Castro will be sworn into office in late January 2022.

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US State Dept. Approves \$9.4 Billion in Deals to Sell Greece Littoral Combat Ships, Upgrade Frigates

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Two potential weapons deals with US ally Greece were given the go-ahead by the US State Department on Friday, which would see four older frigates get extensive upgrades and also supply them with four new warships.

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced approval of the two deals on Friday, which will still have to be approved by Congress before the sale can begin.

In one deal, the US would sell Athens four Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships, better known as Freedom-class littoral combat ships, along with a range of associated equipment and weaponry, including radars, sonar arrays, combat management systems, rockets, and missiles, together [totalling \\$6.9 billion](#).

In the other, the US would agree to supply equipment and expertise for repairing, updating and enhancing the Hellenic Navy's four Hydra-class frigates, which are also known by the German-built family of warships of which they are a part: MEKO. The deal is [worth \\$2.5 billion](#).

The two warship classes are of roughly equal size, with the Hydras displacing 4,000 tons fully loaded and the MMSCs, although longer, displacing 3,500 tons. They also share a similar modularity, allowing them to switch configurations to carry a variety of weapons. However, the frigates are made for blue-water sailing, while as the name suggests, the littoral combat ships are intended for operating close to shore.

The bid to upgrade the Greek frigates was contested by several European firms, including their manufacturer, Germany's Blohm+Voss. Jon Rambeau, vice president and general manager for the Integrated Warfare Systems and Sensors business line at Lockheed Martin, [told Defense News](#) in September that if the contract were awarded to the US, the US Navy would act as "the custodian of Greece's money" and contract the job to Lockheed.

"The proposed sale will improve Greece's capability to meet current and future threats by providing an effective combatant deterrent capability to protect maritime interests and infrastructure in support of its strategic location on NATO's southern flank," the State Department said in a statement.

Athens' naval concerns are threefold: as part of NATO, it wants a better ability to track Russian submarines in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, but it also wants to better police migration from Africa that comes across the Aegean, as well as have better leverage in its ongoing nautical tensions with Turkey, another NATO ally.

Ankara has in recent years pushed back against Greek and Cypriot control over vast portions of the seas off of Turkey's southern and western coasts owing to their control of numerous offshore islands, particularly following the [discovery of gas deposits](#) under the seafloor.

Last week, Nicosia [called Ankara's bluff](#) on claims it would attempt to interfere in any Cypriot gas exploration activities, giving ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum licenses for hydrocarbon

exploration in sectors southwest of the island nation. The two corporations penned the agreement in Nicosia on Friday.

Total and ENI are expected to also be given licensed blocks on the continental shelf in early 2022, [according to AFP](#).

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Videos: Ethiopians, Eritreans Hold #NoMore March Outside US State Department, Capitol
By - Morgan Artyukhina

With Congress laying the groundwork for further sanctions against the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the UN pulling sorely needed food aid from cities following looting by rebel forces, Ethiopians and Eritreans in the US are continuing their pressure on Washington to stop intervening in the conflict.

Thousands of Ethiopians, Eritreans and their allies rallied outside the US State Department on Friday as part of the #NoMore campaign opposing US intervention in the Horn of Africa. Their protest comes as the US' chief envoy to the Horn, Jeffrey Feltman, is visiting several countries connected to the conflict after failing to secure a ceasefire.

The crowd chanted "fake news CNN" and "no more TPLF," referring to the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, a rebel group with Western support that earlier this year made a blitz on the capital from the northern Tigray state. Their offensive was blunted and reversed by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), the military forces loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Many at the rally carried signs hailing Abiy's democratic victory in July, the country's first-ever contested elections, and asking why the US would support the TPLF's attempt to overthrow him. The Ethiopian parliament decreed the TPLF to be a terrorist organization in May, several months after the group launched an uprising by attacking ENDF forces in Tigray. Some carried signs expressing their fears that the United States will turn Ethiopia into another war-marred failed state like Afghanistan or Libya.

"We are pro-democracy. The US government intervention has to be stopped and we are asking that US intervention be stopped against a democratically-elected Ethiopian leader," one attendee at the rally told Sputnik. "We want to stop TPLF intervention, we want to stop TPLF brutal, absolutely brutal action in Afar and Amhara regions and all we are asking for is what the US really wants for its own citizens: having the democratically-elected government in place. That's all we're asking."

Their fears are not without merit: [a video leaked](#) late last month revealed numerous Western diplomats, including the present US ambassador to Somalia, Donald Yamamoto, meeting secretly with a senior TPLF official, cheering on their military success, and speaking of a potential post-Abiy "transition government" once they captured Addis Ababa.

Another man named Sirak who attended the rally brought three large signs bearing photos: one of African-American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; one of Organization of Afro-American Unity founder Malcolm X; and one of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie with

African leaders who led their countries to independence from European empires, including Uganda's Milton Obote, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, and Zambia's Kenneth Kuanda.

"These are African and American fighters. We are tired of the US or the West telling us what's good for us. They fought for their rights, Ethiopia's trying to fight for their rights also," he told Sputnik. "The US should not be telling African countries who their leaders are."

"It doesn't make sense how the US wants to alienate 100 million people and choose a small group that's terrorist, stolen billions of dollars and using that money to hire lobbyists here in the US to facilitate their agenda. It's very misguided and it's pushing Ethiopia towards the East. It's not in the US' best standard of foreign policy to allow Ethiopia to go this route," he added.

The protesters then marched from the State Department to the US Capitol, by then numbering many thousands, in a procession that took them through the heart of the US capital city at midday.

US Builds Sanctions Regime Against Ethiopia, Eritrea

Every weekend for more than a month, #NoMore protests have rocked the US capital city, which has the [largest concentration](#) of Ethiopians outside of Africa. Friday's protest, however, was called because it is Congress' last day in session and the Senate is considering the massive National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the bill that funds the Pentagon.

The [NDAA contains](#) a provision requiring the US State Department to "submit to the appropriate congressional committees a determination whether actions in the Tigray region of Ethiopia by the Ethiopian and Eritrean armed forces constitute genocide as defined in section 1091 of title 18, United States Code, or crimes against humanity."

For Abiy supporters, the claims of a genocide in Ethiopia's northern Tigray state are overstated and part of a media campaign designed to win Western sympathy.

"On November 4 ... they started to use the hashtag #TigrayGenocide," Simon Tesfamariam, executive director of the New Africa Institute, [told Sputnik last month](#), referring to the day in late 2020 when the TPLF first attacked ENDF forces in Tigray.

"Before you could even tally up who was dead and where the bodies were, right off the bat they were using the #TigrayGenocide hashtag. And it became a campaign, the media started to say there was a genocide going on in Tigray," he added.

Indeed, the UN Human Rights Office and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission said in a [report published](#) last month they had found no evidence of such a genocide in Tigray, although they did document human rights abuses by all sides in the conflict.

The US has [sanctioned Abiy's government](#) as well as its ally, Eritrea, for [alleged abuses](#) in Tigray, and an executive order issued by US President Joe Biden in September laid out a framework for justifying further sanctions on groups deemed to "threaten the peace, security, or stability of Ethiopia, or that have the purpose or effect of expanding or extending the crisis in northern Ethiopia or obstructing a ceasefire or a peace process." It includes other reasons, too, such as "obstructing" the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, targeting civilians and UN or African Union officials, and the sweepingly broad "actions or policies that undermine democratic processes or institutions in Ethiopia" and "actions or policies that undermine the territorial integrity of Ethiopia."

It's notable that while the sanctions could theoretically be applied to the TPLF, Washington has yet to do so, despite the evidence of abuses by the group.

The [counteroffensive launched](#) after Abiy went to the front late last month has significantly pushed back the TPLF's southern advance, returning dozens of cities and towns to government control. However, in the wake of the TPLF retreat, widespread looting, destruction, and abuses [have been found](#), including the armed seizure of food from UN World Food Program warehouses in Kombolcha that led to the suspension of aid to the region while 4.5 million remain in near-famine conditions.

"We had to pause distributions last week due to insecurity & loss of assets, but hope to resume in the coming days," the UN relief agency [tweeted on Friday](#).

On Thursday, Abiy declared the counteroffensive a success and [returned to Addis](#). Meanwhile, Feltman, having failed to convince either Abiy or the TPLF to adopt a ceasefire, has embarked on a tour of the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Egypt, three outside nations with connections to the conflict, for what critics say is an attempt to erode international support for Abiy.

Abiy's government declared a unilateral ceasefire in June, immediately prior to the TPLF's offensive, but now demands the TPLF withdraw back to Tigray, cease its attacks against the ENDF, and recognize the legitimacy of Abiy's government as its conditions for a cessation of hostilities. So far, the TPLF has rejected those terms, with spokesperson Getachew Reda claiming the recent withdrawal was by their own design and not because the ENDF forced them out.

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

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Julian Assange Suffered Stroke During October Court Appearance, Fiancee Reveals

By - Gaby Arancibia

The WikiLeaks founder has been held behind bars since he was pulled from the Ecuadorian Embassy in late 2019 after having his political asylum status revoked. He had previously remained within the confines of the embassy in London since 2012.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange suffered a "mini" stroke during an October court hearing in the UK, his fiancee Stella Moris has revealed.

Citing Assange's fiancee, the Daily Mail Online [reported](#) on Saturday that the incident took place during a video court appearance from Belmarsh Prison on October 27th. Following the episode, it was reportedly determined that the WikiLeaks publisher was left with a "drooping right eyelid, memory problems and signs of neurological damage".

A mini stroke, medically known as a transient ischemic attack, is caused by a brief blood flow interruption to the brain, spinal cord or retina, according to the Mayo Clinic. While the condition may not cause permanent disabilities, the occurrence does suggest that a more serious episode could be looming.

WikiLeaks issued a [statement](#) via Twitter that doctors had confirmed Assange's stroke on the morning of his latest hearing.

It is believed that Assange's stroke was brought on by the prison conditions that he has been subjected to since his 2019 detainment, after Ecuador revoked his political asylum status. Moris has indicated that Assange has "more or less" recovered after having an MRI scan and being placed on anti-stroke medications.

"Julian is struggling and I fear this mini-stroke could be the precursor to a more major attack", she stated. "It compounds our fears about his ability to survive the longer this long legal battle goes on".

"It urgently needs to be resolved. Look at animals trapped in cages in a zoo. It cuts their life short. That's what's happening to Julian. The never-ending court cases are extremely stressful mentally".

Moris recalled that while Assange had been excused by the judge from the court appearance, he was not permitted to leave the prison video room.

"He had to sit through all this when he should have been excused. He was in a truly terrible state. His eyes were out of synch, his right eyelid would not close, his memory was blurry", she detailed.

Assange's fiancée asserted that Assange was growing increasingly distressed with having to spend another holiday season apart from his family. Assange and Moris have two sons, aged four and two.

Earlier this year, over 60 doctors weighed in on Assange's health, warning in an open letter that his condition has become so dire that he could die behind bars at the Belmarsh facility. The letter was based on eyewitness accounts of his health and his October 21st court appearance.

"There is no time to lose", the letter stated. The physicians who signed the letter hailed from the US, Australia, the UK, Sweden, Poland, Germany, Italy, and Sri Lanka.

The latest revelation comes days after the US won its appeal to have Assange extradited stateside to face espionage charges over WikiLeaks' publication of thousands of military and diplomatic files, including those that exposed US war crimes committed in Iraq. If convicted in the US, Assange would spend the remainder of his life in prison.

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Red Bull's Max Verstappen to Leave Abu Dhabi as 2021 F1 Champ After Stewards Dismiss Protests

By - Gaby Arancibia

Top rivals Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen headed to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix tied in the points with 369.5 each after the British driver managed to best Verstappen at the chaotic inaugural Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.

Dutch driver Max Verstappen was officially declared the winner of the F1 world championship on Sunday after racing stewards dismissed two protests filed earlier by the rival Mercedes camp in the wake of the controversial win.

Shortly after Verstappen was hailed as the 2021 winner, the Mercedes team lodged two protests with the FIA that argued against the race restart and accused the sports association of not

following its own rules (Article 48.12 of the regulations) regarding lapped cars and the usage of safety cars.

"Having considered the various elements made by the parties the stewards determined the following: that Article 15.3 allows the race director to control the use of the safety car, which in our determination includes its deployment and withdrawal," reads the ruling, adding that while Article 48.12 may not have been "applied fully," it was overridden by the stipulations of Article 48.13.

"That notwithstanding, Mercedes' request that the stewards remediate the matter by amending the classification to reflect the positions at the end of the penultimate lap, this is a step that the stewards believe is effectively shortening the race retrospectively, and hence not appropriate." Hamilton lost his chance at adding another world title to his stats after a crash by Canadian driver Nicholas Latifi triggered a safety car period and then led to an FIA decision to allow lapped cars to unlap themselves before a race restart. Exactly five cars were allowed to do so - the same five cars that stood between Hamilton and Verstappen.

Prior to the FIA's final rulings, Verstappen weighed in on the protests and remarked that there was "not much really to say about that" as he referenced the bitter battle between Red Bull and Mercedes for the 2021 title.

"I think it also sums up a little bit this season," he underscored.

Mercedes has since filed for reconsideration to the International Court of Appeal.

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Israel Consulted US Prior to Covert Strikes on Iranian Nuclear Site, Missile Factory - Report
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this year, Iran's Karaj nuclear facility and a missile base were targeted in alleged "hostile" attempts to cripple the country's defences and impede Tehran's nuclear research. Though Tel Aviv has not taken responsibility for the strikes, Israel has declared that the IAF is "determined" and will "not hesitate to act when it is needed".

The Israeli government consulted with US officials prior to carrying out covert airstrikes against an Iranian nuclear facility in Karaj and a missile factory just west of Tehran, [The New York Times reported on Saturday](#), citing individuals briefed on the actions.

The outlet's report was based on discussions with over a dozen US and Israeli officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Israel has not accepted responsibility for either strike. The first referenced attack was the June strike on an Iranian nuclear facility in Karaj. The strike - deemed a "terrorist attack" by Tehran - resulted in the destruction of the International Atomic Energy Agency-monitored site.

The nuclear facility was responsible for the manufacturing of nuclear centrifuges, noted those briefed on the June attack.

The later attack was conducted on a factory that belonged to the Aerospace Industries Organisation's Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group, which handles matters related to Tehran's [liquid-fueled ballistic missile programme](#).

Satellite images produced by ImageSat provide a look at the damage sustained in the September 27th strike.

Officials revealed that in the days leading up to the indirect US-Iranian nuclear talks, it was made clear that Washington and Tel Aviv had different approaches concerning Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

During a "contentious" call last week, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Iran was attempting to blackmail the US into signing a "reckless" agreement that would ultimately allow the country to reach bomb-grade uranium enrichment levels.

Additionally, reports emerged late last month detailing that senior Israeli officials were concerned that the US-Iranian nuclear talks in Vienna would result in Washington accepting a "less-for-less" deal that would allow Tehran to receive partial sanctions relief in exchange for a pause or rollback on its nuclear work.

Bennett pledged to not make the same "mistake" as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, and said that Tel Aviv will maintain freedom of action in the event that Tehran and other world powers draft a new nuclear agreement.

US officials told the NYT that such an offer is not currently on the table.

The American side also expressed reservations regarding the counter-productive nature of covert Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, arguing that such acts allow Tehran to rebuild their facilities with more efficient and modern technology.

Israeli officials, however, have been left with doubt and fear that US officials are having secret discussions with Iran in Vienna, Austria.

On Saturday, Ali Bagheri Kani, Tehran's top negotiator in the ongoing US-Iranian nuclear talks, emphasised that several issues "which require decision-making at the high-level" remain unresolved.

Iran has accused Israel of conducting a number of attacks against its nuclear programme, including the November 2020 assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a top Iranian nuclear scientist.

While Israel has called on the US to tighten sanctions against Iran and implement restrictions on its missile programmes, Tehran has asserted that all sanctions must be lifted and the agreement must not include unrelated missile clauses.

In May 2018, then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the JCPOA agreement - also known as the Iran nuclear deal - and reimposed sanctions that crippled the Iranian economy. Tehran soon after abandoned its commitments under the agreement.

Following the election of US President Joe Biden, negotiations to revisit the agreement kicked off in April but stalled in June, when Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office. Talks more recently saw a pause from the US after American officials concluded that Iran was "not serious" about the ongoing talks in Vienna.

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Ally Anxiety: US May Block Another French Naval Deal After Approving \$9.4 Bln Sale to Greece
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this year, Washington revealed that it would deliver Australia's first nuclear-powered submarine as part of a new trilateral security partnership, despite France's Naval Group having already discussed a \$90 billion submarine contract with Australia. The move prompted Paris to recall its ambassadors in both Canberra and Washington.

The US State Department has reportedly approved a foreign military sale geared toward the modernisation of Greece's Hellenic Navy (HN) MEKO Class frigates and the delivery of four Multi-Mission Surface Combatant(MMSC) ships, according to a Friday release from the Pentagon's Defence Security Cooperation Agency.

[Per the announcement](#), Greece is seeking to pay up to \$6.9 billion to obtain a variety of naval equipment, including at least four MMSC ships; five Vertical Launch Systems; and five COMBATSS-21 Combat Management Systems, the latter an Aegis-derived system marketed as a cheaper alternative for next-generation surface fleets.

Lockheed Martin is the sole principal contractor for the sale of the weapons.

Meanwhile, the other approved sale covers repairs, updates and enhancement of the HN's existing MEKO Class frigates. The modernisation of the fleet is estimated to cost around \$2.5 billion.

Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, BAE Systems, and VSE Corporation are the principal contractors associated with this sale.

"The proposed sale will improve Greece's capability to meet current and future threats by providing an effective combatant deterrent capability to protect maritime interests and infrastructure in support of its strategic location on NATO's southern flank," Washington touted in both Friday announcements.

The US approval of the combined \$9.4 billion in naval weapons sales comes after France's Naval Group announced in September that it would sell three frigates to Greece as part of a tentative \$3.4 billion deal. The agreement included an option for the future procurement of a fourth frigate.

At the time, French military spokesman Hervé Grandjean noted that Paris expected the agreement with Athens to be finalised within "a period of three months".

Though it's unclear whether the newly-approved US deal with Greece will torpedo France's tentative contract, the move could be perceived as Washington slighting its NATO ally for a second time this year.

In September, France's Naval Group expressed "deep disappointment" in Australia's decision to adopt a new nuclear submarine initiative as part of its new AUKUS affiliation. The move nixed a \$90 billion submarine contract with the French defence contractor.

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Jeff Bezos 'Heartbroken' After Tornado Kills at Least Six Amazon Employees in Illinois
By - Evan Craighead

Edwardsville, Illinois' Fire Department has confirmed that at least six people died after an EF-3 tornado inflicted major structural damage to an Amazon fulfillment warehouse, resulting in its partial collapse. A total of 45 individuals were able to flee the building safely.

Jeff Bezos, founder and chairman of Amazon, took to social media on Saturday night to offer his condolences to the families and friends of those killed in the Friday night tragedy.

"The news from Edwardsville is tragic. We're heartbroken over the loss of our teammates there, and our thoughts and prayers are with their families and loved ones", [he tweeted](#), nearly 24 hours after the incident.

Without announcing any specifics, Bezos expressed that Amazon intends to continue supporting the town of Edwardsville, Illinois, which has been home to two Amazon fulfillment centres since 2016.

"We extend our fullest gratitude to all the incredible first responders who have worked so tirelessly at the site", the Amazon founder added.

Bezos' post notably came after netizens called him out for gleefully celebrating his Blue Origin space journey with National Football League (NFL) Hall of Famer Michael Strahan.

"I'm not a Jeff Bezos hater", [tweeted political commentator Ana Navarro](#). "But how the hell does he have time to be at space launch today, but not to call the Gov of Illinois?"

During a Friday evening news conference, Edwardsville Fire Chief James Whiteford confirmed that 45 individuals were able to make it out of the warehouse prior to the collapse. One worker was critically injured and airlifted to a nearby medical facility for treatment.

"The warehouse doesn't have a specific count of how many employees were in the building at the time that the storm hit, so we're unable to determine how many may be missing still", Whiteford told reporters.

He noted that the warehouse's headcount varied throughout the day, as there was a shift change at the time of the tornado.

Authorities do not believe that anyone is alive in the remaining rubble.

"Everyone assumes that they'll be safe at work", said Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker, who was also in attendance at the news conference. "Families say goodbye in a routine fashion when their loved ones go off to their jobs. We don't think that they'll never come home. It's devastating".

Madison County, which includes Edwardsville, intends to request a disaster declaration from both the state and federal governments.

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House COVID Panel Issues Warning After Ex-Trump Aide Navarro Refuses to Comply With Subpoena

By - Evan Craighead

In a December 7th memo, former Trump-era economic policy adviser Peter Navarro informed the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis that he was unable to respond to the

subpoena due to former US President Donald Trump's invocation of executive privilege and a direct order from 45.

US Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-SC) issued a statement on Saturday rejecting Navarro's argument that Trump's "executive order" defence prevented him from complying with a [subpoena issued on November 18th](#).

"[Y]our letter presents no valid basis for refusing to comply with the subpoena", Clyburn declared in quoted statement, referring to Navarro's previous memo. "Your refusal to comply is particularly indefensible given that you disclosed many details about your work in the White House, including details of conversations with the former president about the pandemic response, in your recent book and related press tour".

Clyburn stated that the House Select Subcommittee expects Navarro to appear at his December 15th deposition and produce all requested records and information, as laid out in the subpoena.

During his time in the Trump administration, Navarro served as director of the White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy and assistant to the president.

Navarro emphasised in his memo that Trump specifically told him "to protect executive privilege and not let these unhinged Democrats discredit our great accomplishments".

He argued that, because this was a direct and explicit order, he must remain non-compliant until the scope of the privilege is negotiated.

However, the committee, which has been tasked with investigating possible political interference in the US government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has argued that legal precedents and current rules do not fit Trump's argument of "executive privilege".

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Biden: Outbreak of Deadly Tornadoes 'Likely Largest' in US History as Death Toll Exceeds 70
By - Nevin Brown

US President Joe Biden addressed the nation on Saturday and relayed to reporters that the overnight spell of tornadoes was possibly the "largest" to take place in US history. The commander-in-chief earlier approved an emergency declaration to release aid for those affected.

Biden described the ravaged communities across parts of the southern and central United States as "like a war zone, but worse", He told reporters that the federal government will do everything in its power to help the affected individuals and communities.

The president said that he is receiving regular updates on the situation and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency will provide emergency housing for those affected.

Biden also indicated that he plans to travel to the disaster site at a time when his presence will not impede rescue and disaster response teams.

The US Environmental Protection Agency and other experts will be asked by the administration to review the role climate change is likely to have had in the disastrous event.

Kentucky Gov: Death Toll 'May' Exceed 100 by End of Day

Kentucky's Governor Andy Beshear has labelled his state as "ground zero" of the disaster. Beshear said: "I'm pretty sure that number (killed in Kentucky) is north of 70 ... it may, in fact exceed 100 before the day is done", he added, "the level of devastation is unlike anything I have ever seen".

According to Beshear, a candle factory with 110 people working in it was struck. Thus far, 40 people have been rescued from the rubble. Beshear added that it would be a "miracle" if any more people were rescued.

To give the scope of the damage, in Warren County, Kentucky, 500 homes and 100 businesses were destroyed. The governor has said that currently the most pressing way to help is by donating blood.

Beshear also detailed that one of the tornadoes that touched down in Kentucky travelled for some 200 miles.

Six states reported more than 30 tornadoes late Friday night into Saturday morning. In Illinois, an Amazon warehouse was partially destroyed, trapping over 100 workers, and in Arkansas, a nursing home collapsed.

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker told reporters during a late Saturday conference that six deaths were reported at the Amazon factory. The overall death toll has since exceeded 70.

Of the six states that reported tornadoes, Missouri, Tennessee, and Mississippi appear to have suffered the least amount of damage.

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Tucker Carlson Reveals Son Was Inside Capitol Building During January 6th Attack

By - Nevin Brown

Fox News host Tucker Carlson, on an episode of the "Fourth Watch Podcast", disclosed that his son was at the Capitol building during the deadly January 6th attack.

Carlson was on the podcast talking about his controversial new documentary Patriot Purge, which presents his version of the events of the deadly January 6th Capitol attack.

[Fourth Watch Podcast host](#) Steve Krakauer asked Carlson: "What is it about the focus on Jan. 6, but then the focus on very specific areas of Jan. 6, that made you say, 'We need to give a different look at this'".

Carlson responded: "Well, I hated what happened on Jan. 6, you know one of my kids was actually in the building when it had happened — I was on the phone in real time".

Carlson did not specify which of his adult children was inside the federal building, however, his son Buckley is known to work for US Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN).

Following the disclosure that his son was connected to the January 6th Capitol attack, the Fox News host mentioned that he did not like the event because he prefers "order", and that he "hates broken windows".

Carlson then criticised the way some news outlets covered the event, accusing them of - in his estimation - wrongly calling it "racist" and an "insurrection".

"Anyone who calls January 6th an insurrection is a liar, that's just flat out because there is no evidence, there never has been...so why are they lying? And that became my obsession", the Fox News host added.

He then claimed that the January riot was described as an insurrection because, according to Carlson, it was intended as a plot "to classify an entire political party a terrorist movement". Carlson's stance on the deadly January 6th Capitol attack and his documentary has been seen as controversial - even by employees at the conservative Fox News network, which has seen resignations by several staff writers over the programme.

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New York City FC Bests Portland Timbers in Fight for 2021 MLS Cup
By - Nevin Brown

New York City Football Club beat the Portland Timbers in penalties to win their first-ever MLS Cup.

NYCFC opened the scoring when Valentin Castellanos headed home a goal from a set-piece in the 41st minute.

The 23-year-old Argentine capped off an incredible season by scoring in all three of his playoff appearances.

The Portland Timbers, winners of the 2015 MLS Cup and the runners up in 2018 and 2021, waited until extra time to knot the score at one.

When the clock struck 90 minutes, the Portland Timbers were granted an additional four minutes of extra time and used every last second. Felipe Mora, after a shot was deflected, rocketed the tying goal with seconds remaining in the game.

Over two periods of extra time, the score remained 1-1 and brought on a penalty shootout to decide the MLS Cup Champion.

The Portland Timbers got themselves in a hole they would not be able to recover from after they missed their first two penalties. The final penalty to give NYCFC the Cup was a thunderous strike by Alex Callens.

New York City FC was founded in 2013 and is owned by City Football Group, the holding company that owns Manchester City, and Yankees Global Enterprises, the LLC that owns the professional baseball team the New York Yankees. From January 2016 to November 2019, they were managed by current Crystal Palace manager and former Arsenal star Patrick Viera.

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S-upiter: Team of Scientists Discover Planet 10 Times the Size of Jupiter
By - Nevin Brown

A team of scientists has discovered a gaseous exoplanet ten times the size of Jupiter orbiting a pair of stars, making it one of the largest planets yet identified.

The planet, named b Centauri (AB)b, or b Centauri b, is some 325 light-years from Earth and was [discovered through direct imaging](#). The image was captured by the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope, in Chile's mountainous Atacama Desert.

The gas giant planet orbits a binary star system that combined has six times the mass of the Sun, making it the most massive system around which a planet has yet been identified.

A statement from the observatory said: "Until now, no planets had been spotted around a star more than three times as massive as the Sun".

As the mass of a star increases, so too does heat and high-energy radiation, according to Markus Janson, a co-author of the research and professor of astronomy at Stockholm University.

The large mass and high heat and radiation levels make planet formation far more problematic, which makes the massive planet an important discovery, outside of its sheer size and great distance from its binary star system host.

[Jupiter is approximately 11 times as wide as the Earth](#), which makes the newly-discovered planet over 110 times as large as our own.

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Can Antonie Griezmann Shake His Atletico Madrid Struggles in Time for Madrid Derby?
By - Nevin Brown

Atletico Madrid forward Antonie Griezmann has struggled to reacquaint himself at the club where he became a star. The French international and World Cup champion is aware of his poor start but remains optimistic that he has turned a corner ahead of their showdown with Real Madrid.

Atletico Madrid currently sit in fourth place in La Liga and ten points off of leaders Real Madrid. However, with a showdown with Real on Sunday and a game in hand, Atletico can quickly turn a 10-point deficit into four. If they are to do that, they'll need star player Antonie Griezmann to live up to his potential.

Griezmann's form in La Liga and the Champions League has been night and day. In La Liga, his three goals in 12 appearances are his worst goals-to-game ratio since 2010-11, when he scored seven goals in 37 appearances as a 19-year-old for the newly-promoted Real Sociedad.

In the Champions League, Griezmann's four goals in five appearances equals the total number of goals he scored for Barcelona in the competition across 16 appearances. The Frenchman is aware of his struggles to get back to his old self in Madrid.

[He told ESPN](#): "To be honest it was quite hard for me at first. It was a rhythm I wasn't used to, a new system for me. I had to take that and mix it with my own style of play. Finally I'm getting better, and I'm feeling better on the pitch. To get to the next round of the Champions League was very important for me".

Griezmann's struggle to adjust to Atletico Madrid is hardly a surprise. When Griezmann first left the club in the summer of 2019, the squad was built around an industrious defence and Griezmann's all-around excellence as a playmaker and goalscorer.

In 2018-19, Griezmann scored or assisted on 23 of Atletico Madrid's 55 La Liga goals. The following season - without Griezmann - Atletico dropped to 51 goals and had no one player who could carry their offence.

Atletico learned the hard way that life without an elite forward is no way to compete for titles, and subsequently bolstered their attack with the signing of Uruguayan striker Luis Suarez, a move that saw Atletico score 67 goals and win their first La Liga title since 2013-14.

In a span of two seasons, Atletico reimagined their team, and while many of the same players from Griezmann's first tour of duty remain, the tactics do not. The other reality is that Griezmann is not the same player he once was.

Griezmann's career has featured three distinct phases since he joined Atletico Madrid in 2014-15: The first phase was as an out-and-out goalscorer.

When Griezmann first arrived in Madrid, his playmaking lagged behind his goalscoring. While he was still able to play all across the front three and as a second striker, he wasn't tasked with receiving the ball deep and progressing it towards goal.

The next phase in Griezmann's progression at Atletico was his shift from goalscorer towards goal creator. In his first two seasons, he scored 22 goals in the league, and in the following three he scored 16, 19, and then 15. While his goals scored metric declined, his total goal involvements remained relatively static, as an increase in assists offset the decline in goals.

The third phase of Griezmann's career came at Barcelona. With Lionel Messi entrenched as Barcelona's primary offensive engine, Griezmann's first season with the club was a struggle as he tried to figure out his new role.

He posted the lowest goal contributions of his career but discovered a new way to play.

Griezmann dropped deeper and became more instrumental in buildup play, rather than making the final pass or shot.

Ahead of the Madrid derby, Griezmann must determine what his next phase will be. Will he look to be a goalscorer? Or will he be the offensive engine at Atletico once more? His Champions League play says he's a goalscorer, and his league play says he's an engine.

With Luis Suarez suffering a muscular injury, Griezmann may be forced to be the goalscorer he was when he first came to Atletico. His figuring out how he fits into Atletico's attack could determine if they make a charge to defend the league title, or if they watch as their city rivals claim another trophy.

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Assange's Fiancee Accuses US of Using UK as 'Executioner' in Plot to Kill WikiLeaks Founder
By - Gaby Arancibia

Earlier this year, reports surfaced detailing alleged plots in 2017 to either kidnap or assassinate WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, when he was five years into his political asylum inside the

Ecuadorian embassy in London. At the time, Assange's team hoped the revelation would help their push to not have the publisher extradited to the US.

Stella Moris, the fiancée of Julian Assange, accused the UK on Sunday of playing the "executioner" in a US "plot" to kill the WikiLeaks publisher.

In a [statement](#) to the Daily Mail Online, Moris stressed to the outlet that Assange's "incarceration is having a catastrophic effect on his health".

"The US government plotted to kill him and have found a way to do so - get the UK state to play the role of executioner," she said, adding that "this is a slow-motion Khashoggi playing out in the heart of London".

Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi-born Washington Post columnist who was assassinated in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Sidestepping blame, Riyadh later suggested that the killing was not state-sanctioned, but was carried out by so-called "rogue" agents.

"It is horrifying that Britain has let itself be instrumentalised by a foreign power to bring about travesty", Moris underscored.

Moris' comments came shortly after a group of physicians [again called](#) on the UK government to release Assange from custody so that he can be provided with sufficient medical care.

The group - Doctors for Assange - wrote in a release: "The health of Mr. Assange and the health of our democracy, which depends on a free press and judicial integrity, are both in serious jeopardy. This shameful and deeply damaging case should be dropped now, and Julian Assange granted his long overdue freedom".

The latest revelations surfaced a day after Moris [detailed](#) on Saturday that Assange had suffered a mini stroke on October 27 that had left him with a "drooping right eyelid, memory problems and signs of neurological damage". He has since been placed on anti-stroke medication.

Assange has been in UK custody since late 2019, shortly after Ecuador revoked his political asylum. More recently, London's High Court granted an extradition request filed by the US government, which seeks to hold Assange liable on espionage charges.

The US has long sought Assange's detainment over the publication of files that exposed the many US war crimes committed in Iraq.

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa Tests Positive for COVID-19, Office Reveals
By - Evan Craighead

In February, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was among the first in his country to be vaccinated against COVID-19 when he received the single-shot Johnson & Johnson jab. The country initially set a goal of vaccinating 40 million people before the end of 2021.

Ramaphosa's office announced on Sunday that the South African president is now receiving treatment after testing positive for COVID-19.

The 69-year-old leader is said to be experiencing mild symptoms of the highly-contagious disease.

"The President, who is fully vaccinated, is in self-isolation in Cape Town and has delegated all responsibilities to Deputy President David Mabuza for the next week," [the release detailed](#). Ramphosa recently returned from a week-long series of visits to Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal. The South African president's office noted that he was tested for COVID-19 in all four West African countries.

"President Ramaphosa says his own infection serves as a caution to all people in the country to be vaccinated and remain vigilant against exposure," the office said, noting that "vaccination remains the best protection" against the disease.

Those who may have been in contact with the South African president are being advised to get tested for COVID-19 and watch for the emergence of related symptoms.

South Africa has recently been ravaged by the omicron variant, recording over 18,000 daily COVID-19 cases. Despite the spread of infections, the country's current unemployment crisis complicates the practicality of further lockdown measures.

With more than 90,000 COVID-19-related deaths and over 3.2 million identified cases of the contagious disease, South Africa is regarded as the hardest-hit nation on the African continent.

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Trump-O'Reilly Tour Kicks Off With Empty Seats in Florida
By - Evan Craighead

It was reported earlier this week that the "The History Tour"—a multi-city tour featuring former US President Donald Trump and disgraced Fox News host Bill O'Reilly—had failed to sell out of tickets, which ranged from around \$100 for a basic seat, to \$7,500 for so-called "premium" options.

Despite promises of ["big crowds"](#) and sold-out venues, a ["lucrative"](#) tour headlined by Trump and O'Reilly failed to fill the FLA Live Arena during its Saturday night kick-off event in Sunrise, Florida.

"Many seats remained empty in the cavernous arena," [reported the Sun-Sentinel](#), detailing that the upper level of the arena was closed off and those with tickets were subsequently "upgraded" to the lower bowl of the venue, which seats an estimated 20,000.

The crowd could be overheard belting out the anti-Biden, "Let's Go Brandon" chant as the event started on Saturday. Per the Sun-Sentinel, members of the Proud Boys, a far-right, neo-fascist organization, were in attendance.

During his time on stage, Trump repeated unfounded conspiracy theories about the results of the 2020 US presidential election and slammed US President Joe Biden's administration for the current state of the nation.

Trump also touted to his supporters that, unlike the current US president, he was able to get along with so-called "tyrants" such as Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

"The ones I did the best with were the tyrants," he said. "For whatever reason, I got along great with Putin, I got along great with President Xi of China. I got along with Kim Jong Un of North Korea ... and isn't that good? Isn't that better than having a nuclear war?"

Although some thousands were in attendance, lackluster ticket sales is a sore spot for both Trump and O'Reilly.

In July it was reported that the former Fox News host had threatened to [sue Politico's Daniel Lippman](#) after the latter published an article detailing low sales for the event, although tickets had been available for a month.

"Nobody has sold tickets this fast at this price, and VIPs are sold out at three of the four venues," O'Reilly declared in an interview with Lippman.

"You put one word in there that's not true, I'll sue your ass off, and you can quote me on that," added the former Fox News Host.

A Trump spokesperson, Liz Harrington, also pushed back on the reporting, arguing at the time that the tour had already grossed over \$5 million in ticket sales.

"Come December, the sold out shows will be a memorable night for all," she asserted.

With one appearance complete, the Trump-O'Reilly tour is slated to continue in Orlando, Florida, on Sunday and in Houston and Dallas, Texas, next weekend.

"We had a great time in Sunrise, FL yesterday. Very exciting, informative, and fun. We will be back in the area for a major rally in the not too distant future. See you then!" Trump said in a quoted statement.

Without providing a date, Trump also noted that he would soon hold a "major rally" for Florida-based supporters.

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Johnson Urges Brits to Get COVID Booster Jabs Ahead of Omicron 'Tidal Wave'

By - Evan Craighead

As of Sunday, at least 3,137 cases of the Omicron COVID-19 variant have been identified in the UK, amounting to over 1,000 additional cases since last Saturday. The variant's rapid spread has resulted in British health officials raising the UK COVID Alert Level from "Level 3" to "Level 4".

In a pre-recorded address to the UK public, Prime Minister Boris Johnson unveiled a new "Omicron Emergency Boost" initiative that seeks to accelerate the availability of COVID-19 vaccine booster shots to Brits.

Under the vaccination campaign, those in England aged 18 years and over will be eligible to receive a booster dose before the year end.

"No one should be in any doubt: there is a tidal wave of Omicron coming", the UK prime minister declared, noting that two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine "are simply not enough to give you the level of protection we all need".

"Do not make the mistake of thinking Omicron can't hurt you; can't make you and your loved ones seriously ill", Johnson added.

Those aged 30 years and older will be able to begin booking a booster shot appointment on Monday, [according to the National Health Service \(NHS\)](#). Younger adults will be eligible to book an appointment beginning Wednesday.

An early analysis [published on Friday by the UK Health Security Agency](#) suggested that the two-dose vaccines offered by AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech are less effective in combating the Omicron COVID-19 variant, when compared to the Delta variant.

The analysis — based on 581 people confirmed to have been infected with the omicron variant — found that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine booster provided around 70% protection for those who initially received the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, and about 75% protection for those who originally received the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

The UK prime minister's Sunday address came shortly after NHS England National Medical Director Stephen Powis and several chief UK health officials recommended the country increase its COVID-19 alert level.

"Transmission of COVID-19 is already high in the community, mainly still driven by Delta, but the emergence of Omicron adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and healthcare services", [read the joint release](#).

Health experts noted that a reduction in vaccine protection and an increased transmissibility of the Omicron COVID-19 variant are poised to increase pressure on an already-strained NHS.

"It is extremely important that if you are eligible, you get your COVID vaccination now - whether this be your first, second or booster dose", officials urged.

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Gunfire Erupts in Los Angeles Near Tribute to Legendary Mexican Singer Vicente Fernandez
By - Evan Craighead

Vicente "Chente" Fernández Gómez, popularly known as "El Rey de la Música Ranchera", passed away on Sunday, around 6:15 a.m. local time in the Western Mexican state of Jalisco. Several music industry heavyweights have paid tribute to the late 81-year-old singer, including Ricky Martin, Pitbull, Maluma, and Gloria Estefan.

Authorities in Los Angeles, California, are investigating reports of a Sunday night shooting that reportedly occurred directly across from the Hollywood Walk of Fame star belonging to Vicente Fernández.

[According to NBC Los Angeles](#), fans of the iconic Mexican singer were mourning his death when at least four to five gunshots rang out from the window of a nearby apartment building around 7:00 p.m. local time.

The alleged gunfire can be overheard in eyewitness video since uploaded to social media.

No injuries have been reported, and authorities have since cleared the scene, ABC7's Leanne Suter reported.

No suspect has been detained by authorities.

The incident comes as fans across the world mourn the loss of the Grammy-award-winning king of ranchera music.

Many highlighted that Fernández's passing coincides with the December 12th birth of Our Lady of Guadalupe — a day that commemorates the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego, an indigenous Mexican, near Mexico City in 1531.

Fernández — who was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1998, and sold more than 50 million records during his lifespan — is survived by his wife, María del Refugio Abarca Villasenor, their three sons, Vicente Jr., Gerardo, Alejandro, and a daughter, Alejandra.

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'Last Chance': UK Foreign Secretary Warns Time is Running Out for Iran Amid Nuclear Deal Talks

By - Nevin Brown

The United Kingdom, United States, and Germany have expressed fear that the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will fail to garner a serious resolution from Iran. The three western allies believe time is running out to come to an agreement, even as the rhetoric on both sides gets turned up.

UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss warned on Sunday that Iran may only have one final opportunity to rejoin the historic 2015 nuclear deal amid the latest spike in tensions between regional powers.

Negotiations over a new JCPOA nuclear deal have been taking place in Vienna since late last month after a five-month pause while Iran held elections and saw the rise of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

[Truss told Reuters](#), "This is the last chance for Iran to come to the negotiating table with a serious resolution to this issue, which has to be agreeing to the terms of the JCPOA." She added, "This is their last chance and it is vital that they do so. We will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon."

On Saturday, Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, voiced a similar sentiment.

[She told reporters](#), "It has shown in the last days that we do not have any progress... due to the offer of the Iranian government, negotiations have been thrown back six months."

"Time is running out," she noted.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is also concerned that negotiations will end without a result. In the wake of a US delegation negotiating with Iran through European allies, Blinken said, "I have to tell you, recent moves, recent rhetoric, don't give us a lot of cause for optimism."

The pessimism comes only a week after US Special Envoy for Iran Robert [Malley told Al Jazeera](#) that officials were "fully committed to a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA."

"We think there's still time to do it if Iran comes back and says they're prepared to roll up their sleeves and do it, too," he underscored at the time.

Earlier this month, Blinken [revealed](#) that the latest round of talks in Vienna were halted after negotiators determined that Iran was not "serious about doing what's necessary to return to

compliance." Iran later [responded](#) to the remarks by blaming the setback on the US' refusal to lift restrictive sanctions.

The JCPOA was initially negotiated over the course of 20 months - from 2013 through 2015, with the 15-year deal granting expanded oversight to outside entities over Iran's nuclear program. The agreement allowed Iran to slowly develop a nuclear infrastructure.

In 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew the United States from the agreement after accusing Iran of breaching restrictions of the agreement. In the wake of the sudden withdrawal, Iran subsequently discarded its nuclear program constraints as the US began a "maximum pressure" campaign that saw a slew of sanctions imposed.

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'Queen of the Vampires': Genre-Defining Author Anne Rice Dies From Stroke at 80
By - Nevin Brown

Anne Rice, one of the best-selling authors of all time, reimagined the vampire genre. Her debut novel "Interview with a Vampire" became an international best-seller and catapulted her to literary stardom.

Famed author Anne Rice has died after suffering from complications related to a stroke, her son Christopher Rice [announced](#) on Sunday. She was 80.

"As my mother, her support for me was unconditional — she taught me to embrace my dreams, reject conformity and challenge the dark voices of fear and self-doubt," Christopher wrote. "As a writer, she taught me to defy genre boundaries and surrender to my obsessive passions."

"In her final hours, I sat beside her hospital bed in awe of her accomplishments and her courage, awash in memories of a life that took us from the fog laced hills of the San Francisco Bay Area to the magical streets of New Orleans to the twinkling vistas of Southern California." Born Howard Allen Frances O'Brien in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1941, Rice grew up in a Roman Catholic family. Her father was a World War II veteran, worked for the postal service and had one book published posthumously. Rice's mother struggled with alcoholism and ultimately died from it when Rice was 15 years old.

Rice moved to North Texas in her late teens before settling permanently in San Francisco in 1962. Over the next decade, she studied at San Francisco State University, earning a B.A. in political science and an M.A. in creative writing.

In 1970, tragedy struck Rice when her daughter Michele was diagnosed with granulocytic leukemia. Two years later, she died at the age of five. Her daughter would inspire the Claudia character in her debut novel.

Rice's debut novel, Interview with a Vampire, released in 1976, shot her to literary stardom and kickstarted her immensely popular Vampire Chronicles. Over the next 40 years, Rice wrote twelve more novels for the series, writing an additional 25 books alongside the immensely popular chronicles. All told, she sold over 150 million books, making her one of the highest-grossing authors of all time.

Rice's novels Interview with a Vampire, Queen of the Damned, Exit to Eden, and Christ the Lord were adapted into major motion pictures.

Rice's Vampire Chronicles, centered on Lestat de Lioncourt, created a modern brooding 'misunderstood-vampire' genre. Series such as "True Blood" and "Twilight" are influenced by Rice's works.

Following the news of Rice's death, there was an outpouring of support on social media. Many of her novels center on outcasts and struck a chord with various groups of readers. Her status as the mother of the modern vampire novel reportedly made her an inspiration for an entire generation of artists.

Rice will be interred at the family mausoleum in New Orleans in a private ceremony. The family intends to hold a public ceremony in 2022 to celebrate the author's life.

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UK Police Find Body in South London Park Connected to Disappearance of Petra Srncova
By - Nevin Brown

The Metropolitan Police Service in London, England, have identified a body that is believed to be the missing nurse assistant, Petra Srncova.

Police were called to the scene at Brunswick Park, SE5, a park in Camberwell, south London, on Sunday, December 12, at 11:40 and according to reports remain at the scene. Srncova lived in Camberwell.

Metropolitan Police have not confirmed if the body is that of is Petra Srncova, but released a statement saying, "At this early stage, the woman's death is being treated as unexplained. While formal identification awaits, Petra's family have been informed of this development."

Petra was reported missing by a colleague on December 3rd and was last seen on November 28 at 10:22 p.m.

On Sunday, a man who was arrested in connection with her disappearance was released on bail.

Over the previous week, police had become increasingly concerned over Srncova's whereabouts. It has been reported that her family in the Czech Republic had not heard from her. Harriet Harman, her constituency MP, pleaded to the public to come forward if they had any information.

Srncova is a senior nurse assistant at Evelina London children's hospital.

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Pelosi Reportedly Intends to Lead House Democrats Through 2022 Midterm Election, Possibly Longer

By - Nevin Brown

US Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has served as the leader of House Democrats since 2003, having served twice as the House majority and the minority leader. Pelosi will turn 82 in March and shows no indication that she's ready to step down.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi reportedly plans to run for re-election in California's 12th district next year, likely securing an 18th term in office, [sources familiar with Pelosi's thinking](#) revealed late Sunday. However, Pelosi's plans following the 2022 midterms are of much greater concern to House Democrats.

In November 2020, [Pelosi insinuated](#) that this would be her final term as speaker. Pelosi has yet to definitively announce her intentions, but those close to her believe that she will consider trying to secure another go-round as the House Democratic leader.

Her presence has long agitated her colleagues across the aisle, but in recent years, as the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has grown in strength and confidence, she has drawn the ire of her own party.

US Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), a prospective successor to Pelosi, described the difficulty in leading the party, noting that "Democrats are not a cult. We're a coalition".

Jeffries' implication that Democrats represent a wide variety of sometimes competing interests highlights the difficult situation the party finds itself in.

US Rep. Kathleen Rice (D-NY) expressed her frustration with the party's lack of overall unity, saying: "We can keep saying our diversity is our power - but guess what? I got more s**t from my fellow Democratic colleagues over the past months than I did from the Republicans".

She went so far as to say: "We're eating our own at a time when we should be doing everything we can to hold onto our slim majority. Progressives need to remember that Republicans are the ones who want to destroy our democracy, not moderates in their own caucus".

The idea of House Democrats being led by someone other than Pelosi causes both excitement and apprehension, according to some. A number of Democrats feel like US Rep. Kurt Schrader (D-OR), who described Pelosi as being someone who "says a lot of things and doesn't seem to be able to deliver".

House Democrats that lean toward more progressive ideas or believe that Pelosi is the consummate politician - saying one thing and doing another - appear ready and willing to move on from her leadership.

Yet, there are those in the Democratic Party that believe her tact and political savvy will be necessary in the wake of a presumed red wave. US Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-MA) described Pelosi glowingly as a "trauma surgeon for these bills, There were so many times -- sometimes multiple times a day -- when a bill was dead and she was able to put the paddles on and revive it".

Pelosi has been at the forefront of American politics for the past two decades. During her tenure as speaker of the House, she has helped pass massive pieces of legislation, from the Affordable Care Act to Dodd-Frank. In 2021 alone, she helped pass an enormous infrastructure bill and the Build Back Better Act in the House.

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US, Uzbekistan Discuss Regional Logistics Hub for Aid to Afghanistan - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu have discussed Tashkent's initiative to establish a regional logistics hub under United Nations auspices to provide urgent humanitarian aid to Afghans, according to a joint statement published by the State Department on Monday.

The joint statement was issued after the first meeting of the US-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue in Tashkent earlier in the day.

"The Foreign Minister and Assistant Secretary Lu expressed the commitment of Uzbekistan and the United States to continue humanitarian support directly to the Afghan people," the joint statement said. "The United States expressed appreciation for the services made available to humanitarian actors at the Termez Cargo Center and welcomed Uzbekistan's initiative to create a regional logistics hub in Termez under the auspices of the United Nations to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan."

The two countries expressed readiness to boost regional engagement through the C5+1 and the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, the joint statement said.

"The delegations reaffirmed the importance of, and support for, Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization and exchanged views on opportunities to increase US private sector trade and investment in Uzbekistan. The sides stressed the importance of strengthening security cooperation by deepening ties between defense departments, law enforcement agencies, and border and customs authorities," the joint statement said.

Both countries also noted the 2021 UN General Assembly resolution on the Aral Sea region and highlighted their pledges to reduce national greenhouse gas emissions in line with the goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the joint statement said.

"The delegations also affirmed their shared interest in strengthening people-to-people ties through academic and research exchanges, and opportunities for vocational, English-language, and STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] programming," it added.

The United States and Uzbekistan will continue to exchange views on topical issues via expert-level working groups, according to the statement.

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US Extradites 2 Guatemalan Cartel Bosses on Global Drug Trade Charges – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) – The US government has extradited two leaders of the Lorenzana drug cartel from Guatemala on charges of participating in international narcotics smuggling, the Department of Justice announced on Monday.

"Guatemalan nationals Haroldo Geremias Lorenzana-Cordon, also known as Chuci and Chuchy, and Marta Julia Lorenzana-Cordon, also known as Julie, Yulie, Julia and Morena were extradited from Guatemala to the United States on December 10 to face international drug trafficking charges," the release said.

The defendants are leaders of the Lorenzana drug trafficking organization, one of the largest and most influential drug cartels in Guatemala which transports tonnage quantities of cocaine from Colombia into Guatemala, the Justice Department explained.

"According to court documents, between 1996 and 2019, the organization coordinated the transportation, storage and distribution of multi-ton quantities of cocaine from Colombia to Central America and Mexico, for eventual distribution into the United States," the release said. The suspects' brothers Eliu Elixander Lorenzana-Cordon and Waldemar Lorenzana-Cordon were convicted on international drug trade charges in Washington in 2019 and received life sentences. Their father Waldemar Lorenzana-Lima pleaded guilty to similar charges in 2014 and received a 23 year sentence, it said.

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At Least 64 People Dead in Kentucky Tornadoes, Number Likely to Increase - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - At least 64 people have been confirmed dead as a result of four tornadoes that hit the US state of Kentucky last weekend and another 105 remain unaccounted for, Governor Andy Beshear said on Monday.

"As of this morning, our best count for confirmed deaths are 64 Kentuckians," Beshear said at a press briefing.

The governor pointed out that the number of casualties as a result of the natural disaster are "fluid" and will undoubtedly increase.

"We believe it will certainly be above 70, maybe even 80. It may be a week or even more before we have a final count," he said.

Beshear noted that the authorities continue to search for missing persons.

"Currently we believe there are at least 105 Kentuckians that are unaccounted for," he said.

On Sunday, the White House said President Joe Biden had approved a major disaster declaration for Kentucky.

Two tornado-related deaths have been reported in the state of Arkansas, four in Tennessee and two in Missouri. In Illinois, six people died in a partial collapse of an Amazon warehouse in the city of Edwardsville.

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Bell Textron to Build Flight Training Devices for Czech Helicopter Fleet - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Bell Textron has signed a contract to build flight training devices for the Czech Republic's fleet of US-manufactured air force helicopters, the US aerospace manufacturer said in a press release on Monday.

"Bell Textron ... has signed a contract with the US government to build the AH-1Z Flight Training Device (FTD) for the Czech Republic's new helicopter fleet," the release said. "The delivery of training devices will play a key role integrating new H-1 helicopters into the Czech Air Force." The FTD will be used for simulation and training purposes for prospective pilots of the combined AH-1Z and UH-1Y fleet, the release said, adding that Bell Textron anticipates the production and delivery of the aircraft will be complete by 2023.

"Bell selected FlightSafety International and VR Group as key subcontractors. FlightSafety International ... will provide hardware and software products for simulation training, including the visual display system and control loading system," the release said.

Production for the Czech Republic's new H-1 helicopter fleet is proceeding on schedule, with Bell's Amarillo Assembly Center recently receiving the first UH-1Y cabin for the Czech fleet, according to the release.

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Biden Admin. Unveils Plan to Build 500,000 Electric Vehicle Charging Stations- White House

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has unveiled a plan to build a charging network of about 500,000 stations for electric vehicles (EV) across the United States, the White House said on Monday.

"Today, the Biden-Harris-Administration is releasing an EV Charging Action Plan to outline steps federal agencies are taking to support developing and deploying chargers in American communities across the country," the White House said in a press release. "The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law ... will put us on the path to a convenient and equitable network of 500,000 chargers and make EVs accessible to all Americans for both local and long-distance trips." The White House explained that the Biden administration will spend \$5 billion to build the charging network for both local and long-distance trips.

The US departments of Energy and Transportation will sign a memorandum on Tuesday to establish a Joint Office of Energy and Transportation that will focus on implementing the EV charging network and will serve as a "one-stop-shop" for EV related resources, the release said. The Department of Transportation will publish no later than February 11 guidance for US states and cities to strategically deploy EV charging stations along the national highway system, the release added.

In August, US President Joe Biden signed a decree setting the goal of bringing the share of electric vehicles to half of all passenger vehicles sold in the United States by 2030.

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US Extradites Cameroon Tax Fraud Fugitive to Serve 80 Years in Jail - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US government has extradited a resident of the state of Texas from Cameroon to serve an 80-year jail sentence for tax fraud, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"In the first extradition from Cameroon to the United States, a Texas man was extradited to Houston on Friday to serve an 80-year prison sentence he received ... four years ago after he pleaded guilty in two separate cases to conspiracy, health care fraud, money laundering, and tax offenses," the Justice Department said in a release.

According to court documents, in November 2016, Ebong Aloysius Tilong, 57, of Sugar Land, Texas, and his wife, Marie Neba, went to trial on the conspiracy, health care fraud, and money laundering charges, the release said.

"The trial evidence and court documents showed that between 2006 and 2015, Tilong, Neba, and their co-conspirators used Tilong and Neba's company, Fiango Home Healthcare to corruptly obtain more than \$13 million by submitting false and fraudulent claims to Medicare for home health care services," the release added.

The trial evidence also showed that Tilong and Neba paid illegal kickbacks to patient recruiters to refer patients to Fiango, and that Tilong falsified and directed others to falsify medical records to make it appear as though Fiango's patients met the Medicare qualifications for home health care, according to the release.

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US Focusing on Understand Military Environment at Russia-Ukraine Border - General

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US armed forces deployed in Europe are trying to better understand the military environment at the border between Russia and Ukraine, US Air Forces in Europe Commander Gen. Jeffrey Harrigan said on Monday.

"We are focused on understanding the environment," Harrigan said during a virtual discussion. The general pointed out that the US military is working on any possible options, but wants to allow diplomacy work.

"Certainly we spent a lot of time thinking about that." Harrigan said with respect to the troops state of readiness. "Our focus internally has really been to make sure that we are ready."

The United States and its allies have accused Russia of a troop buildup at the country's border with Ukraine as a possible preparation for an invasion.

The Russian government has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying NATO's military activity near the Russian borders poses a threat to the country's own security and it reserves the right to move its troops on its sovereign territory.

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US Supreme Court Denies Johnson & Johnson Attempt to Appeal Talc Cancer Risk Lawsuit

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Monday denied Johnson & Johnson's attempt to appeal a Mississippi Supreme Court decision to allow a lawsuit to move forward against the company over an alleged failure to inform consumers about the increased risk of ovarian cancer after using its talc-based products.

The justices denied the company's writ of certiorari to appeal the case in an order list published Monday, meaning that the Mississippi Supreme Court's decision to allow the lawsuit to move forward remains.

Justices Samuel Alito and Brett Kavanaugh both took no part in the consideration or decision of the company's writ of certiorari – a move often made by justices due to personal ties or investment in the involved parties.

The US Supreme Court in June rejected an appeal by the company to reverse an unfavorable ruling in a similar lawsuit over allegations that their talc powder products contained asbestos that could cause ovarian cancer in women.

Though the company still disputes that their talc-based products cause cancer, it stopped using talc in baby powder in the US and Canada since May last year, saying that the lack of demand was fueled by misinformation around the safety of the product and a constant barrage of litigation advertising.

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Trump Says Netanyahu Never Sought Peace With Palestinians

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu never genuinely sought peace with the Palestinians, ex-US President Donald Trump said in an interview.

"I don't think Bibi [Netanyahu] ever wanted to make peace," Trump told Axios correspondent Barak Ravid in an April interview for the latter's book "Trump's Peace: The Abraham Accords and the Reshaping of the Middle East."

Netanyahu "just tapped us along," the former American president added.

In early 2020, alongside Netanyahu, Trump unveiled his peace proposal to reconcile Israel and Palestine. The deal called for creating a demilitarized Palestinian state, with Israel retaining control over West Bank settlements and keeping Jerusalem as its undivided capital. However, the agreement was met with outrage from the Palestinians, who have the return of the West Bank territories and eastern Jerusalem as the cornerstone of their foreign policy.

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Blinken Discusses COVID-19, Climate Crisis With Indonesian President - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Indonesian President Joko Widodo discussed strategic partnership, COVID-19 and the climate crisis during a meeting in Jakarta on Monday, the State Department said.

"Secretary Blinken and President Jokowi emphasized the importance of the U.S.-Indonesia Strategic Partnership and discussed ways to strengthen the bilateral relationship," spokesman Ned Price said. "They also discussed bilateral and regional cooperation to address challenges to democracy and human rights, as well as the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic." Blinken arrived in Indonesia on Monday morning for a two-day visit to discuss bilateral relations and the pandemic response, Price said earlier in the day. The talks will also focus on the importance of an open and free Indo-Pacific region.

After Jakarta, the top American diplomat will head to Malaysia and Thailand.

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Pfizer Says Will Acquire Arena Pharmaceuticals for \$6.7Bln

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Pfizer said on Monday it will acquire American biotech company Arena Pharmaceuticals for \$6.7 billion.

"Pfizer Inc. (NYSE: PFE) and Arena Pharmaceuticals, Inc. (Nasdaq: ARNA) today announced that the companies have entered into a definitive agreement under which Pfizer will acquire Arena, a clinical stage company developing innovative potential therapies for the treatment of several immuno-inflammatory diseases," the release said.

Pfizer will acquire all outstanding shares of Arena for \$100 per share in an all-cash transaction for approximately \$6.7 billion.

The boards of directors of both pharmaceuticals have unanimously approved the transaction.

Arena's portfolio comprises promising development-stage therapeutic candidates in gastroenterology, dermatology, and cardiology, according to the release.

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Blinken Says Met With UK Counterpart to Discuss Coordination on Deterring Russia

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he met with UK counterpart Liz Truss on plans to deter Russia.

"Had a productive conversation with UK Foreign Secretary @TrussLiz on the importance of a coordinated response to counter Russian aggression on its border with Ukraine, working together on the global COVID-19 response, and other shared challenges," Blinken said in a tweet Friday.

Russia has repeatedly said it has a right to move troops within its own borders.

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US Horn of Africa Envoy Heads to UAE, Turkey for Talks With Senior Officials - State Dept. WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will be in the United Arab Emirates and Turkey the coming days for talks with senior government officials from the two countries, the State Department said in a press release.

"US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will travel to the United Arab Emirates and Turkey from December 10 to 15," the release said on Friday.

Feltman will meet with senior officials from the UAE and Turkey to discuss ways to stabilize the Horn of Africa.

Feltman is expected to discuss the conflict in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have been locked in conflict over control of the north of the country since November 2020, when the central authorities accused the Tigray rebels of attacking a military base. The Ethiopian government launched an operation in Tigray with the support of neighboring Eritrea.

In the spring of 2021, Ethiopian authorities announced the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray. In November, Ethiopia declared a six-month state of emergency as the TPLF forces together with eight other factions, some of which are considered terrorist by Addis Ababa, advanced toward the Ethiopian capital.

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UPDATE - Texas Abortion Providers Can Sue Over State Law, Can Not Stop Enforcement - Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Abortion providers in Texas can sue in connection with the state's abortion law that criminalizes the procedure after six weeks of pregnancy when a heart beat is detected, but can not stop the law's enforcement, the US Supreme Court ruled.

"A pre-enforcement challenge under the Federal Constitution to Texas Senate Bill 8 - the Texas Heartbeat Act - may proceed past the motion to dismiss stage against certain of the named defendants but not others; the order of the District Court is affirmed in part and reversed in part, and the case is remanded," the Supreme Court said on Friday.

The Supreme Court did not decide in the ruling whether the Texas law is unconstitutional. However, the court's decision will allow the case to be re-heard in lower courts, where the law may still be successfully challenged.

In addition, the Supreme Court's decision also narrows the number of possible defendants in future suits against the law.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a similar case against an abortion law in the state of Mississippi that bans the procedure starting at 15 weeks of pregnancy. The Supreme Court has yet to rule on the case.

Biden in a statement later in the day said he was "very concerned" by the Supreme Court's decision in light of the significant consequences that law has for women and the rule of law.

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CDC Chief Says Does Not Suspect US Will Be on Same Omicron Time Horizon as UK

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said the United States is unlikely to be on the same time horizon as the United Kingdom with respect to the omicron variant.

UK Health Secretary Sajid Javid on Thursday said that the United Kingdom could see 1 million cases of the Omicron variant by the end of the month, given its rapid spread.

"We will continue to follow the world seeing data from other countries, UK and South Africa, that is demonstrating a really fast-doubling time, sometimes in two or three days. I do not suspect we will be on the same time horizon as the UK," Walensky said during a virtual press briefing on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, the CDC in a report said, during the period from December 1-8, 22 US states reported at least one COVID-19 case attributed to the Omicron variant.

She reassured the audience that, based on research, the US has less than 0.1 percent of Omicron cases.

The CDC director also encouraged people to maintain safety measures during the upcoming holiday season to protect themselves against the novel coronavirus.

Walensky also said the seven-day average of covid cases overall has jumped 37% and deaths by 28% over the prior week.

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Yellen Conveys Interest to Work With Germany to Impose 'Severe Costs' on Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen discussed by telephone with the new German Finance Minister Christian Lindner the United States' interest to

cooperate with Germany on contingency plans to impose severe costs on Russia's economy should military escalation occur against Ukraine, the Treasury Department said.

"Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen spoke with German Finance Minister Christian Lindner... Secretary Yellen also reiterated President Biden's concern over Russia's escalation of forces surrounding Ukraine, and expressed her interest in partnering with Germany on contingencies that could be rapidly deployed to impose severe costs on Russia's economy," the Treasury Department said in a press release on Friday.

The United States is reportedly pressing Germany to threaten to halt the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Russia takes military action against Ukraine.

President Joe Biden was also expected to discuss Nord Stream 2 matters with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during their call earlier on Friday, according to US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland.

Yellen and Lindner also discussed priorities for the G7 summit next year, which will be hosted by Germany, the release said.

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Afghan Reconstruction Fund Donors Agree to Transfer \$280Mln to UNICEF, WFP - World Bank

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund donors today agreed to provide \$280 million to UNICEF and the World Food Program by the end of December to address humanitarian issues, the World Bank said.

"The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) donors today decided to transfer out \$280 million in ARTF funds by the end of December 2021 to UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP)," the World Bank said in a press release on Friday.

The release said UNICEF will receive \$100 million to provide essential health services in Afghanistan, and WFP will receive \$180 million to bolster up food security and nutrition operations in the country.

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US Announces First Sale of 18Mln Barrels From Strategic Oil Reserve to Reduce Pump Prices

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Energy Department announced the first sale of 18 million barrels of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) aimed at reducing pump prices of fuel that had hit seven-year highs and raised inflation woes.

"Exchanges and sales from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve are important tools we are using to address oil supply disruptions as the world recovers from a once-in-a-century pandemic," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a statement on Friday. "The President rightly

believes Americans deserve relief now and has authorized the use of the SPR to respond to market imbalances and reduce costs for consumers."

According to the Energy Department, crude from SPR will be sold and later exchanged with US refiners to refill the strategic reserve, the statement said. Up to 32 million barrels will be released through the so-called exchange-and-sale approach, it also said. The first such exchange-and-sale, for 4.8 million barrels, will be with ExxonMobil, it added.

President Joe Biden announced last month that the United States will release 50 million barrels from the SPR from mid-December onward, under a coordinated action with other major oil consuming countries, to tamp down fuel prices that were retailing at seven-year highs in October.

Pump prices had come down lately, retailing at an average of \$3.33 per gallon this week, according to the American Automobile Association. Biden said on Thursday that he expected further reductions in coming weeks and months as his administration made more use of the SPR.

Biden has been criticized for using the nation's oil reserves to fight inflation when such supplies are typically used to fill shortages in times of crisis in oil supply. Inflation in the United States has grown by its fastest pace in almost 40 years, the Consumer Price Index indicated, as the economy rebounded from the 2020 crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic measures.

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

The Energy Information Administration said last month that based on the scheduled releases of the SPR, the United States' crude reserves could be halved by 2032, bringing it to the lowest level since March 1983.

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Ex-NFL Player Sentenced to 3 Years for COVID-19 Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A former National Football League (NFL) player was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison for fraudulently obtaining over \$1.2 million through a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan, the US Justice Department said in a press release. "According to court documents, Joshua J. Bellamy, 32, of St. Petersburg, Florida, a former NFL player, pleaded guilty on June 9 in the Southern District of Florida to conspiracy to commit wire fraud," the release said on Friday.

Bellamy also sought PPP loans on behalf of his family members and close associates and admitted that he paid more than \$311,000 to an alleged co-conspirator, James Stote, as a kickback for his assistance in preparing and submitting the fraudulent loan application, the release said.

"As part of the fraud scheme, Bellamy obtained a PPP loan of \$1,246,565 for his company, Drip Entertainment using falsified documents and false information. Bellamy admitted to using the PPP loan proceeds on personal items, such as jewelry, and a stay at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino," the release added.

In addition to his prison sentence, Bellamy was ordered to serve three years of supervised release and pay \$1,246,565 in restitution and \$1,246,565 in forfeiture, according to the release. **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

Yellen Conveys Interest to Work With Germany to Impose 'Severe Costs' on Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen in a telephone call with the new German Finance Minister Christian Lindner discussed the United States' interest to cooperate with Germany on contingency plans to impose severe costs on Russia's economy should military escalation occur against Ukraine, the Department of Treasury said. "Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen spoke with German Finance Minister Christian Lindner... Secretary Yellen also reiterated President Biden's concern over Russia's escalation of forces surrounding Ukraine, and expressed her interest in partnering with Germany on contingencies that could be rapidly deployed to impose severe costs on Russia's economy," the Treasury Department said in a press release on Friday.

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Vice President Harris Swears in Jeff Flake as New US Ambassador to Turkey

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris swore in former Arizona Republican Senator Jeff Flake as a new US ambassador to Turkey.

"Congratulations, Mr. Ambassador," Harris said of Friday during the ceremony after Flake took an oath.

The White House reminded reporters that Flake technically was made an ambassador several days ago, but the official ceremony took place on Friday evening.

In July, President Joe Biden nominated Flake to serve as the next US ambassador to Turkey. Flake previously was a Senator from 2013 to 2019 and a Congressman from 2001 to 2013, during which time he served on the foreign relations committees for both chambers of Congress.

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S&P 500 in Record Close, Propelling US Stocks to Biggest Week Since January

NEW YORK, December 10 (Sputnik) - Wall Street had its biggest weekly rally since January, with the key S&P 500 index closing at a record high, as US stocks rebounded forcefully from losses of recent weeks triggered by fears about the coronavirus Omicron variant.

The equity market comeback was particularly remarkable considering that it occurred on the same day that the Labor Department reported that US consumer prices were up their most since 1982, reinforcing worries that the Federal Reserve might have to raise interest rates by the first quarter of next year itself instead of later in 2022.

"Despite today's rebound, consumer sentiment still looks vulnerable and will likely struggle if these widespread price increases continue," Ed Moya, head of the US research at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The S&P 500, an index of the top 500 stocks, rose 44 points, or 0.9%, for a record high close of 4,711. The S&P's all-time high for a session was 4,744, a level attained in November. For the week, the index gained 3.8%, its most for a week since January.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which contains mostly industrial stocks, finished up 216 points, or 0.6%, at 35,971. For the week, the Dow rose 4%.

The Nasdaq Composite index, that groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, gained 113 points, or 0.7%, to settle at 15,630.60. The Nasdaq gained 3.6% for the week.

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Biden Says Spoke With German Chancellor Scholz About Russian Buildup Near Ukraine (Updates with details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he had a telephone call with the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to discuss Russia's military activity near Ukraine's border.

"Today, I spoke with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to congratulate him on his appointment," Biden wrote via Twitter on Friday. "I look forward to working closely together on the full range of global challenges, including transatlantic efforts to address Russia's destabilizing military buildup along Ukraine's border."

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin explained to Biden Russia's "red lines" over the further advance of NATO into Eastern Europe and the deployment of offensive weapons in Ukraine. Putin also expressed interest in obtaining reliable, legally fixed guarantees that NATO will halt its eastward expansion and stop the military build-up in countries bordering Russia. The White House in a separate press release said Biden reaffirmed to Scholz his support for strong US-German relations and desire to strengthen transatlantic cooperation. Biden and Scholz also discussed cooperation to address other global challenges on climate change and the novel coronavirus disease pandemic.

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US Announces First Sale of 18Mln Barrels From Strategic Oil Reserve to Reduce Pump Prices

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Energy Department announced the first sale of 18 million barrels of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) aimed at reducing pump prices of fuel that had hit seven-year highs and raised inflation woes.

"Exchanges and sales from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve are important tools we are using to address oil supply disruptions as the world recovers from a once-in-a-century pandemic," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a statement on Friday. "The President rightly believes Americans deserve relief now and has authorized the use of the SPR to respond to market imbalances and reduce costs for consumers."

According to the Energy Department, crude from SPR will be sold and later exchanged with US refiners to refill the strategic reserve, the statement said. Up to 32 million barrels will be released through the so-called exchange-and-sale approach, it added.

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Biden Says Spoke With German Chancellor Scholz About Russian Buildup Near Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he had a telephone call with the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to discuss Russia's military activity near Ukraine's border.

"Today, I spoke with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to congratulate him on his appointment," Biden wrote via Twitter on Friday. "I look forward to working closely together on the full range of global challenges, including transatlantic efforts to address Russia's destabilizing military buildup along Ukraine's border."

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Myanmar Citizen Pleads Guilty on Plot to Attack Nation's UN Envoy - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Myanmar citizen Ye Hein Zaw has pleaded guilty to participating in a conspiracy to attack or assassinate his country's ambassador to the United Nations, the US Justice Department said.

"Damian Williams, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today the guilty plea of Ye Hein Zaw, a citizen of Myanmar, for his role in a conspiracy to assault and make a violent attack upon Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations," the Justice Department said in a press release on Friday.

Zaw pleaded guilty today in White Plains federal court before US District Judge Philip Halpern, the release said.

During a recorded phone conversation, Zaw and a co-conspirator "discussed how the planned attackers would require an additional \$1,000 to conduct the attack on the ambassador in Westchester County, and, for an additional payment, the attackers could ...kill the ambassador," the release added.

Zaw pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to assault and make a violent attack upon a foreign official, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison. He is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge Halpern on May 10, 2022, according to the release.

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UK Court Decision to Extradite Assange to US 'Seriously Damages' Journalism - CPJ

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A London court's decision to allow the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange seriously damages journalism, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Deputy Executive Director Robert Mahoney said.

"On the same day the Nobel Peace Prize honors journalists, a UK court ruled that the United States can extradite Julian Assange, a move that seriously damages journalism," Mahoney said in a statement.

Mahoney explained that the US Justice Department's pursuit of Assange has set a harmful legal precedent for prosecuting reporters.

The Biden administration could start to live up to its pledge to support journalism made this week at the Summit for Democracy, by removing the threat of prosecution under the Espionage Act that is now hanging over the heads of investigative journalists everywhere, he added.

Assange faces up to 175 years in prison if extradited and found guilty on the 18 charges being brought against him under the Espionage Act and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

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US Weekly COVID-19 Cases Up 37%, Deaths Increase by 28% - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The number of new coronavirus infections this week is up 37 percent as compared to last week and the number of COVID-19-related deaths per week increased by 28 percent, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said.

"The current seven-day average of cases is about 118,500 cases per day which represents an increase of about 37 percent over the previous week," Walensky said during a press briefing on Friday. "The seven-day average of daily deaths are about 1,100 per day, which is an increase of about 28 percent over the prior week."

The seven-day average of new COVID-19-related hospitalizations is about 7,441 each day, an increase of about 16 percent over the previous week, Walensky said.

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Biden Signs Bill to Fast-Track Process to Raise US Debt Limit - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced that he has signed a bill to fast-track the process to raise the US debt ceiling that would prevent a default on the United States' debt.

"I just signed a bill to fast-track the process to raise our debt limit," Biden said in a statement on Friday. "The nation's full faith and credit has always been a shared responsibility. The bipartisan support of this legislation shows that it is still possible for leaders to work across the aisle and deliver."

The bill allows Congress to vote on legislation to raise the debt ceiling through a simple majority instead of the 60-vote majority.

Earlier on Thursday, the US Senate passed the measure in a 59-35 vote. The US House of Representatives passed its own legislation on Tuesday to expedite the passage of the debt limit increase.

Congress is expected to vote on legislation to raise the debt ceiling as early as next week.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * Threats of new sanctions are driving relations between Russia and the United States further and further toward confrontation and Moscow has all necessary instruments to respond, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.
- * US sanctions against Russia are ineffective in addition to being an undignified form of exerting pressure, Ryabkov said.
- * Russia hopes it will be possible to adopt an agreement to replace the expiring Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) as a result of the dialogue with the United States on strategic stability, Ryabkov said.
- * Russia is working out retaliatory measures to possible new US sanctions, senior Russian diplomat Dmitry Birichevsky said.

US SANCTIONS ON NORTH KOREA, MYANMAR

- * The United States has sanctioned the Myanmar Directorate of Defense Industries, the US Treasury Department announced on Friday.
- * The United States has imposed sanctions on North Korea's Central Public Prosecutors Office, the US Treasury Department said.
- * The United States has sanctioned the Moscow-based European Institute "Justo" and Russian citizen Dmitry Soin over North Korea sanctions regulations, the Treasury Department said.

UKRAINE

- * Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Friday that he did not rule out holding of an all-Ukrainian referendum on Donbas.
- * Zelenskyy is not ruling out that a separate format of direct negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Donbas could be created.
- * Zelenskyy said that US President Joe Biden during their conversation had not offered him to conduct direct talks with representatives of the self-proclaimed Donbas republics on a settlement in the region.
- * French President Emmanuel Macron and Zelenskyy held a telephone conversation during which they agreed on the need to resume negotiations in the "Normandy format," the Elysee Palace said.

UK COURT UPHELDS EXTRADITION OF JULIAN ASSANGE

- * The London Administrative Court upheld on Friday the US government's appeal for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to be extradited to the United States.
- * The London court's decision granting Assange's extradition is shameful, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- * The US Justice Department told Sputnik that it is pleased by the London court's decision to overturn an earlier ruling that Assange cannot be extradited to the United States.
- * Amnesty International denounced the London court's decision to allow the extradition of Assange to the United States as "travesty of justice."
- * Assange's fiance Stella Moris announced her intention to challenge the London court's decision as soon as possible, WikiLeaks said.

WORLD CHESS CHAMPION MATCH

* Norwegian grandmaster Magnus Carlsen defeated Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi in the match for the world chess crown and remained a champion.

JCPOA TALKS

* None of the parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's (JCPOA) or the Iran Nuclear Deal) talks in Vienna are interested in the deal falling apart, Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.

* The situation with the current round of the Vienna-hosted nuclear talks on the JCPOA is not easy, but this is no reason to give up, Ryabkov said.

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UFC 269 Closes Out 2021 Pay-Per-View Schedule After Record Year of Profits for Company

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) on Saturday evening will hold its final pay-per-view event of 2021, UFC 269: Oliveira vs. Poirier, after a record year of profits for the company, at the T-Mobile arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. The event is the last pay-per-view scheduled by the mixed martial arts promotion for 2021 - a year in which the company reported the "best nine-month, year-to-date period in UFC history," according to a November statement from parent company Endeavor.

The card is headlined by a championship title bout in the promotion's lightweight division between Brazil's Charles Oliveira and the US's Dustin Poirier. The fight will be Oliveria's first title defense since obtaining the championship belt in May, over a decade after making his UFC debut.

Poirier, whose most recent two victories were over MMA superstar Conor McGregor, will attempt to take from Oliveira the undisputed lightweight title - something he has yet to hold in his own decade-long UFC career.

The event also features a second championship title bout between women's Bantamweight Champion and #1 ranked pound-for-pound female fighter Amanda Nunes and Julianna Pena, who was the first woman to win a season of "The Ultimate Fighter." Their fight, which was previously scheduled for an event earlier this year, was moved to the co-main event of UFC 269 after Nunes tested positive for COVID-19.

The main card will be kicked off with a fight between bantamweights Sean O'Malley and Raulian Paiva, who both earned "fight of the night" bonus awards from the UFC in their most recent bouts. It will also feature bouts between flyweights Kai Kara-France and Cody Garbrandt, as well as welterweights Geoff Neal and Santiago Ponzinibbio.

The UFC remained active as a sporting promotion throughout the pandemic, having partnered with the government of the United Arab Emirates to hold live events on so-called "Fight Island" in Abu Dhabi, in addition to hosting events at their private facility in Las Vegas and other venues.

The UFC is going to hold events at locations where it is easy to do business and put on shows despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and that "are going to treat the fighters right, that are going to treat the fans right," UFC President Dana White said during a press conference on Thursday, when asked about holding more international events in 2022.

White tested positive for COVID-19 following the Thanksgiving holiday, but has since recovered after self-admittedly following the medical advice of fellow UFC employee Joe Rogan, who also fought the virus earlier this year.

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Mother of US Journalist Abducted in Syria Meets With Sullivan - White House

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Deborah Tice, the mother of abducted US journalist Austin Tice in Syria, met with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan earlier on Friday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"I can confirm that Deborah Tice met with Jake Sullivan, our National Security Advisor, today. I would also note that she and her family have been in touch and met a number of times with members of our national security team and been on phone calls as we have been with all families of individuals who are held overseas," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Tice is an award-winning journalist and Marine Corps veteran who entered Syria illegally from Turkey in May of 2012 while working on a story for the McClatchy publishing company. Tice was abducted in August of 2012 and was last seen in a video recording being blindfolded and held by armed men whose affiliation is unknown.

The Biden administration will do everything it can to secure Tice's release and return him home just like it would do for any other American held overseas, Psaki said.

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US State Dept. Approves \$6.9Bln Warships Sale to Greece, \$2.5Bln in Modernizations

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) – The Department of State has approved two arms sales for Greece including new warships worth \$6.9 billion and a \$2.5 billion ship modernization, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a press release on Friday

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to ... Greece of Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$6.9 billion," the agency said. "The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today."

The sale will include four Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships; five COMBATSS-21 Combat Management Systems; five Vertical Launch Systems (VLS), [and] 200 Rolling Airframe Missiles (RAM)," the DSCA said.

The US government has also approved a Greek request to buy equipment and services to repair, update, and enhance their four existing MEKO Class frigates at a cost of \$2.5 billion, the DSCA noted in a second press release.

These upgrades will include eight Close in Weapon Systems (CIWS) Phalanx upgrade kits; four MK 45, 5-inch 54 caliber gun overhauls; four MK 49 Guided Missile Launcher Systems; four COMBATSS-21 Combat Management Systems; and four AN/SQS-56 Sonar overhauls, the DSCA said.

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Pentagon Declines to Say If US, Israel Mull Training for Strikes on Iran Nuclear Sites

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby on Friday declined to say whether the United States and Israel are mulling drills to prepare for possible strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities if diplomacy fails to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"I'm not going to get into specific training scenarios and I have no additional or more specific training events or exercises to speak to today," Kirby said when asked if the United States agreed to hold joint military exercises with Israel targeting Iranian nuclear facilities.

Kirby added that the US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz discussed military readiness against Iran during a meeting at the Pentagon on Thursday. Earlier this week, media reported that Israeli and US officials have been discussing plans for potential military drills to prepare for a possible attack on Iran's nuclear facilities in case diplomatic tools do not work to revive the Iran nuclear deal.

In May 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA aimed at scaling back Iran's nuclear program and signed by the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union, and enacted hardline policies against Tehran.

Iran largely abandoned its own obligations under the accord, too, after the US withdrawal. The seventh round of talks to revive the deal began in late November.

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White House Says Format of NATO-Russia Talks Not Yet Determined

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - A format of talks between NATO countries and Russia, which President Joe Biden announced shortly after his virtual summit with President Vladimir Putin, has not yet been determined, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"There have been formats for conversations about European security with Russia for 70 years, approximately. And many of those are formats that could work," Psaki said in a press briefing.

"As we're determining what that looks like, we have been engaged on a daily basis with all of the players here, our European partners at a range of levels ... and we will continue to be, but I don't have any update at this point on the format."

On Wednesday, Biden said he expects to announce by Friday a high-level meeting between Russia, the US and four other key NATO countries to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance's activities in eastern Europe.

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Pentagon Still Sees 'Sizable' Amount of Russian Forces Near Ukraine After Biden-Putin Call

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to see a sizable amount of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border following the virtual summit between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told a press briefing on Friday. When asked about what Washington is seeing in terms of the alleged Russian buildup on the border since Biden's call with Putin, Kirby said: "I would say that there still is a sizable amount of Russian forces in the western part of their country around the border with Ukraine."

"I don't have any major changes to speak to today but we have continued to see increases over recent days and weeks," Kirby added.

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January 6 Panel Subpoenas Organizers of Pro-Trump Rallies in US Capitol - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The House January 6 committee said on Friday it subpoenaed six individuals involved in organizing pro-Trump rallies in the nation's capitol the day of the Capitol riot.

"The Committee subpoenas individuals involved in the planning of January 5th and 6th rallies, including individuals who worked directly with the former President: Bryan Lewis, Ed Martin, Kimberly Fletcher, Robert 'Bobby' Peede, Jr., Max Miller, Brian Jack," the committee said in a press release.

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IMF Says Needs Further Discussions With Argentina on Support Program

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Argentina need to take additional discussions on fund-supported programs to help the country's economy, the IMF mission said in a statement on Friday.

"While further discussions are needed, the IMF team and the Argentine authorities remain fully committed to their collective work on a framework and policies for an IMF-supported program," the statement read.

IMF and Argentine delegations held meetings in Washington, DC on December 5-10. They analyzed recent economic developments and discussed inflation forecasts, as well as the country's balance of payments.

"The teams acknowledged the stronger-than-expected rebound in economic activity and investment this year, and the importance of a policy framework to durably sustain the economic recovery and improvements in social and employment conditions," the statement said.

Both parties acknowledged a general understanding on the need to gradually and sustainably improve public finances. They also noted the importance of allowing for much-needed infrastructure, technology, and targeted social spending.

IMF encouraged Buenos Aires to impose appropriate monetary policy with positive real interest rates, and wage-price coordination to address inflation and other issues.

"This also needs to be supported by policies to build international reserves, including by encouraging foreign direct investment and exports, which grew very robustly this year, especially in value-added sectors," the statement said.

The two parties underscored the necessity of the broad support of those measures both inside Argentina and within the international community, the statement added.

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US Issues General License to Allow Personal Remittances to Afghanistan - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US government issued a general license to allow individuals to send personal remittances to Afghanistan, the Treasury Department said in a notice on Friday.

"Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions involving the Taliban or the Haqqani Network, or any entity in which the Taliban or the Haqqani Network owns, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, a 50 percent or greater interest, prohibited by the Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations ... that are ordinarily incident and necessary to the transfer of noncommercial, personal remittances to Afghanistan, including through Afghan depository institutions, are authorized," the notice said.

The waiver does not apply to charitable donations of funds used to support business operations in Afghanistan, the notice also said.

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CIA Turns to Spying on Russia, China After 20 Years Focus on Terrorist Networks - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The CIA is reforming its training and deployment of agents around the world, shifting its top priority from fighting terror networks to spying on Russia and China, CNN reported on Friday.

The new policy will transform the way agents are trained, prepared and deployed, giving them more in-depth focus on specific major nations and regions, as they used to do before the focus changed to a much more wide-ranging "war on terror" after the September 11 attacks two decades ago, the report said.

The war on terror emphasized paramilitary operations spearheaded by Special Operations forces against Islamist terror groups, but now the CIA will be trying to rebuild its intelligence gathering capacity toward nations such as Russia and China as highlighted in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the report said.

Over the past two decades, the CIA has especially undermanned or ignored Chinese global penetration in resource-rich regions such as West Africa while focusing on more dramatic and fashionable targets and operations, it said. The agency also needs to recruit more Mandarin speakers and regional experts, the report added.

The move will also require extensive reforms in training the agency's top intelligence analysts and senior officers who recruit and run agents around the world, according to the report.

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US Diplomat Catherine Russell Appointed as Executive Director of UNICEF - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 10 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday appointed US diplomat Catherine Russell to head the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"Following consultations with the Executive Board of the UNICEF, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced today the appointment of Catherine M. Russell of the United States as the Fund's next Executive Director," Dujarric said.

Russell will succeed US' Henrietta Fore, to whom Guterres is grateful for her leadership of UNICEF and its role in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dujarric said.

Russell is currently serving as the Director of the White House Presidential Personnel Office. From 2013 to 2017, she served as Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues at the US Department of State.

Previously, Russell served as chief of staff to the Second Lady of the United States, Jill Biden, Deputy Assistant to the President at the White House under President Barack Obama, Senior Adviser on International Women's Issues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Associate Deputy Attorney General at the Department of Justice and Staff Director of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"Catherine Russell will bring a wealth of expertise to UNICEF's work, and I am delighted to hand over to someone with her knowledge, experience, and deep care for children and women," UNICEF outgoing Executive Director Henrietta Fore said following the appointment. UNICEF said Russell will assume her new functions in early 2022.

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UN Chief 'Horrified' by Death of 54 Migrants in Truck Collision in Mexico - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, December 10 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he was horrified to learn about the deaths of more than 50 migrants in a truck accident in southern Mexico and believes that every person searching for a better life deserves safety.

On Thursday, two trucks collided near the southeastern Mexican city of Tuxtla Gutierrez in the state of Chiapas, leaving at least 54 people dead and more than 100 injured.

"I'm horrified to learn that at least 54 migrants died [and] dozens were injured in a road accident in Mexico," Guterres said via Twitter. "Every person searching for a better life deserves safety [and] dignity."

Guterres also expressed his condolences to the victims' families and all individuals affected by the "senseless tragedy."

The United Nations said it was the single deadliest incident for migrants in Mexico since at least 2014, when the organization started documenting deaths of migrants.

In 2021, record 651 people died attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico.

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Biden Admin. Orders Halting Federal Support for Coal Plants Overseas - Reports
(Updates with details in paras 2-5)

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has ordered the immediate halt of federal support for coal plants and other carbon-intensive projects overseas, Bloomberg reported on Friday citing a document.

The Biden administration sent out the directive to US embassies overseas last week, the report said.

There will be exemptions for important matters related to national security, US foreign policy or providing energy in vulnerable areas, the report said.

The directive is part of the Biden administration's initiative to cut greenhouse emissions around the world, the report said, citing the document.

The directive could affect funding for terminals in eastern Europe and the Caribbean used to receive US natural gas, the report said. Moreover, it also halts US diplomatic and technical support to pipeline companies, LNG terminals, among other projects, the report said.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order directing the US federal government to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

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US Expands 'Open Skies' Civil Aviation Partnership to Ecuador – State Department

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has finalized an "Open Skies" civil aviation agreement with Ecuador, the Department of State announced in a media note on Friday.

"US delegates to the thirteenth International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Air Services Negotiation Event (ICAN 2021) expanded the network of US Open Skies partners by finalizing the text of a new Agreement with the Republic of Ecuador," the note said.

ICAN 2021, which has been taking place from December 6 to December 10 in Bogota, Colombia, is the year's largest gathering of civil aviation negotiators with attendees from more than 77 nations, the State Department said.

"The agreement with ... Ecuador is the first Open Skies Agreement negotiated with this country. Pending signature and entry into force, the agreement is now being applied on the basis of comity and reciprocity, immediately creating new opportunities for U.S. and Ecuadorian air carriers," the note said.

The bilateral Open Skies agreement will enable the expansion of passenger and cargo flights between Ecuador and the United States to promote increased travel and trade, and ultimately spurring high quality job opportunities and economic growth, the State Department said.

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US House Staffer Arrested for Carrying Unregistered Gun Faces 4 Charges - Capitol Police

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The congressional staffer arrested on Thursday after an X-ray machine at the US Capitol complex detected a handgun in his bag is facing four criminal charges related to possession of an unregistered firearm, the US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Friday.

The defendant, 57-year old Jeffrey Allsbrooks, is facing charges including possession of an unregistered firearm, unlawful possession of a firearm, possession of unregistered ammunition and possession of a large capacity ammunition feeding device, the USCP said in an updated press release.

Upon review of the investigation and a preliminary timeline, the USCP determined that it took approximately four minutes to lock the building down and approximately eight minutes for officers to apprehend the suspect, the USCP said. The case remains under active investigation, the USCP added.

Allsbrooks told officers that he forgot the handgun was in his bag, the USCP said. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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US Justice Department 'Pleased by Ruling' on Assange Extradition - Spokesperson to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is "pleased by" the London High Court's decision to overturn an earlier ruling that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange cannot be extradited to the United States, the Department of Justice told Sputnik on Friday.

"We are pleased by the ruling, and have no further comment," a spokesperson said. Earlier in the day, the London court ruled in favor of a US appeal to extradite Assange, dismissing concerns raised about the journalist's health and the inhumane conditions he could face in the American prison system. The case will now be remitted to the Westminster Magistrates' Court with direction that a district judge will send the case to the secretary of state, who will decide on extradition.

The whistleblower is wanted by the United States on espionage charges after WikiLeaks published thousands of classified documents that shed light on war crimes committed by American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. If put on trial and convicted in the US, the Australian journalist faces up to 175 years in prison.

Assange has been on remand at Belmarsh high-security prison in southeast London since October 2020, after serving an 11-month sentence for breaking bail after staying in the Ecuadorean embassy in London for seven years.

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Canada Sanctions 4 Entities Over 'Ongoing Repression' in Myanmar - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly announced on Friday that Ottawa has sanctioned four entities who support Myanmar's military by procuring weapons and other military equipment and providing technical assistance.

"Today's announcement sends a clear message to the people of Myanmar that their resilience and quest for democracy and civil rights will not be diminished," Joly said in her announcement on the International Human Rights Day. "Canada will not hesitate to take additional measures should Myanmar's military continue to flout its international obligations."

Canada imposed the new sanctions in concert with the United States and the United Kingdom in an effort to allow those intending to suspend all operational support for Myanmar's military to do so and end what Canada describes as "the transfer of arms, materiel, dual-use equipment and technical assistance to Myanmar's military and its representatives."

Joly said Canada is increasing pressure on Myanmar's military junta in the hope of forcing it to engage in political dialogue, end the political crisis and restore democratic and civilian governance.

Canadian officials said the sanctions point to achieving the goal of the Myanmar military to implement the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' five-point consensus.

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US Boosts Support for IMF Policies in Caucasus, Central Asia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is strengthening its financial collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s program for macroeconomic management in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia, the US State Department said on Friday.

"The United States intends to support the International Monetary Fund's Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia Regional Capacity Development Center (CCAMTAC)," the State Department said in a media note.

The CCAMTAC is a new regional capacity development center headquartered in Almaty, Kazakhstan, that supports economic policymaking and institution building in the region, the note said.

"Following delivery to the IMF of a Letter of Intent from the United States Department of the Treasury on October 27, the United States became a full voting member on the CCAMTAC Steering Committee," the note added.

The CCAMTAC is a collaborative venture between the IMF, development partners, and the Center's member countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, according to the note.

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US Sanctions 4 Chinese Entities Over North Korea, Uyghurs - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has put sanctions on three Chinese cartoon studios over North Korea and artificial intelligence Chinese company SenseTime Group Ltd. for helping racially profile Uyghurs, US Treasury Department said on Friday.

"OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] is identifying a Chinese firm, SenseTime Group Limited (SenseTime), as a Non-SDN Chinese Military-Industrial Complex Company," the notice said.

SenseTime owns or controls, directly or indirectly, a person who operates or has operated in China's surveillance technology sector, it added.

The company's subsidiary, named Shenzhen Sensetime Technology Co. Ltd., has developed facial recognition programs that can determine a target's ethnicity, with a particular focus on identifying ethnic Uyghurs, US authorities noted. "When applying for patent applications, Shenzhen Sensetime Technology Co. Ltd. has highlighted its ability to identify Uyghurs wearing beards, sunglasses, and masks," the notice said.

The United States also targeted three Chinese companies, including Moxing Cartoon, Nings Cartoon Studio, and Shanghai Hongman Cartoon and Animation Design Studio, as part of North Korea-related sanctions, it added.

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US Imposes Sanctions on North Korea's Central Public Prosecutors Office – Treasury
(Adds details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on North Korea's Central Public Prosecutors Office, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

"The following entities have been added to OFAC's [Office of Foreign Assets Control] SDN List: CENTRAL PUBLIC PROSECUTORS OFFICE, Korea, North," the Treasury Department said.

The United States accused the prosecutors office of being involved in unfair trials to punish persons for "political wrongdoing."

"These trials sometimes end in sentencing to the DPRK's notorious prison camps, run by the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Security," the notice said.

The Treasury recalled that the DPRK Central Public Prosecutors Office works under the North Korean government's control. The agency was designated by the European Union in March 2021, it added.