

12/15/21 Wednesday

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IAEA Chief Says 2015 Nuclear Deal Needs 'Adjustments' in 2022 for 'A Very Different Iran'
By - Morgan Artyukhina

As negotiations carefully resume in Vienna to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the head of the UN nuclear watchdog has advised that the agreement be updated in order to ensure the agency's ability to track Iran's nuclear program.

"The reality is that we are dealing with a very different Iran," Rafael Grossi, director of the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), told [the Associated Press](#) in a Tuesday interview in the United Arab Emirates.

Grossi added that "2022 is so different from 2015 that there will have to be adjustments that take into consideration these new realities so our inspectors can inspect whatever the countries agree at the political table."

The 2015 deal, reached with Iran by the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the European Union, lowered long-standing economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for Iran accepting strict limits on the quality and quantity of uranium it could refine. Tehran was limited to just 3.67% purity of uranium-235 and just enough of the radioactive material to service a handful of nuclear power plants and medical research facilities.

However, in 2018 then-US President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that Iran had secretly been violating the deal and he unilaterally withdrew from it, imposing "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran and beginning an aggressive military posturing that took the two nations to the brink of war. While unconvinced by US intelligence, the deal's European partners nonetheless complied with US sanctions, despite protestations by Tehran.

As a consequence, Tehran began stepping back from its commitments made under the deal, following legislation laid out by the Majlis that mandated increases in purity of uranium-235 refined and in volume stored. Iran has publicly stated it is enriching uranium [up to 60% purity](#), while Israel [reportedly passed intelligence](#) to Washington late last month showing Iran intends to increase its maximum purity to 90% - enough to build a nuclear weapon.

However, despite claims by Israeli leaders, there was no revival of the country's nuclear weapons program, abandoned in 2003 and later [ruled to be a violation](#) of Islam by the country's top Islamic legal authority, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Nonetheless, Iran has faced a multi-pronged espionage campaign by Jerusalem that has seen its nuclear scientists [co-opted into sabotage](#) actions or [brazenly assassinated](#) in broad daylight, along with other acts of sabotage. However, Israeli military intelligence [has also said Iran](#) is "not heading toward a bomb right now."

That was Grossi's conclusion, as well. "There's no other country other than those making nuclear weapons reaching those high levels" of uranium enrichment, Grossi told the AP on Tuesday, adding, "I've said many times that this doesn't mean that Iran has a nuclear weapon. But it does mean that this level of enrichment is one that requires an intense verification effort."

Part of Tehran's reduction of JCPOA compliance has also been limiting IAEA inspectors to scheduled inspections. The agency has sparred with Iranian authorities over a number of issues, including security cameras at facilities such as Karaj, an agricultural and nuclear medicine research facility [that in June was hit](#) by a suspected suicide drone from Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence service, damaging IAEA equipment there. An agreement on replacing them was only [reached on Wednesday](#).

Grossi, speaking before the Karaj deal, said he wanted to tell Iran there was "no way around" cooperating with IAEA inspectors if the country wants to be "a respected country in the community of nations."

"We have to work together," Grossi said. "They must work together. I will make sure they understand that in us they will have a partner."

In Vienna, diplomats from the administration of US President Joe Biden have accused Iran of lacking seriousness about the negotiations. Although, in a recent bit of posturing US ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security [Council on Tuesday](#) that Washington was prepared to "lift sanctions inconsistent with our JCPOA commitments, which would allow Iran to receive the economic benefits of the deal."

"We're convinced that if Iran approaches talks in Vienna with urgency and critique, we can quickly reach and implement an understanding on mutual return," she added.

However, Iran's permanent representative to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, replied that Tehran needed guarantees Washington wouldn't "abuse" the deal's procedures again.

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Videos: Armed Gunmen Reportedly Surround Libyan Prime Minister Dbeibeh's Office in Tripoli
By - Morgan Artyukhina

According to local reports, a group of armed gunmen has surrounded the Presidential Council building in the Libyan capital city of Tripoli.

Photos shared on social media purported to show armed gunmen in technicals posted up around the offices of Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, leader of the Government of National Unity.

Video purported to be of the gunmen at the site was also shared on social media, along with footage of the technical convoy on the highway.

According to Al-Arabiya, power has been cut to the building as well.

[Sky News Arabia](#) reported that Salah Badi, leader of the Al-Samoud Brigade militia, announced on Wednesday night that there would be no presidential elections in Libya and the UN-sanctioned group would close all state institutions in Tripoli.

Elections are presently scheduled for December 24, but earlier on Wednesday, the head of the Interior Affairs Committee in the Libyan House of Representatives [warned the country](#) wouldn't be ready to hold elections by then and called on the government to accept the situation.

Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov said](#) earlier that a postponement of the elections would be acceptable provided the outcome is accepted.

The move comes after Mohammed Menfi, leader of the Presidential Council that functions as Libya's head of state and supreme military commander, dismissed the head of the Tripoli Military District, Maj. Gen. Abdul Basit Marwan [earlier on Wednesday](#).

[According to Al-Marsad](#), the Libyan News Observatory, which cited unnamed sources, the military movements are part of a plan orchestrated by Menfi to issue a presidential decree on December 23 and form a mini-government.

The civil war in Libya has raged since a NATO-backed coup overthrew, tortured and executed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. A March 2021 agreement saw the country's two primary factions - the UN-backed government in Tripoli and the Libyan National Army in Tobruk - agree to form a Government of National Unity as a step toward the elections scheduled for December.

On Sunday, the supreme commanders of the two sides' armed forces met in the central city of Sirte and [agreed to unite](#) into a single military force.

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US Workers Suffering From 'Long Covid' Could Qualify as Disabled, New EEOC Guidance Says
By - Morgan Artyukhina

New guidance from the US' federal workplace antidiscrimination agency on Tuesday laid out the requirements for having contracted COVID-19 to be considered a disability, protecting workers' jobs if they suffer chronic symptoms from the virus.

According to an update to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) document on COVID-19 and the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), a person can be defined as having a disability if an evaluation of their condition meets at least one of a three-part definition.

"Like effects from other diseases, effects from COVID-19 can lead to a disability protected under the laws the EEOC enforces. Workers with disabilities stemming from COVID-19 are protected from employment discrimination and may be eligible for reasonable accommodations," EEOC Chair Charlotte Burrows said in [a Tuesday statement](#) accompanying the update.

The EEOC makes clear that the definition is not intended for people who get "regular" COVID-19 and suffer flu-like symptoms or others that only last for a couple of weeks and then go away. Instead, the rule change is intended to protect those who suffer from what's been variously called "long Covid," "long-haul Covid," "post-Covid" and "chronic Covid."

According to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), Long Covid symptoms "are a wide range of new, returning, or ongoing health problems people can experience four or more weeks after first being infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. Even people who did not have COVID-19 symptoms in the days or weeks after they were infected can have post-COVID conditions. These conditions can present as different types and combinations of health problems for different lengths of time."

Those symptoms can include headaches that last for days, dizziness, brain fog, body aches, memory loss, and loss of sense of taste, among others.

It's not exactly clear why or how someone infected with SARS-CoV-2 develops Long Covid, but studies have found that [between 10%](#) and [36% of those infected](#) continue to experience Covid-like symptoms three to six months after diagnosis.

According to the EEOC's guidance, a person can be defined as having a disability if their symptoms actively limit them mentally or physically from being able to engage in "a major life activity such as walking, talking, seeing, hearing, or learning, or operation of a major bodily function." They could also qualify if they have a "record of" the disability, meaning the symptoms come and go, or if an existing condition is exacerbated by the symptoms such that it becomes a disability, even if it wasn't before.

"The limitations from COVID-19 do not necessarily have to last any particular length of time to be substantially limiting," the agency added.

However, experts noted the departments of Health and Human Services and of Justice have [said since July](#) that sufferers from Long Covid could be protected both by the ADA and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare. Rather, the EEOC's updated guidance provides a framework for practical awarding of legal protections for it. "There's no changes to the law, it's what we've been saying the whole time - that Covid can be a disability," Eve Hill, board chair of disability law advocacy group Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, [told Bloomberg](#).

"One of the things employers often don't understand, if Covid aggravates another underlying preexisting condition, that condition can become a disability, even if it wasn't before," Hill added.

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Eric Trump: My Family Was Not 'Smart Enough to Collude With Russia'

By - Evan Craighead

Published in April 2019, US special counsel Robert Mueller's so-called Russiagate report found that, although members of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign had several Russian government-linked contacts, there was not sufficient direct evidence to back allegations of Trump-Russia collusion, which were also denied by both the Kremlin and Trump's camp.

Eric Trump, executive vice president of The Trump Organization and the middle son of former US President Donald Trump, reignited conversations about Mueller's Russigate probe while noting his family's political naivete during an interview with former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Jay Cutler.

"We weren't smart enough to collude with Russia," Eric Trump asserted, pushing back on debunked claims that his father's 2016 campaign conspired with the Russian government to tilt the presidential election in Trump's favor.

"We went out there and we spoke from the heart, we weren't smart enough to collude," he observed during a recent appearance on 'Uncut with Jay Cutler.' "But from the second we got into politics, the impeachments started, they wanted to take us out."

Eric Trump notably campaigned for his father in both 2016 and 2020 election cycles.

"We didn't know what the hell we were doing," he suggested, speaking of the 2016 campaign, adding, "We didn't know what a delegate was."

Much to Cutler's delight, Eric Trump then recounted a time when he asked a young staffer if they could define a caucus—during the 2016 Iowa Republican presidential caucus.

"I looked at this young staffer and I go, 'Hey, can you tell me what a caucus is?' Because I have no idea what the hell I'm supposed to be doing here," he said.

He also touched on the recent [grand jury indictment](#) of Michael Sussmann, a Perkins Coie partner with close ties to the Democratic party [who was charged with lying to the FBI](#) during a 2016 meeting in which he shared allegations of Trump Organization servers contacting Russia. Sussmann has pleaded not guilty.

"We don't have any secret servers," Eric Trump said to Cutler. "[Sussmann] went in, made this whole story up, lied to the FBI, then went to the New York Times, told the New York Times that the FBI was investigating this."

He also panned the so-called Steele dossier as "nonsense" in the wake of the arrest of contributor Igor Danchenko, who has pleaded not guilty to five counts of making false statements to the FBI regarding his sources for certain claims in the dossier.

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Syrian Air Defenses Engage Hostile Targets Over Damascus, at Least 1 Soldier Killed - State Media

By - Evan Craighead

On Wednesday, reports emerged suggesting that an Israeli-led strike on Syria was "highly likely," as the Israeli Air Force's readiness had increased above normal levels.

Air defenses near the Syrian capital of Damascus have been activated and have engaged several hostile projectiles, according to local reports.

Syrian forces reportedly shot down most of the incoming rockets fired from the Golan Heights around 12:50 a.m. local time. At least one Syrian soldier was killed during the incident, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency.

Unconfirmed reports have said that the early Thursday morning strikes caused material damage and appeared to be targeting the general vicinity of the Damascus International Airport.

Sounds of explosions have been reported around the Syrian capital.

Local sources have claimed the hostile projectiles were launched from northern Israel.

Approximately four hours prior, aircraft tracker Intelsky reported a high likelihood that IAF would carry out such a strike against targets in Syria.

No country/entity has taken responsibility for the alleged strike at this time.

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NWS Issues Multi-State Tornado Warnings for US Midwest as Twisters Touch Down in Nebraska, Iowa
By - Evan Craighead

As Kentucky, Illinois, Arkansas, and other US states continue to deal with the destruction and death left behind from the past weekend's twisters, a tornado watch has been put into effect until 8 p.m. Central Time on Wednesday for some four million people in sections of Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, Kansas, South Dakota, and Nebraska.

The National Weather Service (NWS) has warned that a powerful storm is bringing the threat of a derecho, with high winds and tornadoes, to sections of the upper Midwest.

Damaging winds exceeding 100 miles per hour (161 kilometers per hour) were initially reported in portions of New Mexico and Colorado before traveling to the Great Plains.

Authorities closed sections of I-25 near Colorado Springs after extreme winds caused multiple semi-trailers to overturn on the highway. According to KRDO, the first two wrecks occurred around 11:00 a.m. local time.

While one blocked a section of the highway for approximately 35 minutes, the other incident occurred on the shoulder. The winds [prompted El Paso County](#) to suspend semis, tractor-trailers, buses, recreational and all other high-profile vehicles from its roads.

High winds were also reported in sections of Kansas, prompting dangerous dust storms that limited motorists' visibility.

Later in the day, tornadoes were confirmed near Salix, Iowa, and Emerson, Nebraska.

High winds can be seen in alleged eyewitness footage recorded near Oakland, Nebraska, where a tornado siren was activated earlier today.

[Preliminary data](#) provided by the NWS recorded some 18 tornadoes within the last several hours. In fact, Minnesota [recorded](#) its first tornado during the month of December after a twister touched down near Plainview and continued to move in a northeast direction at a speed of 70 miles per hour.

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US Navy Joins Air Force in Discharging Service Members Over COVID Vaccine Noncompliance
By - Evan Craighead

US Air Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek on Tuesday confirmed that 27 airmen were among the first to be discharged from the service over their failure to obey an order requiring them to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The active-duty members in question did not have exemptions and refused to be vaccinated by the November 2 deadline.

On Wednesday, the US Navy announced that it would enforce its COVID-19 vaccine mandate for service members and begin 'administrative separation' for those who have continued to refuse to be vaccinated against the highly-contagious disease.

Vice Adm. John B. Nowell, Jr., chief of naval personnel, highlighted in a December 15 memo that it is service policy that those who refuse the COVID-19 vaccine "be processed for separation at the earliest possible opportunity."

Per the Pentagon, members of the US Navy and US Marine Corps had until November 28 to be vaccinated, while Reserve members have until December 28.

Service members who have legitimate COVID-19 vaccination exemptions, or pending requests, will not be processed for separation from the service. If a service member's request for exemption is denied, the individual must begin their vaccination series within five days of being notified.

Active-duty troops, or members of the reserve full-time support community who refuse the COVID-19 vaccine will have their administrative separation process expedited in order to "maximize speed and equity in achieving a fully vaccinated force," according to the naval administrative message, or NAVAMIN.

"While the vast majority of Navy service members have already received the vaccine, it remains in the interest of the Navy to encourage remaining Navy service members to become fully vaccinated as soon as possible and, at such time, consider them for retention," Nowell said in a quoted statement.

Sailors who refuse the vaccine and have less than six years of service qualify for an honorable discharge and will have the opportunity to go before a board of inquiry or an administrative separation (ADSEP) board.

Sailors refusing the vaccine with more than six years of service are eligible to appear before an ADSEP board or board of inquiry. The former board is offered to enlistees, while the latter is reserved for officers. Sailors who choose this option cannot receive a discharge lower than 'general,' which may impact a service member's benefits.

The Pentagon has reported that, as of December 10, around 96.4% of eligible active-duty personnel have been vaccinated against COVID-19.

The US Navy's enforcement of its COVID-19 vaccine mandate comes just a day after the US Air Force revealed that 27 airmen had been discharged over their refusal to get the jabs. According to USAF data, over 1,000 service members have refused the vaccine.

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Music Producer 'Flow La Movie' & Eight Others Die in Plane Crash in the Dominican Republic
By - Nevin Brown

A charter plane crashed while attempting an emergency landing near Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The aircraft was carrying seven passengers, including music producer Flow La Movie, and two crew members. There were no survivors.

The charter flight, a Gulfstream IV aircraft operated by the Helidosa Aviation Group, departed La Isabela International Airport in the Dominican Republic on Wednesday for Miami, Florida.

[According to data from FlightRadar24](#), the plane immediately encountered problems upon takeoff. The aircraft circled Santo Domingo before making an emergency landing at Las Américas International Airport. The plane crashed near the runway and burst into flames.

Of the nine deceased, six were American citizens. Producer José Ángel Hernández, better known as Flow La Movie, was one of the passengers. He produced the hit Spanish language

song “Te Bote,” and his company Flow La Movie has had success growing the careers of several Puerto Rican rappers.

The official video to the Te Bote Remix, featuring Casper, Nio García, Darell, Nicky Jam, Bad Bunny and Ozuna on Youtube accrued over 2 billion views since April of 2018.

The Helidosa Aviation Group, which operated the plane, issued a release shortly after the incident identifying all those aboard.

An investigation into the crash is ongoing. Officials have yet to determine a cause.

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Report Uncovers Chinese Telecom Giant Huawei’s Large Catalog of Surveillance Products
By - Nevin Brown

Documents recovered by The Washington Post reveal that Chinese Telecom giant Huawei has marketed its technologies to aid in population and corporate surveillance. One product has touted its success in China’s far west Xinjiang region, where Beijing’s treatment of the Uyghur people has garnered international condemnation.

[A review of more than 100 Huawei marketing presentations](#) reveals that the company has developed and pitched technologies to the Chinese government that can identify individuals by voice, monitor targeted individuals and supervise the prisoner labor schedules.

The review highlighted five PowerPoint slides that marketed Huawei technologies designed for public surveillance: voice recording analysis, prison and detention center monitoring, location tracking, Xinjiang surveillance, and corporate monitoring.

A slide was found that details a Huawei voice recording analysis management platform. The display shows how the service would take a target’s voice and run it through a voiceprint recognition engine to identify instances of the targeted person’s communications.

The system was co-developed by Huawei and artificial-intelligence iFlytek. iFlytek was placed on a sanctions list by the US Commerce Department in October 2019 for human rights violations against Uyghurs, after it was discovered that the company had forced Uyghurs to make voice recordings.

The slide says the service is for national security and defense.

Huawei also created a marketing presentation for their prison and detention center monitoring systems. Created in collaboration with Hwei, the Huawei and Hwei Smart Prison Unified Platform integrates surveillance technology such as cameras and software to manage detainees.

A slide details its successful implementation in prisons in Inner Mongolia, Shanxi province, and the Xinjiang region.

Huawei touts its smart-location tracking services as able to track targets through electronic means, license plate identification, facial recognition, and a target’s relationship network to allow authorities centralized trailing.

The tracking services are thought to already be in use by the public security department of Guangdong. The province is home to approximately 126 million people.

The report did not find Huawei directly touting its role in the surveillance of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, although it found examples of the 'One Person One File' facial recognition method being used in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region, to capture supposed criminals.

Huawei purportedly developed and tested an "Uyghur alarm" that would alert authorities when a Uyghur would appear in a designated area. The company has continuously downplayed its direct involvement in Beijing's persecution of the Uyghur people.

One of the more interesting discoveries was Huawei's development of corporate monitoring systems to track consumers and employees. One service uses cameras and software to conduct human skeletal analysis to determine individual behavior. The service can then alert companies if an employee is sleeping, using their phone, or is away from their work area. Turning the same cameras onto customers, it can quickly generate a demographic profile. According to the presentation, "It identifies customers' portraits as they walk by, such as gender, clothing, occupation, etc., and accurately delivers specific product introductions to different customers."

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Video: Florida Airbase Evacuated After Explosive Device Reportedly 'Became Loose'
By - Nevin Brown

The Homestead Air Reserve Base, in Miami-Dade county, Florida, has been evacuated Wednesday night due to a loose explosive.

According to a briefing, an explosive device became loose and "rolled" out of its designated area.

The device did not explode, but there are concerns that it could. Out of an abundance of caution, personnel was evacuated from the airbase while airmen on the base attempt to contain and secure the explosive.

Video shared by residents living near the base shows streets cordoned off by police.

Officials are asking residence in the areas around the base to remain in their homes.

Out of an abundance of caution, HARB evacuated personnel from base due to an ongoing incident. Please avoid the area of SW 137 Ave to Waterstone Blvd from SW 288 St to 312 St. Residents in this area, please remain in your homes. We will provide updates as they become available.

— Homestead ARB (@Homestead_ARB) [December 16, 2021](#)

Base officials believe the situation is under control.

The type of explosive and cause for it becoming loose have not been detailed by authorities.

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New Findings From VLT Support Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity

By - Nevin Brown

One of the world's most powerful telescopes has given astronomers and physicists their best-ever look at Sagittarius A*, the massive black hole at the center of the Milky Way galaxy, helping them to unlock new mysteries of the cosmos and Einstein's general theory of relativity. The images were captured at the European Southern Observatory in Chile by the Very Large Telescope Interferometer (VLTI).

An estimated 27,000 light-years away, Sagittarius A* sits at the center of the Milky Way galaxy, the galaxy our solar system calls home. Through imaging, Reinhard Genzel, director at the Max Planck Institute for Extraterrestrial Physics in Germany, believes that new astrophysical mysteries can be unlocked.

[Genzel said in a statement](#), "We want to learn more about the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way, Sagittarius A*: How massive is it exactly? Does it rotate? Do stars around it behave exactly as we expect from Einstein's general theory of relativity? The best way to answer these questions is to follow stars on orbits close to the supermassive black hole. And here we demonstrate that we can do that to a higher precision than ever before."

The VLTI uses four primary telescopes and four auxiliary telescopes to detect objects four billion times fainter than what can be seen by the naked eye. Using an instrument called GRAVITY, light from the telescopes is combined to create images 20 times as sharp as what one of the telescopes in the array can produce.

New images have revealed a previously undiscovered star, S300, and the discovery has allowed astronomers to track the movements of the celestial bodies, revealing the closest approach a star, S29, has made to Sagittarius A*.

The new images again put Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity to the test.

Genzel said, "Following stars on close orbits around Sagittarius A* allows us to precisely probe the gravitational field around the closest massive black hole to Earth, to test General Relativity, and to determine the properties of the black hole."

According to the team of researchers, the new data confirms that the stars behave just as Einstein's General Theory of Relativity predicts.

Up next for the VLTI and its team of researchers is to document how fast Sagittarius A* is spinning.

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SeX-Files: DoJ Report Details Several FBI Officials 'Solicited' Prostitutes During Overseas Trips
By - Nevin Brown

Findings from an investigation by the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Inspector General (OIG) has been referred to the FBI for proper action. The probe examined allegations that multiple agents had solicited, engaged in, and/or procured commercial sex, while working overseas.

The inspector general's investigation was prompted after the FBI submitted information that multiple officials had solicited prostitutes and one official supplied a foreign law enforcement officer with a package of approximately 100 white pills.

[According to a DOJ OIG investigative summary](#), “The OIG investigation found that four FBI officials solicited, procured, and accepted commercial sex overseas, and that a fifth FBI official solicited commercial sex overseas, in violation of DOJ and FBI policies.”

The investigation also determined that four agents “lacked candor about their interactions with prostitutes...and that one of those officials made false statements in an OIG compelled interview ...when the official denied having engaged in sex acts with a prostitute.”

All five of the officials failed to report to the FBI their or others' transgressions, as well as relationships that they may have had with foreign nationals.

One official was not transparent over their involvement with supplying a foreign law enforcement officer with a package of 100 white pills.

The summary reported, “the official denied observing or placing pills in a package to be delivered to a foreign law enforcement officer and that another of the officials failed to report having been provided such a package.”

A sixth official was found to be in violation of the Prohibition on the Solicitation of Prostitution Memorandum for failing to report the violations to the FBI.

While the OIG investigation was ongoing, two officials resigned, two retired, and one was removed for their FBI conduct violations.

The report did not provide the names of the individuals, what foreign country the alleged violations occurred in, and the chemical composition of the 100 white pills provided to a foreign law enforcement agent.

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RPT - Russian Citizen Danchenko's Defense Asks Court to Delay Trial From April to September

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Russian citizen Igor Danchenko's defense asked a US district judge to delay the trial date from April to September due to a multitude of classified documents in the case, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.

During a status conference on Wednesday, US district judge Anthony Trenga did not immediately agree to change the date but instead said he would wait until next week when prosecutors are set to provide a report on whether the government has completed the disclosure procedure for classified documents.

The judge has allowed Danchenko to travel throughout the US state of Virginia with his family without any special permission from pretrial services.

Next status conference has been scheduled for January 12.

In November, Danchenko pleaded not guilty in a US court on all five counts of making false statements to the FBI about alleged collusion between former President Donald Trump and the Kremlin.

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Russian Cosmonaut Speaks of Visit to Child Cancer Clinic in Zambia in Rocket Art Project

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Russian cosmonaut Sergey Kud-Sverchkov has shared with Sputnik his impressions of taking part in a rocket art project session with child patients at the University Teaching Hospital, Lusaka.

On Friday, Zambian pediatric oncology patients painted their dreams on pieces of paper, which will decorate a real Russian rocket.

"A visit to the children's oncology department of the city hospital was one of the main purposes of our visit to Lusaka," Kud-Sverchkov said.

The rocket art project team settled in a playroom with chairs and tables, where the walls are covered with posters about English grammar, mathematics and the solar system.

"While my colleagues from the Unity foundation — the event organizer — were preparing the playroom for drawing, I showed the children and hospital staff films about space and a flight to the ISS," Kud-Sverchkov said. "I told them about the ISS project from the very beginning.

Sometimes I just didn't know how kids would react to my words and the film. It seemed that for some kids it was like virtual reality, computer graphics."

But nevertheless, some things are intelligible to any person on earth, regardless of language and age, the cosmonaut continued.

"For example, a video about how to eat in space in zero gravity and how to wash in the same conditions," he noted. "When in the video I let go of food from my hands (and it flew away from me), or washed my hair with bubbles of water, in the hall, children and adults were noticeably animated and cheerful. And then we went to paint."

The idea behind the project is to give inspiration and strength to children battling cancer by "launching" their dreams into space.

"Like all ordinary children, local children could not decide for a long time what and how to draw," Kud-Sverchkov said. "Thoughtful and concerned, they did not know where to start: with a pencil or a brush? What color to use? Then the matter somehow got off the ground, and satellites and planets, cars and houses, the sun and little men of the most interesting shades began to emerge from under the brushes of the young artists."

In the end, the Unity team collected all the drawings, and in return everyone was presented with bright scarves with the drawings which already had been in space, a handful of sweets and a balloon.

"Sweets, by the way, caused no less surprise than the movie about the ISS," the cosmonaut said. "Kids are always kids and for them marshmallows and soft caramel in hand are even more interesting than space which is far away. The children tried the sweets and at first just went back to the ward. But after a few minutes they began timidly to enter the playroom again - sweets were right there!" Then they began blowing soap bubbles, and it became a real holiday.

"The children were jumping and laughing, catching bubbles with their hands ... All they had to do was to catch and burst all the bubbles in the room the fastest!" he recalls. "At that moment, the difference in age, status, and standard of living did not matter. The children forgot about their

disease. We all smiled and rejoiced together. And only the catheters sticking out of the bandages on the legs and arms of the children distinguished them from others playing in the street."

Nurses even had to remind them that it is a hospital.

"When we said goodbye, the children were no longer the same as when we met them," Kud-Sverchkov said. "Now it was a funny team of kids, shouting 'Bye!', so that we heard these screams even as we went down in the elevator."

"May the experience give them strength and bring the moment of recovery closer!" he added. "It is also a good lesson for adults - even in difficult circumstances, one must be able to enjoy life like these children. Enjoy simple things. For example, soap bubbles. "

Sergey Kud-Sverchkov and his wife Olga are the ambassadors of Unity foundation and regularly participate in such events in different countries.

"There is a tradition in our family of participating in Unity charity events in a hospital together. We have two kids ourselves and it is very important for us to share our love and attention with kids in a difficult situation," Olga told Sputnik.

Zambia is the third country to participate in the art rocket project, which was launched in June 2021 in Belgrade, Serbia and continued in Irkutsk, Russia by the Unity foundation with the support of Russian space agency Roscosmos. Prior to the New Year, the Unity team will visit a rehabilitation center in the Moscow region to "collect" more dreams. The project represents art therapy sessions in pediatric oncology centers and aims to creatively raise awareness about children's cancer while simultaneously giving children around the world a unified platform, encouraging them to dream, to explore, and to have courage.

It is not the first time Zambia has participated in space art projects. In 2020, children from UTH painted their dreams on a Dreamer spacesuit along with children from nine more countries. The Dreamer spacesuit was delivered to the ISS in April 2021.

Space art projects are organized by Unity foundation (Russia) and Space for Art Foundation (USA) with the support of Roscosmos and NASA globally.

In Zambia, the art session is supported by the representative office of the Russian agency for international humanitarian cooperation, Rossotrudnichestvo, and the Russian cultural center in Zambia.

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US Backs Turkish-Armenian Steps to Normalize Ties, Raises Concerns Over Karabakh Tensions

(Adds more comments/background to headline, paras 3-11)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Armenian National Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan that the Biden administration welcomes the announcement that Ankara and Yerevan will appoint representatives to discuss normalizing the relationship, the White House said in a statement.

"Mr. Sullivan welcomed the announcement yesterday that Turkey and Armenia will appoint special envoys to discuss the normalization process," White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said Wednesday after the two officials met.

Earlier, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkey and Armenia would appoint special envoys to normalize relations. He added that charter flights with Yerevan would also be opened.

Sullivan, in the same meeting, also raised concerns over ongoing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and "emphasized that military movements near un-demarcated borders are irresponsible and provocative."

In addition, President Joe Biden's top security adviser emphasized the US commitment to confidence-building measures both bilaterally and as a Minsk Group Co-Chair.

Earlier, European Council President Charles Michel, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a trilateral meeting in Brussels. Michel in a statement said the EU will provide expert assistance in the demarcation and delimitation of the borders between the two countries. Aliyev has said his country wants to open borders with Armenia.

The negotiations took place just days after a skirmish between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops on the border on December 10.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, discussed issues related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution during a phone conversation on Tuesday, the Kremlin said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova earlier said Moscow is ready to help normalize relations between the two countries.

There are no diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia - the border between the two countries has been closed since 1993 at the initiative of Ankara. Difficult relations between the countries are caused by a number of circumstances especially regarding Ankara's support for the Azerbaijani position on the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

The escalation of a long-lasting conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted in September 2020 and ended with a trilateral ceasefire agreement, signed in November of the same year.

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US CDC Panel to Discuss Limiting J&J Vaccine Due to Rare Blood Clot Issues - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Vaccine advisers with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will meet on Thursday to discuss potentially limiting the use of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine due to persistent blood clot issues, The Washington Post reported citing clinicians familiar with the matter.

The report said on Wednesday that the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices will review new data that shows an increase in the rate of blood clot issues reported in people who received a dose of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine since April.

The rare blood clot issue occurs mostly in young and middle-aged women, the report said. The report said, citing a federal official, that nine people have died from blood clots caused by the vaccine.

The report said that after Thursday's meeting, the panel will vote on whether to issue a new recommendation about the use of the vaccine.

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Biden Aide Welcomes Turkey, Armenia Appointing Envoys to Discuss Normalization - NSC

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Armenian National Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan that the Biden administration welcomes the announcement that Ankara and Yerevan will appoint representatives to discuss normalizing the relationship, the White House said in a statement. "Mr. Sullivan welcomed the announcement yesterday that Turkey and Armenia will appoint special envoys to discuss the normalization process," National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said Wednesday.

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White House Tells Armenia Military Moves Near Un-Demarcated Borders Seen as 'Provocative'

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a discussion with his Armenian counterpart Armen Grigoryan said military activity near un-demarcated borders are provocative, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with National Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan of Armenia today," Horne said on Wednesday. "Mr. Sullivan conveyed the commitment of the United States to peace, security, and prosperity in Armenia and the South Caucasus region. He expressed concern over ongoing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and emphasized that military movements near un-demarcated borders are irresponsible and provocative."

Sullivan also said he welcomed ongoing communication between the two sides and emphasized the US commitment to continue supporting confidence-building measures both bilaterally and as a Minsk Group Co-Chair.

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US Charges 3 Pipeline Operators Over California Offshore Oil Spill - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Three companies that own and operate the 17-mile-long San Pedro Bay Pipeline have been charged with negligent conduct over a massive oil spill in October that damaged California's coastline, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"A federal grand jury today accused three companies with illegally discharging oil during a pipeline break in early October by acting negligently in at least six ways, including failing to properly respond to eight separate leak alarms over the span of more than 13 hours and improperly restarting the pipeline that had been shut down following the leak alarms," the release said on Wednesday.

The indictment charges Amplify Energy Corporation, Beta Operating Company, and San Pedro Bay Pipeline Company with one misdemeanor count of negligent discharge of oil, according to the release.

As a result of the alleged negligent conduct, the release added, about 25,000 gallons of crude oil were discharged less than five miles west of southern California's Huntington Beach.

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US, New Zealand Defense Officials Discuss Threats to Stability in Indo-Pacific - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US and New Zealand defense officials participated in a virtual meeting to discuss enhancing bilateral security cooperation to address challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, the US Defense Department said.

" [US] Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, Dr. Ely Ratner, and [New Zealand] Deputy Secretary for Defense Policy and Planning, Michael Swain, met virtually to conduct the 8th annual United States – New Zealand Defense Policy Dialogue," the Defense Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

The two officials reaffirmed their countries' commitment to strengthen cooperation to address issues of mutual concern in the Indo-Pacific, the release also said.

In addition, the officials also shared information on their defense strategies in the Pacific region and emphasized the need to enhance collaboration on security matters with Pacific Islands partners, the release added.

The Biden administration is working to enhance cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region to counter a rising China, which it has labeled as the greatest challenge to the United States, according to the release.

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US Investigated Possible Role of Soviet Union in John Kennedy's Assassination - Archives

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States investigated for years the possible involvement of the Soviet Union in the assassination of US President John Kennedy in 1963, according to published records from the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

On Wednesday, (NARA) released an additional batch of 1,491 declassified records related to the assassination of Kennedy.

One of the published documents mentions a 1975 book by Robert Anson - "They've Killed the President!": The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy" - that discusses the shooter Lee Harvey Oswald's trip to Moscow, including how he managed to obtain a visa in a matter of two days while it usually took almost two weeks.

Another document dated December 1978 states that it is unlikely Oswald's trip to Soviet Union was assisted by some Soviet officials and cannot be confirmed by the fact of the accelerated issuance of the visa.

A number of published documents detail an anonymous call made to the US Naval Attache's office in Canberra by someone who described himself as a Polish driver working for the Soviet embassy in Australia. During the call, the individual reported on the possible involvement of the Soviet Union in financing the assassination of Kennedy.

"This individual, while discussing several matters of intelligence interest, touched on the possibility that the Soviet government had financed the assassination of President Kennedy," a Central Intelligence Agency memorandum said describing the call.

The memorandum concluded that the call was most likely made by a "crank" and the Australian authorities were not able to identify any Polish employee of the Soviet Embassy as well as the automobile described by the caller as the one he drove to perform his duties.

President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Several investigations came to the conclusion that the shots that killed Kennedy were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, who was arrested shortly after the murder. Two days later, Oswald was shot by Jack Ruby, an owner of a club in Dallas, while being escorted to a car that was supposed to take him to a county jail. A number of theories have since emerged to explain the assassination of Kennedy and the murder of Oswald.

Under the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, NARA was required to disclose the entire collection to the public in exactly 25 years - on October 26, 2017, unless the US president decided that releasing the information would harm national security or current foreign relations.

The national archivist has since released to the public more than 250,000 records concerning Kennedy's assassination or more than 90% of its collection.

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US Stocks Roar in Rally After Federal Reserve Matches Market Bets on Policy

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US stocks had their biggest run-up in a week as the Federal Reserve matched on Wednesday investors' expectations on forthcoming stimulus taper and rate hikes, after initial worries that the central bank may act too aggressively.

Two of Wall Street's key stock indexes - the Nasdaq Composite, which lists Big Tech stocks, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which groups blue-chip industrials - rose more than 300 points each, delivering outsized profits to investors who bet on the Federal Reserve being sensitive to the market rather than trying to rein in inflation with an excessively-hawkish monetary policy.

Nasdaq, an index that groups the world's most-valued stocks and Big Tech names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed up 328 points, or 2.2%, at 15,566. The tech-laced index lost 2.4% over two previous sessions as investors fretted on how the Federal Reserve would act at its December policy meeting which ended on Wednesday.

The Dow finished up 383 points, or 1.1%, at 35,927. It lost a combined 2% in two previous sessions.

Wall Street's other major index - the S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks - settled up 76 points, or 1.6%, at 4,709.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said the central bank will double the pace of the tapering of the US pandemic-era stimulus from January and have as many as three rate hikes in 2020, as long as COVID-19 does not greatly disrupt economic growth or the labor market.

"If the economy were to slow down significantly, then you would expect that would have an effect of slowing down rate increases," Powell told a news conference. "But we'd have to look at our two goals, maximum employment and price stability and we make policy based on them."

Under the accelerated taper, the Fed will cut \$30 billion monthly from its scheduled buying of \$120 billion of bonds and assets a month that it had committed to since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Prior to this, the central bank set a taper rate of \$15 billion a month in November.

The faster pace of tapering should bring the stimulus program to an end by March, paving way for the first rate pandemic-era rate hike by as early as April. The central bank's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee has kept benchmark US interest rates unchanged in a range of between zero and 0.25% for almost two years now.

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Biden Nominates Figure Skater Michelle Kwan to Be New US Envoy to Belize - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden nominated figure skater Michelle Kwan for the post US Ambassador to Belize, the White House said.

"Michelle Kwan has had a distinguished career in public service, diplomacy, and sports. She is the most decorated figure skater in US history, having won 43 championships, including five world championships, nine national titles, and two Olympic medals. She became the first Public Diplomacy Envoy in 2006 and for a decade, traveled extensively on behalf of the US

Department of State to engage youth around the world on social and educational issues," the White House said on Wednesday.

Kwan, who holds degrees in international relations as well as, law and diplomacy, also worked as a senior adviser at the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the White House said.

Kwan was also a member of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, as well as the Council on Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports, the White House added.

The Biden administration on Wednesday also announced the nomination of Caroline Kennedy, daughter of former President John F. Kennedy, for the post US Ambassador to Australia.

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US Seeks to Double Stimulus Taper, Raise Interest Rate 3 Times in 2022 - Powell

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will double the pace of the tapering of the US pandemic-era stimulus beginning in January and have as many as three interest rate hikes in 2022 as long as COVID-19 does not greatly disrupt economic growth or the labor market, Chairman Jerome Powell said.

"If the economy were to slow down significantly, then you would expect that would have an effect of slowing down rate increases," Powell told a news conference on Wednesday. "But we'd have to look at our two goals, maximum employment and price stability and we make policy based on them."

Under the accelerated taper, the Federal Reserve will cut \$30 billion monthly from its scheduled buying of \$120 billion of bonds and assets a month that it had committed to since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

The Federal Reserve had previously set a taper rate of \$15 billion per month in November. The faster pace of tapering should bring the stimulus program to an end by March, paving way for the first pandemic-era rate hike by as early as April.

The central bank's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee has kept benchmark US interest rates unchanged in a range of between zero and 0.25% for almost two years now. A Federal Reserve projection released on Wednesday showed that the benchmark interest rate could rise to as high as 0.9% in 2022, suggesting that a 0.3% hike could be applied three times during the year.

Powell, however, told reporters that he was mindful of the uncertainties and risks from the protracted coronavirus pandemic, especially those posed by the latest known variant, the Omicron.

The variant has been described by the World Health Organization as highly transmissible, though there was no certainty if it was as dangerous as the Delta strain that caused a renewed spike in deaths last year.

"Delta had the effect of slowing down hiring and it actually had an effect on global supply chains," Powell said, adding that the Omicron might be disruptive to the economy too. "At this

point we don't know much. We'll know a whole lot more in three weeks and we'll know more than that in six weeks."

The Federal Reserve projected that the US economy will grow by 5.5% this year and 4% next year. Unemployment is expected to fall to 3.5% by the end of 2021, well below the 4% jobless rate that the central bank classifies as full employment.

The economy shrank 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. After a robust 3.5% recovery in the first quarter of this year, the Federal Reserve projected a 6.5% expansion target for all of 2021. But spotty growth in subsequent quarters forced the central bank to dial back on the target.

Aside from misreading the economy, Powell also acknowledged that the Federal Reserve had got the inflation picture wrong.

US consumer prices were up 6.8% in the year to November, for their fastest growth since 1982, as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions. Producer prices jumped by a record 9.6% last month, year-on-year. Under its mandate, the Federal Reserve is supposed to keep inflation at around 2% a year and raise rates if they went higher.

"The inflation that we got was not at all the inflation we were looking for or talking about in the framework," Powell said in defense of the central bank. "It really was a completely different thing. It was to do with strong monetary policy and fiscal stimulus into an economy that was recovering rapidly ... (instead) there were these supply-side barriers."

Many economists have criticized the Federal Reserve for exacerbating the inflation situation by holding on longer than necessary to its stimulus program, which added to the trillions of dollars spent by the former Trump and current Biden administrations to deal with the pandemic.

Despite raging price pressures, Powell for months called inflation in the United States "transient" or "transitory" before dumping that language a month ago, just after President Joe Biden gave him a new four-year term as Federal Reserve chair. Powell denied on Wednesday that his pivot was motivated by the reappointment.

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Biden Nominates Career Diplomat Caroline Kennedy to Be US Envoy to Australia - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has nominated career diplomat Caroline Kennedy to be the next US Ambassador to Australia, the White House said.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals to serve in key roles: Caroline Kennedy, Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Commonwealth of Australia," the White House said in a press release on Wednesday. Kennedy previously served as the US Ambassador to Japan from 2013 to 2017, where she helped advance the realignment of US forces in Okinawa and increased student exchange between the United States and Japan, the release said.

In November, Kennedy was awarded the Grand Cordon of the Rising Sun, the highest civilian award of Japan, for her work to strengthen US-Japanese relations.

If confirmed by the Senate, Kennedy will serve in her new ambassadorial post as the Biden administration seeks to enhance cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China.

The United States plans to expand military infrastructure in Australia and the Indo-Pacific islands, according to the Pentagon. Moreover, the United States will sell nuclear-powered submarines to Australia as part of the new AUKUS partnership.

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UN Spokesman Tests Positive for COVID-19, Will Isolate Per Medical Guidelines - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement that he tested positive for the novel coronavirus and will quarantine himself as per medical guidelines.

"Earlier today, as part of routine testing for work, I received a positive result on a COVID-19 PCR test. I am in close contact with the UN Medical Services and will isolate as per medical guidelines," Dujarric said on Wednesday.

Dujarric said he was fully vaccinated and had received a booster shot. He said he was experiencing "very mild" symptoms and will continue working from home.

"Out of an abundance of caution, the Spokesperson's Office will operate virtually until the end of this week," Dujarric added.

The United Nations daily press briefing was held virtually on Wednesday by deputy spokesman Farhan Haq.

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Biden Says US Will Do 'Whatever It Takes' to Rebuild Kentucky After Devastating Tornadoes

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US federal government will do whatever it takes to help the state of Kentucky rebuild and recover from a deadly string of tornadoes that hit the region on Friday and Saturday, President Joe Biden said during a visit to the state.

"I intend to do whatever it takes as long as it takes to support your state, your local leaders, as you recover and rebuild, because you will recover and you will rebuild," Biden said on Wednesday. "I just approved a request that I wasn't sure I had the authority to do, but turns out I do. The government's going to cover 100% of the cost for the first 30 days for all the emergency work, every single cost, the federal government's going to take care of."

Biden noted that the tornadoes, which hit several states including Kentucky, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee, have caused at least 74 deaths.

The federal funds being provided to Kentucky order will be used for debris removal and emergency protective measures, the White House said in a statement.

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COVID-19 Cases in Americas Triple in 2021 Over First Year of Pandemic - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Coronavirus infections in The Americas tripled in 2021 despite a vaccination rate of 56 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa Etienne said.

"When we compare 2020 to 2021, this year was undoubtedly worse, with more than 98 million infections and 2.3 million lives lost," Etienne said in a press release on Wednesday.

Infections in 2021 represented a three-fold increase over 2020, Etienne said.

More than 1.3 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in the Americas, and 56 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated, Etienne added.

At the same time, Etienne warned millions in the region have yet to receive a single dose, with vaccin inequity a key obstacle to controlling the pandemic.

Over the past week, the Americas reported 926,056 coronavirus infections - an 18.4 percent increase from the previous week, according to PAHO.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

* US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he will be talking at length with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in the days ahead.

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday said in response to Biden's statement about plans to hold another meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin that such a possibility existed, but there was no agreement yet on the timeframe of the potential talks.

PUTIN-XI TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping have discussed the US-organized Summit for Democracy and noted that it is counterproductive and imposes new dividing lines, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov said on Wednesday.

* Some countries interfere in China's and Russia's affairs, therefore, the two countries need to make more joint efforts to protect their security interests, Xi Jinping said at a virtual meeting with Putin.

* Putin and Jinping have discussed Moscow's idea on preparing a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and consider it necessary to hold it in 2022, Ushakov said.

* Putin informed Xi Jinping about his recent conversation with US President Joe Biden, Ushakov said.

RUSSIA-GERMANY DIPLOMATIC DISPUTE

* Germany has declared two employees of the Russian Embassy in Berlin personae non gratae over the case of the murder of Georgian citizen Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Wednesday.

* The Russian Embassy in Berlin announced that it had lodged a strong protest with the German Foreign Ministry in connection with the decision of the German authorities to expel two Russian diplomats over the case of the murder of Khangoshvili.

* Russia will respond to the expulsion of two diplomats from Berlin, the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said,

RUSSIA'S SECURITY PROPOSALS

* Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov explained to the ambassadors of the United Kingdom and a number of diplomatic missions of Western countries Russia's initiative on security guarantees, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov shared Moscow's proposals on European security, and she will take these ideas back to Washington.

* Russia has officially handed over proposals on security guarantees to the United States and is in touch with Washington, the Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said.

* Ryabkov will represent Russia during negotiations with the United States on security guarantees, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States is ready to support diplomatic efforts and the Normandy format to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, the US Embassy in Russia said in a statement following a visit to Moscow by Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried.

* Russia has no aggressive intentions toward Ukraine, this is a false message, but it has the right to move military units across its own territory, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, commenting on the statement following the meeting of G7 Foreign Ministers.

EU PROPOSALS ON GAS CONTRACTS

* The European Commission on Wednesday proposes the European Union abandon long-term contracts for gas imports after 2049 and evaluate the state of storage facilities.

* It is necessary to wait for the end of EU discussions on the idea of limiting long-term gas contracts by 2049, as the bloc's position on the matter may become balanced, Russian Deputy Energy Minister Pavel Sorokin said.

* There are no risks to gas supplies in Europe despite the low filling levels of storage facilities, Kadri Simson, the European commissioner for energy, said.

KHANGOSHVILI MURDER CASE IN GERMANY

* The Berlin high court on Wednesday found Russian citizen Vadim Sokolov (Krasikov) guilty of the murder of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent, and sentenced him to life imprisonment, presiding judge Olaf Arnoldi said.

* The verdict against a Russian citizen in the case of murder of Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent, is biased and politically motivated, Russian Ambassador to Germany Sergei Nechaev said.

* A mastermind behind the murder of Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent, is not yet established, a spokesperson of the German Prosecutor General's Office said.

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Legal Advocacy Group Demands COVID-19 Boosters for Over 21,000 Migrants Jailed in US

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) needs to begin providing COVID-19 booster injections to more than 21,000 migrants now held in immigration detention centers, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said in a letter to DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Wednesday.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Immigration and Customs (ICE) detention centers have become places where infection rates are 20 times higher than in the general public, with more than 31,400 people in detention testing positive to date, the letter said.

"It appears that ICE has no plan for detention facilities to provide booster shots," attorney for the ACLU National Prison Project Eunice Cho said in a press release. "This is yet another example of ICE's cavalier approach to the health and safety of people in detention."

The letter also criticized ICE for relying on the single-shot Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine, which has the lowest efficacy of all available inoculations and requires a booster after just two months to ensure protection.

In addition to the letter, the ACLU and seven of its affiliates also filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and local public records act requests regarding the provision of COVID-19 vaccine boosters in 30 facilities with the largest incidence of COVID-19 outbreaks nationwide.

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Biden Amends Kentucky Disaster Declaration After Deadly String of Tornadoes - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has amended the Kentucky disaster declaration following the devastating tornadoes that ravaged several US states but had the worst impact on Kentucky, the White House said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. made additional disaster assistance available to the Commonwealth of Kentucky by authorizing an increase in the level of Federal funding for emergency work undertaken in the Commonwealth of Kentucky as a result of severe storms, straight-line winds, flooding, and tornadoes beginning on December 10, 2021, and continuing," the statement said.

The declaration made available federal funding for emergency work, hazard mitigation and for other immediate needs, the statement also said.

"Under the President's order today, federal funds for debris removal and emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, has been increased to 100 percent of the total eligible costs for a 30-day period from the date of declaration," the statement added.

On Friday and Saturday, a series of tornadoes swept through the central and southern parts of the United States, leaving behind a trail of destruction and casualties. The tornadoes hit several US states, including Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee. On Saturday, Biden approved the disaster declaration for Kentucky and ordered federal assistance for the state as the tornadoes killed more than 70 people.

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US Charges 4 in \$35Mln COVID-19 Relief Fraud Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - An unsealed indictment charges four additional defendants for fraudulently obtaining and laundering millions of dollars in forgivable Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) COVID-19 relief loans guaranteed by the US Small Business Administration (SBA), the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Hamza Abbas, 29, Khalid Abbas, 55, Abdul Fatani, 55, all of Richmond, Texas; and Syed Ali, 53, of Sugar Land, Texas, conspired with others to submit more than 80 false and fraudulent PPP loan applications by falsifying the number of employees and the average monthly payroll expenses," the department said in a press release.

In total, 15 individuals across two states have now been charged in the conspiracy, the release said.

The defendants sought over \$35 million in PPP loan funds and obtained approximately \$18 million in PPP loan proceeds, the release added.

The superseding indictment unsealed on Wednesday further alleges that the defendants laundered a portion of the fraudulent loan proceeds by writing checks from companies that received PPP loans to fake employees, according to the release.

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US Transportation Department Says Will Provide 20% More Federal Highway Aid in 2022

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Transportation Department said on Wednesday it will provide \$52.5 billion in Federal-aid Highway Program apportionments in fiscal year 2022.

"The U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) announced today that it is providing \$52.5 billion in funding to all 50 states and the District of Columbia under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, also known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act," the Transportation Department said.

The \$52.5 billion in apportioned funding represents an increase of more than 20% as compared to fiscal year 2021, the release added.

The Transportation Department is committed to delivering on the promise of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and putting people to work modernizing US infrastructure to be safer, more sustainable and more efficient, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in the press release.

The funding will help reduce the backlog of major highway and bridge repairs and increase the number of communities that have strategies to reduce traffic deaths and serious injuries, the Transportation Department said.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law authorizes FHWA program funding from the Highway Trust Fund, which will be distributed through an apportionment process that determines the amount available to each state.

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Austin, Canadian Counterpart Discuss Concerns Over Russian Troops Near Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Canadian Minister of National Defence Anita Anand discussed concerns over Russian troops near Ukraine, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"The two leaders discussed their concerns over the Russian build-up around Ukraine and reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They also discussed security in the Indo-Pacific and China's increasing assertiveness in the region," Kirby said.

Austin and Anand agreed on the importance of investment in modern forces, and "the need to continue to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command," the Pentagon added.

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US to Examine 'All Options' if Canada Adopts Digital Service Tax - Trade Office

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will examine all options in case Canada adopts the Digital Service Tax (DST), US Trade Representative Office spokesperson Adam Hodge said on Wednesday.

"If Canada adopts a DST, USTR would examine all options, including under our trade agreements and domestic statutes," Hodge said in a statement.

Hodge expressed Washington's concerns over Ottawa's desire to pursue a unilateral DST.

"As noted in comments to Canada regarding the DST described in Canada's 2021 budget document, most DSTs have been designed in ways that discriminate against US companies, as they single out American firms for taxation while effectively excluding national firms engaged in similar lines of business," he noted.

USTR continues to strongly oppose any new DSTs adopted by US trading partners, he added. Hodge underscored the importance to avoid imposing unilateral DSTs prior to the implementation of the agreement reached by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the G20 in October.

"That agreement will help end the race to the bottom over multinational corporate taxation by leveling the corporate tax playing field. Canada's proposed DST would create the possibility of significant retroactive tax liabilities with immediate consequences for US companies," he said. OECD in October finalized an international tax deal aimed at revamping the global tax system by imposing certain restrictions on tax competition and ensuring fair revenue distribution. A major guarantee of the proposed deal was the joint implementation of a minimum 15% tax for multinational enterprises.

The international community intends to sign the multilateral convention sometime in 2022, with hopes to put it into practice in 2023.

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US, Australia Sign Agreement to Boost Cooperation to Counter Ransomware, Terrorism

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland and Australian Minister for Home Affairs Karen Andrews signed an agreement on Wednesday to increase bilateral cooperation on law enforcement activity, including on countering ransomware attacks and terrorism.

"The United States and Australia have today entered into a landmark new law enforcement partnership to stamp out serious organized criminality, terrorism, child sexual abuse and other crime," Andrews said during a press conference.

The signing of the Cloud Act Agreement will allow law enforcement agencies from the United States and Australia to share important digital information and data with each other, Andrews said.

The agreement will also ensure law enforcement agencies have timely access to data to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute serious crimes, including ransomware and cyber criminal activity targeting critical infrastructure, she added.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden Admin. to Sanction 4 Surveillance Tech Firms for Rights Abuses

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Four technology companies need to be penalized by the US for selling surveillance technology used by governments to spy on, imprison and torture critics, Senator Ron Wyden and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff said on Wednesday.

"We write to urge you to implement Global Magnitsky sanctions for technology companies that have enabled human rights abuses, including the arrests, disappearance, torture and murder of human rights activists and journalists, such as Jamal Khashoggi, by selling powerful surveillance technology to authoritarian governments," the lawmakers wrote in a letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The letter sought sanctions against the Israeli spyware firm NSO Group, which reportedly provided hacking software that allowed Saudi Arabia to target associates of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, before and after Khashoggi's 2018 murder by Saudi operatives.

The letter also cited DarkMatter, which sold technology to the United Arab Emirates, allowing the government to spy on and imprison dissidents.

In addition, the letter urged sanctions Nexa Technologies, a French firm that reportedly sold internet monitoring technology to Egypt and Libya, resulting in the arrest and torture of human rights activists who were identified via their intercepted electronic communications.

Trovicor, the final firm named in the letter, reportedly provided bulk internet monitoring technology to Bahrain that was used to intercept communications of activists who were then jailed and tortured.

Although the firms operate overseas, financial sanctions could prevent use of the US financial system, thereby blocking access to American-based investors, particularly when firms try to raise cash with stock sales, the letter said.

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US Sanctions Chinese Entities, Others in Effort to Combat Drug Trade - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 25 actors including four Chinese entities and one Chinese individual as part of a Biden administration effort to combat illegal drug trade and transnational organized crime, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"[OFAC] today designated 25 actors (10 individuals and 15 entities) in four countries for having engaged in, or attempted to engage in, activities or transactions that have materially contributed to, or pose a significant risk of materially contributing to, the international proliferation of illicit drugs or their means of production," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

The designated actors included Chinese entities Wuhan Yuancheng Gongchuang Technology, Shanghai Fast-Fine Chemicals, Hebei Huanhao Biotechnology and Hebei Atun Trading, as well as Chinese national Chuen Fat Yip, the Treasury said.

Chuen and his company, Wuhan Yuancheng Gongchuang Technology, traffic fentanyl, anabolic steroids and other synthetic drugs to the US and sell compounds and chemical precursors used in narcotics production to the public, the Treasury Department said. They were considered one of, if not the largest, producer of anabolic steroids in the world, according to the statement.

The other three entities are similarly accused of trafficking chemical or pharmaceutical products used in the illicit manufacturing of fentanyl to countries around the world including Mexico, where the narcotics made are often intended for sale in the US, the Treasury Department said.

The sanctions came on the heels of two executive orders from President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday. The two executive orders establish a US Council on Transnational Organized Crime and expand the US government's ability to target drug trafficking organizations through sanctions, the White House said in a fact sheet.

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Federal Reserve Says to Double Taper of US Stimulus From January

(Adds details, context on imminent rate hike in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it will double the pace of the tapering of the US pandemic-era stimulus to \$30 billion a month from January.

The Fed announced in November that it will cut \$15 billion a month from its monthly scheduled buying of \$120 billion of bonds and assets. "We are ready to adjust the pace of purchases if the economy's outlook changes," the central bank said in a statement after announcing the new taper rate at the monthly meeting of its policy-setting FOMC or Federal Open Market Committee.

The FOMC left benchmark US interest rates unchanged in the range of 0% to 0.25%, a level it has maintained since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

The faster pace of tapering points to the end of the stimulus program by March, paving the way for the first rate hike by as early as April.

A separate Fed projection released on Wednesday showed that the benchmark interest rate could rise to as high as 0.9% next year, suggesting that as many as three rate hikes may take place in 2022.

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"If Canada adopts a DST, USTR would examine all options, including under our trade agreements and domestic statutes," Hodge said in a statement.

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Most Americans Feel 'Worn Out' by Coronavirus Pandemic, Many Express Anger - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic has taken its toll on Americans, with six in ten saying they feel worn out by pandemic-related changes in their daily lives during the past 20 months, a Monmouth University poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Republicans (64%) are no more likely than Democrats (63%) to say they feel at least a little worn out by pandemic-related changes, but they [Republicans] are much more likely to report feeling angry (63 percent and 34 percent respectively)," a press release explaining the poll said. The American public is evenly split on whether President Joe Biden has done a good job (46%) or bad job (46%) handling the pandemic. While partisan affiliation explain much of the split,

positive ratings among independent voters for Biden's pandemic response dropped from 50 percent in November to 38 percent this month, the release said.

"The failure to get COVID under control may be playing a role there, especially for independent voters, in a growing sense of frustration with the party in power," Monmouth Polling Director Patrick Murray said in the release.

Support for face mask and social distancing rules, which went up from 52 percent in July to 63 percent in September as the delta variant spread, has gone back down to 55 percent, the release said.

Support for requiring people to show proof of vaccination in order to work in an office or other setting where they are around people has gone from a slight majority in September (53%) to a minority now (46%), the release added.

The Monmouth Poll was conducted by telephone from December 2 to December 6 with 808 adults in the United States.

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Sullivan, Russian Foreign Policy Adviser Follow Up on Biden-Putin Call - White House

(Updates with details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Russian Presidential Foreign Policy Adviser Yuriy Ushakov on Wednesday held a telephone call to follow up on the issues discussed earlier by US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the White House said.

"National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan spoke by phone today with Russian Presidential Foreign Policy Adviser Yuriy Ushakov to follow up on the December 7 call between President Biden and President Putin," the White House said in a press release.

Sullivan reiterated the United States' concerns about Russia's military activity near its border with Ukraine and underscored that the US administration will continue to coordinate with European allies to address security concerns through diplomacy, the release said.

US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried will meet with NATO allies in Brussels on Thursday to discuss a coordinated approach on the matter, the release said.

Tensions around Ukraine have been aggravated in the past several weeks by an alleged Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border and claims of a preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

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US, UK, France, Japan Ask UNSC to Hold Open Session on Human Rights in N. Korea - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States, Estonia, France, Ireland, Japan, Norway and the United Kingdom requested the UN Security Council to hold an open meeting on the alleged violations of human rights by North Korea, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the Security Council held a closed session on the situation of human rights in North Korea.

"While we are glad the Security Council discussed this important topic today, we believe it is worthy of a briefing in an open session," Thomas-Greenfield said. "Estonia, France, Ireland, Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States urge all Security Council members to support an open briefing, where we can discuss this dire human rights situation and its implications for peace and security, and focus on the actions the Security Council should take to help the countless individuals impacted by the regime."

The US diplomat said North Korea's "egregious" human rights violations destabilize international peace and security and must be prioritized within the Council.

Thomas-Greenfield stated Pyongyang holds more than 100,000 people in political prisons, where they suffer abuses, such as torture, summary executions, starvation and sexual violence. She noted that these abuses had been exacerbated by the government's implementation of measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including allegedly ordering troops to shoot on sight anyone attempting to cross its border in violation of the country's pandemic closure. Thomas-Greenfield further called on North Korea to immediately address the return of Japanese citizens abducted by Pyongyang.

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US Unveils Executive Orders to Fight Transnational Organized Crime, Illegal Drug Trade

(Adds new details in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is unveiling two executive orders directed to combat transnational organized crime and to sanction foreigners involved in illicit drug trafficking, a US official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Countering these criminal actors and their enablers is a national security priority. That is why today we are proud to announce the release of two new Executive Orders," the official said.

"One is to establish US Council on Transnational Organized Crime (USCTOC), and two - to impose sanctions on foreign persons involved in the global illicit drug trade."

Countering these criminal actors and their enablers is a national security priority, so the new council will unify leaders of several entities across the US government, including Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, State, Treasury, Defense, along with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, this official said.

"The council is in charge with ensuring that the US government deploys a comprehensive approach and effectively leverages all appropriate tools countering the threat," he added. The second Executive Order released today creates the new sanctions authority to target foreign individuals involved in a global illicit drug trafficking through sanctions and related actions, he said.

Another official clarified that under the new executive order US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced the designations of 25 targets on Wednesday. This list includes ten individuals and fifteen entities from China, Brazil, Mexico, he added. "With this new E.O., the US Government will be better poised to disrupt the global supply chain and financial networks that enable synthetic opioids and precursors chemicals to reach US markets and harm American communities," the White House said in a separate notice. This new authority will allow Washington to better target and disrupt bad actors across the whole drug trafficking system and to safeguard the US financial system from use and abuse by those involved in the illicit drug trade, the notice read.

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Global Debt Rises to Record \$226 Trillion in 2020 Due to Pandemic Measures - IMF

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic crisis and the measures implemented to address the pandemic have led to a record increase in the global debt to \$226 trillion, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Wednesday.

"In 2020, we observed the largest one-year debt surge since World War II, with global debt rising to \$226 trillion as the world was hit by a global health crisis and a deep recession. Debt was already elevated going into the crisis, but now governments must navigate a world of record-high public and private debt levels, new virus mutations, and rising inflation," the IMF said in a blog post.

The IMF explained that the global debt increased by 28 percent to 256 percent of GDP in 2020. The global public debt ratio increased to a record 99 percent of GDP, while private debt from non-financial corporations and households also reached new highs, it said.

Advanced economies are facing the most significant spike in public debt, which increased from 70% of GDP in 2007 to 124% in 2020, it added.

"The large increase in debt was justified by the need to protect people's lives, preserve jobs and avoid a wave of bankruptcies," the IMF said. "But the debt surge amplifies vulnerabilities, especially as financing conditions tighten."

The high debt levels limit the ability of governments to support the economic recovery and governments should impose targeted fiscal support to solve outstanding economic issues.

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Ex-Minneapolis Policeman Pleads Guilty to Violating George Floyd's Civil Rights - Filing

(Changes attribution in headline, lede, paras 2-3; adds background, details in paras 4-6; edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty to federal civil rights violations in the murder of George Floyd as part of a plea agreement with prosecutors, court documents revealed on Wednesday.

"The defendant is pleading guilty because he is in fact guilty of Count One of the Indictment and Count One of the Information. In pleading guilty, the defendant admits that the following facts are true, and that those facts establish his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and constitute

relevant conduct pursuant to the United States Sentencing Guideline," the plea agreement between Chauvin and prosecutors said.

Chauvin agreed to plead guilty to two counts of deprivation of rights - one for his role in Floyd's death and the other for a separate physical altercation with a minor in 2017 - the plea agreement said.

Chauvin is currently serving a state sentence of 22.5 years in prison for murdering Floyd in May, 2020. The murder sparked racial justice and police reform demonstrations around the world after footage of the incident went viral.

The prosecutors and Chauvin agreed that the court should impose a federal prison sentence of 240-300 months, as well as a five-year term of supervised release, the plea agreement said.

The federal sentence should be served concurrently with the 22.5 year state sentence, meaning that both would be served at the same time, the plea agreement added.

Chauvin also agreed to permanently forfeit any law enforcement certifications and acknowledged that his felon status will prevent him from seeking future employment in any law enforcement capacity, the plea agreement said.

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UN Urges All Parties to De-escalate Ukraine Tensions, Adhere to Minsk Accords - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues to call on all parties to de-escalate tensions around Ukraine and ensure peaceful settlement of the conflict in accordance with the Minsk agreements, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We have been urging all concerned parties to remain focused on resolving differences through dialogue at all levels, de-escalating tensions and safeguarding regional peace," Haq said. "We remind all stakeholders of the responsibility to ensure peaceful settlement of the conflict in accordance with the Minsk agreements."

Tensions around Ukraine have been aggravated in the past few weeks by an alleged Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border and "preparations for invasion." Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its own security.

Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

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Moderna Says 2 Vaccine Doses 'Significantly' Less Effective Against Omicron

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Two doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine provide a lower level of protection against the new Omicron variant than against the wild-type virus, while a booster significantly increases neutralizing titers, the company said on Wednesday. "After the 2-dose primary series of our vaccine, while individuals had detectable neutralizing titers against Omicron, neutralizing titers were significantly lower compared to the wild-type virus," Moderna Inc. said in a tweet. "[A] booster dose of mRNA-1273 at the 50 µg dose level significantly increased neutralizing titers against Omicron."

The new data are encouraging as the pharmaceutical company continues to work on addressing the Omicron variant and expects more data on a 100 µg dose booster in the coming week, according to the statement.

The Omicron variant of the coronavirus has now been confirmed in at least 36 US states and over 75 countries, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. However, the Delta variant still represents approximately 96% of cases across the country, while the Omicron variant is estimated to represent about 3% of US cases.

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Aging B-52's to Stay in Service With Long Range Missiles Into 2050s – US Air Force

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The aging fleet of B-52 strategic bombers, which first flew in the 1950s, will stay operational for at least 30 more years re-equipped with new Long Range Standoff (LRSO) nuclear missiles, the US Air Force said on Wednesday.

"The B-52 has and will continue to serve as a vital component of the nuclear triad," the US Air Force Global Strike Command (GSC), which directs strategic deterrence and long-range strike operations, told Newsweek.

Originally designed as a high-altitude, high-speed penetrating nuclear bomber, the B-52 now provides long-range cruise missile carriage and launch capabilities using the AGM-86B Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM), GSC said.

"Over the next decade the B-52 will receive the ALCM's follow-on in the LRSO missile," GSC said. "Once these efforts are complete, the aircraft will have sufficient structural longevity to serve into the 2050s," the command said

Boeing Bombers Senior Program Director Jennifer Wong told Newsweek the air force currently deploys 76 B-52's and plans to keep them all flying through a Commercial Engine Replacement Program, Radar Modernization Program and an Advanced Extremely High Frequency satellite.

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US National Archives Releases Additional 1,491 Documents on John F. Kennedy Assassination

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) said on Wednesday it released an additional 1,491 declassified records related to the assassination of former US President John F. Kennedy.

"In accordance with President [Joe] Biden's directive of October 22, 2021, the National Archives today posted 1,491 documents subject to the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992," the National Archives said in a press release.

The US government over the next year will continue to review 14,000 previously withheld records to determine if any additional records should be made available to the public, however, certain records will be withheld if there is a strong reason to do so, according to the release. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, prompting a whirlwind of questions from the public. Several investigations came to the conclusion that the shots were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, who was arrested shortly after the murder. Two days later, he was shot by Jack Ruby, an owner of a club in Dallas, while being escorted to a car that was supposed to take him to a county jail. A large number of conspiracy theories striving to explain the assassination of Kennedy and the murder of Oswald have emerged in the decades since the events took place.

Under the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, the NARA was required to disclose the entire collection to the public in exactly 25 years, which was on October 26, 2017, unless the US president decided that releasing the information would harm national security or current foreign relations.

The national archivist has since released more than 250,000 records concerning Kennedy's assassination — more than 90% of its collection — to the public.

From: Kristopher Rivera - k.rivera@sputniknews.com

Subject:

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US 7-Day Average of Daily COVID Deaths Up 5%, Omicron Found in 36 States - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The seven-day average of US daily deaths from COVID-19 is up 5% from the previous week amid a rise in cases caused by the Omicron variant of the virus that has been confirmed in 36 states, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"The seven-day average of daily deaths are about 1,100 per day, which is an increase of about five percent over the previous week," Walensky said during a White House COVID-19 Response Team press briefing.

The Omicron variant of the coronavirus has now been confirmed in at least 36 states and over 75 countries, Walensky said. However, the Delta variant still represents approximately 96% of cases across the country, the Omicron variant is estimated to represent about 3% of US cases, Walensky added.

The US expects to see the number of cases involving the Omicron variant, which early data suggests to be more transmissible than the Delta variant, to grow in the coming weeks, Walensky said.

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US Senate Passes \$768Bln Defense Spending Bill, Sends to Biden for Signature

(Modifies headline, lede; adds details, background in paras 2, 4-6)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday passed the final version of the \$768 billion defense spending bill for 2022 and now sends it to President Joe Biden's desk to be signed into law.

The Senate passed the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) with a 89-10 vote. The NDAA does not include sanctions against Russian sovereign debt or sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite attempts by lawmakers to add them to the legislation amid rising tensions with Moscow over the buildup of forces near Ukraine.

The budget earmarks \$7.1 billion for operations in the Indo-Pacific region, with initiatives to address challenges from China such as alleged risks to supply chains for critical defense systems.

The defense spending bill also includes \$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative and \$300 million in security aid for Ukraine.

The legislation would also require biennial reporting on alleged Russian influence operations and campaigns targeting American military alliances.

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Majority of US Senate Passes \$768Bln Defense Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A majority of the US Senate on Wednesday voted in favor of passing the final version of the \$768 billion defense spending bill for 2022 and will now send it to President Joe Biden's desk to be signed into law.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) does not include sanctions against Russian sovereign debt or sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite attempts by lawmakers to add them to the legislation amid rising tensions with Moscow over the buildup of forces near Ukraine.

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US Crude Oil Stockpiles See Sharpest Weekly Fall in 3 Months - EIA

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Weekly stockpiles of crude oil in the United States fell the most in three months as energy consumption approached levels seen before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed Wednesday.

Crude inventories fell by 4.6 million barrels in the week to December 10, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed.

Historical EIA data showed it was the most US crude barrels consumed in a week since mid-December.

Industry analysts polled by US media forecast a usage of just around 1.7 million barrels for the week in the world's largest energy consuming country.

Prior to this, crude stockpiles had risen in seven of out 11 weeks, resulting in a net build of 14.5 million barrels over the past three months.

Crude was not the only energy component to experience an inventory drop in the United States last week.

Gasoline stockpiles fell by almost 720,000 barrels, snapping two weeks of back-to-back builds totaling nearly 8.0 million barrels. Analysts had predicted a 1.6-million barrel build instead for gasoline last week.

Gasoline aside, inventories of distillates, the so-called "middle of the barrel" higher-viscous product refined into things like diesel and jet fuel, fell by 2.85 million barrels last week after two previous weeks of builds totaling 4.8 million barrels. Analysts had expected a rise of 1.0 million barrels in distillate stocks for last week.

The weekly EIA data restores some optimism in an industry hurt recently by the emergence of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which the Paris-based International Energy Agency said could "temporarily slow" the recovery in oil demand decimated by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus 20 months ago. US crude prices hit a seven-year high of more than \$85 per barrel in mid-October before falling to around \$70 this week on Omicron concerns.

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US Survey Shows Record Decline in Teen Drug Use During Pandemic - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - An annual US survey of teen drug use dating back to 1975 delivered unexpected results - teen use of marijuana, alcohol and vaped nicotine fell by the largest amounts ever recorded, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Wednesday. "We have never seen such dramatic decreases in drug use among teens in just a one-year period. These data are unprecedented and highlight one unexpected potential consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic," National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Director Nora Volkow said in a press release.

At first glance the survey results appear counterintuitive, especially since NIDA has reported record drug overdose deaths during the pandemic, topping 100,000 in a 12 month period ending last spring.

Volkow said seismic shifts in the day-to-day lives of adolescents during the pandemic obviously played a role in declining teen drug use, but she was at a loss in explaining why.

"Moving forward, it will be crucial to identify the pivotal elements of this past year that contributed to decreased drug use - whether related to drug availability, family involvement, differences in peer pressure, or other factors - and harness them to inform future prevention efforts," Volkow said.

The annual survey showed that in 2021, 7.1 percent of eighth graders reported using marijuana in the past year, down from 11.4 percent in 2020, the release said.

Similar declines were recorded for 10th graders, with 17.3 percent reporting marijuana use in the past year compared to 28.0 percent in 2020. For 12th graders marijuana use fell to 30.5 percent in 2021 compared with 35.2 percent in 2020, the release said.

Alcohol use in the previous year fell to 17.2 percent from 20.5 percent for eighth graders; to 28.5 percent from 40.7 percent for 10th graders; and to 46.5 percent from 55.3 percent for 12th graders, the release added.

Also in 2021, 12.1 percent of eighth graders reported vaping nicotine compared with 16.6 percent in 2020. For 10th graders 19.5 percent reported vaping, compared to 30.7 percent in 2020, and 26.6 percent of 12th graders said the same in 2021, compared to 34.5 percent in 2020, according to the release.

The annual survey is conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, and funded by the NIDA, which is part of the NIH.

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White House Says Confident US Schools Will Not Be Placed on Lockdown Due to Omicron

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is confident schools in the United States will not be placed on lockdown as a result of the spread of the coronavirus Omicron variant, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are very confident that that's gonna be the case, we are not gonna shut down. We are confident by the resources and by what we have learned and the tools that we have,"

Jean-Pierre said when asked about the possibility of the closure of schools.

On Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the number of new coronavirus cases in the United States was up 37% as compared to last week and the number of COVID-19-related deaths over that period had increased by 28%.

On Monday, the California authorities reinstated an indoor mask mandate for all non-exempt individuals through January 15 to mitigate the spread of the Omicron variant during the holiday season.

The health authorities in South Africa, where the Omicron was first detected, have said the variant was found in vaccinated individuals, the cases are mild and the reactions in the Western countries to it are surprising and unfounded.

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US Separating Unvaccinated Sailors in Fleet, Ready to Expel Them From Service - Navy

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Navy is going to separate active duty sailors who have not received vaccination against COVID-19 and those who continue to refuse to do so by the end of next November will be expelled from the service, the force's personnel chief said on Wednesday.

"We want every sailor to receive the vaccine and stay [in the] Navy. And if a sailor gets their shot, we will honor that and make every effort to retain them," Navy Director of Military Personnel Plans and Policy Rear Adm. James Waters told a press conference, Defense One reported.

The Navy will start processing unvaccinated active-duty sailors in the separation process under a new policy guidance that was announced on Wednesday, the report said. Thousands face the termination of their careers and will have to repay bonuses and education fees they received, the report added.

"[T]hose who continue to refuse the vaccine will be required to leave the Navy," Waters said.

On December 9, the US Navy recorded 5,731 sailors who were still unvaccinated, comprising 1.65% of the active-duty force. The Navy received 2,705 religious accommodation requests but has not approved any of them, according to the report.

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Donfried Says Will Take Back Russia's Proposals on European Security to Washington

(Adds more remarks from Donfried in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Wednesday that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov shared Moscow's proposals on European security, and she will take these ideas back to Washington.

"Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov asked to meet with me to share Moscow's proposals on European security. I will take these ideas back to Washington," Donfried said.

All her engagements in Moscow were to reinforce President Joe Biden's goal to create "a stable and predictable relationship" between Russia and the United States, according to Donfried. She noted that she had an opportunity to speak directly to Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Dmitry Kozak to share US concerns and views.

"In this meeting, I underscored the US commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and independence and territorial integrity and stressed the need for the Russian government to deescalate. I also made clear that president Biden believes that the only responsible and positive solution to the situation is through diplomacy," she said.

Donfried arrived in Moscow from Kiev, where she met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, head of the presidential administration Andriy Yermak and deputy head of the Ukrainian delegation in the contact group on Donbas Andriy Kostin.

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Consul Verifying Reports of Russians Shot at While Rushing California Border in Cars

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik that he is in contact with US authorities to verify reports of Russian undocumented migrants being found in two vehicles shot at while barreling through a California border crossing.

"We are in contact with the border service and immigration authorities to verify this information and confirm whether there are Russian citizens there," Zakharov said.

On Tuesday, media reported that two vehicles carrying 18 Russian migrants including children were shot at by an officer at the California border when trying to cross into the US.

The two vehicles collided, and two of occupants suffered minor head contusions, according to local Fox.

The drivers of both vehicles have been arrested and face charges of engaging in illegal migration, according to the media outlet.

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Ex-Minneapolis Policeman Pleads Guilty to Violating George Floyd's Civil Rights - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty to federal civil rights violations in the murder of George Floyd as part of a plea agreement with prosecutors, an NBC affiliate reported on Wednesday.

Chauvin pleaded guilty to depriving George Floyd of his civil rights under the color of law during the incident that led to Floyd's death, the report said.

The plea agreement also contains stipulations that federal charges will be dismissed in a separate incident and that Chauvin will never again be able to serve as a licensed law enforcement officer, the report added.

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US 'Alarmed' by Potential Deployment of Wagner Group in Mali - State Dept.

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is alarmed by the information about a potential deployment in Mali of the private military company Wagner Group, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We are alarmed by a potential deployment of Russia-backed Wagner Group forces in Mali," Price said in a statement. "We understand that the reported deal - costing \$10 million per month - diverts money that could be used to support the Malian armed forces and public services to pay for the deployment of Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Wagner Group forces to Mali."

Price accused the Wagner Group of engaging in destabilizing activities and human rights abuses, and asserted that its presence in Mali will not bring peace to that country.

Price also noted that the Wagner Group has been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union designated it earlier this week.

"Countries that experience Wagner Group deployments within their borders soon find themselves poorer, weaker and less secure. The cases of Libya, CAR, Ukraine and Syria are examples of the detrimental impact of Wagner Group deployments," he said.

In addition, Price called on the government of Mali not to divert funds from nation's armed forces used to fight terrorism.

"The invitation to the Wagner Group would disrupt efforts by the international community to support the fight against terrorism and could put at risk the contributions of more than 20,000 international peacekeepers and troops who serve Mali at no cost to the people or government," he added.

On Monday, the EU member states' foreign ministers met in Brussels and decided to impose sanctions against eight individuals and four legal entities, which - according to the bloc - are associated with the international activities of the Wagner Group.

The Russian Foreign Ministry called the new EU sanctions illegitimate.

Russia has firmly denied its involvement in paramilitary activities in Africa, saying the presence of Russian instructors in foreign countries is official and done at the request of their governments.

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US Retail Sales Slows More Than Fifth in November Amid Inflation Spike - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US retail sales grew by 0.3% in November, down October's growth of 1.7%, amid an inflation spike that has raised prices of all products, Commerce Department data showed on Wednesday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for November 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$639.8 billion, an increase of 0.3 percent from the previous month," the Commerce Department said in a release.

Economists polled by US media had forecast retail sales to grow by 0.8% in November, showing a miss in expectations.

However, annual retail sales remained strong, growing 18.2% from November 2020, in the face of the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

In the monthly reading, almost every major component of retail sales grew at a slower pace or fell last month compared with October. Automobile sales increased 0.3% from the prior 0.9%.

The electronics sector saw a 4.6% drop and general merchandise stores registered a 1.2% decline.

The economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.0% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the central bank though is inflation running at near 40-year highs as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

US consumer prices were up 6.8% in the year to November, for their fastest growth since 1982. Producer prices, meanwhile, jumped by a record 9.6% last month, year-on-year.

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Biden Says 'Will Be Talking at Length' With Putin in Days Ahead

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he will be talking at length with Russian President Vladimir Putin in days ahead.

"We will be talking at length," Biden told reporters at the White House.

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One-Third of US Democrats Would Back Harris if Biden Retires in 2024 - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Most Democrats want President Joe Biden to seek re-election, with Vice President Kamala Harris the top choice if Biden chooses not to run, a Morning Consult poll revealed on Wednesday.

"In the hypothetical test, 31 percent of potential Democratic primary voters said they would support Harris, driven by 52 percent of Black potential primary voters and 43 percent of its youngest potential primary voters (those ages 18-34)," a press release explaining the poll said. Nearly two-thirds of Democrats (63 percent) say Biden should "definitely" or "probably" seek re-election in 2024. But among all voters, 58 percent said Biden should leave office as a single term president, including 67 percent of independent voters and 87 percent of Republicans, the release said.

Aside from Harris, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is supported by 11 percent of potential Democratic primary voters, while another 8 percent each said they would support Senator Elizabeth Warren or Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the release added. Former President Donald Trump has also fueled chatter of another presidential bid, and at this point, has more backing for a 2024 run than Biden (39 vs 34 percent). However, a majority of voters would oppose campaigns by Trump (56 percent) and Biden (58 percent), according to the release.

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Russian Citizen Danchenko's Defense Asks Court to Delay Trial From April to September

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Russian citizen Igor Danchenko's defense asked a US district judge on Wednesday to delay the trial date from April to September due to a multitude of classified documents in the case, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.

During a status conference on Wednesday, US district judge Anthony Trenga did not immediately agree to change the date but instead said he would wait until next week when prosecutors are set to provide a report on whether the government has completed the disclosure procedure for classified documents.

The judge has allowed Danchenko to travel throughout the US state of Virginia with his family without any special permission from pretrial services.

Next status conference has been scheduled for January 12.

In November, Danchenko pleaded not guilty in a US court on all five counts of making false statements to the FBI about alleged collusion between former President Donald Trump and the Kremlin.

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Donfried Says Will Take Back Russia's Proposals on European Security to Washington

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Wednesday that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister

Sergey Ryabkov shared Moscow's proposals on European security, and she will take these ideas back to Washington.

On Wednesday, Donfried met in Moscow with Ryabkov and Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak. Donfried arrived in Moscow from Kiev, where she met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, head of the presidential administration Andriy Yermak and deputy head of the Ukrainian delegation in the contact group on Donbas Andriy Kostin.

"Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov asked to meet with me to share Moscow's proposals on European security. I will take these ideas back to Washington," Donfried said.

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US Navy Tests High-Energy Laser Weapon System in Gulf of Aden - Command

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has carried out a demonstration of a new high-energy laser weapon system in the Gulf of Aden, the Naval Forces Central Command announced on Wednesday.

"Amphibious transport dock ship USS Portland (LPD 27) conducted a high-energy laser weapon system demonstration, Dec. 14, while sailing in the Gulf of Aden. During the demonstration, the Solid State Laser - Technology Maturation Laser Weapons System Demonstrator (LWSD) Mark 2 MOD 0 aboard Portland successfully engaged a static surface training target," the statement said.

Portland was chosen to host the laser weapon technology back in 2018. The vessel is a part of the Essex Amphibious Ready Group that includes amphibious assault ship USS Essex (LHD 2), dock landing ship USS Pearl Harbor (LSD 52) and embarked Marines from the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

"The LWSD is considered a next-generation follow-on to the Laser Weapon System (LaWS) that afloat forward staging base USS Ponce (AFSB(I)-15) tested for three years while operating in the Middle East," the statement said.

According to the US navy, the region around the Gulf of Aden offers a unique environment for innovation.

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US 'Alarmed' by Potential Deployment of Wagner Group in Mali – State Dept.

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"We are alarmed by a potential deployment of Russia-backed Wagner Group forces in Mali," Price said in a statement. "We understand that the reported deal -- costing \$10 million per month -- diverts money that could be used to support the Malian Armed Forces and public services to pay for the deployment of Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Wagner Group forces to Mali. Price accused Wagner Group of destabilizing activities and human rights abuses, and asserted that its presence in Mali will not bring peace to the country.

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Blinken Cuts Short Asia Tour After Reports of COVID-19 Case Among Traveling Group

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US State Secretary Antony Blinken on Wednesday called off his planned visit to Thailand, which was to become the final stop of this three-country tour, to mitigate COVID-19 risks after reports of a case among his traveling group, the US State Department said.

According to media reports, a press corps member has tested positive for COVID-19.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. The Secretary expressed his deep regret to the Foreign Minister that he would not be able to visit Bangkok this week. He explained that, in order to mitigate the risk of the spread of COVID-19 and to prioritize the health and safety of the U.S. traveling party and those they would otherwise come into contact with, the Secretary would be returning to Washington, D.C. out of an abundance of caution," spokesman, Ned Price said.

During the tour, the top US diplomat has visited Indonesia and Malaysia.

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Blinken Announces Deal to Speed Up Malaysia's Transition to Clean Energy During Asia Tour

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Malaysia are launching a partnership to accelerate the latter's transition to clean energy, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"Today we're announcing a new partnership between Malaysia and the United States to speed up Malaysia's transition to clean energy. It's called the Power Sector Program. And the goal is to help Malaysia attract more and higher quality clean energy investments, and to create the conditions for that investment to yield the greatest possible results," Blinken said.

Washington will provide Kuala Lumpur with advice on how to attract the investment which is needed to meet clean energy goals.

"We'll provide technical assistance on upgrading Malaysia's electric grid so that it can better handle and distribute power generated by renewable sources, including solar. And we're focusing the support in regions of the country where it can do the most good, like East Malaysia,

where qualified investors can speed up the transition from diesel to solar and battery power while creating jobs and spurring growth," he said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Blinken met with Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob to discuss bilateral relations.

"The Secretary reaffirmed ASEAN centrality and highlighted U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Secretary and the Prime Minister also discussed their desire to strengthen cooperation, including on COVID-19 recovery and pandemic preparedness," the State Department said.

Blinken's visit to Malaysia follows his travel to Indonesia.