

12/16/21 Thursday

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NATO Says Ready to Take 'Confidence-Building Measures' if Russia Makes De-Escalation Steps

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance said on Thursday evening that it had received security proposals from Russia intended to reduce tensions with the bloc, but that NATO has its own security concerns as well, which Moscow must respect.

"We are gravely concerned by the substantial, unprovoked, and unjustified Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine in recent months, and reject the false Russian claims of Ukrainian and NATO provocations," the Brussels-based alliance [said on Thursday](#). "We call on Russia to immediately de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities."

"We are ready for meaningful dialogue with Russia. We reiterate our long-standing invitation to Russia for a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in the near future. We are aware of Russia's recent European security proposals. We are clear that any dialogue with Russia would have to proceed on the basis of reciprocity, address NATO's concerns about Russia's actions, be based on the core principles and foundational documents of European security, and take place in consultation with NATO's European Partners," the statement continued.

"Should Russia take concrete steps to reduce tensions, we are prepared to work on strengthening confidence-building measures," the alliance further added, noting that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) "is also a relevant platform."

The Western powers have postured as ready to [take severe measures](#) against Russia in recent weeks due to an alleged "buildup" of Russian troops in southern Russia, which NATO and the Western media have fretted may be a prelude to an invasion of Ukraine. However, while the US and UK have led the charge in promising to sanction Russia, major European Union powers like France, Germany, Italy and Spain - all members of NATO as well -

Some of the US and UK's promised responses include excluding Russia from the SWIFT bank transfer system, urging Germany to close the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline that comes from Russia, and the [further buildup](#) of NATO forces in the alliance's eastern flank nations, several of which border or are close to Russian territory.

Moscow has made clear it has no intention of invading Ukraine, but also said that it has red lines concerning NATO's relationship with the Eastern European nation, including the positioning of offensive weapons there and the eastern expansion of NATO, especially if Kiev were admitted to the alliance. Russian President Vladimir Putin has proposed to NATO that these red lines be turned into [security guarantees](#) in order to reduce regional tensions.

US President Joe Biden [has made clear](#) his administration rejects Moscow's red lines, even while drawing its own in the region. Earlier on Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy traveled to Brussels to [meet with NATO](#) Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Zelenskyy said earlier this year that Ukraine's accession to NATO is the only thing that can create peace in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, where Russian-speaking minorities have defended their autonomy and minority rights from Kiev since 2014 in a conflict that has killed more than 10,000 people.

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Dems Hold Closed-Door Meetings on Reforming Filibuster Amid Sinema, Manchin Obstruction
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Democratic senators have backed off attempting to scrap the bill-killing filibuster rule and are instead focused on revamping it in the face of intransigence by two right-wing colleagues. However, candidates seeking office are being increasingly vocal about discarding the rule, which has blocked much of US President Joe Biden's legislative agenda.

Two right-wing Democratic senators, Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), have maintained their opposition to scrapping the filibuster, warning that doing so would risk allowing sharp changes in US policy as Congress' upper chamber shifts between the two parties' control. John LaBombard, a spokesperson for Sinema, [said on Wednesday](#) that the right-wing Democrat "continues to support the Senate's 60-vote threshold, to protect the country from repeated radical reversals in federal policy which would cement uncertainty, deepen divisions, and further erode Americans' confidence in our government."

"Senator Sinema has asked those who want to weaken or eliminate the filibuster to pass voting rights legislation which she supports, if it would be good for our country to do so," LaBombard noted, adding that if a weakened filibuster was then used to pass "nationwide voter-ID law, nationwide restrictions on vote-by-mail, or other voting restrictions currently passing in some states extended nationwide."

Talking a Bill To Death

From the \$1.7 billion infrastructure and social spending bill to LGBTQ rights, abortion, and most recently, voting rights, the Democratic political agenda in Congress has stalled out over the past year thanks to a Senate rule allowing a single lawmaker to block a bill's progress unless a 60-vote supermajority can be mustered to overpower them. The filibuster, first introduced in 1806, has been amended several times, both to strengthen its bill-stopping power but also to permit certain exceptions to be made for essential business.

Thanks to a Republican commitment to blocking Biden's agenda after he beat out their candidate, Donald Trump, in the 2020 elections, little progress has been made in getting Biden-supported bills through the Senate in 2021, with the exception of certain "must pass" bills that are filibuster-proof. This, despite the fact that in the evenly-split Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris casts the tie-breaking vote and would side with the Democrats, giving them a majority capable of passing bills.

Over the summer, pressure built for the Democrats to eliminate the filibuster and force the GOP to argue against their bills on even terms, but opposition by Biden and Sens. Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) kept the rule in place. However, those talks have been

renewed in recent days as the president's massive Build Back Better Act and two bills designed to shore up voting rights, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, have stalled out in the Senate.

Despite their opposition to shredding the filibuster, both Manchin and Sinema have said they support the bills caught in the balance by the rule.

The Senate is under increasing pressure to get the bills passed, with [Biden saying](#) on Wednesday during a visit to Kentucky towns hit by powerful tornadoes that "There's nothing domestically more important than voting rights."

"If we can get the congressional voting rights done, we should do it. If we can't, we've got to keep going," he added. [On Thursday](#), he told Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Alex Padilla (D-CA) that legislation on the issue was "important for democracy."

Tester, who opposes what he calls a "one-person veto," is among those pressuring Manchin to agree to change the filibuster rules. However, instead of scrapping the filibuster, they now seek to limit its power by requiring senators to actually engage in the traditional nonstop speaking on the Senate floor, as the rule originally allowed, instead of simply submitting a written intent to do so, as has been permitted since the 1970s.

Another proposal would change the requirement for defeating a filibuster from 60 "yes" votes to 41 "no" votes; lawmakers are also considering expanding exemptions for more bills.

"The rules change should be done to be where we all have input in this rules change because we're going to have to live with it," Manchin told reporters on Wednesday, adding that the issue "a tough one ... because what goes around comes around here. You've got to be very careful what you do."

LaBombard, Sinema's spokesperson, also noted that the Arizona lawmaker believes "it is time for the Senate to publicly debate its rules, including the filibuster."

"If there are proposals to make the Senate work better for everyday Americans without risking repeated radical reversals in federal policy, Senator Sinema is eager to hear such ideas and - as always - is willing to engage in good-faith discussions with her colleagues," he added.

Running Against Reform

However, for a new crop of Democrats seeking to win office in the midterm elections next fall, reforming the filibuster simply isn't good enough.

John Fetterman, Pennsylvania's lieutenant governor who is looking to beat out Republican rival, celebrity doctor Mehmet Oz, for the Keystone State's open senate seat in November 2022, [told Axios on Tuesday](#) that Democrats should be willing to scrap the filibuster because "Voters gave us a mandate and we need to get things done, especially in the areas of like voter suppression and Roe v. Woe and minimum wage."

"It's incumbent on us as a party to use the opportunities that we have," he said, referring to Democratic control of both houses of Congress and the White House, which should theoretically make passing legislation easy.

Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, who's also running for a Senate seat on the Democratic ticket, [said last week](#) he supports ending the filibuster in order to get voting rights legislation passed. And he's not the only one, either: three others seeking to oust Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) hold the same opinion.

North Carolina's former Supreme Court chief justice, Cheri Beasley, who's seeking the Democrats' Senate nomination, [blasted the filibuster](#) in October, calling it "a tool of gridlock,

which stops and prohibits the passage of the kind of legislation that the majority of the American people support."

International

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NY Times Hit Piece Confirms US Seeks to Demonize Ethiopia's Abiy for Peace With Eritrea, Experts Say

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A recent New York Times story alleging to reveal the origins of the conflict in Ethiopia is riddled with falsehoods intended to further demonize the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and conceal the crimes of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), experts told Sputnik. Disinformation by Western media about the Ethiopian conflict [is nothing new](#), becoming highly visible parts of the [#NoMore protest movement](#) by the Ethiopian diaspora. Their demonstrations have called attention to the New York Times in particular, where journalist Declan Walsh, the paper's Chief Africa Correspondent and author of the Wednesday article about Abiy, [in July infamously](#) referred to photos of Tigrayan child soldiers as "highly motivated young recruits." Walsh's latest article, titled "[The Nobel Peace Prize That Paved the Way for War](#)," claims to peel back the edifice of Abiy's international image as a peacemaker and to reveal that the Nobel Peace Prize winner had long planned the war in Tigray with his partner in crime, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki.

"In fact, it was a war of choice for Mr. Abiy - one with wheels set in motion even before the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 that turned him, for a time, into a global icon of nonviolence," Walsh writes. "The Nobel win stemmed largely from the unlikely peace deal Mr. Abiy struck with Isaias Afwerki, the authoritarian leader of Eritrea, within months of coming to power in 2018. That pact ended two decades of hostility and war between the neighboring rivals, and inspired lofty hopes for a transformed region," Walsh added. "Instead, the Nobel emboldened Mr. Abiy and Mr. Isaias to secretly plot a course for war against their mutual foes in Tigray, according to current and former Ethiopian officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid reprisals or protect family members inside Ethiopia."

According to Walsh, Abiy, an ethnic Oromo, "never felt fully accepted by Tigrayans and suffered numerous humiliations" during his years in the TPLF-led government, for which he sought revenge as part of a mixture of paranoia and inferiority complex. Isaias, who Walsh says "had a long and bitter grudge" against the TPLF due to the 1998-2000 war that killed at least 120,000 Ethiopians and Eritreans, became a natural ally after the two signed a peace treaty to end that war in 2018.

A Bridge Too Far: Peace With Eritrea

Eritrea, which broke away from Ethiopia in 1991 after a decades-long struggle for independence and sits on the Red Sea, is the only country in Africa not to have a relationship with US Africa Command (USAFRICOM). However, Washington has long sought to isolate Eritrea on the world stage, ever since the TPLF-led Ethiopian government became a major US War on Terror partner

in the early 2000s and the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), set up to establish the new border between the two nations, gave the key city of Badme to Eritrea - a move to which Addis objected.

"Instead of putting pressure on the TPLF regime to accept the boundary demarcation ruling of the EEBC, the US further demonized Eritrea and imposed sanctions on it in 2009," Elias Amare, independent journalist, researcher and the editor of Horn of Africa TV, told Sputnik on Thursday. "The trumped-up charges for the sanctions were that Eritrea supported the Al-Shabaab terrorists of Somalia, an utterly bogus charge, because Eritrea was itself the victim of jihadi terrorist proxy groups that were being financed and supported by the TPLF regime of Ethiopia," he added. "These unjust sanctions that were imposed on Eritrea at the UN Security Council were finally lifted in November of 2018 once peace was achieved with Ethiopia."

"So, all along, the TPLF regime and its patrons in Washington have been against peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia," Amare said. Indeed, comments quoted by Walsh in his Wednesday article reflect just such an attitude.

"The West needs to make up for its mistakes in Ethiopia," Alex Rondos, formerly the European Union's top diplomat in the Horn of Africa, told the Times. "It misjudged Abiy. It empowered Isaias. Now the issue is whether a country of 110 million people can be prevented from unraveling."

Washington's Policeman

"The only issue is regional alignment and not complying enough to a regional set policies of isolating Eritrea, plus troop movement in the region, instead of continuing the occupation in Somalia, Sudan, etc," Filmon Zerai, writer, independent analyst and an organizing member at Horn of Africa Pan-Africans for Liberation & Solidarity, told Sputnik.

"Outside of the position on Eritrea and conflict with the TPLF, he [Abiy] is the best leader Washington 'needs' internally," Zerai added, noting that Abiy's government has continued its close military cooperation with US Africa Command begun by the previous TPLF government. US Agency for International Development (USAID) chief [Samantha Power said](#) much the same on CNN last month, even as her agency [withholds \\$272 million](#) in food aid for the country. He cautioned that "while it's important to highlight Abiy's neoliberal leanings and disregard for oppressed nationalities in Ethiopia, the author's only issue seems to be his closeness with Eritrea."

"If Ethiopia does not terrorize its neighbors at the behest of Western powers, it must be terrorized! Since TPLF is willing to do the required, it is not surprising it is preferred by those who want the people of the Horn to be at each other's throats," Mustafa Omer, president of Ethiopia's Somali State, [wrote on Facebook](#) in response to comments by French analyst Rene Lefort, who argued the US wants a strong Ethiopia that can be "the policeman of the Horn." "Peace between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia is good for the region. Most of the regions' wars were fought between these countries. If they decide to make peace, why get nervous?"

'A War of Choice'?

Walsh's article obscures basic facts about the tension between Abiy's government and the TPLF between 2018 and 2020, experts said, giving the false impression that both the tension and the escalation were solely Abiy's fault, making the conflict "a war of choice," as he put it.

However, despite his framing of the very real sequence of events - that the TPLF sneak-attacked Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) on the night of November 3, 2020,

killing an estimated 6,000 soldiers - is nothing more than “an article of faith for Mr. Abiy and his supporters,” Walsh nonetheless admits at the end of his article that on that evening, “Tigrayan forces attacked an Ethiopian military base, calling it a pre-emptive strike.”

Tigrayan journalist Hermela Aregawi [wrote on Thursday](#) that Walsh’s article “is racist to the bone, neocolonial in its approach and spits on the basic tenets of democracy.”

“There is evidence to show that it’s the TPLF who have been mobilizing ethnic Tigrayans using the lie that the country is against them, when the country was against the greedy, brutal TPLF leadership. For the last few years, the TPLF rejected negotiation efforts by the federal government of Ethiopia, unwilling to take any offer less than ruling the country again. They would not let Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed balance out the Army, which had been dominated by ethnic Tigrayans and other pro-TPLF agents for nearly three decades.”

“The TPLF ruled the country for 27 years after its Western-backed overthrow of the then communist government, the Derg. Since, it rigged elections and [killed protesters](#) who spoke out as a matter of routine. When the TPLF was sidelined in 2018 through the struggle of the people and years of protests, it continued to operate as though it was still running the country and refused to let Abiy Ahmed do the job he was appointed, and later elected by the people to do, run the country as he and his parliament saw fit.”

Amare added that Abiy had been “extremely flexible and placating towards the TPLF, traveling several times to Tigray talking openly with the people and pleading with the leaders of TPLF to pursue the path of peace ... Contrary to this, TPLF started to prepare for war, raising nearly a quarter of a million special forces, militias and irregular armed vigilantes and continued its belligerent stance beating the war drums.”

Amare explained that Abiy dismantled the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which the scholar referred to as an “ethnic-based trojan horse umbrella organization by which the TPLF imposed its minority rule,” and replaced it with a stronger, more centralized Prosperity Party “which aimed to eventually end to toxic ethnic politics that TPLF introduced and imposed in Ethiopia.”

“This, plus the peace with Eritrea, was a death knell to TPLF. And thus, once ousted from power in 2018, the TPLF unleashed inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts to make Ethiopia ungovernable. Having failed in all this chaos strategy, it resorted to its final gambit of open warfare against the central government, believing that it had the necessary army and war arsenal to defeat [Prime Minister Abiy] and march all the way to Addis Ababa to bring about regime change,” he added.

Indeed, as TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda recently said in separate interviews on [Tigray TV](#) and [Dimtsi Weyane](#), it was clear to the rebel group that the Americans intended for them to enter Addis. Further, [video from a secretive meeting](#) between Berhane Ghebre-Christos, a TPLF-era foreign minister, and several US and European diplomats last month revealed American approval of the TPLF’s rapid military gains and for a potential “transition government” to replace Abiy.

All the while, however, the US has maintained a public position of neutrality on the conflict, calling on all sides to adopt an immediate ceasefire and sanctioning both Abiy’s and Isaias’ governments for actions “that have contributed to the crisis and conflict, which have undermined the stability and integrity of the Ethiopian state.” No parallel measures have been taken against

the TPLF, although early in the conflict the then-Trump administration did [admonish the group](#) for its attacks on both the ENDF and bombarding the Eritrean capital of Asmara.

Those gains have now largely been reversed, as a massive ENDF counteroffensive has pushed the TPLF back by nearly 100 kilometers, [recapturing dozens](#) of towns and totally pushing them out of Afar. In the liberated areas, numerous reports have emerged of TPLF brutalities, including [executions of civilians](#) and looting of hospitals and UN World Food Program warehouses.

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RPT - US Returned 161 Migrants to Mexico Since Trump-Era Border Policy Reinstated Last Week - UN

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US authorities have returned more than 160 migrants to Mexico since the Biden administration reinstated a Trump-era policy last week that requires asylum-seekers to await immigration court proceedings on the other side of the border, UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokesperson Alberto Cabezas Talavera told Sputnik.

In August, a federal court in the state of Texas ordered the Biden administration to restart the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) - otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy. The decision came after the US Supreme Court rejected the Biden administration's attempt to end the program.

"On 6 December the operation was officially reinstated but the first two people under MPP arrived in Mexico on 8th December," the spokesperson said on Thursday. "Since that date... 161 people [returned]."

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in a release has said there are some changes to the policy, which include a commitment that proceedings will generally be concluded within six months of an individual's initial return to Mexico and opportunities for enrollees to secure communication with counsel before and during immigration court hearings.

In addition, MPP will not be imposed on individuals DHS considers vulnerable, and the agency will offer COVID-19 vaccinations for all persons enrolled in the program.

About 60,000 asylum-seeking migrants were returned to Mexico when the Trump administration rolled out the MPP program. Migrant shelters on the Mexican side of the border became overwhelmed and migrants themselves faced extortion or were kidnapped by criminal gangs.

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RPT - US 'Severely Violates' Free Trade Rules, Threatens Supply Chain Security - Chinese Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States severely violates free trade rules and threatens global supply chain security, Chinese Embassy in Washington spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik.

"[The United States] severely violates the rules of free trade, gravely threatens the security of global industrial and supply chains, hinders the development of science and technology of human-being, and seriously undermines the well-being and interests of people in all countries including the United States," Liu said on Thursday.

The United States has been making excuses to suppress and contain certain foreign companies and research institutions by applying measures such as export controls, Liu also said.

China urges the United States to immediately stop its "erroneous practice" and will take all essential measures to uphold legitimate rights and interests of Chinese businesses and research institutions, Liu added.

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Congressional Panel Subpoenas Trump's Adviser James 'Phil' Waldron to Testify

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US House Select Committee investigating the events at the Capitol on January 6 has subpoenaed former President Donald Trump's adviser and member of his legal team James "Phil" Waldron and requested him to provide documents and testimony with respect to allegedly seeking to subvert the 2020 presidential election results.

"Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) today announced that the Select Committee has issued a subpoena to James P. "Phil" Waldron for records and testimony. Mr. Waldron appears to have been involved with efforts to promote claims about fraud in the 2020 election," the Select Committee said in a press release on Thursday.

Thompson said he believes Waldron promoted claims of election fraud and circulated strategies for challenging the results of the 2020 presidential election and alleged that he was actively communicating with the Trump administration officials in the weeks preceding the January 6 events.

The panel became interested in Waldron after he reportedly publicly claimed to be the author of a 38-page PowerPoint presentation dubbed "Election Fraud, Foreign Interference and Options for 6 Jan." that had been sent to Trump's chief of staff Mark Meadows on January 5 recommending that Trump declare a national emergency and return himself to the presidency. Earlier this week, the Select Committee advanced a measure recommending the lower chamber of Congress to hold Meadows accountable to criminal contempt for failing to fully cooperate with the panel.

Trump and his associates have called the work of the Select Committee a political witch hunt.

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Biden Admin. Asks US Supreme Court to Allow Health Care Worker Vaccine Mandate - Filings

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is asking the US Supreme Court to block low-court orders that lifted the vaccine mandates for health care workers that provide Medicare and Medicaid services, according to court filings.

The court filings revealed on Thursday that the Biden administration is asking the US Supreme Court to allow vaccine mandates for Medicare and Medicaid health care workers in the states of Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, West Virginia, Alaska, Arkansas, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The Biden administration argues in its appeals that the vaccine mandate will help protect the health and safety of Medicare and Medicaid patients, possibly saving hundreds or thousands of lives each month.

According to separate court documents, there are about 10.3 million healthcare workers who provide Medicare and Medicaid Services, but about 2.4 million of them do not want to receive a COVID-19 vaccines due to concerns of injuries or death or because of religious reasons. The administration has mandated healthcare providers receive one vaccine dose by December 6 and a second dose by January 4, 2022, the court documents said.

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IMF Approves Extended Credit Release of \$212Mln to Congo - Executive Board

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s Executive Board has approved the immediate release of more than \$212 million to back up the international reserves of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire, the fund announced in a press release.

"The conclusion of the first review under the ECF [Extended Credit Facility] arrangement enables the immediate disbursement of \$212.3 million to reinforce international reserves, given downside risks to the domestic and global economy outlook and recovery," the release said on Thursday.

The ECF arrangement continues to support the authorities' medium-term reform program to foster macroeconomic stability and sustainable development by stepping up domestic revenue mobilization, strengthening governance, and reinforcing monetary policy, the release said. On Wednesday, the IMF's Executive Board "completed the first review of the arrangement under the ECF for the DRC. The completion of the review enables the immediate disbursement of SDR[Special Drawing Rights] 152.3 million (14.3 percent of quota or \$212.3 million)," the release added.

Despite the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DRC's economy is recovering; growth for 2021-22 has been revised upward to 5.4 percent and 6.2 percent respectively, supported by higher-than-envisaged mining production and a rebound in non-extractive growth, according to the release.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Bipartisan Resolution Reaffirming Support for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A group of US lawmakers introduced a resolution that reaffirms bipartisan support for Ukraine in Congress in response to Russia's alleged plan to invade the country, Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen's office said in a statement.

"US Senator Jeanne Shaheen... led a bipartisan group of 10 Senators... in introducing a resolution expressing support for an independent and democratic Ukraine - one that is secure against further Russian military aggression," Shaheen's office said on Thursday.

The build up of forces near Ukraine's border, the release added, is raising concerns that Russia is planning a military offensive against the country.

The resolution also reaffirms the United States' and NATO's commitment to support an independent Ukraine and to back efforts to provide Kiev with lethal and non-lethal security assistance to boost its defense capabilities on land, sea and air.

The resolution also calls on Russia to abide by the commitments agreed to in 2014 and 2015 in 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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Biden Administration Releases Plan to Replace Lead Pipes, Paint in US - White House

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration released a plan to renovate US infrastructure that uses harmful lead pipes or paint, the White House said in a fact sheet about the plan.

"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is releasing its Lead Pipe and Paint Action Plan. The plan represents a historic effort of unprecedented ambition that will deploy catalytic resources from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law while leveraging every tool across federal, state, and local government to deliver clean drinking water, replace lead pipes, and remediate lead paint," the White House said on Thursday.

The plan includes more than 15 new actions from over 10 federal agencies to ensure the US government marshalls every resource to make rapid progress towards replacing all lead pipes in the next decade, the White House added.

The plan includes steps to collaborate with local, state and federal partners to accelerate the replacement of lead pipes, launch a new Environmental Protection Agency regulatory process to protect communities from lead in drinking water and award grants to remove lead paint and other home health hazard in low-income communities, according to the White House.

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Pfizer Applies to Expand License of Its COVID-19 Vaccine for 12-15 Years Age Group

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Pfizer-BioNTech has submitted an application to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to expand the license of its two-dose COVID-19 vaccine for 12-15-year-old adolescents, the companies said in a joint press release.

"Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE today announced they have submitted a supplemental Biologics License Application (sBLA) to the US Food and Drug Administration [FDA] to expand the approval of COMIRNATY (COVID-19 Vaccine, mRNA) to include individuals ages 12 through 15 years," the press release said on Thursday.

The application includes data results from the companies' clinical trial of 2,228 participants aged between 12 and 15 years, the release said.

In the coming weeks, Pfizer and BioNTech are planning to use the same clinical data to apply for an approval with the European Medicines Agency as well as other regulatory authorities around in the world, the release added.

On May 10, FDA issued an emergency authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for use in adolescents 12-15 years of age. Should FDA clear the new application, the Pfizer-BioNTech will become the first vaccine manufacturer with the full license for inoculating this age group.

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US, Canada Hold 'Virtual' Cooperation Dialogue on Arctic Issues - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The governments of the United States and Canada have held an interactive "virtual" cooperation dialogue to discuss Arctic regional issues, the US State Department said.

"In recognition of the growing challenges and opportunities in the Arctic, the United States and Canada held a half-day dialogue on Arctic issues on December 16," the State Department said in a media note on Thursday.

US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols and Global Affairs Canada Assistant Deputy Minister for Europe, Arctic, Middle East and Maghreb Sandra McCardell led the event, the note said.

"[T]he United States and Canada seek to maximize collaboration on shared Arctic priorities, including safeguarding national and homeland security interests, promoting international cooperation through the Arctic Council, combating climate change including by reducing black carbon in the Arctic region," the note added.

Speakers from various US and Canadian governmental departments and agencies participated in the interactive exchange, which reaffirmed the shared commitments outlined by President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in the Roadmap for a Renewed US-Canada Partnership in February 2021, according to the note.

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US 'Severely Violates' Free Trade Rules, Threatens Supply Chain Security - Chinese Embassy (Updates with more details, background in paras 5, 6)

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"[The United States] severely violates the rules of free trade, gravely threatens the security of global industrial and supply chains, hinders the development of science and technology of human-being, and seriously undermines the well-being and interests of people in all countries including the United States," Liu said on Thursday.

The US has been making excuses to suppress and contain certain foreign companies and research institutions by applying measures such as export controls, Liu also said.

China urges the US to immediately stop its "erroneous practice" and will take all essential measures to uphold legitimate rights and interests of Chinese businesses and research institutions, Liu added.

Earlier on Thursday, the US Treasury Department sanctioned eight Chinese entities by adding them to the Office of Foreign Assets Control's Chinese Military-Industrial Complex Companies list. The companies are being targeted for alleged surveillance and human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, the Treasury Department said.

US authorities claim that the technologies provided by the companies have been exploited by the Chinese government to violate human rights of the Uyghur minority - a claim that Liu called "totally groundless."

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Biden Says Omicron Variant Spreading in US, 'Going to Increase'

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden warned on Thursday that the coronavirus Omicron variant has begun spreading in the United States.

"It is here now, it is spreading, and it is going to increase," Biden said at the White House on Thursday.

Biden also said his administration has taken steps to limit the spread of Omicron.

"Due to the steps we have taken, Omicron is not yet spread as fast as it happens in Europe," he added.

In addition, Biden urged Americans to get vaccinated and said the booster shots work.

The Omicron variant has now been confirmed to be present in at least 36 US states and more than 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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NASA Names 2 Astronauts for 2023 SpaceX Crew 6 Mission to Int'l. Space Station - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have chosen two astronauts as part of the crew for the sixth manned SpaceX mission to the International Space Station (ISS) scheduled for 2023, NASA announced in a press release.

"NASA has assigned two crew members to launch on the agency's SpaceX Crew-6 mission – the sixth crew rotation flight aboard a Crew Dragon spacecraft to the ISS," the release said on Thursday. "NASA astronauts Stephen Bowen and Woody Hoburg will serve as spacecraft commander and pilot, respectively.

NASA's international partners will assign additional crew members as mission specialists in the future, the release also said.

"The mission is expected to launch in 2023 on a Falcon 9 rocket from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Bowen, Hoburg and the international crew members will join an expedition crew aboard the space station," the release added.

The mission will be Bowen's fourth trip into space as a veteran of three space shuttle missions: STS-126 in 2008, STS-132 in 2010, and STS-133 in 2011. Hoburg was selected by NASA as an astronaut in 2017 and the flight will be his first trip to space, according to the release.

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Meta Says Banned 7 'Surveillance-for-Hire' Firms Spying on 50,000 Users Worldwide

(Updates with additional details in paras 4-5, provides background in para 6)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Facebook parent company Meta said it took down accounts linked to seven "surveillance-for-hire" entities that targeted thousands of users across the world to manipulate them into disclosing sensitive information that would compromise their devices.

"As a result of our months-long investigation, we took action against seven different surveillance-for-hire entities. They provided services across all three phases of the surveillance chain to indiscriminately target people in over 100 countries on behalf of their clients. These providers are based in China, Israel, India, and North Macedonia," Meta said in a press release on Thursday.

"We alerted around 50,000 people who we believe were targeted by these malicious activities worldwide," it added.

Meta's investigation found that an unidentified, Beijing-based company was responsible for developing surveillanceware that was used by domestic law enforcement in China against minority groups in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Xinjiang region of China, Myanmar, and Hong Kong.

The tech giant expects surveillance operations to remain persistent and to keep evolve in their tactics, according to the press release.

Earlier in the day, US Senate unanimously passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act prohibiting all imports from Xinjiang while the Treasury added eight Chinese entities to its investment blacklist for alleged surveillance and human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China.

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Nasdaq Plunges Most Since September 1 Day After Fed Announced Taper, Interest Rate Hikes

NEW YORK, December 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector plunged its most on Thursday since September, losing more than it gained a day ago on friendly Federal Reserve policies on forthcoming US stimulus tapers and rate hikes that underscored the state of confusion among many investors in navigating an inflation-choked economy.

The Nasdaq Composite, an index of the world's most-valued stocks that include names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, tumbled 385 points, or 2.5%, on the day.

Percentage-wise, it was the biggest one-day slump on the Nasdaq since September 28.

The Big Tech index jumped 328 points, or 2.2% after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday the US 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 2022, as long as COVID-19 incidences do not greatly disrupt economic growth or the labor market.

Wall Street's two other key indexes - the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average - also rose on Wednesday as investors celebrated Powell's remarks on the economy.

But just 24 hours later, all that optimism seemed to evaporate as data on new US residential construction showed a 12% leap in November, despite record home prices. The housing start numbers suggested that builders were under renewed pressure to meet a buying frenzy from Americans scrambling to lock in on homes before next year's rate hikes. The take-away message was that this could aggravate inflation, already growing at its fastest pace in four decades.

"Wall Street abandoned mega-cap tech stocks as investors continue to digest FOMC dot plots and another round of US data," Ed Moya, analyst at New York's online trading platform OANDA, said, referring to the Federal Reserve's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee. "After the FOMC, it is hard to get excited about this round of economic data."

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which contains mostly industrial stocks, settled down 30 points, or 0.1%, at 35,898. It rose 338, or 1.1%, in the previous session.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished down 41 points, or 0.9%, at 4,668. It gained 76 points, or 1.6%, on Wednesday.

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US Senate Confirms Career Diplomat Nicholas Burns to Be Next Ambassador to China

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Senate confirmed career diplomat Nicholas Burns to serve as President Joe Biden's ambassador in Beijing as the United States seeks to counter a rising China in a global power competition.

Burns was confirmed by a 75-18 vote on Thursday.

In October, Burns said during a confirmation hearing that China represents the greatest security threat to the United States and the democratic world and unlike Washington, Beijing has no real allies.

Burns said that the United States and China should work on improving their communications in order to avert the possibility of a conflict and maintain regional peace. Burns promised to communicate directly with Chinese officials and to facilitate meetings with US counterparts, including Biden as well as lawmakers.

However, Burns called on Congress and the Biden administration to scale up security cooperation and arms provisions to Taiwan to defend itself from China.

Moreover, Burns said China's ongoing nuclear weapons buildup, its development of hypersonic missile technology, and economic dominance should be matters of concern for Russia.

Burns was nominated by Biden to be the next US ambassador to China in August. Following the nomination, China expressed hope the new ambassador will play a constructive role in improving the significantly deteriorated relations between Beijing and Washington.

Burns previously served as US ambassador to Greece from 1997 to 2001 and ambassador to NATO from 2001 to 2005. During Burns' time as the under secretary of state from 2005 to 2008, he worked with the Chinese government on various issues, including Afghanistan, UN sanctions against Iran and North Korea.

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US 'Severely Violates' Free Trade Rules, Threatens Supply Chain Security - Chinese Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States severely violates free trade rules and threatens global supply chain security, Chinese Embassy in Washington spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik.

"[The United States] severely violates the rules of free trade, gravely threatens the security of global industrial and supply chains, hinders the development of science and technology of human-being, and seriously undermines the well-being and interests of people in all countries including the United States," Liu said on Thursday.

The United States has been making excuses to suppress and contain certain foreign companies and research institutions by applying measures such as export controls, Liu also said.

China urges the United States to immediately stop its "erroneous practice" and will take all essential measures to uphold legitimate rights and interests of Chinese businesses and research institutions, Liu added.

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US Voters Favor Republicans Over Democrats by 48% to 39% in Generic Congress Ballot - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A 48 percent plurality of likely US voters plan to vote for a Republican congressional candidate in 2022 mid-term elections, compared with 39 percent who expect to vote for a Democrat, a Rasmussen Reports poll revealed.

"If the elections for Congress were held today, 48% of Likely US Voters would vote for the Republican candidate, while 39% would vote for the Democrat. Just four percent (4%) would vote for some other candidate, but another nine percent (9%) are not sure," a press release explaining the poll said on Thursday.

Democrats have narrowed the gap in the generic congressional ballot since November, when the GOP led by an unprecedented 13-point margin, the release said.

While the generic congressional ballot question offers a snapshot of voter sentiment, decades of polling show little value in predicting which party will control Congress after the next election.

While polls consistently show a low overall approval of Congress, voters queried about their congressional districts often say they like their representative even if they dislike Congress - a dynamic that explains why many if not most incumbent lawmakers win.

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Fourteen House Republican Members Press New Twitter CEO on Chinese Propaganda - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Fourteen Republican members of Congress are warning new Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal not to allow his social media giant to become a conduit for Chinese "malign propaganda," according to a joint letter they have sent to him.

"Today, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using Twitter - a platform that is blocked in ... China - to spread its disinformation on the peaceful pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, the origins of COVID, the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang, and disappearance of athletes, around the world," the letter said on Thursday.

The letter was signed by congressional China Task Force chairman Michael McCaul and Representatives Andy Barr, Liz Cheney, Mike Gallagher, Michael Waltz, Darin LaHood, Guy Reschenthaler, Robert Wittman, Neal Dunn, Mark Green, Mike Garcia, Austin Scott, Diana Harshbarger and Young Kim.

"We hope you take your new leadership position at Twitter as an opportunity to address these concerns and ensure your platform is not corrupted and abused by the Chinese Communist Party," the letter said.

The 14 Republicans said they looked forward to Agrawal's new leadership of Twitter in the hope that it would bring about a renewed, healthy discourse between Congress and the social media giant.

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Biden Admin. Calls Off Settlement Talks for Separated Migrant Families - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration terminated settlement talks for financial compensation for migrant families separated under previous administrations so-called zero-tolerance policy on the US border with Mexico, a court document revealed. "[This] action has been held in abeyance since June 1, 2021, to facilitate settlement discussions between Plaintiffs and the United States," the court document said on Thursday. "Those settlement discussions have reached an impasse, and Plaintiffs accordingly respectfully request that this Court lift the abeyance."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in response to the end of negotiations said the Biden administration is walking away from helping migrants who were traumatized, and President Joe Biden is shamefully playing politics with migrants' lives.

According to the ACLU, some 5,500 migrant children were separated from their families under the now defunct zero-tolerance policy of the Obama and Trump administrations.

It is not clear why Biden's Justice Department ceased the negotiations, but the administration was heavily criticized .

In early November, Biden denied reports claiming that his administration was considering to compensate migrant families impacted by the Trump-era rule up to \$450,000.

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UNGA Adopts Russian-Drafted Resolution Against Glorification of Nazism

UNITED NATIONS, December 16 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly with an overwhelming majority supported a Russian-drafted resolution against the glorification of Nazism except for the United States and Ukraine who decided to vote against the draft.

A total of 130 UN member states on Thursday supported the document named "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance."

The United Kingdom, Turkey, Poland, Georgia, Italy, Japan and 43 other countries abstained from voting.

The resolution, initially adopted by the UN General Assembly Third Committee, recalls the "horrors of the Second World War" and notes that neo-Nazism is a contemporary phenomenon seeking to promote racial inequality and gain broad support for its false claims of racial superiority.

The document sounds alarm at the spread of extremist racist ideologies across the globe and the use of the Internet to fund and share information about public events, such as rallies and acts of violence, promoting racism and xenophobia.

It expresses "deep concern" about the glorification of the Nazi movement, including by erecting monuments and memorials and renaming streets after its members.

Simultaneously, the resolution expresses deep concern about the increased frequency of attempts to demolish monuments in remembrance of those who fought against Nazism during the Second World War.

The document urges countries to take concrete measures to prevent revisionism of the Second World War and the denial of the crimes against humanity and war crimes.

It calls on all countries to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination by all appropriate means as neo-Nazism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia and antisemitism represent a threat to social cohesion.

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US Returned 161 Migrants to Mexico Since Trump-Era Border Policy Reinstated Last Week - UN

(Adds background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US authorities have returned more than 160 migrants to Mexico since the Biden administration reinstated a Trump-era policy last week that requires asylum-seekers to await immigration court proceedings on the other side of the border, UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokesperson Alberto Cabezas Talavera told Sputnik.

In August, a federal court in the state of Texas ordered the Biden administration to restart the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) - otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy. The decision came after the US Supreme Court rejected the Biden administration's attempt to end the program.

"On 6 December the operation was officially reinstated but the first two people under MPP arrived in Mexico on 8th December," the spokesperson said on Thursday. "Since that date... 161 people [returned]."

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in a release has said there are some changes to the policy, which include a commitment that proceedings will generally be concluded within six months of an individual's initial return to Mexico and opportunities for enrollees to secure communication with counsel before and during immigration court hearings.

In addition, MPP will not be imposed on individuals DHS considers vulnerable, and the agency will offer COVID-19 vaccinations for all persons enrolled in the program.

About 60,000 asylum-seeking migrants were returned to Mexico when the Trump administration rolled out the MPP program. Migrant shelters on the Mexican side of the border became overwhelmed and migrants themselves faced extortion or were kidnapped by criminal gangs.

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Moderna, Pfizer Vaccines 'Preferred' Over Johnson & Johnson Shot - US Advisory Panel

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

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advisory committee on Thursday unanimously recommended that the agency adopt a statement saying that the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are preferred over the Johnson & Johnson shot.

The statement "mRNA COVID-19 vaccines are preferred over the Janssen [Johnson & Johnson] COVID-19 vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19 for all ≥ 18 years of age" won approval in a 15-0 vote.

The vote followed nearly four hours of presentations of data on thrombosis and thrombocytopenia syndrome, known as TTS - a serious form of blood clotting associated with the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine.

The Pfizer and Moderna jabs use messenger RNA (mRNA) to produce an immune response. In contrast, the J&J vaccine uses a weakened virus to trigger an immunity.

At least nine people have died from TTS after receiving the J&J inoculation, with additional fatalities under investigation. The blood-clotting complication occurs about once in every 100,000 people who receive the single shot J&J vaccine, according to data examined by the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

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Sullivan Spoke With B9 Counterparts as Part of Diplomatic Efforts on Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan spoke with Bucharest Nine (B9) counterparts about the Ukraine-Russian tensions as part of the ongoing diplomatic efforts following the Biden-Putin summit earlier this month, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

"[W]e are constantly consulting closely with our European allies and partners to determine the best way to proceed with the security talks that President Biden and President Putin agreed to very recently. Today, National Security Adviser Sullivan had a call with his B9 counterparts," Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

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US Navy Will Not Close Jet Fuel Storage Facility That Contaminated Water on Base - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Navy will not close a jet fuel storage facility that leaked into the water service system of a military base in Hawaii, the Wall Street Journal reported citing a Navy official.

The report said on Thursday that the US Navy committee responsible for overseeing the incident decided not to close the World War II-era storage facility on Hawaii's Oahu island. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said earlier this week that the leak of the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam forced more than 3,000 military personnel and their families to leave their military housing to live temporarily in hotels.

Rear Adm. Blake Converse has said Navy officials believe the contamination occurred on November 20 when 14,000 gallons (52,995 liters) of jet fuel spilled at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel

Storage Facility. Since then, people have complained about foul-smelling water and suffering cramps or vomiting after they drank it.

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Ex-US Contractor Arrested for Allegedly Trying to Provide Classified Info to Russian Gov't
(Updates with details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A former defense contractor was arrested by the US authorities for allegedly attempting to provide classified information to an FBI agent posing as a Russian agent, the Justice Department.

"A South Dakota man was arrested last night in Lead, South Dakota, on criminal charges related to his alleged espionage attempts," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday. "According to court documents, John Murray Rowe Jr., 63, of Lead, attempted to provide classified national defense information to the Russian government."

Rowe worked nearly 40 years as a test engineer for multiple defense contractors and held various national security clearances, including for top secret material, the release said. Rowe was involved in work for the US Air Force's aerospace technology, among other things, the release added.

However, Rowe was terminated from employment from the last defense firm he worked for when he was identified as a potential insider threat after committing several security violations and showing a profound interest in Russian affairs, including interest into whether he could obtain a security clearance from the Russian government, the release explained.

The FBI launched an undercover operation to determine Rowe's willingness to exchange classified information to a foreign government, so in March 2020, he met with an undercover FBI agent posing as a Russian agent, the release said. Over the span of eight months, Rowe sent 300 emails with the fake Russian agent expressing willingness to provide the Russian government classified information related to US national security and military matters, the release also said.

Eventually, Rowe sent the fake Russian agent classified information about specific operating details of the electronic countermeasure systems used by US military fighter jets, the release added.

Rowe faces up to life in prison if he is found guilty, according to the release.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) -

NORD STREAM 2

* Germany's federal network agency Bundesnetzagentur chief Jochen Homann said the agency had not received yet the documents necessary to continue the certification of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, media reported on Thursday.

* The Nord Stream 2 AG told Sputnik that it is working on establishing a subsidiary in Germany, but is not yet commenting on the details of the matter.

* The German energy regulator has said that the decision on the Nord Stream 2 certification will not be made in the first half of 2022, Bloomberg reported.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Any response to Russia's proposals regarding de-escalation of tensions around Ukraine will be shaped jointly with US allies in Europe, US Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried said on Thursday.

* There is no consensus among NATO members about Ukraine's membership in the alliance and on providing military assistance to Kiev, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

* Ukraine has initiated a negotiation process with its partners in the Black Sea region to increase the number of exercises, Zelenskyy said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin is open for dialogue with Zelenskyy and the agenda should be clear, prepared and result-oriented, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

HAITI CRISIS

* All 17 kidnapped missionaries in Haiti have now been set free, Christian Aid Ministries, an Ohio-based global missionary organization, said on Thursday.

* The Biden administration will hold an international meeting to address the political and economic crisis in Haiti on December 17, the US State Department said.

EUROPEAN GAS MARKETS

* Gas futures prices in Europe are growing by 10%, exceeding \$1,700 per thousand cubic meters for the first time since October 6.

RUSSIA-MONGOLIA TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that he discussed energy issues with his Mongolian counterpart, Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh, adding that Russian companies are interested in working there.

* Russia and Mongolia will continue cooperation in the COVID-19 response and make efforts to restore transport links between the countries, according to the joint political declaration.

* Putin, following a meeting with Khurelsukh, said that the negotiations had been held in a businesslike and constructive manner.

COVID-19

* Germany expects to receive the first deliveries of BioNTech vaccines adapted to the omicron coronavirus variant in the first quarter of 2022, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said on Thursday.

* The European Medicines Agency (EMA) advised to use Pfizer's medicine Paxlovid for the treatment of COVID-19 in adults with mild symptoms, starting rolling review of the drug.

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Biden Awards Medal of Honor to 3 US Servicemen During White House Ceremony Thursday

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden awarded the Medal of Honor to three US servicemen for their heroism during military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Today, we honor three outstanding soldiers. We also remember the high price our military and their families are willing to pay," Biden said during a ceremony at the White House.

Biden said that as a commander-in-chief he had promised to keep the commitment to prepare US troops in the best possible way as well as care for them and their families.

"That commitment never expires," Biden said.

Two of the soldiers - Sargeants First Class Alwyn Cashe and Christopher Celiz - were awarded posthumously, and their families came to the podium to receive the Medal of Honor.

Biden said Cahse became the first African American to be awarded the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War for his repeated efforts to rescue soldiers from a burning vehicle in Iraq in 2005. Celiz died while protecting a medical evacuation helicopter in Afghanistan in 2018.

Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee was awarded for preventing a terrorist attack on the US military base in Afghanistan in 2013 and received the Medal of Honor in person.

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US Leads World as Top Recipient of Direct Foreign Investment - IMF Report

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US consolidated its position as the world's top recipient of foreign investment in 2020, a year in which the global total increased by 6 percent despite the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a report on Thursday.

"The world's top ten recipients of foreign direct investment by end-2020 were the United States, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, China, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore, Switzerland, Ireland, and Germany," the report said.

Total reported foreign direct investment positions increased by \$2.2 trillion - or six percent - from 2019 to 2020, the report said.

Despite the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in foreign direct investment positions is largely in line with the average annual increase over the past five years, the report added.

The US attracted \$4.6 trillion from global investors in 2020, besting the Netherlands with \$4.5 trillion, according to an interactive chart included in the report. The chart showed the two nations trading the top two slots in recent years, with the US regaining the No. 1 position in 2019 and maintaining its lead last year.

Japan, Germany and the Netherlands were the top three sources of investment in the US, according to the report.

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US Adds 8 Chinese Entities to Military Industrial Complex Companies List – Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States in a round of sanctions has added eight Chinese entities, including dronemaker DJI, to its military industrial complex companies list prohibiting investments in the companies, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The released said the following entities have been added to OFAC's Non-SDN CMIC List: Cloudwalk Technology Company, Dawning Information Industry Company, Leon Technology Company, Megvii Technology Limited, Netposa Technologies Limited, SZ DJI Technology Company, Xiamen Meiya Pico Information Company, Yitu Limited.

The companies are being targeted for an alleged surveillance and human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

Earlier in the day, US Senate unanimously passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act prohibiting all imports from Xinjiang.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden to Suspend Limits on Food, Other Humanitarian Relief to Cuba

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden should lift US restrictions on shipments of humanitarian goods to Cuba, according to a letter from 114 Democrats in the House of Representatives released on Thursday.

The letter was sent just days before the 7th anniversary of the Obama administration's decision to normalize relations with Cuba - an opening that was largely reversed by the Trump administration, the lawmakers said.

"While the embargo allows for the shipment of humanitarian aid, in practice, licensing requirements, end-use verification, restrictions on the banking sector, and fear of unknowingly running afoul of U.S. law severely complicate sending humanitarian aid to Cuba, from other countries as well as from the United States," the lawmakers added.

The letter urged the Biden administration to suspend US regulations that prevent food, medicine, remittances and other humanitarian assistance from reaching the Cuban people. Since a series of protests over shortages of food and medicine, as well as draconian COVID-19 measures, erupted last summer, the US government has sanctioned several Cuban officials over the subsequent crackdown.

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US Senate Passes Final Version of Uyghur Protection Bill, Sends to Biden for Signature

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday passed the final version of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which bans importing goods made with forced labor in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The Senate passed the measure by unanimous consent and now has sent it to President Joe Biden to sign it into law.

The House of Representatives passed the bill earlier this week by a voice vote.

The legislation targets "goods, wares, articles, and merchandise imported directly from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or made by Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tibetans, or members of other persecuted groups in China."

In addition, the measure requires the US president to impose sanctions on officials responsible for persecuting Muslim minorities and facilitating the use of involuntary labor.

The legislation also requires businesses to prove their operations do not involve the use of forced labor from alleged work camps in Xinjiang.

The legislation accuses China of arbitrarily imprisoning as many as 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and members of other Muslim minority groups in a system of extrajudicial mass internment camps.

The prisoners are forced to produce "textiles, electronics, food products, shoes, tea, and handicrafts" at a network of government-subsidized factories in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, according to the legislation.

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UN Chief Says Will Travel to Lebanon in His Last Visit of 2021

UNITED NATIONS, December 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday said he will head to Lebanon in his last visit of the year to show solidarity with the Lebanese people.

"My last visit of the year will take me to a country that is in the grip of all these challenges and worse. I look forward to traveling to Lebanon at the invitation of the government on a state visit to express my solidarity with the Lebanese people who have suffered for far too long," Guterres said.

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UN Chief Urges Reform of Global Financial System 'Supercharging' Inequalities, Instability

UNITED NATIONS, December 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his end-of-year address on Thursday called for reforming the international financial system, which has "supercharged" inequalities and instability across the globe.

"Today's global financial system is supercharging inequalities and instability," Guterres said. He said the existing system allows credit rating agencies to undermine the ability of developing countries with good growth prospects to pay back debt and address their development needs. "Meanwhile, inequalities keep widening. Social upheaval and polarization keep growing... This is a powder keg for social unrest and instability. It poses a clear and present danger to democratic institutions," Guterres said. "It is time to clearly assume the need for reform of the international financial system."

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New US Home Building up Most in 8 Months in November Amid Fear of Interest Rate Hikes

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - New residential construction in the United States increased by almost 12% in November for the fastest growth in eight months, according to data from the Commerce Department on Thursday, suggesting a continued rush by buyers to lock in on homes before impending interest rate hikes.

"Privately-owned housing starts in November were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1,679,000," the Commerce Department said in a news release. "This is 11.8 percent above the revised October estimate of 1,502,000."

Historical data maintained by the Commerce Department showed it was the fastest growth in new residential construction since March.

Dire housing shortages in the United States since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and last year's coronavirus outbreak have led to a scramble mostly among first-time home buyers, pushing prices to record highs.

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

To compound the problem, the Federal Reserve says it expects to raise interest rates by as many as three times next year to curb inflation growing at its fastest pace in four decades. The worry of having to pay more for monthly mortgages has intensified the buying frenzy, widening demand for homes over available supply.

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Kentucky Tornado Death Toll Rises to 75, Number of Missing Down to 16 - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the tornados that hit the US state of Kentucky over the weekend has increased to 75 with at least one more person suspected dead and 16 more still unaccounted for, Governor Andy Beshear said on Thursday.

"We believe that the total loss of life thus far 75 Kentuckians though there are at least initial reports that there may be at least one more that will come out today," Beshear said during a press conference. "The missing appears to be down to 16. That is good news."

Beshear explained that the number of those unaccounted for is an estimate since a person is considered "missing" only after they have been reported so.

The latest 75th victim of the disaster died from a heart attack while working on debris removal, Beshear said.

On Friday, tornadoes swept across a number of US states, including Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee, claiming over 100 lives, destroying entire towns and leaving thousands of residents without water and electricity. US President Joe Biden issued a disaster declaration for Kentucky, the most affected of the states, and pledged to do whatever it takes to alleviate the tornadoes' effects.

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IMF Approves \$24Mln Disbursement to Barbados, Cites Progress in 4-Year Reform Plan

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Barbados won access to an additional \$24 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to continue four-years of economic reforms, the IMF Executive Board said on Thursday.

"Despite the challenges posed for the economy by the pandemic and a series of natural disasters, Barbados has been steadily moving ahead with the implementation of the comprehensive Economic Recovery and Transformation (BERT) plan aimed at restoring fiscal sustainability, and increasing reserves, and unlocking growth potential through structural reforms," the IMF said in a press release.

A four-year agreement with the IMF, which was approved in October 2018, authorized loans totaling \$465 million to support the reform effort in Barbados, the release said.

Thursday's decision will bring to \$425 million the total disbursements thus far, the release added.

The release credited Barbados with strong implementation of reforms amid setbacks to tourism - a main driver of the Caribbean nation's economy - due to the coronavirus pandemic measures, volcanic ashfalls from neighboring St. Vincent in April and Category 1 hurricane Elsa in July.

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Medical Supply Firm Owners Jailed for 12 Years in \$279Mln Fraud Scheme - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge in Texas has sentenced two individuals who owned and operated a medical equipment company to more than 12 years in prison each for operating a \$27 million fraud scheme against Medicare, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"From March 2016 to January 2019, the defendants paid kickbacks and bribes to their co-conspirator's call center in the Philippines in exchange for signed doctors' orders for DME [durable medical equipment] that were used to submit false claims in excess of \$59 million to Medicare," the Justice Department said in a press release.

According to the trial evidence, Leah Hagen, 50 of Arlington, Texas, and Michael Hagen, 54, a citizen of Austria and Arlington resident, owned and operated two DME companies - Metro DME Supply LLC and Ortho Pain Solutions. From those claims, Medicare paid the defendants more than \$27 million, the release said.

"On July 8, the Hagens were convicted following an eight-day trial on charges of conspiracy to defraud the United States," the release said. "The Hagens were sentenced by US District Judge Jane Boyle of the Northern District of Texas, who also ordered them to pay \$27,104,359 in restitution."

The defendants transferred millions of dollars overseas to purchase a home in Spain and to conceal the payments of kickbacks and bribes from the authorities, they signed sham contracts that disguised payments as marketing and business process outsourcing, the release added.

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Biden Signs Gold Medal Honors to 13 US Troops Killed in Afghanistan Pullout - White House

WASHINGTON, Dec. 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed a US House of Representatives resolution awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the 13 US troops and other armed service members killed during the rushed final evacuation from Afghanistan in August, the White House said on Thursday.

"President Biden signs HR [House Resolution] 5142 into law, posthumously awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the 13 service members who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan during the evacuation of United States citizens and Afghan allies," the White House said in a statement via Twitter.

On August 26, several explosions targeted Kabul airport and its outskirts, killing 13 American soldiers and injuring many others, including US troops and civilians of other nationalities.

The Afghan wing of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

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Islamic State Killed Record Number of People Outside Syria, Iraq in 2020 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) is actively developing its network outside Syria and Iraq after being defeated there and its attacks during 2020 resulted in a record number of victims than any previous year, a new US State Department report on terrorism revealed on Thursday.

"Although ISIS [Islamic State] lost all the territory it had seized in Iraq and Syria, the organization and its branches continued to mount a worldwide terrorism campaign, carrying out deadly attacks globally. Illustrating the evolving threat, ISIS affiliates outside Iraq and Syria caused more fatalities during 2020 than in any previous year," the report said.

The report found a significant increase in Islamic State-affiliated attacks in Africa the number of which almost doubled from 2,700 in 2017 to nearly 5,000 in 2020. In Mozambique alone, 1,500 deaths were associated with Islamic State attacks.

The terror group managed to retain an active presence in both Iraq and Syria with more frequent attacks during the first half of 2020, the report said.

With respect to Asia, the Islamic States' focus there was on radicalizing individuals to violence and inspiring them to conduct attacks, the report added.

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US Reviewing Designation of Cuba as State Sponsor of Terrorism - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is reviewing whether Cuba should continue to be designated as a state sponsor of terrorism, US State Department Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism John Godfrey said on Thursday.

"The Cuba policy and the designation you referenced are under review," Godfrey said during a conference call when asked whether the Biden administration thinks Cuba should still be considered a state sponsor of terrorism.

In January, the Trump administration restored Cuba to a list of state sponsors of terrorism after accusing the Cuban government of supporting international terrorism and subverting US justice by harboring American fugitives, among other claims. Former President Barack Obama removed Cuba from the list in 2015 as part of effort to normalize relations with the island nation.

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Biden Extends US National Emergency Related to Global Rights Abuses, Corruption

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden renewed a 2017 executive order declaring a US national emergency due to human rights abuses and corruption in other nations, the White House said on Thursday.

"The prevalence and severity of human rights abuse and corruption that have their source, in whole or in substantial part, outside the United States, continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," a statement signed by Biden said.

The emergency declaration will remain in effect for one year beyond December 20, the statement added.

The original 2017 order issued by then-President Donald Trump broadens US authority under existing laws to sanction global human rights abusers and corrupt officials, according to the US Treasury Department.

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US State Dept. Includes Section on White Terrorism in Report for First Time - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US State Department included for the first time in the 2020 Country Reports on Terrorism a section on white-identity terrorism (WIT) and racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE) groups, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The rising threat from REMVE groups, including those promoting the superiority of the white race, is addressed in a new section of the report for the first time," Blinken said in a statement on the report.

Pursuant to the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, the State Department was directed to incorporate in its annual report all credible information about WIT attacks, perpetrators, victims, organizations and notable figures.

In 2021, the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau instructed all diplomatic and consular posts to engage with their host governments regarding REMVE individuals and groups, with a particular focus on WIT advocates, the report said.

In response, European governments said that REMVE and WIT groups were a growing counterterrorism priority, the report added.

The US designated the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and members of its leadership as terrorists - the first time that a WIT group was designated. RIM has provided paramilitary-style training to white supremacists in Europe and actively works to unite these types of groups into a common front against their enemies, according to the report.

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Four-Nation Group Gives Iran Final Chance to Discuss 2020 Downing of Ukraine Passenger Jet

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Iran has until January 5 to begin negotiating compensation for families of 176 passengers killed on Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752

by an Iranian missile minutes after taking off from Tehran, the four-nation International Coordination and Response Group said on Thursday.

"We have delivered a further request inviting Iran to discuss the matters that pertain to our claim and demands for reparations for the downing of PS752 during the week of January 17, 2022," Canada, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom said in a statement. "Our response to Iran indicates that they have until January 5, 2022 to confirm whether they are willing to engage in negotiations."

The statement cited earlier efforts to engage Iran in reparations talks, without success, and noted the four nations who lost citizens on the flight will have to consider other steps to resolve the matter under international law.

All 176 passengers and crew perished when the flight from Iran to Ukraine was shot down shortly after taking off from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport. After initially denying responsibility, Iran's government admitted that its military had shot down the Boeing 737-800 jet, having mistaken the aircraft for a cruise missile.

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COVID-19 Pandemic Making More Americans Want to Leave Inner Cities for Suburbs - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The ongoing coronavirus pandemic is making a still small but growing number of Americans want to leave their inner cities to live in the suburbs, but this intent has not resulted in any increased desire to live in the countryside, a Pew Research Center poll revealed on Thursday.

Some 19% of Americans still want to live in cities, a drop of 4% from the 23% who expressed that desire in a previous poll three years ago, the Pew Research Center said.

The number of Americans preferring to live in the suburbs, still the most desirable location for US citizens, rose by the same amount from that earlier time by 4%, from 42% to 46%, it added. However, the number of Americans who prefer to live in rural settings has remained virtually unchanged from falling marginally from 36% in 2018 to 35% today, according to the Pew Research Center.

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US, 3 Other Nations Hail Reinstatement of Sudan Prime Minister as Step Toward Democracy (Updates with more details, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The reinstatement of Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister of Sudan under a November political agreement marks an initial step in restoring the nation's path toward democracy, the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"This is a first step to resolving Sudan's political challenges and returning the country to its transition to democracy based on the 2019 Constitutional Document," the statement read. "We urge signatories to live up to the commitments made in the [November 21] political agreement. In this respect we note with appreciation the recent releases of political detainees, and the establishment of a committee of investigation to ensure that those responsible for violence against protestors are held accountable."

The November agreement came on the heels of an October coup that threatened to end plans for a democratic government that followed the April 2019 ouster of longtime ruler Omar Bashir. Coup leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan declared a state of emergency and dissolved the nation's military-civilian Sovereign Council, which had been established following Bashir's ouster to oversee a transition to democracy.

Subsequent protests and international condemnation prompted Burhan to agree in November to reinstate Hamdok, promise to hold elections in July 2023 and hand over power to an elected civilian government, according to media reports.

However, pro-democracy activists that helped topple Bashir have continued to protest the November agreement, saying the military cannot be trusted and should have no role in the government.

Earlier this week, police used tear gas, rubber bullets and sticks to disperse protestors near the palace in Khartoum, according to eyewitness accounts cited by media.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 206,000, Consolidating From 5-Decade Lows

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 206,000 for last week, rising from the previous week's five-decade lows, as the employment market consolidated some of its dynamic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending December 11, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 206,000, an increase of 18,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a release. "The previous week's level was revised up by 4,000 from 184,000 to 188,000." Economists polled by US media had anticipated 200,000 filings for jobless benefits for the week ended December 11. In the previous week to December 4, claims came in at 184,000, the lowest since September, 1969.

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

WASHINGTON, December 16 (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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US Backs Turkish-Armenian Steps to Normalize Ties, Raises Concerns Over Karabakh Tensions

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

WASHINGTON, December 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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

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

WASHINGTON, December 16 (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

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

WASHINGTON, December 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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 16 (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.