

12/20/21 Monday

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Saudi Royal Air Force Launching 'Specific and Precise' Strikes on Yemen's Sana'a Airport - Coalition

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The strikes came shortly after a warning was issued by the Saudi government for civilian organizations to evacuate the main airport in Sana'a, the Houthi-controlled capital of Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition announced Monday evening it was carrying out "precise and specific" airstrikes on Houthi targets at Yemen's Sana'a airport "in accordance with international and humanitarian law."

Photos posted on social media claimed to show the intensity of the bombardment.

However, journalist [Shuaib M. Almosawa](#), who is located in Sana'a, noted that the language of the Saudi statement implied it struck the airport's tarmac, which would make it unsuitable for accepting humanitarian aid shipments being flown in by the United Nations.

The strikes came after the [Saudis claimed](#) to have shot down a Houthi drone targeting King Abdullah Airport in the southern Saudi city of Jazan, where Saudi air forces are located. The coalition said it was targeting drone-related facilities in Sana'a, including a factory, storage sites, and a launch facility.

They also come as the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition, which includes Yemeni forces loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, loses its grip in Ma'rib Governorate. The oil-rich province is Hadi's last stronghold in the north, and the Saudi Royal Air Force has waged a [fierce bombing campaign](#) to blunt the Houthi offensive.

Earlier this month, [the Houthis boasted](#) government forces in the city of Ma'rib would collapse within days of their capture of Jabal al-Balaq al-Awsat mountain, but with control over the massif still unclear, the regional capital remains split.

According to a [November 20 estimate](#) by Muammar Al-Eryani, the Houthi information minister, 15,000 Houthi fighters have fallen in Ma'rib since March, when [the drive on Ma'rib](#) began to get bogged down.

The war has raged since March 2015, when Hadi was forced from the country and fled to Riyadh, which rallied several other Sunni Arab states and launched a massive blockade and bombing campaign that has crippled Yemen's infrastructure, creating what the [UN has described](#) as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis." UN estimates from late November [say 377,000 Yemenis](#) have been killed in the war, the majority of whom have died due to noncombat effects of the war, including hunger, diseases like cholera and COVID-19, and lack of access to medical care or clean water.

The Zaidi Shiite Houthis, who hail from the country's north, came to power at the head of a protest movement against reforms by Hadi that raised gas prices and would have amplified already-existing poverty in the country instead of eliminating it. The Saudis and US have

claimed they are supported by Iran, although both groups have denied the claims and little evidence has been produced to support them.

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Quick-Spreading Omicron Variant Now Dominant COVID-19 Strain in US, Making Up 73% of Cases, CDC Says

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced on Monday that 73% of the new COVID-19 cases detected in the previous week were from the Omicron variant, identified just a few weeks ago by South African scientists.

The variant has quickly displaced Delta as the dominant strain in the US, which has reigned supreme since the summer. Both variants have evolved to be more infectious than previous variants of SARS-CoV-2, with Omicron containing an exceptional number of changes to its infection tool, called the spike protein, making it a "variant of concern" for the World Health Organization (WHO).

The [WHO revealed on Monday](#) that Omicron spreads even faster than Delta and has the ability to [penetrate the immune](#) systems of people who have previously had COVID-19 or been vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

A study [published on Friday](#) by Imperial College London based on UK Health Security Agency and National Health Service data found that Omicron is about five times as transmissible as Delta and found that, despite early beliefs Omicron would have weaker symptoms, the variant was proving no milder than any other SARS-CoV-2 strain.

In several US cities, Omicron had already become the dominant strain, accounting for perhaps 90% of new cases in New York City, which [set new records](#) last week for daily number of new cases. In Washington, DC, Mayor Muriel Bowser declared a [state of emergency](#) on Monday after seeing a similarly dramatic and record-setting spike in cases. The first Omicron case was only identified in the US [three weeks ago](#).

On Sunday, the US' seven-day moving average for daily new cases stood at 132,659, [according to CDC data](#). As of Sunday, 803,593 Americans had died of the virus, with the seven-day moving average for daily deaths being 1,169 that day.

US President Joe Biden rejected the notion of a new lockdown on Monday, instead redoubling his administration's message for Americans to get vaccinated, including getting a booster shot that can better protect against the virus. However, a [Friday statement](#) by his spokesperson, Jen Psaki, that shamed unvaccinated people fell flat and was widely panned for its perceived callousness.

"We are intent on not letting Omicron disrupt work and school for the vaccinated. You've done the right thing, and we will get through this," Psaki said. "For the unvaccinated, you're looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm."

Despite the messaging, the [pace of vaccination](#) in the US has slackened in recent days, with a seven-day average of 1.4 million on December 15, the last day for which such data exists, down from 1.7 million per day two weeks earlier. Just over 61% of the US population has been fully vaccinated, and 29% of them have received a booster shot. The US has not yet begun vaccinating children under 5 years of age, and began vaccinating children ages 5-11 in early November.

The nationwide spike has come just days before the Christmas holiday, when 109 million Americans are expected to travel to see their families, according to American Automobile Association ([AAA estimates](#)).

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TPLF Claims Withdrawal to Tigray From Occupied Areas Amid Ethiopian Government Counteroffensive

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Amid a powerful counteroffensive by the Ethiopian government, the leader of Tigray State has appealed to the United Nations for help, announcing on Monday that Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces had been pulled back to Tigray. The pullout is just one peace condition laid out by Addis prior to the TPLF's invasion of Amhara and Afar.

"I have ordered those units of the Tigray Army that are outside the borders of Tigray to withdraw to the borders of Tigray with immediate effect," Debretsion Gebremichael, president of Tigray and head of the TPLF, said in a Monday letter to the United Nations Security Council.

"We trust that our bold act of withdrawal will be a decisive opening for peace," he said.

Debretsion further added: "Our forces are intact and undefeated on the ground. We are confident in their capability, spirit and steadfastness."

TPLF spokesperson [Getachew Reda added](#) that "by doing so, we believe we have taken away whatever excuse the international community [has used] to explain its feet-dragging when it comes to putting pressure" on the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Earlier this month, [Getachew also claimed](#) the TPLF had withdrawn from Dessie, Kombolcha, and several other towns, denying they had been forced out and that "things are going according to our plan."

However, the story on the ground has been far different. [According to reports](#) in Ethiopian media, a new offensive late last week swept across the narrow supply line extending southward out of Tigray along Highway 2 that was maintaining the TPLF's southern advance toward the capital of Addis Ababa. Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) units captured the city of Kobo, just 8 miles from the Amhara-Tigray border, cutting off the northern retreat of TPLF forces from further south and isolating the strategic town of Woldia, which fell to the ENDF on Friday. On Sunday, the day before Debretsion's letter was sent, a Tigrinya-language press release announced the withdrawal and called on all able-bodied Tigrayans of age to be ready to take up arms and "defend their region, raising further questions about the TPLF's "plan." The group,

designated a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian legislature, has [previously been accused](#) of using food aid as a tool for coercing Tigrayan families into conscripting their sons.

At its maximum southern extent in late November, the TPLF occupied Debre Sina, just 190 kilometers from Addis, before Abiy declared a state of emergency and took over direct control of ENDF operations from the front for a short period of time.

[According to Borkena](#), TPLF units isolated by the rapid ENDF advance have remained dangerous, occupying numerous towns in which they are surrounded, and the ENDF is still engaged in operations to eliminate those pockets, which include Sekota and Lalibela, the latter of which had previously been recaptured by the ENDF.

US Partner Refused Peace to March on Addis

For decades, the TPLF was a close US partner in the War on Terror and its operations in Africa, until it lost power in 2018 amid massive protests and the nomination of Abiy, an Oromo, to lead the government by other members of the TPLF's ruling coalition. Political reforms by Abiy that sought to diminish the group's domination of Ethiopian politics helped provoke the present conflict, including ending a [war against Eritrea](#) in 2018 that the TPLF had started two decades earlier.

The TPLF began the conflict on November 3, 2020, when it launched a surprise attack on ENDF forces in Tigray. The ENDF recovered and seized the capital of Mekelle, but the TPLF regrouped in the countryside and retook most of Tigray, at which time Abiy's government issued a unilateral ceasefire and appeal for peace. However, the TPLF ignored those appeals and launched an invasion of neighboring Amhara and Afar states in July, and as [Getachew recently admitted](#) on Tigrayan television, their southern advance on Addis Ababa was given explicit US approval.

[Sputnik also reported](#) in November that American and European diplomats have been secretly meeting with TPLF leaders, voicing their support for the group's rapid advance and speaking of a "transition government" after the anticipated capture of Addis Ababa and the collapse of Abiy's government.

Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman [Dina Mufti told reporters](#) last month the government's terms for a ceasefire included the TPLF's withdrawal from Amhara and Afar, cessation of attacks against government forces, and recognizing the legitimacy of Abiy's government. "In order for there to be a peaceful solution, they say it takes two to tango," Dina said at the time.

Abiy's government has not yet formally replied to Debretsion's Monday overtures, which notably were not directed to him, but to the UN, leaving out at least one key element for peace.

TPLF Calls for Protecting Aid It's Accused of Seizing

In the letter to the UNSC, Debretsion urged the creation of a no-fly zone over Tigray and the imposition of arms embargoes on Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as a "mechanism to ensure the immediate and verifiable cessation of all forms of hostilities," including "the total withdrawal of all external forces" from Tigray.

Debretsion further gave his approval to the UN Human Rights Council's probe into alleged human rights abuses in the conflict by all sides. [As Sputnik reported](#), the probe was called for without the approval or consultation of the Ethiopian government, as is standard for such inquiries, and every African state on the council voted against the resolution or abstained from the vote.

He also proposed an air bridge or humanitarian corridor “under a demilitarized route designated for safe passage of humanitarian supplies to ensure rapid, unconditional, unfettered, and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and items essential to survival.”

The UN World Food Program (WFP) and other aid efforts have attempted to deliver supplies, including food and fuel, to as many as [9.4 million Ethiopians](#) put in dire straits by the conflict. However, at a [press conference](#) earlier this month with Catherine Sozi, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ethiopia, Commissioner for the National Disaster Risk Management Commission of Ethiopia (NDRMC) Mitiku Kassaand denounced the TPLF’s seizure of 1,010 aid trucks and called on the UN to similarly denounce the TPLF’s use of food aid as a weapon of war in the areas of Amhara it had occupied.

The WFP [temporarily suspended aid](#) operations earlier this month in the Amhara cities of Dessie and Kombolcha in response to looting of their warehouses by TPLF forces. The group was also accused of looting hospitals in the region and the fuel depot in Kombolcha.

Despite these incidents, the US has only sanctioned the Ethiopian government and their Eritrean allies, claiming Addis had itself committed human rights abuses in Tigray and that both nations’ actions have perpetuated the conflict in Tigray. In comments on Friday in response to the UNHRC’s resolution, the US State Department only condemned alleged abuses by Abiy’s government, not mentioning the accusations against the TPLF.

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US Senators Call for Probe on Amazon Over Unfair Dismissals, Tornado Deaths - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - E-commerce giant Amazon needs to be investigated by the US Labor Department for harsh labor practices that include wrongful dismissals and lack of sensitivity to emergencies, such as the one that killed six workers in a tornado, US Senators Sherrod Brown and Marco Rubio said in a letter to Labor Secretary Martin Walsh.

“Recent reports have brought to light troubling working conditions at Amazon that suggest improper treatment of its employees, to the detriment of workers and families across the country,” the senators said in the letter. “Today, approximately one out of every 170 US workers is an Amazon employee, underscoring our particular interest in ensuring that the company’s employment practices are fair, and in accordance with the law. We urge you to use every mechanism at your disposal to investigate Amazon’s labor and employment practices immediately.”

The call by Brown and Rubio represents a bipartisan effort to rein in various business practices by Amazon objected to by US lawmakers and regulators over the past year. In February, New York Attorney-General Letitia James said Amazon may have broken the law when it fired an employee for attending a protest against working conditions at a warehouse owned by the company.

In their complaint, the senators cited media reports of allegations by Amazon employees of how the company mismanaged their benefits and pay, set grueling work hours and showed a general lack of response to their concerns due to its highly-automated management practices.

The senators highlighted reports of “workers not having time to use the restroom on the job, and being forced to resort to extraordinary measures such as urinating in bottles to meet work quotas.”

Brown and Rubio also pressed Secretary Walsh to look into the investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration of Amazon's conduct over the collapse of its warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois after a tornado struck the facility earlier this month, killing six people.

Reports indicated that one of the employees who died in that incident had texted his girlfriend, claiming that the company would not let him leave to go home during the storm, the senators said. Workers also voiced concerns about Amazon's alleged lack of emergency response training and expectations that workers continue to work during tornado warnings.

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Man Sentenced to Almost 4 Years for Assaulting Officer During Capitol Breach - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A Washington man was sentenced to nearly four years in prison for assaulting a law enforcement officer during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, CNN reported.

Devlyn Thompson was sentenced to 46 months in prison by Judge Royce Lamberth after pleading guilty to the charges against him earlier this year, the report said on Monday. Thompson struck a police officer with a metal baton, pepper sprayed police officers, threw objects at officers, and assisted others in the crowd to commit acts of violence against officers, according to court documents.

A Florida man on Friday was sentenced to over five years in prison - the longest yet for a defendant facing charges related to the January 6 Capitol breach - for throwing a wooden plank at police officers and spraying them with a fire extinguisher that he also later threw at officers. More than 700 individuals have been arrested for crimes related to the January 6 US Capitol breach, including over 220 facing charges of impeding law enforcement, according to the Justice Department.

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IMF to Provide Jordan With Additional \$335Mln in Funding - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a statement that it will provide to Jordan more than \$335 million in funding after completing the third review of the country's existing program.

"The Executive Board of the IMF today completed the third review of Jordan's program supported by the Extended Fund Facility (EFF). The completion of the review will make the

equivalent of SDR 240.17 million (about US\$335.2 million) immediately available," the statement said on Monday.

This tranche will bring total IMF disbursements to Jordan since the beginning of 2020 to US\$1.23 billion, which includes a purchase of the equivalent of Special Drawing Rights (SDR) 291.55 million, or approximately \$407 million in May 2020 under the Rapid Financing Instrument, the statement said.

The IMF highlighted the gradual reopening of Jordan's economy in 2021 but noted that unemployment remains high, particularly among young population and women, the statement said.

Another issue includes a significant current account deficit caused by high global fuel prices and intermediate imports, the statement added.

"Despite challenging circumstances, sound policies have helped maintain macroeconomic stability, and the structural reform momentum has endured," Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair Kenji Okamura said.

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US, UK Send Cyberwarfare Teams to Ukraine Amid Concerns Over Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Kingdom sent cyberwarfare teams to Ukraine over concerns Russia could potentially launch a cyber attack, the New York Times reported.

The report said on Monday that the United States and the United Kingdom think Russian President Vladimir Putin may soon attempt to launch a cyber attack targeting Ukraine's electrical grid, banking system and other critical infrastructure.

US officials declined to describe the type of cyber teams that were sent to Ukraine while the UK government described its support to Ukraine as defensive in nature, the report said.

The report added, citing US intelligence, that Putin may be trying to make Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy look inept.

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

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US Judge Blocks Biden Admin COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for Federal Contractors - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Magistrate Judge David Noce blocked the enforcement of the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for federal contractors in ten states, a court order from the US District Court of Eastern Missouri said.

"It is hereby ordered that plaintiff's motion for preliminary injunction is sustained. Defendants are enjoined from enforcing the vaccine mandate for federal contractors and subcontractors in all covered contracts in Missouri, Nebraska, Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming," Noce said in the court order on Monday.

The decision will not harm the US federal government to maintain the status quo while the courts decide the legal issues at hand, Noce said.

The Court concludes that consideration of the harms and the public interest weigh in favor of blocking the mandate's enforcement, Noce also said.

The injunction only applies to those aforementioned states who were plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the mandate, Noce added.

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US May Erase Travel Restrictions on Visitors From Southern African Countries - Fauci

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States may ease restrictions on visitors from southern African countries because the number of coronavirus infections in the country is already high, Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, said.

"In the beginning, if you want to buy some time ... which is what we did with the southern African countries [but] we're likely to pull back on that pretty soon," Fauci said at the National Press Club on Monday.

Fauci explained that such a move made sense in the uncertain early days when the COVID-19 pandemic was first surging, but US medical authorities had a much clearer picture of the patterns of infection now.

"We're likely to pull back on that pretty soon because we have enough infection in our country and we're letting in people from other countries that have at least a much or more infection than the southern African countries. So very likely we are going to look at that very carefully and see if we can pull back on that," he said.

Keeping borders closed against visitors other countries that had lower level of infections than the United States did not have any added value, Fauci said, adding that the United States had so far recorded more than 50 million cases of COVID-19 and 802,000 deaths from it.

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Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly Tests Positive for COVID-19 - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly announced in a public message that she has tested positive for the novel coronavirus and is continuing to work from isolation.

"I have taken a rapid test and tested positive for COVID-19," Joly said via Twitter on Monday. "Following public health guidelines, I am in isolation and will continue my work virtually, as I have been for a number of days until I get the results of my PCR test."

Joly emphasized that vaccines remained the best protection against contracting the coronavirus or suffering serious symptoms from the COVID-19 disease.

"I'm grateful for the protection that vaccines offer us and encourage everyone to get vaccinated and boosted. It's the best thing we can do to keep our families safe this holiday season and all year long," she said.

Joly, 42, only took over as foreign minister in October after serving Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as his minister of economic development and official languages. She is seen as a rising star in Trudeau's ruling Liberal Party.

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Omicron Coronavirus Variant Now Accounts for More Than 73% of Sequenced Cases in US - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus Omicron variant now accounts for more than 73% of the cases sequenced in the United States, according to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The Omicron variant was found in 73.2% of sequenced cases between December 12 and December 18, up from just 12.6% the previous week, the CDC data revealed on Monday. The Delta variant, which accounted for 87% of cases the previous week, accounted for 26.6% of cases during this most recent period, the data showed.

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Iran High on Agenda During Sullivan's Meeting in Israel - Biden Administration Official

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Iran will be high on the agenda during US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's meetings with senior Israeli officials this week set up to discuss concerns over Tehran's rapid advancements with its nuclear program, a senior Biden administration official said.

"Iran will be very high on the agenda for Jake's visit to Israel this week," the official said during a conference call on Monday. "The discussion will be a continuation of our ongoing consultations on the threat posed by Iran, particularly its nuclear program but also its destabilizing activities in the region."

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US Stocks Down for 5th Day in Six as Omicron Wave Heightens

NEW YORK, December 20 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell hard on Monday, for a fifth time in six days, on fears of a heightened Omicron wave of the coronavirus that led to a spike in infections and hospitalizations in Europe and the United States.

The White House said President Joe Biden had no intentions of shutting down the US economy although he will warn of a "harsh winter for the unvaccinated" as cases rise ahead of the Christmas and New Year holidays. That helped US equity benchmarks to rebound from their lows, though they still finished as much as 11% lower than the December 10 close, before the latest selling stretch in stocks began.

Wall Street also took a hit from news that President Joe Biden's signature \$1.75-trillion "Build Back Better" infrastructure agenda was likely doomed by fellow Democrat Senator Joe Manchin's last-minute refusal to vote for the plan. Manchin is one of the 50 Democrat senators in a divided Senate that has 50 Republicans as well. Goldman Sachs lowered its US growth forecast on the news, because of a likely drop in government spending.

"It does not feel like the most wonderful time of the year for Wall Street," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "US stocks are not seeing a Santa Claus rally and in fact remain stuck in the COVID-19 house of pain."

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, one of Wall Street's three key benchmarks that had taken the worst beating in the past six sessions, showed a 1.2% drop on the day and a total decline of 11% since the December 10 close.

The Nasdaq Composite, an index of Big Tech stocks which groups names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, fell 1.24% on Monday. For the past six sessions, Nasdaq showed a net drop of 4%.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished down 1% on Monday and 3% lower since December 10.

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White House in Touch With Officials Across US on Uptick in COVID-19 Cases - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is in contact with officials across the United States who are dealing with the increase of coronavirus cases, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"We are in touch, I will say first, with the city of New York, and the state as well as all officials all across the country experiencing upticks," Psaki said during a press briefing on Monday. "We've

sent 30 ambulances to the State and accompanying team of personnel to help balance patient loads among hospitals across the state."

On Sunday, chief medical adviser Anthony Fauci predicted that hospitals in the United States would face an increased burden due to the spread of the coronavirus Omicron strain.

The United States is reportedly going through another upswing with about 130,000 cases reported daily, which is the highest rate worldwide. About 60% of the US population is fully vaccinated, while 50 million eligible Americans opting not to receive vaccines.

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IMF Extends Debt Service Relief for 25 Low-Income Countries

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a statement that it has extended its debt relief service for 25 low-income countries.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved on December 15, 2021 a fifth and final tranche of debt service relief under the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT) for 25 member countries with eligible debt service falling due to the IMF from January 11 to April 13, 2022," the statement said on Monday.

The IMF explained in the statement the new approval is in the amount of \$115 million, noting that this tranche follows four previous similar measures it undertook in the past two years.

"The tranche completes the two-year COVID-19-related debt service relief first approved on April 13, 2020, totaling a cumulative debt service relief of about SDR 690 million (US\$ 964 million)," the statement said.

The IMF said it looks forward to the comprehensive review of the CCRT planned for fiscal year 2023, the statement added.

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Biden Admin. to Close Gaps of Unfinished Wall on US-Mexico Border - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will proceed to finish sections of former President Donald Trump's border wall that were left open when President Joe Biden issued an order halting construction, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said.

"DoD [Department of Defense] will turn over unfinished projects to DHS in various stages of completion to undertake activities necessary to address urgent life, safety, environmental, or other remediation required to protect border communities," DHS said in a press release.

"Activities include but are not limited to: Closing small gaps that remain open from prior construction activities and remediating incomplete gates."

Much of the work will be completed in the US border states Texas and Arizona, the release said.

DHS said it is completing gaps left open on Trump's border wall due to safety concerns. Work will include adding missing gates, addressing incomplete foundations and connecting power to gates that are already hung but are currently inoperable, the release added.

One of Biden's first actions when he assumed office in January was to halt the border wall construction funded by Defense Department funding. However, the move left several portions of border wall open after construction was halted, which is often exploited by migrants crossing illegally into the United States.

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US Prepares Additional Options on Iran in Case Diplomacy Fails - White House

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing additional options on Iran regarding talks to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement - formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - if diplomatic efforts to resolve the issue fail, White House spokesperson Jan Psaki said.

"Because of the way that the Iranians approached and participated in the last rounds of talks, we did ask the national security team to be prepared in the event that diplomacy fails and to take a look at other options," Psaki said during a press conference on Monday.

The United States continues to work on the issue, including engaging in consultations with partners around the world, she said.

Psaki declined to clarify details of the possible additional measures the United States would undertake.

"In terms of what next steps it looks like, I do not think I have anything at this point to preview," she said.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries - the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom plus Germany - and the European Union. The agreement obligated Tehran to scale back its nuclear program and significantly decrease its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its own commitments.

The seventh round of the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna to revive the JCPOA began on November 29. Lifting US sanctions on Tehran appeared to be the main issue of the talks that has not been resolved at present. However, an agreement was reached to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to replace the surveillance cameras at the TESA Karaj Complex, which could assuage concerns about the nature of Tehran's nuclear program. Some of the Karaj cameras were damaged in a sabotage attack earlier this year.

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Biden to Announce New Steps to Fight Omicron Variant Tuesday - White House

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce on Tuesday new measures to fight the coronavirus Omicron variant, but his administration does not intend to impose more lockdowns, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"He will talk about what to expect as we heading to the winter months, and detail additional steps that we will be taking," Psaki said during a press briefing on Monday.

Biden has said that so-called fully vaccinated individuals who have also received a booster dose will likely have mild or asymptomatic Omicron cases, Psaki said.

"We continue to see, and our health expert assess that you are 14 times more likely to die of COVID if you are not vaccinated versus vaccinated. He will reinstate that fully vaccinated individuals have tools to protect themselves with a booster shot and masking," she added.

Asked about the possibility of the Biden administration imposing new lockdowns, Psaki said Biden's speech will outline to the American people the benefits of being vaccinated, the upcoming steps to increase testing and the risks posed to unvaccinated individuals.

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Blinken Meets Slovenian Counterpart to Discuss Ukraine, Bosnia - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Slovenian Foreign Minister Anze Logar in Washington to discuss a range of issues, including the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the State Department said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Slovenian Foreign Minister Anze Logar today in Washington, DC," the release said on Monday. "The Secretary and Foreign Minister Logar jointly expressed a commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina." "The Secretary emphasized the need to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of continued Russian aggression," the release said.

Blinken welcomed Slovenia's support for EU membership for all six so-called "Western Balkan" aspirants, i.e., for Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia, according to the release.

Blinken was joined by US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who welcomed Slovenia's declaration of its candidacy to the UN Security Council, the release said. Tensions around Ukraine have been aggravated over the past several weeks over West's claims of an alleged Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it reserves the right to move forces within its own sovereign territory.

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US House Democrats Ask Biden to Unfreeze Afghan Reserves to Avert Crisis - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Democratic US House members sent a letter to President Joe Biden and the Treasury Department urging his administration to unfreeze Afghanistan's central bank reserves in the amount of \$9.4 billion.

"[W]e stand with American allies and humanitarian experts in urging the United States to avoid harsh economic measures that will directly harm Afghan families and children," the lawmakers said in the letter on Monday. "This means conscientiously but urgently modifying current US policy regarding the freeze of Afghanistan's foreign reserves and ongoing sanctions."

The lawmakers said that Afghanistan's dwindling economy and humanitarian collapse threatens to trigger a new refugee crisis throughout the region. The United States' decision to freeze Afghanistan's central bank reserves is contributing to high inflation and the closing of commercial banks and vital private businesses, the lawmakers added.

The lawmakers noted, citing the World Food Program data, that 95 percent of Afghan households are not consuming enough food. Moreover, lawmakers said the poverty rate in the country is expected to increase from 72 percent to 98 percent.

The US freeze of Afghanistan's reserves could lead to more deaths in 2022 than were lost in the last 20 years of the war in the country, the letter said.

The collapse of Afghanistan's economy could push the Taliban (an organization under UN sanctions over terrorist activities) away from engaging with the United States, especially on counterterrorism efforts, which could strengthen the Islamic State terror group's (banned in Russia) presence in Afghanistan and the potential to plot attacks against the United States.

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US Puts 8 More Countries on List to Avoid Due to COVID-19, Including Spain, Finland

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) put eight more countries on its list of states that Americans should avoid due to the high risk of being infected with the novel coronavirus, including Spain and Finland.

"Avoid travel to Spain," the CDC said in one of the identically-worded travel alerts for the eight countries that include Chad, Lebanon, Bonaire, Gibraltar, Monaco and San Marino. "If you must travel to Spain, make sure you are fully vaccinated before travel. Because of the current situation in Spain, even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants."

The CDC also urged travelers to follow recommendations or requirements in the eight countries, including wearing a face mask and staying six feet apart from other individuals.

The CDC's travel alerts are usually for countries regarded to be on Level 4 for coronavirus infections, signifying "very high" risk.

Monday's alerts came after the Netherlands went into a lockdown at the weekend and more European governments contemplated implementing additional COVID-19-related restrictions ahead of the Christmas and New Year holidays.

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Sullivan to Visit Israel, West Bank This Week to Discuss Iran, Other Issues - White House

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Israel and the West Bank this week to meet with senior government officials and discuss a range of issues, including regional security and Iran, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"This week, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Israel and the West Bank," the statement said on Monday. "In Israel, Mr. Sullivan will meet with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and senior Israeli government officials to reaffirm the US commitment to Israel's security and consult on a range of issues of strategic importance to the US-Israel bilateral relationship, including the threat posed by Iran."

Sullivan will be joined by Deputy Assistant to the President and Middle East and North Africa Coordinator Brett McGurk and State Department's Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Yael Lempert, the statement said.

Sullivan will meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah to discuss ongoing efforts to advance peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis, the statement added.

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US Approves \$108M In Sale of Hellfire Missiles to Australia - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has given preliminary approval for the sale of \$108 million worth of Hellfire Missiles and related support to the Australian government, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a press release.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Australia of Hellfire AGM-114R2 Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$108 million. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today," the DSCA said on Monday. The Australian government requested to buy up to 800 Hellfire air-to-surface, anti-armor missiles, which are often used in drone strikes, the DSCA said.

The proposed sale will support US foreign policy and national security objectives, the DSCA said. It is vital to US national interest to assist Australia in developing a strong and ready self-defense capability as one of the United State's "most important allies" in the Western Pacific, the DSCA added.

The principal contractor for the deal will be Lockheed Martin, and no adverse impact on US defense readiness will occur as a result of the sale, according to the DSCA.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-US-NATO RELATIONS

* US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke over the telephone with Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov and indicated Washington's willingness to engage in diplomacy, including via the NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

* Russia will respond proportionately if NATO countries deploy strike weapons on their territory, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said.

* The provisions on security guarantees proposed by Russia to the United States and NATO are a preventive measure, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States in its latest travel advisory for Ukraine said that it encourages Americans to avoid traveling there over the alleged increased threats from Russia, the US State Department said on Monday.

* Former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has been summoned for questioning on December 23 in the case of smuggling of coal from Donbas, his lawyer Ilya Novikov said.

* Russia has not received any specific proposals from Ukraine regarding a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIA-GERMANY DIPLOMATIC DISPUTE

* German Ambassador in Moscow Geza Andreas von Geyr has been summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry and informed about the expulsion of two German diplomats over Berlin's similar move, the ministry said on Monday.

* The decision of the Russian authorities to expel two German diplomats in response to a similar decision in Berlin did not come as a surprise, but the German government considers it unfounded, it complicates relations between the two countries, the German Foreign Ministry said.

PUTIN-MODI TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephone conversation to discuss practical issues of the implementation of the agreements reached following the talks earlier in December, the Kremlin said on Monday.

EUROPEAN GAS MARKETS

* Russia's Gazprom decided not to book additional gas transit capacity via Ukraine for January, according to auction results on Monday.

* The Moldovagaz company said that it fully paid for gas imports for December to Russia's Gazprom.

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Pentagon Releases Report on Countering Extremism in Military

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon released its Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense on Monday as part of their effort to educate personnel on the threat posed by extremist activity and mitigate threats to the military.

"Extremist activity within the Department of Defense is rare, but even the actions of a few can have an outsized impact on unit cohesion, morale and readiness – and the physical harm some of these activities can engender can undermine the safety of the Total Force. The Department will continue to address insider threats and other activities that might undermine unit cohesion, including extremist activity," the report said.

The counter-extremism working group established by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recommended six actions, including developing a training plan on prohibited extremist activity for Defense Department personnel, reviewing and updating policies to provide notice to personnel on prohibited extremist activity, and improving Insider Threat programs to enhance capabilities and maximize information sharing, the report said.

Fewer than 100 active duty or reserve personnel have been subject to official action for participation in some form of extremist activity over the past year, the report said. However, even a small number of cases can pose a significant problem for safety and unit cohesion, the report added.

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US States Not Seeking Major Military Assistance Amid COVID-19 Surge - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon has not received a large-scale request from states across the United States to provide military assistance amid the winter surge of coronavirus cases, spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"I know of no large-scale military request for assistance with respect to the boost in cases," Kirby told a press briefing.

Kirby also said no US governors have made a request for navy hospital ships.

However, there are several small teams of active-duty troops helping out at hospitals in various US states, according to Kirby.

The United States is currently going through another COVID-19 upswing with about 130,000 cases registered daily, which is the highest rate worldwide. Around 60% of the US population is fully vaccinated, while 50 million eligible Americans remain unvaccinated.

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US Working With UN to Find Ways to Infuse Aid, Liquidity in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with a number of the United Nations' organizations, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), to allocate humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and infuse its economy with liquidity to alleviate the crisis in the country following US withdrawal, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"We are working with various UN bodies, including the UNDP to find creative ways that we can infuse not only humanitarian aid but also liquidity into the Afghan economy," Price said during a press briefing.

The United States believes that Afghanistan is experiencing an acute humanitarian crisis that was preexisting before the US withdrawal in August and has become worse since then, Price said.

Since the takeover in mid-August by the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have suspended financial aid which previously accounted for nearly 75% of Afghanistan's public expenditure, while the United States froze billions of dollars in assets belonging to the Afghan Central Bank.

Afghanistan is experiencing severe and deepening economic, humanitarian and security crises. The challenges faced by the Afghan people include food security, access to education, displacement, health issues and human rights abuses.

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US Disappointed by Egypt Sentencing 2 Journalists, Lawyer to Prison Terms - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is disappointed by an Egyptian court sentencing journalist Alaa Abdel-Fattah, lawyer Mohamed el-Baqer and blogger Mohamed "Oxygen" Ibrahim to prison terms, Department of State spokesman Ned Price said in a press briefing on Monday.

Earlier in the day, the Committee to Protect Journalists said Egyptian authorities sentenced freelance journalist Abdel-Fattah to five years in prison for spreading fake news and undermining state security. Lawyer Mohamed al-Baqer and Mohamed Oxygen were sentenced to four years each on the same charges.

"We're disappointed by the verdicts issued today by Egypt state security court and the trials of Alaa Abdel-Fattah, Mohamed el-Baqer and Mohamed Oxygen Ibrahim," Price said. "Journalists, human rights defenders and others seeking to peacefully exercise their freedom of expression should be able to do so without facing criminal penalties, intimidation, harassment, or any other form of reprisal."

Price said the United States stressed to the Egyptian government that the bilateral relationship would be improved if Washington saw progress in human rights.

"The Egyptian government is very well aware of the concerns we have both broadly and specifically," Price pointed out.

Washington will continue to engage with Cairo to promote freedom of expression and other universal human rights, he added.

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UN Welcomes US Willingness to Ensure Liquidity of Afghanistan's Economy - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the expressed willingness of the United States to find ways to ensure liquidity in Afghanistan's economy, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik on Monday.

Earlier in the day, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said the United States is cooperating with the United Nations to find ways to deliver aid in Afghanistan and ensure liquidity in the country's economy.

"We welcome the willingness of the US to find ways to ensure liquidity in Afghanistan's economy," Haq said.

Afghanistan is facing a dire humanitarian situation in the wake of the August takeover by the Taliban (an organization under UN sanctions over terrorist activities). A number of countries and organizations expressed readiness to continue providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan despite the political and socio-economic turmoil that prompted a mass exodus of Afghans and foreigners.

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Magnitude 6.2 Earthquake Strikes Off Coast of Northern California - USGS

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - An earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale occurred off the coast of Northern California at about 12:10 p.m. local time, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said on Monday on its website.

The USGS reported a magnitude 6.2 earthquake 38 kilometers (approximately 24 miles) west of Petrolia, California, the USGS said. The earthquake occurred at a depth of 9.3 kilometers, they added.

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US Remains Committed to Supporting Saudi Arabia Against Threats From Yemen - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States remains committed to providing support to Saudi Arabia against threats emanating from Yemen's Houthi rebels despite the fact that Washington suspended sales of munitions to Riyadh, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"We have suspended proposed sales of certain air-to-ground munitions [to Saudi Arabia], but we are committed to continuing to support Saudi Arabia to improve its ability to defend its territory against these threats," Price said during a press briefing.

The United States welcomes direct talks between Saudi and Iranian officials aimed at de-escalating the ongoing conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen, Price also said.

Houthi rebels have conducted over 400 cross-border attacks of Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the war and, besides Saudi nationals, have endangered 70,000 of US citizens residing in the country, Price added.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces, led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi rebels. Since March 2015, the Saudi-led Arab alliance, working in cooperation with Hadi's forces, has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis, who control the capital of Sanaa and large areas in northern and western Yemen.

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Small US Assessment Team Visits Ukraine to Discuss Air Defense Needs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A small assessment team from the US Department of Defense visited Ukraine recently to discuss air defense needs for the country, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Monday.

"There was a small assessment team that went over to Ukraine to talk to them about air defense issues and to evaluate what they believe their air defense needs are," Kirby said during a press briefing. "That team has just recently come back."

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US Says Will React to Moscow's Security Demands With Own Concerns Over Russia's Activities

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will put on the table its own concerns over Russia's activities in response to Moscow's proposal for a security deal with NATO presented last week, Department of State spokesman Ned Price said in a press briefing on Monday.

"Russia ... has put on the table its concerns with American and with NATO activities. We're going to put on the table our concerns with Russian activities that we believe are harmful to our collective interests and our collective values with our European allies and partners," Price said.

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Russia Urges UN to Establish Presence in Idlib to Control Aid Distribution - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is calling on the United Nations to establish presence in Syria's Idlib governorate to oversee the distribution of humanitarian aid to people in need, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"We are concerned about what is taking place directly in Idlib, which is rife with terrorists who have seized control of all areas of people's lives, including their freedom of movement," Polyanskiy told a UN Security Council meeting. "We emphasize the pressing need for the United Nations international presence to be established in the [Idlib] enclave. This will help to enhance confidence in the distribution mechanism."

Polyanskiy said as a result of the terrorists operating in Idlib, food items delivered to the town of Sarmada in August were distributed as late as December 16.

"What kind of impartial, independent nature of the provision of assistance under these circumstances can we even talk about?" he said.

Polyanskiy expressed regret that fellow member states at the UN Security Council "did not utter a word of condemnation, but patiently waited for the consent of the terrorists so that the aid could reach the areas not covered by the cross-border mechanism."

The Russian diplomat also called "completely unconvincing" the statements that the United Nations has a monitoring mechanism in the Idlib enclave.

"This is clearly confirmed by the precedents with the misappropriation of UN aid by terrorists in Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and the Rukban [refugee camp controlled by the US Army]," Polyanskiy said.

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NASA, Roscosmos Rotational Space Flights to Start in Fall 2022 - Space Station Manager

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Alternate flights of Russian cosmonauts on US SpaceX vehicles and US astronauts on Russian Soyuz vehicles to the International Space Station (ISS) are expected to commence next Fall after the agreement is reached between the respective government bodies in the two countries, ISS Program Manager Joel Montalbano said on Monday.

"Fall of [20]22 where we plan to have Russian cosmonaut on a SpaceX vehicle and then a NASA astronaut on the Soyuz vehicle," Montalbano said during a press conference. "There is some governmental agreements that have to happen between our State Department and in the Russian ministries. The preliminary agreement has been out of the State Department and it's now on the Russian side."

Montalbano said the Russian cosmonauts and US astronauts are going through a training ahead of the future space launches to the ISS.

NASA officials will continue to travel to Russia and Roscosmos counterparts to the US to continue the dialogue on space between the countries that is important for the United States, Montalbano added.

At the end of October, NASA had started initial planning for cooperative missions with the Russian federal space agency Roscosmos to fly US astronauts on Soyuz vehicles and Russian cosmonauts on SpaceX ones.

However, Sputnik reported on November 9 that before such cross flights could be approved, Roscosmos officials will ask NASA why one of the SpaceX Crew Dragon parachutes failed on a recent mission. The four astronauts on board returned safely as the other parachutes successfully deployed.

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US Federal Judge Jails Man for 3 Years for Threats to Election Officials - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has jailed a California resident for three years for threatening political officials and journalists who accepted the victory of Joe Biden in the November 2020 presidential election, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"Damian Williams, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that Robert Lemke, a California man who threatened members of Congress and journalists in connection with the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, was sentenced to 36 months in prison," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Lemke previously pleaded guilty to making threatening interstate communications and US District Judge Alvin Hellerstein imposed the sentence, the release said.

"Robert Lemke, refusing to accept the result of the 2020 presidential election, sent messages threatening dozens of victims, including journalists, elected officials, and their families, for the perceived offense of stating the facts," Williams said in the release.

According to documents in the public record, from November 2020 into January 2021, Lemke sent threatening electronic and audio messages to about 50 victims, including journalists and politicians because of their statements that then-President Donald Trump had lost the 2020 election, the release added.

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Jury Deliberations Begin in Trial of Ex-Minnesota Police Officer Who Killed Daunte Wright

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Jury deliberations began on Monday in the trial of former Minnesota police officer Kimberly Potter, who is facing manslaughter charges for killing black man Daunte Wright during a traffic stop in April of this year.

The jury will determine whether Potter is guilty of first or second-degree manslaughter for shooting and killing Wright after purportedly mistaking her handgun for her TASER device while attempting to arrest Wright on a warrant during a traffic stop.

The legal teams also delivered their closing arguments on Monday, during which the prosecution emphasized Potter's guilt regardless if the shooting was an accident and she meant to use her TASER, and the defense focused on the perceived danger to Potter and fellow officers during the incident.

Potter and a trainee officer pulled Wright over on April 11, 2021 for expired registration tags and a rearview mirror violation. After making initial contact, the officers learned that Wright had an arrest warrant for a weapons violation and protective order against him, and subsequently went to arrest Wright with the assistance of their supervisor who arrived at the scene.

Potter shot and killed Wright after he resisted arrest and attempted to re-enter his vehicle. Potter, who can be heard on video of the incident yelling "TASER, TASER, TASER!" before firing the first shot, maintains that use of the handgun was an accident. The defense argued that Potter had legal authority to use lethal or non-lethal force given the fatal risk of fellow officers being dragged by Wright's vehicle.

First-degree manslaughter carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison, and second-degree manslaughter carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. The former requires Potter to have caused Wright's death while committing a misdemeanor such as reckless handling of a firearm, whereas the latter requires only that Potter acted with culpable negligence during the incident.

Jury deliberations are expected to finish by Christmas Eve, but contingency plans have been made to resume deliberations after the holidays should it be necessary.

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US Launches Most Ambitious Vehicle Emissions Plan as Biden Targets Zero Pollution - EPA

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said on Monday it was finalizing the most ambitious US federal emissions standards ever for passenger cars and light trucks as the Biden administration targets zero pollution eventually from US roads.

"At EPA, our priority is to protect public health, especially in overburdened communities, while responding to the President's ambitious climate agenda," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement. "Today we take a giant step forward in delivering on those goals, while paving the way toward an all-electric, zero-emissions transportation future."

The Biden administration has said it aims to reduce by 2030 some 50-52% of the greenhouse gas pollution recorded in the United States in 2005. By 2050, its target is to bring those levels to zero.

Under the first phase of the EPA plan, running between 2023 and 2026, the agency will leverage advances in clean car technology to unlock \$190 billion in net benefits to Americans, that include reducing climate pollution, improving public health, and saving drivers money at the pump, the statement said.

For 2027 and beyond, it will initiate a separate rule-making to establish multi-pollutant emission standards under the Clean Air Act to expedite the transition of the light-duty vehicle fleet toward a zero-emissions future, the statement added.

Through 2050, EPA programs will result in avoiding more than 3.0 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions, equivalent to more than half the total of US carbon dioxide emissions in 2019, according to the statement.

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UN Chief Says Confident Lebanese Election to Take Place in March 2022

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday following a meeting with Prime Minister Najib Mikati that he was confident the general election in Lebanon will take place at the end of March.

On Sunday, Guterres arrived in Lebanon, where he is set to meet senior government officials, religious leaders and civil society representatives. The UN chief has already met with President Michel Aoun, Prime Minister Mikati and other leaders.

"I was extremely impressed by the commitment of the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament. We have the guarantee that elections will take place according to the constitution allowing for the new Parliament to be elected before the end of the mandate of the present Parliament," Guterres said.

Guterres also noted he was encouraged by Mikati's commitment to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and lead a number of reforms needed for Lebanon's effective recovery to start as soon as possible.

Lebanon is enduring a dire economic and humanitarian crisis stemming from political turmoil, a malfunctioning economy and the devastating August 2020 explosion at the port in the capital of Beirut.

Guterres said the United Nations is committed to helping Lebanon by ensuring that international financial institutions are able to provide the Middle Eastern country with the maximum possible support.

"The Lebanese people are suffering as a result of many factors, ... and it is essential that we tackle this linked crisis together with a united front based on a focused, coherent and coordinated effort with only one agenda: the wellbeing of the Lebanese people," Guterres stated.

Lebanon had been without a government for more than a year after Hassan Diab's government resigned in August 2020, following the Beirut explosion. The formation of a new cabinet was announced on September 10, when Mikati and Aoun signed a decree putting an end to the political deadlock in Lebanon.

Mikati promised to carry out effective reforms, help the country recover from the financial crisis, which the World Bank ranked as one of the three worst crises the world has seen in the past 150 years, and regain the confidence of the IMF to unlock billions of dollars in aid. With the approach of the parliamentary elections on March 27, 2022, the Mikati cabinet has just several months left to gain the IMF's support for the economic recovery plan.

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World Has Enough Medical Molybdenum Made Without Enriched Uranium - US Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is now ready to ban its enriched uranium exports for foreign medical production after the departments of Energy and Health certified on Monday that there is sufficient worldwide supply of medical molybdenum made without nuclear weapons-usable enriched uranium.

"US Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm and US Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra jointly certified that there is now enough worldwide supply of the medical isotope molybdenum-99 made without using highly enriched uranium (HEU) to meet the needs of patients in the United States. This certification paves the way for a nuclear nonproliferation milestone and supports US companies by triggering a congressionally mandated ban on exports of HEU for foreign medical isotope production," the Energy Department said in a press release.

Molybdenum-99 is used in medical procedures for diagnostic imaging purposes and is vital for diagnosing heart disease and cancer, the release said.

In the United States alone, the isotope is used in more than 40,000 medical diagnostic procedures each day, the release added.

For decades, the United States had no other choice but to export HEU abroad to ensure a stable supply of molybdenum-99 which it was not capable of producing domestically, according to the release.

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Sullivan Tells Ushakov US Ready for Diplomacy, Including Through NATO-Russia Council, OSCE

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a phone call with Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov indicated Washington's willingness to engage in diplomacy, including via the NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE, NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne said in a readout on Monday.

"He indicated U.S. readiness to engage in diplomacy through multiple channels, including bilateral engagement, the NATO-Russia Council, and the OSCE," Horne said. "He made clear that any dialogue must be based on reciprocity and address our concerns about Russia's actions, and take place in full coordination with our European Allies and partners. He also noted that substantive progress can only occur in an environment of de-escalation rather than escalation."

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Justice Dept. Says Awarding \$1.6Bln in Grants to US Communities Working to Reduce Crime

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice said on Monday that it is providing \$1.6 billion in grants to communities throughout the United States to fund programs designed to reduce crime.

"Attorney General Merrick B. Garland today announced the Department of Justice will award \$1.6 billion in grant awards to support a wide range of programs designed to reduce violent crime and strengthen communities," the Justice Department said in a press release. "The grants, which are being distributed to communities and organizations throughout the nation, are administered by the department's Office of Justice Programs (OJP)."

Some of the funding is intended to address gun violence, to help former inmates transition back to the communities and keep them from recommitting a crime, and to support responses to crises like drug overdoses and mental illness, the release said.

The funding could also help support US law enforcement efforts to advance violence intervention activities and evidence-based police and prosecution strategies, the release added. The FBI reported recently that murder rates in the United States increased by nearly 30% in 2020 amid the "defund the police" movement that took flight among US liberals after the death of African-American George Floyd in police custody.

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US Advises Citizens to Avoid Travel to Ukraine Due to 'Increased Threats From Russia'

(Adds details in paras 3-9. background info in para 10)

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States in its latest travel advisory for Ukraine encourages Americans to avoid traveling there over alleged increased threats from Russia, the State Department said in a release on Monday.

"The Department of State continues to advise U.S. citizens not to travel to Ukraine due to COVID-19 and to reconsider travel due to increased threats from Russia. Exercise increased caution due to crime and civil unrest. Some areas have increased risks," the release said. Americans should know about reports that Moscow is preparing for significant military action against Ukraine, according to the release.

"U.S. citizens are also reminded the security conditions, particularly along Ukraine's borders, in Russia-occupied Crimea, and in Russia-controlled eastern Ukraine, are unpredictable and can deteriorate with little notice," the release said. "U.S. citizens choosing to travel to Ukraine should be aware that Russian military action anywhere in Ukraine would severely impact the U.S. Embassy's ability to provide consular services, including assistance to U.S. citizens in departing Ukraine."

The State Department went on to say that Russia "occupies and has attempted to annex Ukraine's Crimea peninsula," and has a large military presence there.

"Occupation authorities continue to abuse and arbitrarily imprison foreigners and the local population, particularly individuals who are seen as opposing Russia's occupation of the peninsula," the release stated. "The U.S. government prohibits its employees from traveling to Crimea and is unable to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in Crimea."

Moreover, the State Department claimed that Russia-led forces control areas of Donetsk and Luhansk.

"Individuals, including U.S. citizens, have been threatened, detained, or kidnapped for hours or days after being stopped at checkpoints controlled by Russia-led forces," the release said. "The U.S. government restricts U.S. government employees from traveling to the eastern parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and adjacent regions, which limits the ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in these regions."

"Crime targeting foreigners and property is common. Demonstrations, which have turned violent at times, regularly occur throughout Ukraine, including in Kyiv," it added. "Politically targeted assassinations and bombings have also occurred. There are reports of violent attacks on minority groups and police by radical groups."

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

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Russian Ambassador Says Reports of Civilian Death Toll From US Airstrikes 'Terrifying'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Media estimates of the number of civilians killed by "targeted" US airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are terrifying, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

On Saturday, The New York Times reported that thousands of civilians in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, including children, were killed by US airstrikes conducted with imprecise targeting and "deeply flawed intelligence." The newspaper has studied 1,311 documents from a hidden Pentagon archive, concluding that the civilian death toll was much higher than the 1,417 civilian deaths reported by the US military in Iraq and Syria, and the 188 deaths reported in Afghanistan since 2018.

"The number of victims of 'targeted' US airstrikes - which is, according to preliminary estimates, more than 1,500 civilians - is terrifying," Antonov said, commenting on the report. "Among the killed are women and children. Their murder is on the conscience of those in the US Defense Department and, obviously, the special services serving it, who were in a hurry to report on their successes in counterterrorism."

The diplomat said the revelations are far from unique "in a series of criminal miscalculations in the overseas escapades of the United States."

Instances of using depleted uranium munitions against Yugoslavia, Syria and Iraq, as well as bombings of Iraq's Fallujah and Syria's Raqqa, have still to be investigated, Antonov recalled. "Questions about the supply of weapons from Western countries to terrorist groups remain unanswered," Antonov stated. "The list of claims is long and requires closer attention from the international community."

Reports of civilian casualties were often dismissed because surveillance footage was too brief, The New York Times said on Saturday. Interviews with surviving residents and current and former US officials revealed that the American military made little effort to identify patterns of failure, and there have been no public assessments which included admission of wrongdoing. The newspaper said that civilian deaths were often the result of "confirmation bias" on the part of the US military, which confused civilians with terrorist fighters, or failed to make sure that targeted buildings had no civilians inside.

Earlier this month, The New York Times reported that a secret US strike cell called Talon Anvil was responsible for civilian casualties in Syria resulting from air strikes. The unit rushed to destroy "enemies" and sidestepped safeguards, circumventing important rules which helped protect civilians. Some members of Talon Anvil even refused to participate in strikes targeting people who appeared to be innocent bystanders. The majority of the strikes were ordered by relatively low-ranking US Army Delta Force commandos in Talon Anvil, and were labeled as defensive strikes in order to limit oversight.

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US Federal Jury Indicts Contractor for Bribing Broadcast Board Official - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury in the state of Virginia has indicted a former US government contractor on a charge of bribing an official for a national broadcasting oversight body, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"A federal grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia returned an indictment charging a North Carolina man with engaging in a bribery and fraud scheme with a former contracting officer for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) (now known as the US Agency for Global Media)," the Justice Department said in a press release.

According to court documents, between late 2014 and late 2016 William Snow, 70, of Jamestown, who worked for a government contracting firm, allegedly agreed to hire and pay a contracting officer's relative more than \$68,000 for a job involving minimal work, the release said.

In exchange, the BBG contracting officer took official actions that benefited Snow, the contracting firm, and another executive, Rita Starliper, who previously pleaded guilty for her involvement in the scheme, the release added.

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Thirteen UN Members Now Detained in Ethiopia, UN Calls for Their Release - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - At least six more United Nations staff members and dependents have been detained in Ethiopia, bringing the total number of the organization's personnel arrested in the East African country to 13, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday.

"There's an increase, not a decrease in the staff that has been detained. We now stand at 11 UN staff members and two dependents who are in detention, and, again, we call for all of them to be released," Haq said during a press briefing.

The United Nations has recently been targeted on several occasions by the Ethiopian authorities in the Tigray region, affected by the year-long conflict between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Last month, at least 16 local UN staff and dependents and 70 truck drivers contracted by the United Nations were detained across Ethiopia. The truck drivers have since been released, while seven UN employees remained in "unexplained and unacceptable detention," as of late November, according to the United Nations.

In November, the Ethiopian government declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide, allowing authorities to detain everyone suspected to have ties with terrorists.

In May, Ethiopia designated the rebel TPLF as a terrorist organization.

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UN Says World Food Program Staff Member Killed in Attack on Convoy in South Sudan

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - A staff member of the UN World Food Program (WFP) was killed in an attack on a vehicle convoy in South Sudan over the weekend, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in a statement on Monday.

"The Humanitarian Coordinator ad interim (a.i.) in South Sudan, Mr. Matthew Hollingworth, strongly condemns the targeted attack on a UN World Food Programme convoy, and the murder of a UN-contracted aid worker and injury of another," the statement said.

Hollingworth calls on the perpetrators to respect international law and humanitarian staff, and demands that authorities make every effort to bring the perpetrators to justice and protect humanitarian efforts in the country, the statement said.

Armed men reportedly attacked a convoy of five amphibious vehicles carrying a team returning from a food assistance mission to flood-affected people, the statement said. The vehicles were clearly marked as humanitarian vehicles, the statement also said.

The "senseless acts of violence" compromise the United Nations' ability to continue assisting people in remote and difficult-to-reach flooded areas, the statement added.

The incident brings the total number of aid workers killed in 2021 while undertaking their work to five, according to the statement.

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Navy Lands MQ-25 T1 Refueler Drone on Aircraft Carrier in Successful Test - Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has successfully maneuvered a MQ-25 T1 Stingray refueler drone onto an aircraft carrier for the first time, Boeing announced in a release on Monday.

"The US Navy and Boeing have successfully maneuvered the Boeing-owned T1 test asset on a US Navy aircraft carrier for the first time – an early step forward in ensuring the MQ-25 unmanned aerial refueler will seamlessly integrate into carrier operations," the release said.

During an underway demonstration aboard the USS George H.W. Bush Navy flight deck directors used standard hand signals to direct T1 just like any other carrier-based aircraft using a new handheld deck control device, the release said.

"The demonstration was intended to ensure the design of the MQ-25 will successfully integrate into the carrier environment and to evaluate the functionality, capability and handling qualities of the deck handling system both in day and night conditions," Unmanned Carrier Aviation program manager Captain Chad Reed said in the release.

The drone was put through test maneuvers that included taxiing on the deck, connecting to the catapult, clearing the landing area and parking on the deck, the release added.

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US Indicts Klyushin, 4 Other Russian Nationals for Hacking, Trading Scheme
(Updates with more details in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A newly unsealed US indictment charges Vladislav Klyushin and four other Russian nationals over alleged involvement in a global hacking and trading scheme, Acting US Attorney Nathaniel Mendell said on Monday.

"Klyushin is charged with a sophisticated and lucrative scheme in which he and his co-defendants are alleged to have hacked into companies that handle nonpublic information for large publicly traded companies, gained access to earnings reports and other market moving information before it was public, and then traded stocks based on that nonpublic information," Mendell said. "With this scheme, they made millions of dollars for themselves."

Klyushin and four other Russian nationals are charged in two indictments unsealed today in Boston, he added.

The US Justice Department said in a press release that the indictment alleges Klyushin and co-conspirators, Ivan Yermakov, Nikolai Rumiantcev, Mikhail Irzak and Igor Sladkov hacked into the computer networks of two US filing agents, used by publicly traded companies to make quarterly and annual filings, that between January 2018 and September 2020.

The group attempted to obtain data on the earnings of such companies ahead of publication of their financial results, the release said. This information was used by Klyushin and his co-defendants to know in advance whether a company's share price will go up or down, and was used to trade the shares accordingly, the release added.

The defendants allegedly made at least \$82 million in profit by using the stolen data, according to the US Securities and Exchange Commission.

Mendell said the sophisticated intrusion technologies that were used by the hacking group are not unique for Russia and a number of other countries specialize in this kind of capabilities.

Klyushin, Yermakov and Rumiantcev worked at M-13, an IT company in Moscow that provided services for the President of the Russian Federation, the Russian government and a range of other federal and state entities in Russia, the release said.

Ivan Yermakov was charged in July 2018 in connection with a hacking and influence effort related to the 2016 US elections. In October 2018, Yermakov was also charged with an alleged hacking that targeted international anti-doping agencies, sporting federations, and officials, the release added.

Klyushin was arrested in Switzerland in March 2021 upon the US request and was extradited to Boston, Massachusetts over the weekend after a Swiss court satisfied the respective US request while the other four co-defendants remain at large, according to the release.

If found guilty, each defendant faces up to 30 years in prison for conspiracy to obtain unauthorized access to computers, and to commit wire fraud and securities fraud combined with substantial fine and several years of supervised release.

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Washington Mayor Issues State of Emergency, Restores Indoor Mask Mandate

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser said on Monday that she has declared a state of emergency in the US capital due to a surge of novel coronavirus cases and has reinstated the city-wide indoor mask mandate.

"I will be declaring a state of emergency today that is primarily to expand our administrative tools to make sure that we can do all the things that we need to do administratively, including buying good and services and make sure that we're handling DC government operations in an urgent way," Bowser said during a press conference.

The indoor mask mandate will take effect on Tuesday and will last until January 31, 2022, Bowser said.

Moreover, Bowser said the city will institute a local government vaccine mandate for city employees, which will include mandatory booster doses.

Bowser said the local government will also expand testing and vaccination sites throughout the city.

Washington, DC Health Chief Science Officer Anjali Talwalkar said 97 percent of the coronavirus infections are from the Delta variant and about three percent of cases are the Omicron variant, but the latter is expected to increase in the coming weeks.

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Biden Admin. Makes Available 20,000 Temporary Work Visas for Winter Season - DHS

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is making available 20,000 temporary work visas for the winter season, the Department of Homeland Security said on Monday.

"The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) today announced the forthcoming publication of a joint temporary final rule to make available an additional 20,000 H-2B temporary nonagricultural worker visas for fiscal year (FY) 2022," the department said in a press release.

US employers will be able to hire the temporary migrant workers on or before March 31, 2022, the release said.

13,500 visas are reserved for returning migrant workers who had H-2B status in at least one of the last three fiscal years, the release said.

The remaining 6,500 visas are reserved for migrants from Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the release added.

DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the additional temporary work visas will help spur the United States' economic recovery.

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Maryland Governor Hogan Says Tested Positive for Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Maryland Governor Larry Hogan said on Monday that he has been tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"This morning, as part of my regular testing routine, I received a positive rapid test for COVID-19," Hogan said via Twitter.

Hogan noted that he had received two vaccine doses and a booster shot against the coronavirus but still got infected.

"I am feeling fine at the moment," the governor added.

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) does not provide data on confirmed coronavirus cases since a hacker attack on its systems about two weeks ago.

"MDH is experiencing a server outage. Hospitalizations data are current. Other surveillance data will be updated as soon as possible," the state health agency said.

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Tigray Leader Asks UN to Impose No-Fly Zone on Province, Arms Embargo on Ethiopia, Eritrea
UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) chief Debretsion Gebremichael on Monday sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asking the world body to establish of a no-fly zone over Tigray and impose arms embargoes on Ethiopia and Eritrea to protect civilians from the ongoing violence.

"We call for immediate action to fulfill the responsibility to protect, including establishing a no-fly zone for hostile flights of aircraft and drones over Tigray except for humanitarian and civil purposes [and] imposing an arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea," Debretsion said in the letter.

United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Monday that the United Nations was studying the content of the letter.

Debretsion said in the letter that he had ordered the units of the Tigray Army positioned outside of the Tigray borders to withdraw immediately.

"We trust that our bold act of withdrawal will be a decisive opening for peace," he said.

Debretsion said the areas of Tigray close to Eritrea remain under "violent and abusive" occupation with an ongoing ethnic cleansing in Western Tigray.

Debretsion also said he hoped the UN Security Council will use every measure to end the occupation and annexation of Tigray and stop the severe human rights abuses there.

"We propose that the Security Council establishes a mechanism to ensure the immediate and verifiable cessation of all forms of hostilities, the total withdrawal of all external forces, including Eritrean armed forces and Amhara Special Forces, and militia from all Tigray parts," he said.

Debretsion pointed out that the hostilities in Tigray have resulted in an imposed starvation and expressed disappointment that the United Nations has not found a way to assist the people in need.

"We propose an airbridge and/or humanitarian corridor to Tigray under a de-militarized route," he said.

Debretsion also called for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Tigray to be followed by negotiations and asked Guterres and the UN Security Council to back this process. Since its beginning in November 2020, the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray has claimed thousands of lives and displaced over 2 million people. According to rights groups, thousands of civilians have been detained and arrested without charge, kept in poor conditions, tortured, and deprived of basic rights.

Last week, the UN Human Rights Council decided to launch an international investigation into alleged human rights abuses by all parties in the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia.

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US Advises Citizens to Avoid Travel to Ukraine Due to 'Increased Threats From Russia'

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"The Department of State continues to advise U.S. citizens not to travel to Ukraine due to COVID-19 and to reconsider travel due to increased threats from Russia. Exercise increased caution due to crime and civil unrest. Some areas have increased risks," the release said.

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Biden Popularity Falls, More Than Half of US Voters Disapprove of His Record - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's popularity has fallen to record low levels with more than half the of US voters disapproving of his performance so far and 44% disapproving very strongly, a new PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist poll revealed on Monday. Some 55% of Americans disapproved of Biden's record through his year in office, including 44% who said they strongly disapproved, the poll said. Those figures show a 20% increase in Biden's disapproval rating since he succeeded former President Donald Trump last January. Only 41% of the public now approves of Biden's track record as president, the poll said. His popularity has held up strongly among registered Democrats and registered Republicans have always overwhelmingly rejected him and the poll showed no significant change in those patterns,

Biden's main fall in credibility has come from the independent, centrist voters who played the key role in getting him elected over Trump, the poll said. Two-thirds of independents now disapprove, including half who strongly disapprove. Both figures are 30% higher than last January, the poll added.

PBS NewsHour, NPR and Marist Poll carried out the poll from December 11 through December 13 among 1,400 US adults with a 4% margin of error.

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Potential Terrorist From Saudi Arabia Caught Illegally Entering US Via Mexico - CBP

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A potential terrorist from Saudi Arabia was apprehended by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents on the US southern border last week, CBP Yuma Sector Chief Chris Clem said on Monday.

"USBP [Border Patrol] Yuma Sector agents apprehended a potential terrorist who illegally entered the US from Mexico Thursday night," Clem said via Twitter.

Clem said the individual is a 21-year-old migrant from Saudi Arabia with ties to several Yemeni individuals of interest.

Clem shared pictures of the Saudi national's mug shot, which showed him dressed in a medical volunteer jacket with a patch from Central Oneida County, New York, and a patch of the US flag. Republican lawmakers, citing US border patrol agents, said earlier this year that several migrants from the Middle East who are on the US government's terrorist watch list have been caught illegally crossing from Mexico to the United States.

Illegal border crossings on the US-Mexico border reached an all-time record 1.7 million in fiscal year 2021, according to CBP data. Some experts have said the number of immigrants illegally crossing the border is far higher.

Experts have also said the massive migration surge to the United States is due to President Joe Biden's campaign message that migrants are welcome to come to the United States.

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US Indicts Klyushin, 4 Other Russians for Hacking, Trading Scheme

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – A newly unsealed US indictment charges Vladislav Klyushin and four other Russian nationals over alleged involvement in a global hacking and trading scheme, Acting US Attorney Nathaniel Mendell said on Monday.

"Klyushin is charged with a sophisticated and lucrative scheme in which he and his co-defendants are alleged to have hacked into companies that handle nonpublic information for large publicly traded companies, gained access to earnings reports and other market moving information before it was public, and then traded stocks based on that nonpublic information," Mendell told reporters. "With this scheme, they made millions of dollars for themselves."

Klyushin and for other Russian nationals are charged in two indictments unsealed today in Boston, he added.

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Trump Sues New York Attorney General to Stop Probe Into His Business Practices - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump filed a lawsuit against New York Attorney General Letitia James as a means to stop her investigation into his business dealings, the New York Times reported on Monday.

The report said Trump is accusing the New York Attorney General of violating his constitutional rights and is asking a judge to agree to his motion and to halt the probe.

James has been digging into Trump's real estate business for more than two years in an attempt to find evidence of wrongdoing. However, James can only file a lawsuit against Trump should any wrongdoing be found because it is a civil inquiry.

James has said she plans to seek to get testimony from Trump under oath early next month, according to the report.

James launched an investigation against Trump's business in March 2019 and is primarily looking into whether he defrauded lenders by inflating the value of his assets. Trump has said the alleged probe is a continuation of the political witch hunt against him.

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Blinken Designates Under Secretary Uzra Zeya as Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues
(Adds details in paras 3-6, background in para 7)

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has appointed Under Secretary Uzra Zeya to serve as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Monday.

"I have designated Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, an important role she will take on effective immediately," Blinken said. "She will also continue to serve as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, a position for which she was sworn in on July 14, 2021."

Blinken explained that Zeya will promote dialogue, without preconditions, between China and the Dalai Lama and his representatives.

"She will promote respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Tibetans, including their freedom of religion or belief, and will support efforts to preserve their distinct historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage," he said. "Special Coordinator Zeya will further support U.S. efforts to address the humanitarian needs of Tibetan refugees and diaspora communities, including those in the United States who have faced threats and intimidation instigated by the PRC."

Moreover, Zeya will promote activities to protect the environment and manage the water and other natural resources of the Tibetan plateau, the secretary added.

"Consistent with the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, she also will seek to increase access to Tibet for U.S. officials, journalists, and other citizens," Blinken added. "Special

Coordinator Zeya will work closely with Tibetan cultural, religious, and political leaders, the U.S. Congress, international allies and partners, and civil society representatives on these matters." India has been home to the Dalai Lama since he fled Tibet in 1959. In 2003, Beijing and New Delhi signed a declaration of cooperation under which India recognized China's claim over Tibet and agreed to deny the Tibetan government-in-exile a platform for political mobilization.

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US Offers \$5Mln for Information on Deadly Terror Attack in Dhaka - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will pay \$5 million to anyone who provides information leading to the arrest or conviction of the individuals involved in a terror attack on February 26, 2015 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, that killed a US citizen and injured his wife, US Department of State said in a press release on Monday.

"The US Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service ... is offering a reward for information on the terrorist attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh that left US citizen Avijit Roy dead and his wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, seriously injured," the press said. "The Secretary of State has authorized a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest or conviction in any country of anyone involved in the murder of Roy and the attack on Ahmed."

A total of six individuals have been charged and convicted in connection to the attack while two of the co-conspirators, Syed Ziaul Haque (aka Major Zia) and Akram Hussain, remain at large, the release said.

Two groups, which are both affiliated with Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia as a terrorist organization), Ansarullah Bangla Team and the Al-Qaeda branch in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), claimed responsibility for the attack, the release added.

Since the inception of the Rewards for Justice Program in 1984, the State Department has paid more than \$200 million in rewards to more than 100 people for information leading to apprehensions and other qualifying outcomes, according to the release.

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US Senate Majority Leader Vows to Pass Build Back Better Act Despite Manchin's Opposition

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer in a letter to Democratic colleagues on Monday urged them to do everything possible to pass the Build Back Better Act, which remains in limbo after Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin said he would not vote on the current version of the bill.

"[N]either that [Manchin's] delay, nor other recent pronouncements, will deter us from continuing to try to find a way forward. We simply cannot give up. We must and we will keep fighting to deliver for working families," the letter read. "We are going to vote on a revised version of the House-passed Build Back Better Act — and we will keep voting on it until we get something done."

Schumer announced that the US Senate will consider the act early in the new year to give every senator a chance to share their view on the floor and not on television, according to the letter. The Senate cannot pass the bill without Manchin's support since it requires at least 51 votes, according to the budget reconciliation process.

Manchin's main concern is that the bill will significantly increase the US national debt, which in turn will hit ordinary Americans through inflation and high prices.

"My Democratic colleagues in Washington are determined to dramatically reshape our society in a way that leaves our country even more vulnerable to the threats we face. I cannot take that risk with a staggering debt of more than \$29 trillion and inflation taxes that are real and harmful to every hard-working American at the gasoline pumps, grocery stores and utility bills with no end in sight," Manchin said in a statement on Sunday.

"I have always said, 'If I can't go back home and explain it, I can't vote for it.' Despite my best efforts, I cannot explain the sweeping Build Back Better Act in West Virginia and I cannot vote to move forward on this mammoth piece of legislation," he added in the statement.

The \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better Act would expand spending on certain social welfare and climate change programs, if passed. Among other provisions, the bill includes funding for paid family and medical leave, expands the health program known as Obamacare, as well as universal pre-kindergarten care for three- and four-year-old children.

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US Still Struggles With COVID-19 Data Gaps, Relies on International Info – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Two years into the pandemic, the United States is still striving to build a system to collect accurate and timely information on cases of COVID-19, and therefore has to rely on international data to help inform policy decisions, including the spread of the new Omicron variant, Politico reported on Monday, citing American officials.

The existing gaps in the CDC's data collection program reportedly hampers Washington's knowledge of both the scale and speed of the viral spread.

Due to the lack of accurate and timely domestic information, in the last eight months the Biden administration has heavily relied on international sources to respond to domestic surges, the news outlet reported, citing officials, who noted they believe these data to be more reliable.

Such dependence on international data shows the extent to which US public health data infrastructure is unable to achieve real-time information on both the spread of the virus and the degree to which the virus evades the vaccine, according to the news outlet.

The matter also allegedly raises concerns over whether the US public healthcare system will be able to sustain a surge of Omicron cases in the coming months.

On Sunday, chief White House medical adviser Anthony Fauci predicted that American hospitals would face an increased burden due to the spread of the Omicron strain.

The United States is currently going through another COVID-19 upswing with about 130,000 cases registered daily, which is the highest rate worldwide. Around 60% of the population is fully vaccinated, while 50 million eligible Americans remain unvaccinated.

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US, Western Allies Express 'Grave Concern' Over Hong Kong Elections - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand voiced concern on Monday about the state of democracy in Hong Kong, after pro-Beijing candidates won the first parliamentary elections in the autonomous region held under the reformed system.

"We, the Foreign Ministers of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, and the United States Secretary of State, noting the outcome of the Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong, express our grave concern over the erosion of democratic elements of the Special Administrative Region's electoral system," the joint statement read.

According to the statement, the new electoral system "reduced the number of directly elected seats and established a new vetting process to severely restrict the choice of candidates on the ballot paper."