

12/23/21 Wednesday

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Iran Nuclear Deal Talks to End 'Within Weeks', Sullivan Tells Israeli Paper During Jerusalem Visit

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After meeting with US allies, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan has said the time for settling the outstanding issues with Iran on returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal would soon draw to a close. The US left the deal in 2018, claiming without proof that Iran was violating the deal.

"There is still room for a diplomatic effort," Sullivan told Israeli [daily paper Haaretz](#) in a Wednesday interview, adding that "within weeks," the US would know "whether Iran is ready for the diplomatic solution."

The comments come as Sullivan [traveled to Jerusalem](#) to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to discuss Washington's commitment to Israeli security. Jerusalem has long been opposed to the 2015 deal between Iran, the US, UK, Germany, France, Russia, China, and the European Union, which lowered economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for Iran accepting strict limitations on the nuclear fuel it could produce.

The US pulled out of that deal in 2018, claiming alongside Israel that Iran had been secretly violating its terms and was still in pursuit of a nuclear weapon, even though that program had ended 15 years earlier and the country's clerical leadership had [denounced the use](#) of all weapons of mass destruction as violations of Islam.

As a consequence, Iran began increasing the purity of uranium-235 it produced and the volume it stored, backing away from the terms of the deal in a bid to [pressure Washington](#) to remove its sanctions and return to the deal.

After US President Joe Biden took office in January, talks on reviving the deal began, with the seventh round in Vienna, Austria, [concluding earlier](#) this month without resolution.

"I won't talk about the details of the negotiations," Sullivan told Haaretz about the Vienna talks, adding that "we intend to guarantee that Iran will not acquire nuclear weapons."

Israel and Saudi Arabia, two close US partners in the Middle East, have opposed reviving the deal without stronger limitations being placed on Iran, and the US and its allies have considered [attempting to add them](#) to the deal as well - a suggestion Tehran has balked at.

Earlier on Wednesday, [Axios published](#) an article based on the testimony of four senior Israeli officials who met with Sullivan, reporting that the US laid out three possible near-term scenarios for what could happen with Iran.

The first is that Washington and Tehran could reach an accord in the next few weeks, return to the JCPOA and bury the hatchet. Sullivan was reportedly skeptical this was possible.

The second was termed a "freeze for freeze" interim agreement, which would stop Iran from increasing its uranium enrichment to weapons-grade 90% purity, but not lower US sanctions or

lead to a longer-term detente. Neither the Iranians or the Israelis seem to approve of such a situation, though for opposite reasons.

The third possibility is that no new deal is reached and the US puts further sanctions on Iran in an attempt to pressure them into agreement.

The Israeli officials also told Axios that the door to reaching a deal would close by the end of January 2022.

"What happens in Vienna has profound ramifications for the stability of the Middle East and the security of Israel for the upcoming years," [Bennett told Sullivan](#) on Wednesday.

Also on Wednesday, Israel Defense Forces Maj. Gen. Tomer Bar, who is preparing to assume command over the Israeli Air Force, told Israeli daily [Yediot Acharonot](#) on Wednesday that the IAF was ready to attack Iran "tomorrow morning" if necessary.

"Preparations have been underway for a while, including procurement of the F-35 jets and missile defense systems," Bar told the paper, adding that if the operation is necessary, "there is no way that I will fly 1,000 kilometers and come home without succeeding in my mission."

In October, the Knesset approved a special \$1.5 billion budget for [preparing such a strike](#).

However, the [Times of Israel](#) reported, citing an anonymous source, that contrary to Bar's comments, planning the strike would take nearly a year.

Israel has developed a reputation for being willing to carry out such operations, not the least of which was [the 1981 airstrike](#) on Iraq's unfinished Osirak nuclear power plant. As with Iran, Tel Aviv feared Iraq intended to use the plant to further its nuclear weapons program, although at the time, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein actually had a nuclear weapons program. Ironically enough, the fledgling Iranian Islamic republic, which was fending off an Iraqi invasion of Khuzestan Province and thus the most likely target for an Iraqi nuclear weapon, secretly helped Israel destroy the reactor.

However, unlike Iraq, Iran has an extensive air defense system, most of its nuclear facilities are deep underground, and has no active nuclear weapons program, as Israeli military [intelligence has admitted](#).

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Video: Iran Tests Out New Tank, Precision Combat Drones in 'Great Prophet' War Games
By - Morgan Artyukhina

During multi-day war games across Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has deployed several new weapons, including improved tanks and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

At the Payambar-e Azam 17 (The Great Prophet) war games in southern Iran on Wednesday, observers spotted a new type of tank being used. According to Iran's [Tasnim News Agency](#), the tank is called "Karrar," and is an upgraded version of the Soviet-built T-72 main battle tank. The Karrar itself isn't new, but this is the first time it's been seen used in mock combat, the agency noted. It employs a special camouflage system to protect it from thermal infrared radar

detection and uses an advanced computer system to put its shells perfectly on target, including an electro-optical fire control system, laser rangefinders, and a ballistic computer.

The tank has a visual similarity to Russia's T-90, which is also based on the T-72, but Moscow has denied any collaboration on the project.

"We were once interested in buying the Russian tanks. But since we can manufacture similar models within the country and we plan to do so in the near future, the deal is now off," Iranian Brig. Gen. Ahmad Reza [Pourdastan told reporters](#) in 2016 after a deal to buy T-90s from Russia fell through.

"We are trying to develop the needed defensive capacities and capabilities in ourselves proper to the atmosphere of threats," he added.

Indeed, Rear Adm. Alireza [Tangsir told reporters](#) on Tuesday that all weapons being used in the Payambar-e Azam 17 drills are "indigenous."

Iran has long used other versions of the T-72, including the original export version of the T-72, dubbed "Shilden" in Iran, and the heavily upgraded Rakhsh.

The war games, being held in Hormozgan, Bushehr and Khuzestan, have rehearsed a variety of scenarios, [including an air attack](#) on the nuclear power station in Bushehr, built with help from Russia's Ministry for Atomic Energy. [Israel has threatened](#) to attack Iranian nuclear facilities if talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with the US fall through; these are [not the first air defense](#) drills to be held by Iran in recent months, either.

The drills have also featured amphibious warfare tactics and an air cavalry assault, as well as tests both launching and fending off ballistic missile attacks.

IRGC Ground Force Commander Brig. Gen. Mohammad Pakpour also [boasted on Wednesday](#) about the precision of the elite armed forces branch, telling reporters: "Our assault and combat drones can target any spot deemed necessary, in a way that hitting and detonating any target has become possible with such a tool and after a process in which such aircraft have developed and been equipped."

The drills saw Mohajer-6 drones deploy Qaem smart bombs "with pinpoint accuracy," [Tasnim reported](#).

Pakpour added that the IRGC's electronic warfare capabilities had improved both qualitatively and quantitatively, although he did not elaborate.

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US Education Dept. to Extend Student Loan Payment Pause by Three Months
By - Morgan Artyukhina

US President Joe Biden has long pledged to forgive at least part of millions of Americans' burdensome student loan debt, although critics have noted that plans for restarting payments put on hold during the pandemic runs counter to those promises.

Biden announced on Wednesday that the pandemic-driven pause on payment of student loans would be extended by another 90 days from its February 1 resumption date to May 2.

"We know that millions of student loan borrowers are still coping with the impacts of the pandemic and need some more time before resuming payments. This is an issue Vice President Harris has been closely focused on, and one we both care deeply about," the White House said in [a news release](#).

"Given these considerations, today my Administration is extending the pause on federal student loan repayments for an additional 90 days - through May 1, 2022 - as we manage the ongoing pandemic and further strengthen our economic recovery. Meanwhile, the Department of Education will continue working with borrowers to ensure they have the support they need to transition smoothly back into repayment and advance economic stability for their own households and for our nation."

Biden's announcement comes as the country is grappling with [rapidly rising cases](#) of COVID-19, driven by the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant of the virus. On Tuesday, he laid in [a national address](#) how his administration plans to deal with the outbreak, including expanding testing and vaccination sites and funneling necessary resources to struggling areas.

Pressure to Forgive Loans Mounts

With millions fewer American workers employed than before the pandemic began in early 2020, the Biden administration has faced pressure from lawmakers and activists to extend the payment pause and consider his past promises to forgive at least some student loan debt. Earlier this month, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) [urged Biden earlier](#) this month to forgive up to \$50,000 in student loan debt per person and to extend the payment pause, or it could cost the US economy \$85 billion in 2022.

During his campaign for the 2020 US presidential election, [Biden said the US](#) "should forgive a minimum of \$10,000/person of federal student loans," accusing the Trump administration and Republican lawmakers of attempting "to put corporate bailouts ahead of families" in the first pandemic relief bill in late March 2020.

Last month, Secretary of Education Miguel [Cardona announced](#) his department was forgiving the student loan debts of up to 50,000 people who qualified for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program under more relaxed rules, which means a demonstrable payment record for the previous 10 years. However, when White House spokeswoman [Jen Psaki told a reporter](#) last week that "a smooth transition back into repayment is a high priority for the administration," [many were dismayed](#).

When asked by a reporter a few days later about why Biden hadn't followed through on his forgiveness pledge, [Psaki said it was](#) because federal lawmakers "haven't sent him a bill on that yet."

Debt owed on student loans in the US, in which university education is both expensive and privately financed, [tops \\$1.73 trillion](#) and is owed by more than 43 million Americans.

According to data collected by the Education Data Initiative, the average undergraduate student at a public university borrows \$30,030 in order to obtain a Bachelor's degree, and US Census [Bureau data shows](#) that college costs have increased by 169% since 1980, while earnings for workers between the ages of 22 and 27 have increased by just 19%.

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US Army Wraps Preclinical Trials on COVID-19 Vaccine Designed to Combat Variety of Variants
By - Evan Craighead

Initial reports claimed that scientists at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) were developing a vaccine against all variants of SARS-CoV-2, a virus that causes respiratory illness in humans. However, this appears to be only partially true, according to clarification provided by the Maryland-based biomedical research facility.

The WRAIR issued a news release on Wednesday offering clarification against some "inaccurate representations" about the research facility's development of the Spike Ferritin Nanoparticle (SpFN), the US Army-developed COVID-19 vaccine.

"The Spike Ferritin Nanoparticle platform is designed to protect against an array of SARS-CoV-2 variants and SARS-origin variants but was not tested on the Omicron variant," the release stated.

While the SpFN has yet to be tested on the omicron variant, "testing against the variants is ongoing in a neutralization assay in the laboratory," the facility noted.

The WRAIR went on to claim that facility scientists "remain encouraged" by early data from preclinical trials, which were [published on December 16 in Science Translational Medicine](#), an interdisciplinary medical journal.

Researchers are now analyzing data from Phase One of human trials, but no timeline was provided.

The WRAIR's protein subunit nanoparticle vaccine works by presenting a fragment of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to one's immune system to elicit a broad, protective response. The SpFN includes ALFQ, a vaccine adjuvant that is part of the [Army Liposome Formulation \(ALF\) family](#).

"Preclinical and early clinical studies have demonstrated ALFQ to be safe and strongly potent as a vaccine adjuvant," the WRAIR claimed.

According to the facility, the vaccine could potentially be useful on a global scale, as it remains stable at a wide range of temperatures, unlike the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna-developed vaccines, which require refrigeration.

Dr. Kayvon Modjarrad, director of Walter Reed's infectious diseases arm, told Defense One that the development and progress made so far on the WRAIR vaccine is "very exciting."

However, there is clearly more work to be done, as COVID and its many variants have become a moving target for researchers.

"We need to evaluate it in the real-world setting and try to understand how does the vaccine perform in much larger numbers of individuals who have already been vaccinated with something else initially [...] or already been sick," he told the outlet in an exclusive interview.

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US Navy Seizes 1,400 AK-47s From 'Stateless Vessel' in North Arabian Sea
By - Evan Craighead

US Navy coastal patrol ships USS Tempest (PC 2) and USS Typhoon (PC 5) reportedly conducted the seizure on December 20, along a route of the North Arabian Sea that has been historically used to traffic weapons and munitions to Houthi militants in Yemen, according to the service.

The US Navy confirmed on Wednesday that, earlier this week, the 5th Fleet had seized some 1,400 AK-47 assault rifles and at least 226,000 rounds of ammunition from a stateless fishing vessel traveling in the North Arabian Sea.

The weapons and ammo were discovered by Navy forces amid a flag verification boarding "in accordance with customary international law in the North Arabian Sea."

The vessel's five-man crew were all identified as Yemeni nationals, and will be returned to their country of origin, according to US personnel. Although described as a "stateless vessel," the service noted in its Wednesday release that undisclosed findings suggested it had "originated in Iran."

"After removing the crew and illicit cargo, US naval forces determined the stateless vessel was a hazard to navigation for commercial shipping and sank it," the release detailed.

This comes several months after guided-missile destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81) seized what are reported to be illicit shipments of weapons and weapons components from two stateless dhows off the coast of Somalia.

The seizure, conducted between February 11 and February 12, resulted in the confiscation of a cache of weapons, including thousands of AK-47-style assault rifles, light machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and heavy sniper rifles.

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Biden: Potential 2024 Rematch With Trump Would 'Increase' Desire to Seek Reelection
By - Gaby Arancibia

Former US President Donald Trump has repeatedly flirted with the idea of running in the 2024 presidential election cycle but has steered clear of giving a definitive answer on whether he will toss his name into the race. Recently, ex-Fox News host Bill O'Reilly suggested that the one-term president would run again.

US President Joe Biden disclosed on Wednesday that he would be interested and willing to run for reelection in 2024, so long as he remains in good health, but underscoring that a rematch against his predecessor would "increase the prospect."

The commander-in-chief's confirmation came during an [exclusive interview](#) with ABC News' David Muir, who took the opportunity to ask Biden whether he would run in 2024.

"Yes," the president told Muir in response to his reelection effort. "But look, I'm a great respecter of fate. Fate has intervened in my life many many times. If I'm in the health I'm in now -- from a good health. And, in fact, I would run again."

When asked if he'd stick to his second term plans if former US President Donald Trump weighed into the election cycle, Biden didn't shy away.

"You're trying to tempt me now," Biden said jokingly. "Sure. Why would I not run against Donald Trump for the nominee? That'll increase the prospect of running."

Biden has previously indicated that he is interested in running for his second term so long as his health remains in top shape. He earlier relayed that he would "fully expect" to have US Vice President Kamala Harris on his presidential ticket.

Trump has repeatedly told supporters that he would announce a move in the months to come, at one point hinting to his followers that they will be delighted with his decision, when it comes.

However, the former US president has made no affirmative steps toward a campaign for reelection.

Biden's talk with Muir also saw the pair discuss his roadblocked Build Back Better legislation and supply line shortages.

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'Most Important Box Office Force?': Experts Weigh in on Pandemic-Era Success of 'Spider-Man'

Variety, the publication of record covering Hollywood, has declared that after the record-breaking success of "Spider-Man: No Way Home," the Marvel character is "Hollywood's most important box-office force," underscoring that the film series is "Hollywood's most important film franchise."

The film, which was released last weekend, is the ninth big-screen adventure of everyone's favorite friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man, following the three films that kicked the franchise off with Tobey Maguire in the titular role and two that starred Andrew Garfield.

The popular series also included the animated outing called "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse," which earned widespread acclaim when it was released in 2018, later winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Film.

"Spider-Man: No Way Home" is the third installment with Tom Holland in the role of Peter Parker, following 2017's "Spider-Man: Homecoming" and 2019's "Spider-Man: Far From Home." The films are part of the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), allowing the character to crossover with other iconic Marvel characters and their respective movies, such as he did in entries in "Captain America: Civil War" (2016), "Avengers: Infinity War" (2018) and "Avengers: Endgame" (2019).

The latest installment made an eye-watering \$587.2 million worldwide last weekend, which marked it "the third-biggest global debut of all-time, trailing only the two most recent Avengers outings" in which Spider-Man also appeared. This included \$260 million in North America, making it the second-largest opening in the US market behind only "Avengers: Endgame," according to popular box office reporting site [BoxOfficeMojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com).

The stunning box office performance is even more remarkable given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of the Omicron variant. The film's release was easily the biggest since the pandemic hit in early 2020, despite ongoing fears and safety protocols.

Much has been made of [Variety's reporting](#) of "Spider-Man: No Way Home" in particular. According to journalist Rebecca Rubin, the film is on track to be the first since Covid hit to gross over a billion dollars worldwide - all the while high-profile movies like Guillermo Del Toro's adaptation of "Nightmare Alley" and Steven Spielberg's remake of the classic musical "West Side Story" both received critical acclaim, but failed to make even a fraction of what "Spider-Man" did on just its debut weekend.

The success of "Spider-Man" proves "audiences are willing to go to theaters — but certainly not for any ol' movie," Rubin writes.

Variety wasn't the only publication to offer analysis of the film's box office performance, [as Vulture declared](#) last weekend the "most Important box-office weekend ever" because "it represents movie theaters rising like a phoenix from an incredibly challenging and tough time where many counted out the movie theater for good," Comscore senior media analyst Paul Dergarabedian explained to the outlet.

However, noted online pop-culture newspaper and entertainment website [The A.V. Club responded to Variety's coverage](#) in an article provocatively called "Box office experts try to solve the mystery of why 'Spider-Man: No Way Home' made so much money."

A.V. Club's Sam Barsanti, writing online, says "We're not box office experts here, we merely have an academic curiosity about it, but it seems likely to us that 'Spider-Man: No Way Home' made a lot of money because... it's a movie about Spider-Man, one of the most beloved superheroes across multiple generations."

"Also, it's a known-quantity superhero movie that went straight to theaters, with no option to stream it at home, so people would want to see it no matter what," Barsanti continued. "Also, people are sick of worrying about COVID, and it was just a matter of time before something caused the dam to burst, which every movie studio has been betting on since last fall."

Variety also noted that even Spider-Man-adjacent media, like the two movies featuring Tom Hardy as Spidey's longtime symbiotic foe "Venom" in his own solo spinoffs, have prospered because of their affiliation with the world's most durable web-crawler. While Spidey's next appearance in the MCU is reportedly still being figured out, a sequel to "Into the Spider-Verse" entitled "Across the Spider-Verse (Part One)" is set to debut in 2022.

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US President Joe Biden Tests Negative for COVID-19 After Exposure to Aide With Virus

The new quick-spreading coronavirus strain, dubbed Omicron, has become dominant in the US, making up more than 70% of the newly registered cases in the country.

The US President has tested negative for COVID-19 after taking a second PCR test on Wednesday. Earlier, it was reported that Biden was exposed to an aide, who later tested positive while travelling on Air Force One on Friday.

Following the incident, the President tested negative with an antigen test on Sunday and got a negative result with a PCR test on Monday.

The results come after a fully vaccinated staff member who flew with the President on Air Force One on Friday started experiencing symptoms of the virus on Sunday.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, Press Secretary Jen Psaki noted that CDC guidelines do not require those who are fully vaccinated to quarantine after exposure and that the President will resume with his daily schedule.

Biden, who is 79 years old, is the oldest president in United States history. He has been vaccinated against the coronavirus, receiving a booster shot in September. The president has also called on Americans to get booster jabs as soon as possible amid fears of the quick-spreading Omicron variant.

On Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that Omicron has become the dominant coronavirus strain in the country, making up 73% of the new COVID-19 cases registered during the previous week.

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Barcelona Reportedly Set to Meet Man City's €55 Million Price for Ferran Torres
By - Nevin Brown

FC Barcelona are reportedly nearing completion of a €55 million transfer for Manchester City's Ferran Torres. The primary obstacle remains Barcelona freeing up enough room in their wage budget to finalize the deal.

[It has been reported](#) that officials from Barcelona and Manchester City met in Sevilla on Tuesday to finalize the transfer. The deal will be for an initial fee of €55 million with €10 million in add-ons.

For the move to go ahead, Barcelona will have to significantly reduce their current wage bill. La Liga implemented financial restrictions that capped Barcelona's spending limit at €97 million and the club is currently saddled with €1 billion in gross debt.

Barcelona is currently well above their €97 million spending limit, but they're allowed to spend 25% of any savings. Sergio Aguero's retirement due to a heart condition opened up significant wages, but they will still have to sell or offload players in January to bring Torres in.

The club has been trying to find new homes for Samuel Umtiti, Neto, and Philippe Coutinho, but are willing to listen to other players including Serginio Dest.

Torres was purchased by City from Valencia CF in 2020 for €23 million. At 21, Torres has performed well in the limited game action he has received in England. Across two Premier League seasons, Torres has played 17.9 full 90s, his total minutes played divided by 90, and netted 9 goals and 3 assists.

Initially deployed on the right wing in Spain, Torres has been used as a central forward for City. His performance for Spain on international duty has been even more impressive. Excluding friendlies, across 15.6 90s he has netted 12 goals and 1 assist.

[Torres' versatility](#) should make him an excellent long term fit for Barcelona. He is comfortable pressing, excels in link-up play, can carry the ball past defenders, is a fine finisher, and his age suggests plenty of room for growth.

According to FBRef.com, his top three statistical comparisons for forwards are Gabriel Jesus, Lautaro Martinez, and Kelechi Iheanacho.

[According to Transfermarkt.com](#), Torres has a market value of €50 million. His low purchase price from Valencia wasn't a product of performance, but was rather due to Valencia's own financial struggles.

Barcelona still has a long way to go to secure Torres. Finding a new home for Umtiti, Neto, and Coutinho will be difficult [due to their wages](#). Umtiti earns €208,000 a week, Coutinho earns €146,000, and Neto earns €65,000.

There are few, if any, clubs in Europe that will want to pay any of the trio's current salaries. Barcelona may be forced to explore loan options where they foot a large percentage of their wages. In all likelihood, for Barcelona to bring Torres to the Camp Nou they'll have to sell one of their core players.

Torres has been out since October due to a foot injury. He is expected back sometime in January.

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UK Watchdog Will Not Probe Metropolitan Police Over 10 Downing Street Christmas Party
By - Nevin Brown

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), a police watchdog group for England and Wales, said it will not investigate a complaint over Scotland Yard's handling of allegations that a 2020 Christmas party that took place in 10 Downing Street, London, broke Covid protocols. The IOPC said the complaint, brought by Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb, was "invalid" because the baroness was neither close to nor personally present when police officers allegedly failed to enforce Covid rules.

They also added that she had not been "adversely affected" by police officer failures. The IOPC's final conclusion was that it was up to the Metropolitan Police to decide whether to pursue the matter.

[An IOPC spokesperson added](#), "If evidence were to come to light that anyone serving with the police may have breached standards of professional behaviour or committed a criminal offence, linked to the alleged party, we have reminded the Metropolitan Police of its obligations to refer relevant matters to us, irrespective of whether or not a valid complaint has been made."

The incident in question is an alleged party that broke Covid protocols on December 18, 2020, at 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the First Lord of Treasury and the headquarters of the government of the United Kingdom.

The party, along with multiple social gatherings that occurred from November 2020 through December 2020, came to light at the end of November 2021 and sparked outrage as the preeminent facility of the UK government was used for parties and social gatherings as the country was in lockdown.

At the time of the alleged parties, government guidance said work Christmas lunches or parties were not allowed. The string of parties at 10 Downing Street have embroiled UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson in controversy.

After deeper scrutiny, the baroness wrote to the IOPC on December 6 alleging that police were involved in an alleged December 18, 2020 Christmas party.

Jones wrote in her letter, "Put very simply, if there was an unlawful gathering taking place at No10 Downing Street, then the police must have known, and were highly likely to have played an active part in organising or facilitating the illegal gathering."

She would go on to allege that the Metropolitan Police's refusal to investigate the incident was "a potential cover-up."

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US Authorizes Paxlovid, the First Oral Antiviral Treatment for COVID-19

By - Nevin Brown

On Wednesday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cleared Pfizer's Paxlovid for use in patients 12 and older. The first-of-its-kind Covid treatment pill has been shown to be highly effective at preventing serious Covid symptoms in infected individuals.

The emergency use authorization of Paxlovid comes as the United States faces a Covid surge due to the emergence of the highly-contagious Omicron variant. The pill will be available to those who are at an increased risk to become severely ill.

One study found that when taken within five days of the first symptoms by high-risk unvaccinated adults, Paxlovid managed to reduce hospitalization or death by 88%. The study was conducted when the Delta variant was surging, but laboratory studies indicate it is likely to work against the Omicron variant as well.

[According to an FDA news release](#), "Paxlovid is available by prescription only and should be initiated as soon as possible after diagnosis of COVID-19 and within five days of symptom onset."

Paxlovid is to be administered twice daily over five consecutive days. Each dosage is three tablets consisting of two tablets of nirmatrelvir and one tablet of ritonavir. A 30-pill round of Paxlovid is set to cost approximately \$530 per patient.

Paxlovid's promise has seen the United States order enough doses to treat 10 million people; however, it's roll-out could take some time as Pfizer can only make enough pills to cover 65,000 people in the US by the end of next week.

Over the first two months, Pfizer will make 350,000 treatment courses available before production is expected to be ramped up. Pfizer is expected to produce 120 million courses of Paxlovid in 2022.

While Paxlovid appears promising in the global fight against Covid, another antiviral pill is poised to soon hit the market. Merck has developed a pill that in a study reduced the risk of

hospitalization and death for high-risk patients by an estimated 30%. It is expected that Merck will gain FDA emergency authorization over the next week.

Merck's pill has more health concerns, and experts expect that Paxlovid will be the preferred course of treatment. Merck, however, is thought to be able to ramp up production more quickly. Before these two pharmaceutical treatments, the only authorized treatment available to individuals were monoclonal antibody drugs. These drugs had to be infused into the bloodstream at a hospital or clinic, which limited their utility.

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US Training Ukraine Army 'Perplexing' as Russia Offers Security Proposals - Ex-CIA Officer

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Reported US intelligence plans to train Ukrainian troops to fight a guerrilla war against Russia are unconstitutional in addition to being perplexing at a time when Russia has submitted proposals to the United States to ensure security, retired veteran CIA officer and analyst Phil Giraldi told Sputnik on Thursday.

The Mirror reported on Monday that US intelligence officials have secretly agreed to arm and train Ukraine troops on how to fight a guerrilla war against Russian forces. High-level meetings took place this week between the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) on the project, the report added.

"This is perhaps one of the more perplexing of all the Biden administration initiatives that are loosely described as foreign policy, particularly as it is taking place at a time when Russia has submitted clear proposals regarding establishing viable spheres of influence and thereby avoiding a war," Giraldi said.

The United States is openly providing weapons and training to Kiev and without any restrictions on how the weapons are to be used, Giraldi said. This made the US government "complicit in any Ukrainian provocation that would seek to involve Washington in a broader conflict," he added.

Giraldi said it is particularly troubling that "we now learn there is a clandestine program that is engaging in what are undoubtedly war crimes while also creating a 'guerrilla warfare' capability." The new initiative appeared consistent with a long pattern now going back many decades of secret and ultimately unsuccessful US efforts to destabilize and topple governments and support rebel forces in countries around the world, he said.

"Unfortunately this comes as no surprise and is just one more indication of how Washington has learned nothing through its many failures involving attempted regime change and support of proxy rebel groups," he said.

Apart from being warmongering and unconstitutional, in this particular case, the consequences of the reported Ukrainian initiative could easily be catastrophic for all parties involved, Giraldi warned.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday that US private military companies have delivered containers with unidentified chemical components to the Donetsk region for the

purposes of committing provocations in eastern Ukraine. About 120 employees of US private military companies are presently training the Ukrainian troops in the Donetsk region.

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US Supreme Court Agrees to Hear Challenges to Biden Admin. Vaccine Mandates - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court agreed to hear lawsuits challenging the Biden administration's coronavirus vaccine mandate for companies with more than 100 employees as well as for healthcare facilities, according to a court order list. The order, filed on Wednesday, consolidated the lawsuits challenging the vaccine mandates and allotted time for one hour of oral arguments on January 7, 2022.

The mandate for big companies with 100 or more workers to require them to vaccinate or test while the healthcare mandate requires workers in facilities that receive government funds to require employees be vaccinated.

A US District Court on Monday blocked the enforcement of a separate Biden administration coronavirus vaccine mandate for federal contractors in ten states while the mandate's legality is worked out in the courts.

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Senator Ted Cruz Says Ready to Run Again for US President 'In Heartbeat'

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz, a leading figure in the Republican Party, said that he is eager to run again for President of the United States in 2024. "Absolutely, in a heartbeat," Cruz in an interview with The Truth Gazette on Wednesday. "I ran in 2016... very strong field and I ended up placing 2nd. There's a reason historically that the runner up is almost always the next nominee."

The full interview with The Truth Gazette is scheduled to be podcast and published on Friday. In 2016, Cruz was the last remaining credible candidate to oppose eventual Republican nominee and successful national election winner Donald Trump who was then a New York businessman.

The race between the two men was harsh and abusive on both sides, but when Trump was elected president, Cruz became and remained one of his strongest political allies.

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Harris Tests Negative for Coronavirus After Staffer Gets Infected Earlier - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22(Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris decided to get tested for the novel coronavirus after one of her staffers was infected and the test is negative, spokesperson Symone Sanders said in a statement.

"On Wednesday morning, a staff member who staffed the Vice President throughout the day Tuesday received a positive test result for COVID-19... Earlier today, after being notified of the staffer's positive test, the Vice President received a PCR test and tested negative. She will be tested again on Friday then again on Monday per CDC guidance," the statement said on Wednesday.

The staff member who tested positive was fully vaccinated and did not experience symptoms, the statement said. Others who came into contact with the individual will be advised to get tested as per public health guidelines, the statement added.

Harris will continue with her daily schedule and depart for Los Angeles this evening to spend the New Year celebration there with the Second Gentleman since fully vaccinated individuals are not required to quarantine after an exposure per public health guidance, according to the statement.

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US Congresswoman Scanlon Carjacked at Gunpoint After Meeting in Philadelphia - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Mary Gay Scanlon was carjacked at gunpoint after attending a meeting in a nearby park in Philadelphia, spokesperson Lauren Cox said in a statement.

"Congresswoman Scanlon was carjacked at gunpoint in FDR Park following a meeting at that location. The Congresswoman was physically unharmed. She thanks the Philadelphia Police Department for their swift response, and appreciates the efforts of both the Sergeant at Arms in [Washington] DC and her local police department for coordinating with Philly PD to ensure her continued safety," the statement said.

Scanlon, a former civil rights lawyer, is a member of the Democratic party and represents Pennsylvania's 5th Congressional District. She serves on the Administration, Judiciary and Rules committees.

The FBI said in September that overall violent crime in the United States increased by 5.6% last year, with motor vehicle thefts rising 12% since the previous year.

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Proud Boys Member Pleads Guilty to January 6 Capitol-Related Charges - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A New York man who was a member of the Proud Boys movement pleaded guilty to charges related to the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, the US Justice Department said.

"A New York man pleaded guilty today to crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, which disrupted a joint session of the US Congress that was in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

According to court documents, Matthew Greene, 34, of Syracuse conspired with fellow members of the Proud Boys, a self-described pro-Western fraternal organization for men. He pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy and one count of obstruction, the release said.

According to court documents, on January 6, Greene and other Proud Boys members marched to the Capitol and he was among those who crossed a downed police line. He later advanced to a set of stairs that ran from the West Plaza to the Upper West Terrace, the release added.

In the 11 months since those events, more than 700 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol, according to the Justice Department.

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US Investing \$10Mln to Expand Access to Affordable Internet in Tribal Lands - White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is providing \$10 million to expand access to affordable internet on tribal lands in the United States, the White House said.

"Today, the White House is announcing nearly \$10 million in funding awards from the Departments of Commerce, Treasury, and Agriculture that will be leveraged to expand access to affordable, reliable, and high-speed internet services to Tribal Nations," the White House said in a press release.

The funding is part of the Biden administration's commitment to strengthen the resilience and prosperity of Tribal groups, the release added.

The grant will help establish connections between Tribal communities, provide laptops and tablets to Tribal members, support capital broadband projects, foster economic growth, according to the release.

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US Stocks Extend Rally After Emergency Authorization Use Granted to Pfizer's COVID-19 Pill

NEW YORK, December 22 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rallied for a second straight day on Wednesday, after a prior week-long sell-off, after health authorities approved emergency use for Pfizer's COVID-19 pill in a bid to hasten the end of the two-year long pandemic.

"The next battle in the war against COVID-19 has both the US and UK rushing to secure supplies in COVID-19 treatments," Ed Moya, equities analyst at the online trading platform OANDA, said.

The United States will have more than 250,000 courses of Pfizer's COVID-19 pill available by January and has ordered as many as 10 million more, the White House said after the US Food and Drug administration granted emergency use authorization for the world's first oral treatment against the coronavirus. Pfizer said the United Kingdom will receive 2.5 million doses through 2022.

US stocks responded positively to the news, adding to Tuesday's gains.

The Big Tech sector was again the biggest winner of the day. The Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed up 1.2% after Tuesday's 2.4% gain. Prior to that, Nasdaq dropped 4% over six sessions. The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished up almost 1% after a rise of 1.8% in the previous session. Prior to Tuesday, the S&P 500 had lost 3% since the close of December 10.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, one of Wall Street's three key benchmarks that had taken the worst beating over the past week, rose 0.7% on Wednesday, adding to Tuesday's 1.6% rise. Prior to the two-day rally, the Dow tumbled 11% over a six-day period.

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US Seizes 1,400 Rifles Allegedly Destined for Yemen Rebels - Navy

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Navy seized a stateless vessel with about 1,400 AK-47 rifles allegedly shipped by Iran to Houthi rebels in Yemen via the Arabian Sea, United States Naval Forces Central Command said in a press release.

"US 5th Fleet ships seized approximately 1,400 AK-47 assault rifles and 226,600 rounds of ammunition from a stateless fishing vessel during a flag verification boarding in accordance with customary international law in the North Arabian Sea, Dec. 20," the release said on Wednesday. "The stateless vessel was assessed to have originated in Iran and transited international waters along a route historically used to traffic weapons unlawfully to the Houthis in Yemen."

The Central Command said in the release that the five crew members identified themselves as being nationals of Yemen and will be returned to their country.

The US naval forces sank the vessel after the Central Command determined it represented a hazard to navigation, the release added.

Earlier in December, the United States seized Iranian weapons, including 171 surface-to-air missiles and some 1.1 million barrels of Iranian petroleum products from vessels in the Arabian Sea destined for Houthi rebels in Yemen.

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. The conflict has created the arguably biggest humanitarian crisis in the world.

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NASA Confirms December 25 Launch Date for James Webb Space Telescope - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - NASA confirmed that it will launch the James Webb Space Telescope early on Saturday morning from French Guiana.

"NASA, ESA [European Space Agency] and Arianespace confirmed a targeted launch date of Saturday, Dec. 25, for the James Webb Space Telescope," NASA said in a press release on Wednesday.

There will be a 32-minute launch window starting at 7:20 a.m. Eastern Time in Kourou, French Guiana, the release said.

The launch was originally scheduled to launch on December 18, but it was delayed by four days to investigate the unanticipated release of a clamp band holding the highly sensitive instrument to its launch vehicle.

Unlike its predecessor, the Earth-orbiting Hubble telescope, the Webb will orbit the sun at a distance of about a million miles from Earth. From that position, the telescope will be able to explore every phase of cosmic history - from within our solar system to the most distant galaxies in the early universe, according to NASA.

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Blinken, EU Foreign Policy Chief Discuss Ukraine, Russia - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell discussed over the telephone Ukraine, Russia and China, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"They emphasized the need for coordinated action to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and reaffirmed that any further Russian military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences for the Russian Federation," Price said in a statement on Wednesday.

Both diplomats also discussed what the White House called was the "escalating political pressure and economic coercion" by China against Lithuania, Price also said.

The spokesperson noted that the situation has impacted US and European companies as well as the determination of the collective West to stand together with Lithuania.

"They underscored our continuing solidarity with Lithuania in the face of the PRC's [People Republic of China's] coercive behavior and committed to work together to strengthen economic resilience," he said.

Blinken and Borrell also highlighted bilateral commitment to strengthen the US-EU partnership, Price added.

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US to Have Over 250,000 Courses of Pfizer's COVID Pill By January - White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will have more than 250,000 courses of Pfizer's COVID-19 pill available by January, the White House said after US health authorities granted emergency use authorization for the world's first oral treatment against the novel coronavirus.

"With today's action, we add the first-ever oral treatment to our nation's medicine cabinet and take a significant step forward in our path out of the pandemic," the White House said in a statement on Wednesday. "We will have over 250,000 treatment courses available to us in January and we will be working with states to ensure those are being distributed equitably and fairly and that our hardest-hit communities are reached."

The Biden administration said it has pre-purchased 10 million treatment courses - more than any other country in the world - and will work closely with Pfizer to speed up production of the pill by providing the company with any resource needed, including utilization of the Defense Production Act, the White House said.

The emergency authorization for the Pfizer pill came after the Omicron was identified as the dominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new cases since last week.

Earlier in the week, President Joe Biden warned that Americans who do not get vaccinated against the coronavirus face "a winter of severe illness and death."

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US Foreign Arms Transfers, Defense Trade Decline by 21% in Fiscal Year 2021 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US arms transfers and defense trade declined by approximately 21% between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021, the State Department said in a fact sheet.

The combined total value of foreign military sales and approved direct commercial sales for Fiscal Year 2021 was roughly \$138 billion, down 21% from the roughly \$175 billion combined in Fiscal Year 2020, the State Department data released on Wednesday showed.

Arms transfers and defense trade are important tools of US foreign policy with potential long-term implications for regional and global security, the State Department said.

However, a total of 13,927 entities were registered with the Directorate of Defense Trade Controls to conduct defense trade activities, representing a slight increase from the previous year, the State Department added.

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CDC Reviewing Whether to Require Booster Shot to Be Considered Fully Vaccinated - Director

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is looking into whether a third dose of a vaccine for the novel coronavirus is required for a person to be considered "fully vaccinated," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said.

"We're looking at the definition right now and more to come there," Walensky said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

The CDC's current guideline recommends citizens to receive a booster shot amid the winter surge of the novel coronavirus.

The Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new cases as of last week, according to the CDC.

Walensky said the latest US seven-day average of cases has increased by a quarter to nearly 150,000 amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant.

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Western Nations at UN Warn Russia of 'Severe Cost' in Case of Aggression against Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States, the European Union, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and a number of other countries at the United Nations on Wednesday warned Russia of "severe cost" in case the latter advances on Ukraine.

"The UN Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State. Any further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and a severe cost in response," the countries said in a statement.

A total of 36 UN member states, including Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland and Ukraine issued the statement following a Russian-organized informal meeting of the UN Security Council on national minorities and glorification of Nazism in the Baltic states and Ukraine.

"The timing of this Arria-formula meeting is especially troubling, coming against the backdrop of Russian military build-up on the Crimean Peninsula and on Ukraine's borders," the statement read.

The countries said they regretted Russia's "misuse" of the issue of racism and xenophobia in a Security Council's meeting to distort history for its political purposes and promote disinformation.

"This is a deliberate attempt yet again to divert the international community's attention from Russia's own ongoing violations of international law, including violations of international human rights law, and abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms," the statement said.

The countries called on Russia to stop its alleged disinformation campaign against Ukraine, lower tensions around it and immediately withdraw the forces it has purportedly stationed in the country.

Russia stands accused of allegedly deploying troops near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA'S SECURITY PROPOSALS

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke over the telephone and confirmed that any future negotiations with Russia on European security would take place in coordination and with the participation of the European Union, the European External Action Service said in a statement on Wednesday.

* Before organizing and holding a new meeting between the leaders of Russia and the United States, Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden, you need to understand what the response will be to Russia's proposals on security guarantees, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said that an open line of engagements is ongoing with Russia, and United States is hopeful that the diplomatic discussion will continue.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

* The United States and its partners have agreed to end the deadline to revive the Iran nuclear deal within weeks, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Israeli media outlet Haaretz on Wednesday.

* The Vienna-hosted talks on reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will resume before the end of 2021 after the Christmas holidays, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

UK-GERMANY TALKS

* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed on the importance of interaction with Russia for de-escalation in Ukraine, Johnson's office said following a telephone conversation between the leaders.

EUROPEAN GAS MARKETS

* The Ukrainian and Hungarian operators of the gas transportation systems have signed an agreement on guaranteed capacities for daily transportation of up to 8 million cubic meters of gas from Hungary to Ukraine, which will increase the total import capacity to 35 million cubic meters per day, Ukrainian GTS Operator head Sergiy Makogon said on Wednesday.

* Ukraine's Naftogaz said that Russia's Gazprom has artificially limited supplies of gas to Europe to create a deficit.

* The European Union does not have any capabilities to impose sanctions against Russia in the field of gas and is not in a position to do that, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said.

US-RUSSIA GENERALS TALKS

* Russian First Deputy Defense Minister Valery Gerasimov and Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley discussed by phone topical issues of international security, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Milley and Gerasimov had a phone call to address regional security issues of concern, Joint Staff spokesman Col. Dave Butler said.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING ON AFGHANISTAN

* The UN Security Council on Wednesday unanimously adopted a United States resolution allowing humanitarian aid payments to Afghanistan despite the current sanctions.

* China calls for Afghanistan's overseas reserves to be promptly unfrozen, permanent representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun told the UN Security Council.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia is proposing to Washington a solution to the US presence in Syria and the situation in the Euphrates, Russian Special Representative Alexander Lavrentyev said on Wednesday.

* Foreign troops should not be present in Syria, Russia's special envoy, Lavrentyev, said.

* The Russian military has recently eliminated one of the major militants operating in Syria Ash-Shishani Margoshvili, Lavrentyev said.

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Virginia Conservators Open 1887 Time Capsule Found Beneath Removed Robert E. Lee Statue

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Virginia Historic Resources Department conservators on Wednesday opened a time capsule hidden in the pedestal of a taken-down statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, finding books and other historically significant items placed in the 1887 container.

The conservators worked slowly over a number of hours to open the time capsule, which was sealed with lead, without damaging any of the contents inside. After unsealing the lid, the conservators carefully removed items including books and an envelope, the content of which is currently unknown. Some of the objects did appear to have water damage, a conservator noted.

The bronze statue of Robert E. Lee, from underneath which working crews removed the time capsule, was taken down in September due to its association with the Confederacy and racial injustice.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam – who ordered the statue's pedestal removal in a reversal of previous plans to repurpose it – attended the time capsule's opening, watching closely as conservators removed the historic items.

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US Seven-Day Average of COVID-19 Cases Up 25% to 149,000 - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The US seven-day average of new COVID-19 cases has increased by a quarter to nearly 150,000 amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant of the virus, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"The current seven-day average of cases is about 149,300 cases per day, an increase of about 25% over the previous week. The seven-day average of hospital admissions is about 7,800 per day, and the seven-day average of deaths is about 1,200 per day, which is an increase of about 3.5% over the prior week," Walensky told a press briefing.

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UN Planned to Pay \$6Mln to Afghanistan for Security Before Taliban's Takeover - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations prepared its budget plans to pay in 2022 almost \$6 million in security assistance to Afghanistan before the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorist activities) seized control of the country in August, and the budget proposal is currently being reviewed, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Wednesday.

"The budget proposal we have initially made for 2022 was prepared before the government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell. And some of that language in our budget submission is no longer current, so that budget is currently under review," Haq said during a press conference when asked to confirm reports saying the United Nations' plans to allocate \$6 million to the Taliban to provide security.

Haq explained that since the Taliban's takeover, the United Nations mission in Afghanistan had requested security assurances and assistance from the authorities to provide allowances to personnel performing security services for the UN staff.

However, any such allowances or money is provided to the concerned persons directly and not through the Taliban, Haq added.

The Taliban took over Afghanistan after a decades-long invasion by the United States and its allies and a subsequent war, which plunged the country into a prolonged humanitarian, security and economic crisis.

The group set up an all-male non-inclusive government, led by Mohammad Hasan Akhund, who served as the foreign minister during the previous Taliban rule and has been under UN sanctions since 2001. Once in power, the Taliban imposed Islamic Sharia laws in the country.

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Blinken , EU's Borrell Discuss Need for Coordinated Action to Support Ukraine - State Dept.

Canada PM Trudeau Says 3 Staff Members, 3 Security Guards Tested Positive for Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a nationally televised broadcast on Wednesday that six members of his staff and security detail have tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"My office is not immune," Trudeau said, giving the Canadian people a new update on the state of the coronavirus pandemic in their country. "We have three members of my staff and three members of my security detail who have tested positive. They are following our public health guidance. So am I."

Trudeau said he was continuing to take rapid tests and so far he had continued to test negative for the coronavirus.

"I have been taking rapid tests, so far negative ... I am being careful about everything that I do," he said.

Trudeau added that so far he had not been advised by doctors and other health officials to go into quarantine.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Canadian authorities have reported 30,139 COVID-19-related deaths, the country's Health Department said.

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US House January 6 Panel Requests Testimony From Republican Congressman Jordan - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the events at the US Capitol on January 6 on Wednesday sent a letter to Republican Congressman and Trump ally Jim Jordan, asking him to testify before the panel on matters under investigation. "We write to seek your voluntary cooperation in advancing our investigation," Select Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson said in the letter to Jordan. "We understand that you had at least one and possibly multiple communications with President Trump on January 6th. We would like to discuss each such communication with you in detail."

The Select Committee is seeking details about Jordan's communication with individuals in the Willard War Room near the White House, the Trump legal team and with White House personnel and others involved in organizing strategies for the January 6 gathering, the letter said.

The Select Committee is asking Jordan to testify on January 3, 4 or 10, the letter noted.

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US National Security Adviser Says Deadline for Iran Talks to End 'Within Weeks' - Reports

(Adds details, background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its partners have agreed to end the deadline to revive the Iran nuclear deal within weeks, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Israel's Haaretz newspaper.

Sullivan said a deadline was agreed to behind closed doors among the US and other world powers to end negotiations with Iran within weeks if it does not return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), according to the report.

The United States and other parties involved in the Vienna talks will know in the coming weeks if Iran is ready to take a diplomatic path to revive the Iran nuclear deal, according to Sullivan. Sullivan added that there is still room for a diplomatic effort to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and any sanctions that are removed must be accompanied by limitations, the report said.

Moreover, Sullivan said there are other tools the United States can use besides military force to keep Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

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, but has not yet been resolved. However, an agreement was reached to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to replace 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.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries including China, France, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, 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 US withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its own commitments.

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Hockey Canada Says Disappointed, But Supports NHL Decision to Skip Olympics

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – Hockey Canada expressed disappointment over the National Hockey League's decision to skip the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, but said it supports this measure due to COVID-19 uncertainty.

"Hockey Canada recognizes the amount of deliberation and consideration the NHL and NHLPA [National Hockey League Players' Association] put into the decision to not participate in the 2022 Olympics in Beijing, and we understand and support that decision given the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic," Hockey Canada CEO Tom Renney and its President and chief operating officer Scott Smith said in a statement.

NHL and NHLPA announced a joint decision not to go to Beijing this winter due to COVID-19 concerns and the need to organize dozens of NHL regular season games, which had been postponed because of the pandemic.

"While we are disappointed that we will not be able to build a team of the best Canadian NHL players from across the country for the first time since 2014, we know hockey fans from coast-to-coast-to-coast are equally disappointed that they will not be able to watch their favorite NHL players compete for gold at the Olympics," Renney and Smith said.

They also expressed confidence that Canadians across the country will support the national team during the Games in February. "We look forward to working with our hockey operations staff to assemble a group that gives us the best possible chance to bring home a gold medal," they said.

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UNGA President Says Tested Positive for COVID-19, Isolating at Home with Mild Symptoms

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid said on Wednesday he had tested positive for COVID-19 and is currently isolating at home with mild symptoms.

"I have tested positive for COVID-19 today. I am isolating at home with mild symptoms," the top Maldivian diplomat wrote on Twitter.

Shahid said he was fully vaccinated and received a booster.

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US National Security Adviser Says Deadline for Iran Talks to End 'Within Weeks' - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its partners have agreed to end the deadline to revive the Iran nuclear deal within weeks, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Israeli media outlet Haaretz in an interview.

Sullivan said a deadline was agreed to behind closed doors among the US and other world powers to end negotiations with Iran within weeks if it does not return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, according to the report.

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US Court Sets Arraignment for Russian National Klyushin on January 3 – Judge

(Adds details of hearing in paras 4-7, background in para 8)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – A US court in the state of Massachusetts has rescheduled an arraignment hearing for Russian national Vladislav Klyushin for January 3, 2022, Magistrate Judge Marianne Bowler said on Wednesday.

Klyushin was due to be arraigned in court on Wednesday, but the judge delayed the hearing until attorneys in the case can submit more documents, including a translation of his criminal case in Switzerland, where he was initially detained before being extradited to the United States.

"I would like the translation from the government of the Swiss opinion. I will set an arraignment for January 3 at 3:00p.m.," Bowler said during the virtual hearing.

During the hearing, government prosecutors argued that Klyushin poses a flight risk and should therefore be held in jail until his trial for his alleged role in a global hacking and trading scheme. Through his attorney, Klyushin had offered to put \$2.5 million worth of assets — including a \$1.5 million London property and \$1 million in cash — up as bond to ensure his appearance at trial. Klyushin also agreed to strict conditions that would include his home confinement, a GPS electronic monitoring device, no visitors and only one phone line with no internet capabilities that the defense would allow the US government to monitor.

The prosecution argued that these conditions would fall short of ensuring Klyushin's appearance at trial. They said that because the US government only has limited insight into his financial situation, the court could not guarantee that Klyushin would not have other means to flee the US.

During the hearing, Klyushin's attorney Maksim Nemtsev noted that his situation in jail is currently "difficult." The Russian citizen is only allowed out of his cell for two hours a day and has only limited ability to communicate his attorney, Nemtsev said.

Klyushin owns M13, a company that provides media monitoring and cybersecurity services. If convicted, he faces a prison sentence of up to 20 years on some of the charges brought up against him.

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Omicron Drives Doubling in Daily New COVID Cases in Canada – Chief Health Officer

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – A surge in Omicron variant infections is spearheading the doubling of new cases of COVID-19 in Canada over the weekend, threatening very high numbers in the New Year, the nation's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Wednesday.

"Omicron is increasingly responsible for a rapid rise in case counts," Tam told a national telecast. "There were over 11,300 new cases reported yesterday alone compared to a national average of over 5,000 new cases being reported daily by the end of last week."

With over 2,360 confirmed Omicron cases to date, this new variant is now predominating in various locations across Canada, the chief public health officer observed.

"Modelling shows that by the beginning of January we could have a very high number of cases which underscores the need to act urgently now to reduce the acceleration," she said.

The Omicron variant now accounts for nearly 80% of the 5,043 new COVID-19 infections most recently reported, Health Canada said on Wednesday. The country has so far recorded 30,139 deaths and 1,918,130 cases of the disease, the national organization said.

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US Stockpiles Most Gasoline Since June as Omicron Bites Into Fuel Demand - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US gasoline stockpiles rose their most for a week since June, according to data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) on Wednesday, indicating fuel demand was slumping from cutbacks in social activity triggered by the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

Gasoline stockpiles rose by 5.53 million barrels during the week ended December 17, their most since a 7.5 million-barrel build during the week to June 7, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Supply-Demand Report showed.

Industry analysts surveyed by US media had expected gasoline inventories to rise by just 65,000 barrels for the just-ended week, putting what the EIA reported at least eight times higher than projections. In the previous week, gasoline stockpiles drew down by 719,000 barrels.

The EIA report also showed that inventories of distillates, which are refined into diesel and jet fuel, among other fuel products, rose by 396,000 barrels last week versus a projected drop of 250,000. In the previous week, distillate stocks fell by 2.85 million.

Crude oil inventories, meanwhile, fell by 4.72 million barrels - versus a forecast decline of 2.5 million - and added to the 4.58-million slide in the previous week to Dec. 10.

But it was the build in gasoline - the United States' No. 1 automotive fuel - that caught the attention of many oil traders.

"It's quite shocking how much gasoline demand has cratered over the past week just as Omicron caseloads went through the roof," John Kilduff, founding partner at Again Capital, an energy hedge fund in New York, told Sputnik.

The Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus strain in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new coronavirus cases last week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention. US cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago have announced mass cutbacks in activity and introduced various new restrictions in response.

Oil prices have fallen from the 2021 highs since the discovery of the Omicron variant in South Africa in November. The Brent global benchmark for crude fell from seven-year highs of \$86.70 a barrel in mid-October to as low as \$65.80 over the past two months, before settling into a range of between \$70 and \$75 now.

Despite the price slump and threats of a resurgence in the pandemic, global oil producers have so far played down risks from the Omicron.

OPEC+ - a 23-nation oil producing alliance led by the 13-member OPEC under Saudi Arabia and 10 others non-OPEC countries steered by Russia - says the Omicron is unlikely to become as disruptive to energy demand as the original novel coronavirus strain that broke out in 2020. In its monthly demand outlook released earlier this week, the Saudi-led OPEC said it saw the world consuming 99.13 million barrels per day of crude in the first quarter of 2022, up 1.1 million from its November forecast.

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US Court Sets Arraignment for Russian National Klyushin on January 3 – Judge

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – A US court in the state of Massachusetts has rescheduled an arraignment hearing for Russian national Vladislav Klyushin for January 3, 2022, Magistrate Judge Marianne Bowler said on Wednesday.

Klyushin was due to be arraigned in court on Wednesday, but the judge delayed the hearing until attorneys in the case can submit more documents, including a translation of his criminal case in Switzerland, where he was initially detained before being extradited to the United States.

"I would like the translation from the government of the Swiss opinion. I will set an arraignment for January 3," Bowler said during the virtual hearing.

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White House Says Biden Administration Purchased 10Mln Pfizer, 3Mln Merck Antiviral Pills

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration purchased a combined 13 million doses of antiviral pills from the pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Merck and will be used to treat people infected with the novel coronavirus, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We have purchased 10 million Pfizer doses, three million Merck and we'll be prepared to distribute them as soon as supply is ready," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki pointed out that the pharmaceutical companies have experienced difficulties in producing the antiviral treatments, but the Biden administration will try to make available as many as possible.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Food and Drug Administration approved Pfizer's Paxlovid pill to treat mild-to-moderate COVID-19 cases that is the first oral drug cleared to treat the disease. The FDA has not yet approved Merck's pill.

The Biden administration purchased the 10 million doses of Pfizer's oral treatment for \$5 billion and Merck, if approved, will be awarded \$2.2 billion for its pills, according to media reports.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the Omicron variant is now the dominant coronavirus variant in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new cases as of last week.

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US Inspectors Probe Tesla's Onboard Game That Could Cause Driver Distraction, Crashes

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US federal traffic safety inspectors said on Wednesday they have opened investigations against electric carmaker Tesla's models that allowed a game to be played during driving that could cause distraction and chances of a crash. Tesla's Model 3, S, X and Y vehicles from years 2017 to 2022 have a functionality called "Passenger Play" "that may distract the driver and increase the risk of a crash", the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said in a statement.

Prior to a December 2020 upgrade, the game could only be played when Tesla vehicles were in park mode, the NHTSA's Office of Defects said in its "Preliminary Evaluation."

The evaluation would determine the level of driver distraction potential from the game when Tesla vehicles were being driven, the statement said. The agency will also attempt to discover the frequency and use scenarios of the game.

The CBC news portal said the NHTSA probe was triggered by a complaint filed by Tesla owner Vince Patton who discovered from a YouTube video in August that he could now play a video game on his car's touchscreen while driving.

Patton said he loved his Tesla but added that he was worried that drivers will play with the feature while on the road and become dangerously distracted. "Somebody's going to get killed," the 59-year-old retired broadcast journalist was quoted as saying. "It's absolutely insane."

Tesla did not immediately respond to media queries about the investigation.

All new Tesla cars have hardware for self-driving if autonomous driving becomes a norm in the future. That allows them to carry driver features and conveniences typically not found in motorized vehicles.

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White House Says Open Line of Engagements Ongoing With Russia, Hopes This Will Continue

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that an open line of engagements is ongoing with Russia, and Washington is hopeful that the diplomatic discussion will continue.

"The good sign is that there's an open line of diplomatic discussion and engagement that is happening and we expect to continue, we hope to continue," Psaki said in a press briefing.

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White House Says US, NATO Do Not Have Aggressive Intent With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and NATO have no aggressive intent with Russia, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"NATO is a defensive alliance. We don't have aggressive intent with Russia. The United States doesn't, neither do NATO partners," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Biden to Address Americans on Anniversary of January 6 Capitol Riot - White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The American people will hear from President Joe Biden on the anniversary of the January 6 events at the US Capitol, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We are still finalizing plans but I think it's safe to say that the American people will hear from him on that day," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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US Consumer Confidence Up 2nd Month in Row in December - Conference Board

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence rose for a second month in a row in December despite Americans' concerns about spiraling inflation, suggesting that economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic may be on track, the Conference Board said Wednesday.

"Consumer confidence improved further in December, following a very modest gain in November," Lynn Franco, senior director of economic indicators at the Conference Board, said in a news release.

The data suggests "the economy has maintained its momentum in the final month of 2021" in spite of "continued price increases and the emergence of the Omicron variant" of the coronavirus, the release said.

Consumers account for nearly 70% of the US economy.

The Conference Board's 'Consumer Confidence Index' showed a reading of 115.8 for December versus 111.9 in November. Its "Present Situation Index" - based on consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions - was relatively flat at 144.1, versus last month's 144.4.

The "Expectations Index" - based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business, and labor market conditions - rose to 96.9 from 90.2.

The US economy shrank 3.5% for all of 2020 from business shutdowns forced by the pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter and 3.6% in the second and 2.3% now for the third quarter.

The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for all this year and 4% for 2022. The central bank's problem, however, is inflation, running at near 40-year highs as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

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Biden Extends Pause on Federal Student Loan Repayment by Additional 90 Days - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is extending a pause on federal student loan repayments by an additional 90 days as pandemic response and economic recovery continue, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"[T]oday my Administration is extending the pause on federal student loan repayments for an additional 90 days – through May 1, 2022 – as we manage the ongoing pandemic and further strengthen our economic recovery. Meanwhile, the Department of Education will continue working with borrowers to ensure they have the support they need to transition smoothly back into repayment and advance economic stability for their own households and for our nation," Biden said in a statement.

The president also asked student loan borrowers to do their part and take full advantage of the Education Department's resources to help prepare for the resumption of payments.

Biden on his first day in office directed the Education Department to pause student loan repayments through September and then extended the pause through January 31, 2021 in August. The issue is one that Vice President Kamala Harris has been closely focused on and that they both care about, Biden noted.

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Omicron Associated With Two-Thirds Less Risk of COVID-19 Hospitalization Than Delta- Study

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus Omicron variant is associated with two-thirds lesser risk for an infected person to be hospitalized when compared to the Delta variant, a new study by a group of researchers from the University of Edinburgh found on Wednesday.

"These early national data suggest that Omicron is associated with a two-thirds reduction in the risk of COVID-19 hospitalization when compared to Delta," according to the study results. The study also found that a booster shot is associated with a 57% reduction in the risk of symptomatic COVID-19 for Omicron and provides the greatest possible protection against Delta. On Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that the Omicron variant, which emerged in November in southern Africa, accounts now for nearly 75% of all new infections in the United States.

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US to Provide Extra 1Mln COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to Afghanistan - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will allocate another one million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Afghanistan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"In addition, the United States will provide the people of Afghanistan one million additional COVID-19 vaccine doses through COVAX, bringing our total to 4.3 million doses. We stand with the Afghan people," Blinken said.

The announcement comes after the US issued three general licenses earlier in the day to facilitate the continued flow of assistance to Afghanistan despite restrictions on the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism).

"These licenses expand upon existing authorizations for the provision of humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs and enable broader support for the Afghan people consistent with Resolution 2615 (2021) adopted by the UN Security Council earlier today," Blinken said. "This Resolution, drafted by the United States and unanimously adopted by the 15 members of the UN Security Council, establishes a carveout in the UN 1988 sanctions regime to ensure urgently needed aid can reach the Afghan people."

Blinken noted that the resolution also requests periodic briefings by the UN emergency relief coordinator on assistance deliveries.

"UN sanctions are an important tool to respond to threats and human rights abuses, but we must make sure these sanctions do not hinder the delivery of urgently needed aid to the Afghan people," the secretary said. "While U.S. sanctions on the Taliban remain in place, OFAC has

provided broad authorizations that ensure nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and the U.S. government can continue to provide assistance and critical support to the most vulnerable Afghans."

The general licenses issued by OFAC on Wednesday authorize transactions and activities with the Taliban and related actors for the US government, UN, Red Cross, Islamic Development Bank, humanitarian non-governmental organizations and others.

The US is the largest single provider of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and is committed to supporting the Afghan people, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said in the release. The Afghan economy faces challenges exacerbated by the country's long-time dependence on foreign aid, drought, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Taliban takeover, Adeyemo added.

The General Licenses explicitly do not authorize financial transfers to the Taliban or related actors other than for the specified humanitarian purposes, the release noted.

The UN Security Council on Wednesday also unanimously adopted a US resolution to allow humanitarian aid payments to Afghanistan despite current sanctions.

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US Orders Safety Review on Boeing 777-200 PW4000 Engines - Federal Aviation Agency

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Safety inspectors will review the Pratt & Whitney PW4000 engines of Boeing 777-200 civilian aircraft and the company must strengthen a key component after an engine failure over Denver last February, the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) said on Wednesday.

"AD 2021-05-51 requires performing a one-time Thermal Acoustic Image (TAI) inspection for cracks in certain 1st-stage Low Pressure Compressor (LPC) blades and removal of those blades that fail inspection," the new ruling, which remains technically unpublished in the Federal Register until December 28, said.

In the new ruling, the FAA proposes to supersede two previous airworthiness directives AD 2019-03-01 and AD 2021-05-51 that apply to certain Pratt & Whitney Division turbofan engines, the agency explained.

"Since the FAA issued AD 2019-03-01 and AD 2021-05-51, the manufacturer determined the need to add initial and repetitive ultrasonic testing (UT) inspections of the 1st-stage LPC blades," the agency said.

This proposed AD would require initial and repetitive UT inspections and inspections for cracks in certain 1st-stage LPC blades and removal of those blades that fail inspection. The FAA is proposing this AD to address the unsafe condition on these products, the agency added.

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US Capital to Require Proof of Vaccination at Indoor Venues in January - Mayor's Office

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Washington, DC residents will need to show proof of vaccination at indoor venues, including restaurants, gyms and movie theaters, starting on January 15, 2022, Mayor Muriel Bowser's office said in a notice on Wednesday.

"On January 15, 2022, per Mayor's Order 2021-148, the District of Columbia will adopt a city wide vaccination entry requirement that requires COVID-19 vaccination to enter indoor facilities within the city," the notice said.

Individuals 12 years of age and older must show proof of vaccination with at least one dose starting January 15, but eventually this age group will need to show proof of being fully vaccinated starting February 15, 2022, the notice said.

The new rule will apply to individuals trying to enter restaurants, nightclubs, coffee shops movie theaters, concerts, gyms, conferences, among other indoor facilities, the notice added.

The decision is part of the city's effort to curb the winter surge of novel coronavirus cases, according to the mayor's office.

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US Existing Home Sales Up 3rd Month in Row as Buyers Race to Get Ahead of Rate Hikes

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US existing home sales rose for a third straight month in November as buyers rushed to beat impending rate hikes by the Federal Reserve that would make mortgages cost more, the National Association of Realtors said Wednesday.

"Determined buyers were able to land housing before mortgage rates rise further in the coming months," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the realtors association, said in a news release.

Total existing-home sales comprising completed transactions that include single-family homes, townhomes, condominiums and cooperatives, grew 1.9% from October to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 6.46 million in November. Compared to a year ago, however, sales were down 2% from the November 2020 level of 6.59 million.

Total housing inventory at the end of November amounted to 1.11 million units, down 9.8% from October and 13.3% lower from a year ago. Unsold inventory sits at a 2.1-month supply at the current sales pace, a decline from both the prior month and from a year ago.

The median existing-home price for all housing types in November, meanwhile, was at \$353,900 as prices increased in each region. That was up 13.9% from November 2020 when it was at \$310,800.

The realtors association noted that it was the 117th month where home prices have increased year-over-year without stop, the longest-running streak on record.

"Locking in a constant and firm mortgage payment motivated many consumers who grew weary of escalating rents over the last year," said Yun, who forecast the 30-year fixed mortgage rate to average at 3.7% by the end of 2022 from a current range of 2.6% to 3.7%.

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

To compound the problem, the Fed says it expects to raise interest rates by as many as three times next year to curb inflation growing at its fastest pace in four decades.

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US FDA Authorizes Pfizer's Paxlovid Pill to Treat COVID-19

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized on Wednesday Pfizer's Paxlovid pill to treat mild-to-moderate coronavirus disease. "Today, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) for Pfizer's Paxlovid (nirmatrelvir tablets and ritonavir tablets, co-packaged for oral use) for the treatment of mild-to-moderate coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in adults and pediatric patients (12 years of age and older weighing at least 40 kilograms or about 88 pounds) with positive results of direct SARS-CoV-2 testing," the statement read.

Those at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19 are also included in the list of potential patients, it added.

"Today's authorization introduces the first treatment for COVID-19 that is in the form of a pill that is taken orally — a major step forward in the fight against this global pandemic," the director of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, Patrizia Cavazzoni, said.

Paxlovid is not authorized for the pre-exposure or post-exposure prevention of COVID-19 or for initiation of treatment in those requiring hospitalization due to severe or critical cases, the FDA noted.

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NHL Players to Not Participate in Winter Olympics Due to COVID-19 - Executive Director

(Updates with more details in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Players of the National Hockey League (NHL) will not be taking part in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing due to risks linked to the coronavirus pandemic and the newly discovered Omicron variant, NHL Players' Association (NHLPA) Executive Director Don Fehr said on Wednesday.

"Until very recently, we seemed to be on a clear path to go to Beijing. COVID-19 has unfortunately intervened, forcing dozens of games to be postponed this month alone. ... We need to utilize the Olympic period to reschedule these games," NHLPA quoted Fehr as saying. Fehr said he expects NHL players to return to the Olympics in 2026, which is scheduled to take place in Italy.

However, USA Hockey said in a separate statement that it regrets the NHL and NHLPA decision to skip the 2022 Winter Olympics.

"While we're disappointed, we certainly respect the decision of the NHL and NHLPA," the statement said.

US hockey players look forward to compete and win a gold medal in Beijing, the statement also said.

"With the NHL personnel we previously announced as part of our management team and coaching staff no longer available, we'll shortly be announcing new people to fill those roles. Further, we expect to name our final roster by mid-January," the statement added.

Hockey Canada told Sputnik it will issue a statement on the situation later on Wednesday.

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Biden Signs Bill to Allow Capitol Police to Request Help Without Prior Approval in Crisis

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden signed legislation on Wednesday that will allow the US Capitol Police to request assistance without prior approval during emergencies, the White House said.

"On Wednesday, December 22, 2021, the President signed into law: S. 3377, the – the 'Capitol Police Emergency Assistance Act of 2021,' which authorizes the Chief of the Capitol Police to request the assistance of Federal agencies in emergencies," the White House said in a press release.

The bill passed the House of Representatives and the Senate unanimously last week. The legislation was crafted in response to what legislators claimed was the Trump administration's delay to approve a request from Capitol Police to deploy the National Guard during the January 6 Capitol riot.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election from several US states that former President Donald Trump claimed were fraudulent. Trump claimed the election results were invalid due to election and voter fraud that robbed him of election victory. The authorities shot one protester dead during the incident and charged over 700 people for participating in the event.

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US Designates 3 Persons, 2 Entities in Brazil as Al-Qaeda Support Network - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated three people and two entities in Brazil as al-Qaeda (banned in Russia as a terrorist organization) linked network, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a release on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated members of a Brazil-based network of al-Qaeda-affiliated individuals and their

companies for providing support to the terrorist group," the release said. "Today's action targets three individuals and two entities, including al-Qaeda operative in Brazil Haytham Ahmad Shukri Ahmad Al-Maghrabi (Al-Maghrabi), as Specially Designated Global Terrorists pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, as amended."

According to the Treasury Department, Al-Maghrabi is one of the initial members of the network in Brazil and had frequent contact and business dealings with another al-Qaeda-affiliated person there.

"As of late 2018, Al-Maghrabi reported to and was Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali's al-Qaeda contact in Brazil. Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali (Ali) was designated as an SDGT pursuant to E.O. 13224 on October 12, 2001," the release said.

Other designated persons include Mohamed Sherif Mohamed Mohamed Awadd and Home Elegance Comercio de Moveis EIRELI, the release also said.

Awadd came to Brazil in 2018 and received financial bank transfers from other terrorist group associates in Brazil, the release added.

Moreover, the Treasury Department also targeted Ahmad Al-Khatib and Enterprise Comercio de Moveis e Intermediacao de Negocios EIRELI, according to the release.

The Treasury Department said al-Qaeda remains a threat for both the United States and the world as it generates funding from individual fundraisers and supporters throughout the world and the US government has aggressively utilized financial tools to limit the terror group's funding streams globally.

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US House Oversight Committee Launches Bipartisan Probe Into Astroworld Tragedy - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee on Wednesday announced that it is launching a bipartisan investigation into the deadly incident that occurred at the Astroworld Festival in the state of Texas last month.

"Today, Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney, the Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, Rep. James Comer, the Ranking Member of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, Rep. Kevin Brady, Rep. Al Green, and Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr. sent a letter to Michael Rapino, President and Chief Executive Officer of Live Nation Entertainment, Inc., requesting information regarding the tragic events of the Astroworld Festival on November 5, 2021, when a stampede crushed concertgoers, killing ten people and injuring hundreds more," the Oversight Committee said in a press release.

Live Nation must provide the Oversight Committee information by January 7 regarding the company's handling of the incident, including its security plans for the festival and actions taken after law enforcement informed them that the event was a mass casualty event, the release said.

The lawmakers are raising concerns over reports that medical staff at the festival was inexperienced or ill-equipped, and that the placement of the barricades made it difficult for attendees to get out of the area, the release said.

Live Nation has a long record of safety violations and has been fined or sued many times due to safety incidents at its events, the release said.

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Amazon Limits Sales of Self-Test Kits for COVID-19 to 10 Per Buyer - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US e-commerce giant Amazon has limited the number of coronavirus self-test kits for online shoppers to ten amid concerns over the now predominant Omicron variant and ahead of the holidays, CNBC reported on Wednesday.

The main reason for this decision is the lack of tests in the Amazon's warehouses, but the company assures the customers it is working with its selling partners to secure additional testing kits inventory, the report said citing an Amazon spokesperson.

Other vendors have also limited the number of their at-home tests, including the California-based manufacturer iHealth Labs, which limited sales to five units per person, the report added.

On Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that the Omicron variant accounts now for nearly 75% of all new infections in the United States.

Many outdoor testing stations in the country have been overwhelmed with long lines by residents who seek a free coronavirus test.

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US Allowing Some Transactions With Taliban to Support Afghan Aid Efforts - Treasury Dept.

(Adds background, details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is allowing certain transactions and activities involving the Taliban or Haqqani Network (both under UN and US sanctions) for governmental and non-governmental organizations doing humanitarian work in Afghanistan, the Department of the Treasury said on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued three General Licenses to facilitate the continued flow of humanitarian assistance and other support for the Afghan people. These actions underscore the United States' commitment to support the people of Afghanistan and continue the US government's longstanding practice of authorizing the provision of humanitarian goods and services to areas affected by US sanctions," the press release said.

The General Licenses issued by OFAC on Wednesday authorize transactions and activities with the Taliban and related actors for the US government, UN, Red Cross, Islamic Development Bank, humanitarian non-governmental organizations and others.

The US is the largest single provider of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and is committed to supporting the Afghan people, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said in the release. The Afghan economy faces challenges exacerbated by the country's long-time dependence on foreign aid, drought, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Taliban takeover, Adeyemo added.

The General Licenses explicitly do not authorize financial transfers to the Taliban or related actors other than for the specified humanitarian purposes, the release noted.

The UN Security Council on Wednesday also unanimously adopted a US resolution to allow humanitarian aid payments to Afghanistan despite current sanctions.

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US Government Spends \$300M In to Fight Opioid, Stimulants Crisis - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved \$300 million in new funding to fight the substance abuse crisis that has led to soaring deaths from the overuse of stimulants and opioids, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"The Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) today announced grant awards totaling more than \$300 million to help combat America's substance use crisis, which has worsened during the coronavirus pandemic," the release said.

Most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that there were an estimated 100,306 drug overdose deaths in the United States during the one year period ending in April 2021, an increase of 28.5% from the 78,056 deaths during the same period the year before, the release noted.

"Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation is experiencing a precipitous rise in opioid and stimulant misuse and overdoses. The Justice Department is committed to supporting programs aimed at addressing the substance use crisis," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in the release.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance is awarding more than \$137 million under its Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant and Substance Abuse Site-Based Program to help communities address the prevention, diversion, treatment and recovery needs of those affected by substance use disorders, the release said.

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US Allowing Some Transactions With Taliban to Support Afghan Aid Efforts - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is allowing certain transactions and activities involving the Taliban or Haqqani Network (under UN and US sanctions) for governmental and non-governmental organizations doing humanitarian work in Afghanistan, the Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued three General Licenses to facilitate the continued flow of humanitarian assistance and other support for the Afghan people. These actions underscore the United States' commitment to support the people of Afghanistan and continue the US government's longstanding practice of authorizing the provision of humanitarian goods and services to areas affected by US sanctions," the release said.

The General Licenses issued by OFAC on Wednesday authorize transactions and activities with the Taliban and related actors for the US government, UN, Red Cross, Islamic Development Bank, humanitarian non-governmental organizations and others.

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US, Israeli Security Officials Meet in Jerusalem to Discuss Iranian 'Threat' - White House
(Adds details in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Israeli counterpart discussed a "threat" posed by Iran as their delegations gathered for a meeting of the US-Israel Strategic Consultative Group in Jerusalem on Wednesday.

"The delegations discussed the need to confront all aspects of the threat posed by Iran, including its nuclear program, destabilizing activities in the region, and support for terrorist proxy groups. They agreed that Iran's rapidly advancing nuclear program poses a grave threat to the region and to international peace and security," the sides said in a joint statement.

Sullivan briefed his Israeli partners on the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna. Both sides exchanged views on the way forward and agreed to continue dialogue on the regional security.

The two delegations also discussed bilateral cooperation on strategic issues important to the entire region, the statement read. Sullivan reaffirmed strong US commitment to Israeli security and self-defense, it added.

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Top US, Russian Generals Discuss Regional Security-Related Issues of Concern - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley and Russia's chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov had a phone call on Wednesday to address regional security issues of concern, Joint Staff spokesman Col. Dave Butler said. "The military leaders discussed regional security-related issues of concern," Butler said. "The phone call is a continuation of communication between both leaders to ensure risk reduction and operational de-confliction. In accordance with past practice, both have agreed to keep the specific details of their conversation private," he added.

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US Intelligence Perceived Russia's Klyushin as Having Confidential Information - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US intelligence viewed Russian national Vladyslav Klyushin, charged in the United States with involvement in a global hacking and fraud scheme, as a person who may know state secrets or possess confidential information, Klyushin's lawyer Oliver Ciric said on Wednesday.

"He was perceived by US intelligence as someone who may have confidential information or state secrets," Ciric, who represented Klyushin's interests during his extradition from Switzerland to the United States, said.

Ciric noted that he argued in the Swiss court during the case in which the US government sought Klyushin be extradited to the United States that "this is not a simple case of insider trading." He pointed out that Klyushin's company had concluded a number of contracts with the Russian government, including with the country's security agencies.

Klyushin owns M13, a company that provides media monitoring and cybersecurity services. If convicted, he faces a prison sentence of up to 20 years on some of the charges brought up against him.

The US court in the state of Massachusetts has set detention and arrangement hearing in Klyushin's case for Wednesday.

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NHL Players to Not Participate in Winter Olympics Due to COVID-19 - Executive Director

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Players of the National Hockey League (NHL) will not be taking part in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing due to risks linked to the coronavirus pandemic and the newly discovered Omicron variant, NHL Players' Association (NHLPA) Executive Director Don Fehr said on Wednesday.

"Until very recently, we seemed to be on a clear path to go to Beijing. COVID-19 has unfortunately intervened, forcing dozens of games to be postponed this month alone. ... We need to utilize the Olympic period to reschedule these games," NHLPA quoted Fehr as saying. Fehr said he expects NHL players to return to the Olympics in 2026, which is scheduled to take place in Italy.

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US Revises Q3 GDP Growth Upward to 2.3% in Final Reading

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US gross domestic product expanded by 2.3% in the third quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said in its third and final estimate for the period revised higher than previously.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 2.3 percent in the third quarter of 2021," the department said in a release issued Wednesday. It previously estimated a 2.1% reading in its second reading for Q3 GDP.

The upward revision for the third quarter reflected increases in private inventory investment, state and local government spending and nonresidential fixed investment, the Commerce Department said.

Overall decreases in government assistance payments, forgivable loans and benefits aimed at helping Americans through the coronavirus pandemic also boosted Q3 GDP, it said.

The US economy shrank 3.5% for all of 2020 from business shutdowns forced by the pandemic. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter and 3.6% in the second and 2.3% now for the third quarter.

The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for all this year and 4% for 2022.

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China Calls for Unfreezing Afghanistan's Overseas Reserves as Soon as Possible - UN Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - China calls for Afghanistan's overseas reserves to be promptly unfrozen, permanent representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun told the UN Security Council on Wednesday.

"We once again call for the unfreezing of Afghanistan's overseas assets as soon as possible," Zhang Jun said. "These assets should be returned to their real owners and they cannot be used as a bargaining chip for threats or coercion."

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UNSC Unanimously Adopts Resolution Allowing Humanitarian Aid Payments to Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Wednesday unanimously adopted a US resolution allowing humanitarian aid payments to Afghanistan despite the current sanctions.

"The result of the following is as follows: the draft resolution received 15 votes in favor, the draft resolution has been adopted unanimously as resolution 2615 of 2021," the UNSC president said.

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Americans Widely Distrust Social Media, Want Government to Do More on Privacy – Poll

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Almost two thirds of Americans think the federal government should more actively regulate how social media giants tackle privacy issues as they become distrustful of Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, according to a poll conducted by The Washington Post and Schar School out on Wednesday.

Sixty-four percent of respondents believe the authorities "should do more" to regulate how internet companies handle privacy issues, while 35% think it should not get more involved. This is a significant change compared with a 2012 Pew Research Center poll which found that only 38% said they want to see more government action on the matter, with a whopping 56% opposing that view.

Only every fifth American expressed trust in Facebook, and 72% said they do not trust the social network.

According to the survey, only Amazon has a positive balance of trust among users (53%), but all other internet giants, including Apple, Microsoft, Google, TikTok, WhatsApp and Instagram, face a lack of confidence when it comes to responsibly handling users' personal information and data.

The poll was conducted from November 4-22 among a random national sample of 1,122 adults, including 1,058 internet users.

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German Navy Chief Calls China's Naval Development 'Explosive'

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - China's naval power is growing at an "explosive" pace, German navy chief Vice Adm. Kay-Achim Schoenbach told CNBC in an interview. "Indeed... it's explosive. Of course, I can understand the political leaders, of course, in China," Schonbach said. "The question is if they fit into the international rules-based order." Schoenbach noted that China is increasing the size of its navy by the equivalent of the entire French navy every four years.

The interview comes as the German frigate Bayern is docked in Singapore as part of a six-month deployment to the Asia-Pacific. It is sailing through the South China Sea, where tensions have been running high over rival claims by China and its neighbors to parts of the Western Pacific.

In November, Schoenbach promised his country's commitment to allies in confronting North Korea and a "threatening situation" in the western Pacific, in a thinly veiled hint at China.

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US Puts Visa Restrictions on 2 Ex-Maltese Officials Over Corruption - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced visa restrictions against two former senior Maltese officials and their immediate family members over "significant corruption," State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of State announces the public designation of former Maltese public officials Konrad Mizzi and Keith Schembri due to their involvement in significant corruption," Price said. "In their official capacities as Minister of Energy and Conservation of Water and Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Mizzi and Schembri were involved in corrupt acts that included using their political influence and official power for their personal benefit."

Mizzi and Schembri allegedly engaged in a corrupt scheme where there was an award of a government contract for the construction of a power plant and related services "in exchange for kickbacks and bribes." The State Department has also designated Mizzi's wife, Sai Mizzi Liang, and his two minor children; as well as Schembri's wife, Josette Schembri Vella, his daughter Juliana Schembri Vella, and his minor child, Price added.

This action renders all these individuals "ineligible for entry into the United States," the spokesman explained.

