

12/23/21 Thursday

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Trump Asks Supreme Court to Block Release of His White House Records to Jan. 6 Panel
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Former US President Donald Trump has appealed to the Supreme Court in a final bid to block his presidential records from being delivered to the House committee investigating the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol by his supporters.

In a massive 195-page filing laying out his case, Trump petitioned the high court for a [writ of certiorari](#) on Thursday, asking it to consider "whether the Committee's records request violates the Constitution or laws of the United States entitling President Trump to a preliminary injunction prohibiting production of the records to the Committee."

In a [separate filing](#) on Thursday, Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), who chairs the select committee, asked the high court for an expediting ruling, arguing that "delay would inflict a serious injury on the Select Committee and the public."

For months, Trump has been fighting the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol through the courts, attempting to stop the Democrat-run probe from getting ahold of his files kept in the US National Archives by arguing they're protected by executive privilege. Most recently, a District of Columbia [federal court struck down](#) his latest motion earlier this month.

However, it's not just Trump's records the committee wants: dozens of Trump affiliates and former staffers have also been subpoenaed for their testimony and various records, including phone records. Many have refused to cooperate and been held in contempt of Congress, including right-wing ideologue and former chief adviser to Trump, [Steve Bannon](#), and his former chief of staff, [Mark Meadows](#).

Earlier this week, Alex Jones, host of the website InfoWars, and Michael Flynn, a retired US Army general who briefly served as Trump's national security adviser before later becoming a cheerleader for the QAnon conspiracy theory, both [filed their own lawsuits](#), attempting to dodge the committee's subpoenas of their phone records.

The committee is investigating the [circumstances surrounding](#) the events of January 6, 2021, when a large "Stop the Steal" rally hosted by Trump outside the White House preceded the storming of the US Capitol Building by thousands of Trump supporters, many of whom came immediately from the rally. The committee has looked at communications as the events unfolded that day, as well as in the days leading up to it, which included other smaller pro-Trump rallies and a [so-called "war room" meeting](#) held at a luxury hotel near the White House.

The rioters were attempting to void the results of the election, which Congress was certifying at the time of the attack in a special joint session. While Trump lost the election to now-US President Joe Biden, he has refused to admit the loss, claiming the Democrats committed fraud and "stole" the election from him. However, the rioters failed in their goal, as while they

temporarily dispersed Congress, they failed to lay hands on the election results, and police and National Guardsmen soon cleared them from the building.

Five people died in the riot, including a US Capitol Police (USCP) officer and a female rioter shot by an officer outside the House chamber while attempting to break through the door. Wider questions remain about why [so few defensive](#) precautions were taken prior to the protest, including why Pentagon brass were so slow to respond to urgent pleas for support by Capitol Police. The extent to which the riot was coordinated with or by [Republican lawmakers](#) and numerous [right-wing elements](#), including militia members and [neo-Nazi parties](#), is also not yet fully known, but the committee has also subpoenaed the leaders of right-wing groups that participated, including the Proud Boys gang and Oath Keepers militia.

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Watch: Huge Explosion Erupts From Saudi Airstrike on Houthi Weapons Depot in Sana'a
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Saudi airstrikes on the Yemeni capital of Sana'a on Friday morning struck several sites, including a Houthi munitions depot, which sparked a massive fire.

Riyadh gave the Houthis a six-hour ultimatum on Thursday to remove its weapons from the Al Thawra Sports Complex, which is home turf for the Yemeni national football team. However, conflicting reports say the airstrikes have targeted other sites around the city and so far spared the sports arena.

Photos and videos posted on social media captured the massive explosion caused by the strike, as well as numerous other smaller explosions likely to be stored munitions "cooking off" due to the blaze.

However, Saudi bombs fell in other places around the capital, as well. One video showed a massive crater in a Sana'a street, claimed to have been caused by an airstrike on Friday morning.

"If an international committee finds any drones or missiles at Al-Thawra we will directly hand them to the United Nations, but if nothing is found, the coalition should permanently halt their attacks," Mohamed Ali al-Houthi, the head of the Houthi supreme revolutionary committee, said on Twitter.

A spokesperson for the coalition [told Al-Arabiya](#) that the airstrikes had targeted weapons transfers in progress, and that weapons had been moved to the Tashrif camp by the Houthis prior to Riyadh's deadline.

The Saudi Royal Air Force has been [pounding Sana'a for days](#), striking the city's international airport earlier this week and causing damage that observers said would limit the ability of large aid-carrying transport aircraft to land there.

The Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition, which includes the government of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, has been steadily losing ground to the Houthis in the [northern Ma'rib Governorate](#), the coalition's last stronghold in the north. The Houthis have captured much of the surrounding countryside, but the central city of Ma'rib remains only under their partial control.

However, [recent attempts](#) to gain control over the commanding ridgeline of Jabal al-Balaq al-Awsat mountain could soon spell disaster for the remaining coalition forces inside Ma'rib. The war began in March 2015 when the Houthis forced Hadi from power at the head of a mass movement against austerity reforms proposed by his government. The Saudi blockade and bombing campaign have created a massive humanitarian crisis in the country, where an [estimated 377,000 people](#) have died, most of them from indirect causes created by infrastructure failures, hunger, and disease, according to the United Nations.

An attempt to [block a \\$650 million](#) weapons sale to the Saudi monarchy by the United States was rejected by the US Senate earlier this month. The Biden administration said in February it would stop selling offensive weapons to the Saudis that could be used in the Yemen war, but that it would still sell them defensive weapons like anti-air missiles that could be used to shoot down Houthi ballistic missiles and drones being used to strike targets inside the kingdom. However, since the Yemen war has become a war of attrition, giving the Saudis defensive weapons but not the Houthis still enables Riyadh to prosecute its war in Yemen by limiting the negative effects of the war on its own population.

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Stalemate Sets in as Ethiopian Army Holds Positions in Liberated Amhara, Afar Towns Outside Tigray

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) will maintain their positions in Amhara and Afar states after pushing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) out of them in a hard-fought counteroffensive, believing the rebel group to be severely weakened after the defeat.

"The first phase operation to expel the terrorist group from the areas it invaded has ended with victory. At this moment the enemy's desire and ability (to engage in war) is severely destroyed," Legesse Tulu, Ethiopia's ministry of government communications, announced on Thursday. The country's parliament designated the TPLF a terrorist organization in May, after months of war against the group.

"The government will take further steps to make sure that (the TPLF) desire won't arise again in the future. For now, Ethiopian forces are ordered to maintain the areas it has controlled," he added.

Legesse also called on the TPLF and other allied groups, like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), to disarm.

Western media had [previously reported](#) without evidence that the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had "dismissed calls for a ceasefire" offered by TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael over the weekend. However, in the remarks quoted from Abiy's spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, she said that Abiy was committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but whether the TPLF's actions are "a strategic retreat or not, will inevitably reveal itself."

Notably, the TPLF [didn't appeal directly](#) to Addis Ababa for peace, but to the United Nations Security Council, which it asked to guarantee such a peace, even if it means imposing a no-fly zone over the northern Tigray state.

Past Peace Overtures Dismissed as 'Sick Joke'

After the TPLF had largely expelled the ENDF and Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) from Tigray in June, the allied armies offered a unilateral ceasefire, which TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda [dismissed as a "sick joke."](#)

"We want to stop the war as quickly as we can," Getachew told the Associated Press. Just days later, the TPLF launched its invasion of Amhara and Afar, swiftly advancing southward along Highway 2, the main road to Addis Ababa. By late November, they had approached within 190 kilometers of the capital before being repulsed by the wide-ranging ENDF counteroffensive that eventually expelled the TPLF from Afar and Amhara.

As [Sputnik reported](#) at the time, the group enjoyed the support of Washington and US allies in Europe, whose diplomats met with TPLF leaders and advised them [to seize Addis](#) and declare a post-Abiy "transition government."

On Monday, [Getachew claimed](#) the TPLF had withdrawn from Afar and Amhara by its own volition, claiming it was far from defeated and was doing so in order to take away "whatever excuse the international community [has used] to explain its feet-dragging when it comes to putting pressure" on Abiy. However, as [Ethiopian media](#) reported over the weekend, a new ENDF drive across the TPLF's thin line of controlled territory succeeded in severing its supply lines by capturing several key towns, sending the TPLF retreat into disarray.

On Wednesday, prior to Legesse's announcement, Fana Broadcasting Corporate ([FBC](#)) [reported](#) the ENDF had recaptured Sekota, an Amhara town about 21 miles from the Tigray border by road. The state-owned media outlet also noted the ENDF was fighting in Muja, in northern Amhara state, but also said the military had captured Temuga, the southernmost town in Tigray, and was intent on advancing on Almata further to the north.

As the TPLF pulled back into Tigray, a bulletin went out [on Tigrayan media](#) calling on all able-bodied men of age to be prepared to take up arms and defend the region in case government forces continue to advance.

Abiy's office [announced on Wednesday](#) that a National Dialogue Commission would be formed "with an independent mandate to bridge differences and chart an inclusive way forward for national understanding and alignment." However, Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Dina Mufti clarified](#) on Thursday that the dialogue should not be mistaken for negotiation with a terrorist organization.

However, the [terms for peace laid out](#) by Abiy's government in November include not just that the TPLF withdraw from Afar and Amhara and stop attacking ENDF and EDF forces, but also that they recognize Abiy's government as the legitimate government of all of Ethiopia. Given their posturing with the UN to be treated as an equal to the Ethiopian government instead of as a rebel non-state actor, that seems unlikely at the moment.

Despite the recent developments, on Thursday evening US President [Joe Biden decreed](#) that Ethiopia, along with Mali and Guinea, would be removed from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) preferential trade deal on January 1, 2022. It's just the latest in punishments handed down by Washington, including sanctions against Eritrea and the withholding of \$272 million in aid money.

Rebellion Begets Humanitarian Crisis

The TPLF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years after coming to power in 1991 at the head of a movement to oust the Derg military regime. The group used an ethnicity-based federal system to control the country's roughly 80 different ethnic groups and became a close ally of Washington, sending Ethiopian troops into various African states in conjunction with the newly formed US Africa Command (USAFRICOM). They also launched a disastrous war against Eritrea in 1998, just years after it won independence from Ethiopia, which killed more than 120,000 people and resulted in a standoff.

After mass protests against their government in 2018, the other ethnic parties in the TPLF ruling alliance, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), also rebelled, choosing Abiy, an Oromo, instead of a Tigrayan to be its next chairman. Abiy became prime minister and quickly made peace with Eritrea, winning a Nobel Peace Prize that the New York Times [recently bizarrely attempted to claim](#) had emboldened him and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki to plan a revenge war against Tigrayans.

Abiy also combined the EPRDF alliance into a single centralized Prosperity Party, which seriously undercut the TPLF's power. After the TPLF attempted to hold illegal elections in September 2020, when Addis had postponed all elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ENDF forces were deployed to Tigray. On the morning of November 4, 2020, the TPLF launched a sneak attack on ENDF bases, beginning the present conflict.

The war has produced a massive humanitarian crisis: [more than 70,000](#) people had fled across the border into neighboring Sudan and an [estimated 4 million](#) more internally displaced, according to United Nations data. In addition, [some 9.4 million](#) people also require food aid. There is no reliable death toll for the conflict.

The UN World Food Program (WFP) has attempted to deliver aid to the most hunger-stricken areas, which includes Tigray state. At a [press conference](#) earlier this month with Catherine Sozi, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ethiopia, Commissioner for the National Disaster Risk Management Commission of Ethiopia (NDRMC) Mitiku Kassaand denounced the TPLF's seizure of 1,010 WFP trucks and called on the UN to similarly denounce the TPLF's use of food aid as a weapon of war in the areas of Amhara it had occupied.

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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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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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US Unites 100th Illegal Immigrant Family Separated by Trump Administration - DHS Chief

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration this week reunited the one hundredth immigrant family that was separated by US border authorities when caught entering the United States under the so-called zero-tolerance policy implemented by the previous Trump administration, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said.

"This week our Family Reunification Task Force reunified the 100th family separated under the prior administration's cruel policy," Mayorkas wrote via Twitter on Thursday.

The Biden administration is currently working to reunite an additional 345 migrant families, Mayorkas added.

Mayorkas said the separated migrant families will be granted humanitarian parole to allow them to live and work in the United States.

The policy originated during the Obama administration, when Biden served as vice president, and was continued by the Trump administration.

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US Eases Quarantine Time for Health Care Workers With COVID-19 Due to Staffing Shortages

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an updated guidance that shortens the amount of time health care workers who test positive for the novel coronavirus must quarantine due to staffing shortages in US hospitals. "The following are criteria to determine when HCP [Health Care Personnel] with SARS-CoV-2 infection could return to work," the CDC said. "HCP with mild to moderate illness who are not moderately to severely immunocompromised: at least 7 days if a negative antigen or NAAT is obtained within 48 hours prior to returning to work (or 10 days if testing is not performed or if a positive test at day 5-7) have passed since symptoms first appeared." Health care workers were previously required to quarantine for ten days if they tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

The CDC said health care workers recovering from severe COVID-19 cases may return to work 20 days after symptoms first appeared.

The CDC said is easing the quarantine time in response to the winter coronavirus surge in the United States amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant. However, health experts in the United States and South Africa, where the variant was first detected, have said the cases are mild and no deaths have been reported so far.

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New York Cuts Back on Times Square New Year Eve Party Over COVID-19 Concerns - Mayor

WASHINGTON, December 24 (Sputnik) - New York City will drastically scale down the annual New Year's Eve party celebration at Times Square next week, Mayor Bill de Blasio said. "The Times Square celebration usually totals 58,000 people in viewing areas, but this year it will be limited to 15,000 and visitors will not be allowed entry until 3:00 pm Eastern Times. The celebration's organizers will require full vaccinations for all in-person revelers, the city government said," De Blasio said on Thursday.

The New York city government issued a press release saying additional protections will also be put in place to ensure a safe celebration.

In addition to requiring proof of "full vaccination" with valid photo identification, attendees will also be required to wear masks. A smaller number of people will be allowed in the viewing areas to allow for physical distancing, the release said.

The authorities decided on implementing the measures in consultation with health and medical experts in order to keep visitors safe and healthy as they celebrate the New Year, the release added.

New York City, in partnership with the Times Square Alliance, will continue to monitor the situation and may take additional measures in the coming days if needed, according to the release.

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Northrop Grumman Wins \$1.38Bln Integrated Battle Command System Contract - US Army

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation was awarded a more than \$1.38 billion US Army contract for the Integrated Battle Command System, the US Defense Department announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Huntsville, Alabama was awarded a \$1,382,319,836 hybrid ...contract for low-rate initial production and full-rate production of the Integrated Battle Command System," the release said on Thursday.

The Defense Department explained in the release that bids were solicited via the internet with two received and the US Army Contracting Command at the Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama is the contracting activity.

Work locations and funding to execute the contract will be determined with each order, with an estimated completion date of December 22, 2026, the release added.

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Texas Board Rescinds Posthumous Clemency Recommendation for George Floyd - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles withdrew a recommendation to grant George Floyd posthumous clemency due to procedural errors, but Governor Greg Abbott will review the recommendation if the Board resubmits it for consideration, the governor's spokesperson Renae Eze said.

In October, the Board of Pardons and Paroles recommend that Floyd be posthumously pardoned for committing a minor drug conviction in 2004.

"The Board of Pardons and Paroles has withdrawn 25 clemency recommendations that contained procedural errors and lack of compliance with Board rules," Eze said in a press release on Thursday. "Among the recommendations withdrawn was one concerning George Floyd."

Eze said the Board of Pardons and Paroles will review and resolve procedural errors and issues related to any pending applications in compliance with their rules.

Abbott did not have the opportunity to consider the recommendation, but he will review any recommendations that the Board of Pardons and Paroles submits for consideration, Eze added. Floyd, a native of Houston, Texas, died in May 2020 after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nine minutes during an arrest. Floyd's death sparked mass protests - and riots - against police violence and racial injustice across the United States and in some parts of the world.

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Shooter in North Hollywood in Custody After Killing 2 People in Store - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - At least two people have been killed and one more injured in a shooting that took place at a Burlington Coat Factory store in North Hollywood, the Los Angeles Times reported citing local authorities.

As a result of the incident at 11:45 a.m. local time near Victory Boulevard and Laurel Canyon Boulevard, one man and one woman died on the spot, the report said.

Another injured woman was transported to hospital, the report also said, citing a spokesperson with the Los Angeles Fire Department.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) said via Twitter that the suspect was taken into custody.

The state of the injured woman remains unknown, the LAPD added.

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US Hopes Donbas Ceasefire Will Help De-Escalate Regional Tensions - State Dept.

(Updates with details, background in paras 4-9)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes the Trilateral Contact Group's recent decision to recommit to the Donbas ceasefire agreement will create a diplomatic path to de-escalate tensions in the region, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said. "We hope the resultant peace will create the diplomatic space necessary to de-escalate regional tensions and provide a positive atmosphere for further discussion," Price said in a press release on Thursday.

Kiev announced earlier that an agreement was reached during the last meeting of the Contact Group on the resumption of the ceasefire in Donbas.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova had said that Russia hopes Ukraine will comply with all ceasefire commitments in Donbas.

Zakharova pointed out that after the parties signed measures to strengthen the Donbas ceasefire agreement at the end of July of 2020, Donetsk and Luhansk complied and continue to

comply with all obligations under this document but have had to invariably call on Kiev for the same in negotiations, and Ukraine has constantly evaded it, continuing to shell Donbas. Price said work to resolve the conflict in the area will only be possible if there is a de-escalation of tensions. He added that the United States calls on Russia to scale back its military activity near Ukraine's border.

In addition, Price said the United States is prepared to help facilitate the implementation of the Minsk agreements in order to support the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Normand process.

The United States urges the ceasefire parties to fully adhere to their commitments in the ceasefire for the shared security of people in the area, Price added.

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

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Wall Street Rings in Christmas With S&P Record, Big Tech Gains

NEW YORK, December 23 (Sputnik) - Wall Street ushered in Christmas with a rally that sent the S&P 500 to a record high and loaded tech stocks with big gains after data on Thursday showed the US economy to be in good health despite growing inflationary risks.

Waning threats from the coronavirus Omicron variant also boosted sentiment in equities after a week of volatile trading where investors first dumped stocks on fears of a resurgence of the pandemic, before buying them back on the assurance that the latest variant of the virus wasn't as lethal.

"Omicron is looking more like a short-term disruption to the economic outlook and not a destructive headwind that knocks the economy off its course," Ed Moya, equities analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "If the US was not battling the Omicron variant, US stocks would be dancing higher as the Santa Claus rally would have kept the climb going into uncharted territory."

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished the session up 0.6% at 4,725, after hitting a record high at 4,740. For the week, the index rose 1.2%.

Thursday is the last trading day for US markets this week, with Friday being a holiday in observation of Saturday's Christmas break.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed Thursday's trade up 0.9%, while posting a gain of 3.1% on the week.

The blue-chip Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists a wide variety of stocks from leisure to banking and agriculture, rose 0.6% for the session and 0.2% for the week.

Thursday's rally in stocks came after the Labor Department reported no change in filings for jobless claims by Americans last week compared to the previous week - an indication that employment was on a steady keel since the worst impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The US Federal Reserve's preferred gauge for inflation, meanwhile, grew at its fastest pace in four decades as wages and other costs continued to soar in an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic.

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Sullivan, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Common Approach to Russian Buildup – White House

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a phone call with Ukraine's Presidential Office Head Andriy Yermak discussed common approach regarding Russia's military build-up on the border with Ukraine amid ongoing tensions, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a press release.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke today with Head of Presidential Administration Andriy Yermak of Ukraine. They discussed their shared concerns and common approach regarding Russia's military build-up near Ukraine's border," the release said on Thursday. Sullivan has also welcomed the ceasefire in Donbas region of Ukraine announced by the OSCE on Wednesday.

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Assange Files Application to Appeal UK Ruling on Extradition to US

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's defense team has filed to appeal a UK court's ruling that says he can be extradited to the United States, according to a statement from his fiancée Stella Moris on Thursday.

"This morning at 11:05 Julian Assange filed an application for leave to appeal to the Supreme Court the High Court's ruling that he can be extradited to the US on three grounds," Moris wrote on Twitter.

Moris said the application to seek an appeal to the UK Supreme Court is currently under review by the High Court judge and a decision is not expected before the third week of January.

Assange's counsel is arguing that the US government made non-binding assurances that he would not be subjected to extreme conditions in an American prison because it is conditional and could change if the US authorities decide it is necessary.

Earlier this month, the London High Court ruled in favor of a US appeal to extradite Assange, overturning an earlier decision that the whistleblower cannot be extradited to America due to his health issues and the inhumane conditions he might face in the US prison system. The court ordered that the case should now be remitted to the Westminster Magistrates' Court with direction that a district judge will send the case to the secretary of state, who will decide on extradition.

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

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

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US Waives In-Person Interviews for H-1B, Other Visa Applicants in 2022 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will waive the in-person interview requirement for a range of visa applicants during the entire year in 2022, including for H-1B workers and students, the US State Department said in a press release.

"We are pleased to announce that consular officers are now temporarily authorized, through December 31, 2022, to waive in-person interviews for certain individual petition-based nonimmigrant work visas in the following categories: Persons in Specialty Occupations (H-1B visas), Trainee or Special Education Visitors (H-3 visas), Intracompany Transferees (L visas), Individuals with Extraordinary Ability or Achievement (O visas)," the press release said on Thursday.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has also extended the consular officers' current ability to waive the in-person interview for the same period for Temporary Agricultural and Non-agricultural Workers (H-2 visas), Students (F and M visas) and Student Exchange Visitors (Academic J visas), the release said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik)

RUSSIA'S SECURITY PROPOSALS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that the United States and its Western allies had reacted positively to Moscow's proposal to hold talks on the security guarantees proposed by Moscow.
- * Russia is ready to discuss its security guarantees proposal with Western countries within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Putin said.
- * The United States and its NATO allies are ready to work with Russia on the proposed security guarantees and hope to see progress, US Ambassador in Moscow John Sullivan said.
- * The United States will not agree to the proposals made by Moscow regarding NATO, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

WORLD ENERGY MARKETS

- * The situation in the world energy market will be factored into any US response to possible Russian actions in Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said on Thursday.
- * Gas futures prices in Europe are losing more than 28 in value%, dropping below \$1,500 per thousand cubic meters, according to data from the London-based ICE exchange.
- * For the fourth day in a row, Russian gas giant Gazprom has not booked the capacity of the Yamal-Europe pipeline for gas transit through Poland at the regular session of the daily auction, according to the results of the auction on the GSA Platform.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin again rejected Europe's accusations of trying to manipulate its gas market, saying the European gas crunch resulted from the European Union's decision to buy at spot markets.

PUTIN'S PRESS CONFERENCE

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that the West was pursuing its geopolitical agenda over the will of the people in Crimea by imposing sanctions on what it sees as an occupied Ukrainian territory.
- * Russia should look for some kind of "effective antidote" to non-traditional values penetrating into Russian society from abroad, Putin said.
- * Russia and China have teamed up to develop high-tech weapons, Putin said.
- * Putin said that the West should be first to give Russia immediate security guarantees, after decades of breaking its promises with respect to the post-Soviet space.
- * Putin said that not placing US missiles near Russia is "not too much to ask" and further expansion of NATO to the East is unacceptable for Russia.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The first delivery of chemical weapons and antidote to Ukraine was carried out by planes from the United States in October in Boryspil airport, Donetsk People's Republic Militia spokesperson Eduard Basurin said on Thursday.
- * Berlin and Paris welcome the decision of the Trilateral Contact Group to fully comply with the measures to strengthen the ceasefire agreement in Donbas, the foreign ministries of Germany and France said in a joint statement.
- * Russia wants to develop good-neighborly relations with Kiev, but it is almost impossible to build them with the current leadership of country, President Vladimir Putin said.
- * Russia hopes that Ukraine will comply with all ceasefire commitments in Donbas, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- * The Ukrainian cabinet of ministers extended the embargo on a number of goods from Russia until December 31, 2022.

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Justice Department Awards US Schools \$125Mln to Fight Violence - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice has awarded nearly \$126 million to the country's schools to combat a growing wave of violence, Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Thursday.

"The Justice Department has no greater responsibility than protecting Americans from harm," Garland said in a press release. "Schools must be safe places to learn, and today's investment of more than \$125 million under the STOP School Violence Act will help ensure that they are." The grants will help institute safety measures in and around primary and secondary schools, bolster school violence prevention efforts, offer training to students and school personnel and employ evidence-based threat assessments, the release said.

The grants are designed to improve security at schools and on school grounds through evidence-based school safety programs, the Justice Department said. The funding also provides grants to ensure a positive school climate by helping students and teachers recognize, respond quickly to and help prevent acts of violence.

The funding comes amid an apparent spike in school violence, including deadly shootings. The US NGO Everytown for Gun Safety documented at least 149 incidents of gunfire on US school grounds this year, resulting in 32 deaths and 94 injuries nationwide.

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Ex-Afghan President Karzai Urges World to Work With Taliban

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai has called on the international community to work with the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism).

When asked in an interview with CNN whether the world needs to work with the Taliban, Karzai stated: "It is necessary."

"Definitely there will be instances where they will need to work with the reality on the ground," Karzai said. "The reality on the ground is that the Taliban are now the de-facto authorities in the country, so they will have to work with them in order to reach the Afghan people, in order to provide assistance to the Afghan people."

Karzai also welcomed a recent UN Security Council resolution allowing humanitarian aid payments to Afghanistan despite current sanctions. The US resolution was adopted unanimously on Wednesday.

The Taliban took over Afghanistan in August, ending the years-long US and NATO military presence. President Ashraf Ghani stepped down, and the radical group set up a government.

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Meta Appealing UK Watchdog's Order to Sell Its GIF Library – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – Facebook parent company Meta is appealing the UK competition watchdog's decision that orders a sale of Giphy, a GIF database firm acquired by the social media giant in 2020 in a \$315 million deal, Politico reported on Thursday.

The appeal hearing at the UK's Competition Appeals Tribunal will most likely take place in the spring of 2022, according to a person familiar with the matter cited in the report.

"We are appealing the CMA's [Competition and Markets Authority] GIPHY decision and will seek a stay of the CMA's order to divest," Christopher Sgro, a Meta company spokesperson, was quoted by the news outlet as saying. "The decision to block the deal is wrong on the law and the facts, and the evidence does not support the CMA's conclusions or remedy."

The CMA decision marks the first time a Big Tech company is ordered by an antitrust watchdog to effectively break up, the report said.

The British regulator is concerned about the possibility of Meta being able to restrict access to Giphy GIF libraries for its main competitors in the social media realm, including Twitter and TikTok, according to the report.

The Giphy deal remains under scrutiny in the Federal Trade Commission in the US as well. The commission is seeking to invalidate the acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp by Meta, the report said.

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US Jury Finds Ex-Cop Who Shot Daunte Wright Guilty on Two Counts of Manslaughter

(Updates with details in paras 4-7, modifies headline and lede)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A US jury found former Minnesota police officer Kimberly Potter guilty on two counts of manslaughter for killing black man Daunte Wright during a traffic stop in April of this year, Hennepin County Judge Regina Chu said on Thursday. "We the jury on the charge of manslaughter in the first degree while committing a misdemeanor on or about April 11, 2021, in Hennepin County find the defendant guilty," Chu said when reading out the verdict.

Chu added that the jury also found Potter guilty of second-degree murder due to her "culpable negligence."

Potter was ordered into custody and will be sentenced on February 18.

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

Potter shot and killed Wright after he resisted arrest and attempted to re-enter his vehicle.

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

First-degree manslaughter carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison, and second-degree manslaughter carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

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US Justice Department Announces \$34Mln in Grants to Boost Community Crisis Response

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – The Department of Justice announced grant awards of \$34 million Thursday to help strengthen communities as they cope with public health and safety issues, including mental health, homelessness, substance use, and a variety of other challenges.

"We simply cannot arrest or incarcerate our way out of the challenges presented by untreated mental illness, co-occurring substance use, homelessness and poverty," Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said. "These resources awarded today reaffirm our commitment to support diversion programs and expand community partnerships so that people are connected to the help they need and are kept out of the criminal justice system whenever possible."

The grants will shore up partnerships between justice system officials, health and mental health professionals, and community providers to divert the mentally ill, those addicted to drugs and others from the criminal justice system and steer them toward the treatment and support services they need.

The grants build on over \$300 million in new investments this year to fight the opioid and narcotics crisis and tackle substance use disorders, the department noted. It also provides for drug court and mentoring initiatives, correctional substance use treatment programs and efforts

to address the prevention, diversion, treatment and recovery needs of those affected by substance use.

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US Jury Finds Ex-Cop Who Shot Daunte Wright Guilty of First Degree Manslaughter

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A US jury found former Minnesota police officer Kimberly Potter guilty of first-degree manslaughter for killing black man Daunte Wright during a traffic stop in April of this year, Hennepin County Judge Regina Chu said on Thursday. "We the jury on the charge of manslaughter in the first degree while committing a misdemeanor on or about April 11, 2021, in Hennepin County find the defendant guilty," Chu said. Chu added that the jury also found Potter guilty of second-degree murder culpable negligence.

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US Transportation Dept. Gives \$241Mln to Ports to Strengthen Supply Chains - Secretary

WASHINGTON, DC December 23 (Sputnik) – The US Transportation Department has awarded more than \$241 million in grants for 25 port projects as part of a broader effort to untangle the country's supply chain crisis, Secretary Pete Buttigieg said on Thursday.

"US maritime ports play a critical role in our supply chains," Buttigieg said in a press release.

"These investments in our nation's ports will help support American jobs, efficient and resilient operations, and faster delivery of goods to the American people."

The grants will help improve port facilities in 19 states and one territory by providing money for planning, operational and capital financing, as well as project management assistance to improve ports' capacity and efficiency, Buttigieg said.

The expectation is that these grants and other measures will strengthen America's supply chains, allowing them to withstand the increased demands caused by the post-COVID economic surge and recovery over the past year, he said. They will also help mitigate inflation, which is at its highest levels in 39 years.

The projects receiving awards include coastal seaports, Great Lakes ports, and inland river ports, he said, adding that the grants would prioritize job creation, climate change and environmental justice.

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US, UK Top Diplomats Discuss Response to 'Russian Aggression' Toward Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss on Thursday discussed a potential response to the alleged Russian aggression toward Ukraine, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss on shared priorities, including a strong, united response to further Russian aggression against Ukraine," Price said in a statement.

Both officials agreed on the importance of reinforcing coordinated support among allies and partners to impose consequences and costs in case of Russia's aggressive actions toward Ukraine, Price added.

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 Russia's borders, which it deems to be a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own sovereign territory as it sees fit.

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Marathon Petroleum Takes 250,000 Barrels from US Oil Reserve to Help Curb Pump Price - DOE

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has released 250,000 barrels from its oil reserve to Marathon Petroleum under a second sale-and-exchange deal aimed at reducing pump prices of fuel, the Department of Energy said Thursday.

The transaction follows a previous sale-and-exchange deal with ExxonMobil for 4.8 million barrels, the department said. "Today, the US Department of Energy (DOE) approved a second exchange of 250,000 barrels of crude oil for release to Marathon Petroleum Company from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)," a news release from the agency said.

The DOE announced two weeks ago that up to 32 million barrels would be released from the SPR through the sale-and-exchange program.

"As with all exchanges, companies that receive SPR crude oil through the exchange agree to return the amount of crude oil received, as well as an additional amount, dependent upon the length of time in which they hold the oil," Thursday's news release said.

Through the exchange program, the Biden administration hopes to reduce the amount of crude oil that petroleum refiners buy directly from the open market in order to cap prices for both the raw material and the fuel sold at pumps.

Prices of crude oil and fuel at US pumps hit their highest since 2014 as global oil exporters under the OPEC+ alliance cut output despite higher demand for energy in a world recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

President Joe Biden announced last month that the United States will join other major oil consuming countries under a coordinated action to release crude from their reserves in order to tamp down inflation from soaring energy prices.

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US Has Not Responded to Russian Proposals on Ukraine, Talks to Begin in January - Official

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US government has not yet responded to Russia's security proposals regarding NATO's activity in eastern Europe, especially those related to Ukraine, but negotiations are expected to begin in early January, a senior Biden administration official said on Thursday.

"We're prepared to meet in early January, we have not yet set a date or location for those talks," the official said during a conference call. "In terms of our response, I expect we will have our substantive response in those talks, but we have not responded substantively to the proposals that have been made."

On Friday, Moscow published draft agreements between Russia, the United States and NATO on security guarantees. The proposals, if agreed to, would ban NATO from expanding eastward and prohibit the United States and Russia from deploying intermediate and shorter-range missiles within striking distance of each other's territory, among other terms.

The Biden administration official said Russia's security proposals include items that the United States will never agree to but there are other areas the two countries may be able to explore about possible agreement. However, at present, the United States will not respond in public to all of Russia's security proposals, which Moscow understands, the official said.

The United States and Russia will negotiate bilaterally and multilaterally through the NATO-Russia Council and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the official said.

The Biden administration believes negotiations should start from the baseline foundational principles and documents on European security, which underscores territorial integrity, borders not being changed by force and respect for sovereign decision-making, the US official said.

The United States has conveyed to Russia that substantive progress in these talks will only be possible if there is an environment of de-escalation, the official said. The official added that there is no evidence that the Ukrainian side is escalating tensions with Russia.

The United States and its European allies are ready to take serious actions against Russia in the form of severe economic sanctions should it invade Ukraine, the official said. Washington and its allies have factored the state of the world energy market into any response to possible Russian actions in Ukraine, the official noted.

On Tuesday, the head of Russia's delegation in the Vienna talks on arms control, Konstantin Gavrilov, said Moscow has a backup plan to consider if the United States and NATO do not respond to its proposal on security guarantees.

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

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Trump Asks US Supreme Court to Block Jan 6 Panel From Getting His Records – Court Filing

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump has submitted an application to the Supreme Court asking it to block the release of his records from the National Archives, which were requested by the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot, according to a court application published on Thursday.

“Applicant respectfully requests that the Court stay the mandate from the DC Circuit pending the resolution of Applicant’s Petition for 27 Certiorari and grant an injunction, prohibiting the National Archives and Records Administration and the Archivist from releasing any and all records requested by the House Select Committee over which appellant asserts executive privilege, until further order of the Court,” the application read.

In his application, Trump says that records requests, like the one he is fighting at the moment, can become the new norm of American politics due to an increasingly partisan political climate in the United States.

To date, the National Archives identified approximately 1,600 pages of documents as relevant to the Select Committee probe into the January 6 events. In November, Trump submitted a motion to prevent the release of some 750 of them on the basis of executive privilege, but that request was denied by the US District Court for the District of Columbia.

The records include proposed talking points for then-Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany related to the 2020 presidential election, presidential activity calendars and a related handwritten note for January 6, as well as a draft text of a presidential speech for the rally in Washington that day.

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Record 122,000 Unaccompanied Migrant Children Arrive to US Shelters in 2021 – Reports

Washington, DC December 23 (Sputnik) – US authorities took a record 122,000 unaccompanied migrant children into custody in fiscal year 2021, CBS News reported on Thursday, citing government data it obtained from the Department of Health and Human Services.

“The program faced an unprecedented challenge at the beginning of this year,” a senior official at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the HHS agency that cares for unaccompanied children, told CBS News.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said HHS and the US were expecting to see a significant increase in the numbers of migrant children entering the US next year. To absorb the numbers, HHS has identified two facilities in North Carolina and New Mexico that can be converted into emergency housing facilities and staff are also expanding capacity at traditional shelters.

According to figures obtained by CBS, in fiscal years 2016 and 2019, when the previous records were set, HHS received 59,000 and 69,000 unaccompanied migrant children, respectively, historical government statistics show. For the six months beginning in March, more than 92,000 unaccompanied minors were transferred to HHS.

Officials say 147,000 unaccompanied children arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2021, which ended in October.

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US New Home Prices Hit Record High Above \$416,000 in November - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The selling price for a new residence in the United States hit record highs above \$416,000 in November, according to data from the Census Bureau on Thursday that showed no let up in the rise of home prices as inflation grew at its fastest pace in four decades.

"The median sales price of new houses sold in November 2021 was \$416,900," the Census Bureau, a unit of the Commerce Department, said in a statement. "The average sales price was \$481,700."

The previous high was seen in October when the median selling price for a new home stood at \$407,700.

Sales of new homes on their own were at 744,000 in November, up 12.4% above the revised October rate of 662,000 but 14% below the November 2020 estimate of 865,000, the statement said.

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 among first-time home buyers, triggering record high prices.

To compound the problem, the Federal Reserve is expected to raise interest rates by as many as three times next year to curb inflation growing at its fastest pace in four decades. The Federal Reserve closely watched inflation barometer - the Personal Consumption Expenditures Index - grew by 5.7% in the year to November, the Commerce Department reported on Thursday. Historical data showed it was the largest annual growth in the index in 39 years.

Sales of existing homes in the United States - the other major half of the residential property market - rose for a third straight month in November as buyers rushed to beat impending rate hikes by the Fed that would make mortgages cost more, the National Association of Realtors said Tuesday.

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UN Special Adviser Urges All Libyan Actors to Facilitate Elections After Polls Delayed

UNITED NATIONS, December 23 (Sputnik) - UN Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Libya Stephanie Williams on Thursday called on all actors in the country to facilitate the holding of inclusive, free and fair national elections after the postponement of the polls initially planned for December 24.

On Wednesday, Libya's High National Elections Commission said it was unable to hold the elections citing difficulties related to the inadequacies in the electoral legislation and the issues with the eligibility of candidates.

"I strongly urge relevant institutions and all political actors to focus on the electoral process and on creating the political and security conditions to secure the holding of inclusive, free, fair, peaceful and credible elections, whose outcome will be accepted by all parties," Williams said in a statement.

Williams also said in the statement that the current challenges in the electoral process should in no way be used to undermine the stability and progress which has been achieved in Libya over the past 15 months.

"To contribute to a solution of Libya's political crisis and to durable stability, presidential and parliamentary elections must take place in the appropriate conditions, on a level playing field among all candidates to peacefully end the political transition and transfer power to democratically elected institutions," she added.

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US Not Ready to Agree to Russian Proposals Regarding NATO – White House

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will not agree to the proposals made by Moscow regarding NATO, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"There have been proposals put forward by the Russians. Some we would agree with, some we certainly wouldn't agree with. Obviously, the NATO example is a good example of that, and we are working to finalize what they'll look like," Psaki said.

Last week, Russia released its draft proposals on security guarantees. They suggest in particular that NATO should commit to not expanding further, including Ukraine, and must abandon military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia and Central Asia.

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Blinken, NATO Chief Discuss Readiness for Talks Over Russia-Ukraine Tensions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg concerns over Russia's military activity near Ukraine,

but conveyed the United States' readiness to engage in dialogue to resolve the issue, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today to discuss their shared concern about Russia's military build-up on the borders of Ukraine," Price said in a press release. "They discussed NATO's dual-track approach to Russia, noting the Alliance remains ready for meaningful dialogue with Russia, while standing united to defend and protect Allies."

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White House Cannot Confirm Talks With Russia in Geneva in January - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot confirm that talks with Russia will take place in Geneva early next year, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"There has not been a final agreement on final location and timeline at this time," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked to comment on Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement about the possibility for such a meeting in January.

Earlier on Thursday, Putin said Russia's "American partners" are ready to start discussion in Geneva early next year.

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US Ready for Talks With Russia in Early January, No Date or Location Set - Official

(Adds background in para 4)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to hold security talks with Russia early next month through various channels, but no date or location have been determined yet, a senior administration official said on Thursday.

"We said it both publicly and to the Russian government, we are prepared to meet in early January. We have not yet set a date or location for those talks," the senior official told reporters. The contacts can be made through various formats, including the NATO-Russia Council and OSCE, the official added.

Last week, Russia released its draft proposals on security guarantees. They suggest in particular that NATO should commit to not expanding further, including Ukraine, and must abandon military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Another provision says that Russia and the US should not deploy intermediate- and short-range missiles in areas from where they can hit each other's territory.

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Holiday Travel Through US Airports Exceeds 2019 Levels - Transportation Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US airports screened more passengers for the holiday season this week than during the same period in 2019, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data revealed on Thursday, suggesting a recovery in air travel from the lows of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

TSA checkpoint travel data showed US airports screened 2,081,297 passengers on December 22 this year versus 1,937,235 on December 22, 2019. A year ago, 1,191,123 people went through US airport checkpoints amid a breakout in the coronavirus Delta variant.

This year, air travel for the holidays has risen above pre-pandemic levels, suggesting more confidence among travelers amid a variety of treatments available for the novel coronavirus disease and the early information that the new Omicron variant is more contagious but significantly less lethal.

The increased numbers of air travelers came as major US cities and sports leagues attempted in recent weeks to control the increase in coronavirus cases. Cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have reintroduced restrictions to stem the growth of the Omicron variant while sports leagues have postponed or canceled meets due to outbreaks among players.

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US Says to Factor In Energy Market Situation in Any Response to Russian Action in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The situation in the world energy market will be factored into any US response to possible Russian actions in Ukraine, a senior administration official said on Thursday.

"The energy market is something that has consequences for our people, for European people, for people around the world and it'll be factored into our analysis and in our response as it is in a number of areas of our foreign policy, but I don't have anything to say about it beyond that," the official told a press briefing, when asked if spiking energy prices in Europe make discussions with EU allies about sanctions against Russia more difficult.

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Senior US Official Says No Evidence Ukraine Escalates Tensions With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A senior Biden administration official said on Thursday that there is no evidence indicating Ukraine is escalating tensions with Russia. "To be clear, we see no evidence of that escalation on the Ukrainian side," the official said during a conference call.

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

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Emergency Teams Extinguish Fire at Baytown Oil Refinery in Texas - ExxonMobil

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Emergency response teams have succeeded in putting out the fire at the Baytown Oil Refinery in the US state of Texas, in which four people were injured ExxonMobil announced on Thursday.

"ExxonMobil emergency response teams have safely extinguished the fire at the Baytown refinery," the company said via Twitter.

Air monitoring continues along the refinery's fence line and available information shows no adverse air quality monitoring impact to the community or personnel on site at the current time, ExxonMobil said.

The causes of the incident have not yet been determined, the company added.

ExxonMobil said the fire started at around 1:00 a.m. local time. In early reports, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said that preliminary information indicated that some type of explosion happened inside the plant.

The ExxonMobil facility in Baytown suffered an earlier fire in July of 2019, when 37 people were injured.

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US Will Not Respond in Public to All Russian Proposals, Moscow Understands - Official

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will not respond in public to all of Russia's security proposals related to the alleged escalation of Russian military activity near Ukraine's border, a senior US administration official said on Thursday.

"We are not going to respond to every proposal or comments that have been made including from the Russian president and I think our approach is understood to the Russians in this regard," the US official said during a conference call with reporters. "There are some issues that

Russia has raised that we believe we can discuss and others they know very well we will never agree to."

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US, Allies to Bring More NATO Capabilities Near Russia if It Invades Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – The United States along with its allies stands ready to impose severe costs on the Russian economy and to bring more NATO capabilities near its borders if it decides to invade Ukraine, a senior US administration official said on Thursday. "We and our allies are prepared to impose severe costs that would damage Russia's economy and bring about exactly what it says it does not want, more NATO capabilities, not less, closer to Russia, not further away," the official said during a press briefing.

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US Ready for Talks With Russia in Early January, No Date or Location Set - Official

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to hold security talks with Russia early next month through various channels, including the NATO-Russia Council and OSCE, a senior administration official said on Thursday. "We said publicly, to the Russian Government will prepare to meet in early January, we have not yet set a date or location for those talks," the senior official told reporters.

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TD Bank to Pay \$115,000 to Settle US Sanctions Violations on North Korea - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - TD Bank of North America will pay just over \$115,000 to settle two violations of US sanctions on North Korea that were non-egregious, the Treasury Department said Thursday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control today announced a \$115,005.04 settlement of two cases involving T.D. Bank, N.A. for apparent violations of the North Korea Sanctions Regulations and the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Sanctions Regulations," the Treasury said in a statement.

In the first violation, TD Bank processed transactions and maintained accounts on behalf of employees of the North Korean mission to the United Nations without a license from the Treasury, according to the statement.

In the second, the bank maintained accounts for a US resident who was listed on the Treasury's list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons.

The Treasury said both violations were voluntarily self-disclosed by TD Bank and were non-egregious.

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Japan, US Plan 'Attack Base' to Respond to Possible Taiwan Crisis With China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US and Japanese armed forces have drafted a joint operational plan to create an attack base on the Nansei islands - southwest of the Japan's main islands - from which to respond to any crisis over the sovereignty of Taiwan, Kyodo News reported on Thursday.

Japan and the United States are expected to start work to formalize the operational plan in January 2022 when their top defense and foreign policy officials are scheduled to meet anyway in their regular "two-by-two" talks, the report said citing sources in the Japanese government. The United States military will receive support from Japan's Self-Defense Forces and will deploy US troops on the islands if a Taiwan crisis erupts, the report also said.

However, Japan's current laws would have to be changed in order to accommodate the new US deployment, the report added.

The SDF and the US military are looking at around 40 potential locations among the 200 islands in the Nansei chain for the new base, Kyodo said. The proposed deployment is anticipated to set off a negative reaction from China, according to the report.

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Egypt Returns US Citizen Home to Face Fraud, Money Laundering Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Egypt has returned a US citizen to the United States to face fraud and money laundering charges over an alleged scheme to defraud the Kuwaiti Embassy, the Department of Justice said on Thursday.

"According to court documents and statements made during his initial appearance, Ahmed El Khebki, 62, a naturalized US citizen originally from Egypt and Sudan, was returned to the United States by Egyptian authorities," the Justice Department said in a press release.

According to court filings, El Khebki and his co-conspirators carried out a scheme to defraud the Kuwaiti Embassy Health Office in Washington, DC, which arranged and paid for services provided by US medical providers to Kuwaiti citizens who traveled to the United States for medical care, the release said.

"El Khebki and his co-conspirators submitted fraudulent invoices to the Kuwait Embassy Health Office, where other members of the conspiracy signed checks drawn off the Health Office's US

bank account made payable to shell companies created as part of the scheme," the release added.

In 2014, El Khebki fled the United States and in 2016, two former employees of the Health Office pleaded guilty in the US District Court for the District of Columbia to conspiring with El Khebki and others to launder money embezzled from the Health Office, according to the release.

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Biden Signs Bill to Ban Imports from China's Xinjiang Into Law - White House

(Updates with background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden signed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act that prohibits imports into the United States of goods made with forced labor in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the White House said on Thursday.

"On Thursday, December 23, 2021, the President signed into law: H.R. 6256, which bans imports from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) of the People's Republic of China and imposes sanctions on foreign individuals responsible for forced labor in the region," the White House said in a press release.

The Senate and the House of Representatives passed the final version of the bill earlier this month with overwhelming support.

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

The legislation requires the US president to impose sanctions on officials responsible for persecuting Muslim minorities and facilitating the use of involuntary labor. Businesses will have to prove their operations do not involve the use of forced labor from alleged work camps in Xinjiang under this new law.

US lawmakers accuse China of arbitrarily imprisoning as many as 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and members of other Muslim minority groups in a system of extrajudicial mass internment camps, where they are forced to produce "textiles, electronics, food products, shoes, tea, and handicrafts," according to the legislation.

The Chinese government has repeatedly denied all accusations of being engaged in abuses in the Xinjiang region.

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Pentagon Says Seven Staff Members Tested Positive for COVID-19 After Base Tour

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - At least seven staff members who traveled with Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks to Hawaii last week have tested positive for COVID-19 and are quarantined at the moment, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Seven members of the traveling and advance staff who accompanied Deputy Secretary Hicks on her domestic trip last week have tested positive for COVID-19," Kirby said in a statement. "All staff members who tested positive are quarantined, in keeping with CDC guidelines."

Deputy Secretary Hicks and members of her personal staff have tested negative, Kirby added. On December 14-15, Hicks visited the Department of Defense sites in Hawaii and met with the US Indo-Pacific Command to discuss the US strategy in the region.

The news comes as the the United States is experiencing a new surge in COVID-19-related infections, hospitalizations and deaths amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant. On Wednesday, the CDC said the number of new coronavirus cases was up by a quarter as compared to last week and reached nearly 150,000 per day.

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Intel Apologizes in China Over Xinjiang Supplier Advice

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – American technology giant Intel extended its apologies to China on Thursday over its recent letter to suppliers with an appeal to avoid products from Xinjiang due to US sanctions over forced labor concerns.

The company deeply regretted that the letter caused a heated debate and hurt the feelings of the Chinese people. The letter was meant to express its compliance with US laws, but did not contain any stance on the matter, the company explained.

"We apologize for the trouble caused to our respected Chinese customers, partners and the public. Intel is striving to be a reliable technology partner to China," Intel said in a Chinese-language statement on the WeChat social network.

Intel issued a letter to suppliers earlier in the month saying that it is required to comply with restrictions on goods from Xinjiang. "Our investors and customers have inquired whether Intel purchases goods or services from the Xinjiang region of China. Multiple governments have imposed restrictions on products sourced from the Xinjiang region," the letter read. "Therefore, Intel is required to ensure our supply chain does not use any labor or source goods or services from the Xinjiang region."

Earlier in December, the US Congress passed legislation banning imports of goods made with the forced labor of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tibetans, or members of other "persecuted groups" in China. On Thursday, President Joe Biden signed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act into law.

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Biden Signs Bill to Ban Imports from China's Xinjiang Into Law - White House

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US Consumer Prices Up 5.7% in Year to November, Fastest Gain in 39 Years - Commerce Dept.

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew by 5.7% in the year to November, data from the Commerce Department showed on Thursday as wages and other costs continued to soar in an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic.

Historical data from the Commerce Department showed the consumer prices increase was the largest annual growth in the index in 39 years.

"The PCE [Personal Consumption Expenditures] price index for November increased 5.7 percent from one year ago, reflecting increases in both goods and services ... Excluding food and energy, the PCE price index for November increased 4.7 percent from one year ago," the statement said.

The rise in PCE matched the general inflation trend set so far by the Consumer Price Index, a broader inflation gauge which also grew by its fastest pace in almost four decades in November. The US economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 from the lockdowns and other restrictive measures imposed to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus.

This year's growth has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.1% in the third.

The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for next year and 4% for 2023. The US central bank's problem though 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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US Grants Emergency Use Authorization for Merck's COVID-19 Pill - FDA

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in a statement on Thursday that it has granted an emergency use authorization for Merck's antiviral pill Molnupiravir that is used to treat COVID-19 patients.

"Today, the US Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) for Merck's Molnupiravir for the treatment of mild-to-moderate coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in adults with positive results of direct SARS-CoV-2 viral testing, and who are at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19, including hospitalization or death, and for whom alternative COVID-19 treatment options authorized by the FDA are not accessible or clinically appropriate," the statement said.

Molnupiravir is available by prescription only and should be initiated as soon as possible after COVID-19 diagnosis and within five days of symptom onset, the statement said.

The FDA pointed out that it did not authorize the use of Molnupiravir for patients younger than 18 due to potential negative effect on bone and cartilage growth. Nor can the medication be used for the pre-exposure or post-exposure prevention of COVID-19 or for initiation of treatment in patients hospitalized due to COVID-19, the agency said.

"Molnupiravir is limited to situations where other FDA-authorized treatments for COVID-19 are inaccessible or are not clinically appropriate and will be a useful treatment option for some patients with COVID-19 at high risk of hospitalization or death," FDA Center for Drug Evaluation and Research Director Patrizia Cavazzoni said in the statement.

The granting of the emergency use authorization is a crucial step in expanding the US arsenal of therapies for COVID-19, Cavazzoni added.

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Last Afghan Refugees Leave US Marine Base Housing at Quantico - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The last group of Afghan refugees temporarily housed at the US Marine base at Quantico, Virginia has left it to settle more permanently elsewhere in the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"Yesterday [Wednesday], the last group of Afghan nationals temporarily housed at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia as part of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) departed the base," the DHS said.

Quantico is the second of eight Department of Defense installations supporting the resettlement of Afghan refugees since the Taliban overran the country during the final stages of the US military evacuation in August, the release noted.

"To date, more than 49,000 Afghan evacuees have been resettled in communities across our country. These resettlement efforts are led by the Department of State in close coordination with more than 290 local resettlement affiliates," the DHS said.

The Defense Department continues to provide temporary housing facilities for the remaining approximately 25,000 Afghan refugees at Camp Atterbury, Indiana; Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Fort Bliss, Texas; Fort Pickett, Virginia; and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, the release noted.

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US Jobless Claims at 205,000 for Last Week, Unchanged From Previous Period - Labor Dept.

(Adds details, context in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 205,000 for last week, unchanged from the previous week's revised level, as the employment market continued to consolidate after a stretch of dynamic recovery from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending December 18, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 205,000, unchanged from the previous week's revised level," the department said.

Weekly filings for jobless benefits hit their lowest level since 1969 during the week ending November 20, when they totaled 199,000.

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers, although the monthly jobless rate in November stood at just 4.2% versus the Federal Reserve's 4% target for "maximum employment." At the height of the labor market collapse during the pandemic, the jobless rate rose to almost 15%.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5% in 2020 from lockdowns and other slowdown in activity associated. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.3% in the third. The Fed has projected a 5.5% growth for next year and 4% for 2023.

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UNICEF Concerned by Violence Against Children in Sudan Intercommunal Conflict, Protests

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - UNICEF voiced concerns on Thursday over children being subjected to violence in Sudan, including minors killed in an intercommunal conflict in West Darfur and raped during protests in Khartoum.

"The increase in inter-communal violence in West Darfur, most recently in Jebel Moon has resulted in a high death toll, including children," Kambou Fofana, acting UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, said in a statement. "Families continue to be displaced fleeing violence. We also received reports of gender-based violence in the area." According to latest data, a conflict between Arab nomads and farmers from the Misseriya Jebel tribe in Jebel Moon locality, which broke out on November 17, resulted in 59 deaths. Moreover, dozens of villages were burnt down and looted and several thousand people had to flee their homes.

"We are closely following harrowing reports of rape of women and girls during the protests," Fofana stated. "UNICEF calls on all authorities in Sudan to protect all children from all forms of

violence and harm including during conflict and political events. The use of excessive force against civilians is unnecessary and should be avoided, always."

The UN Human Rights Office said on Tuesday that they received reports about security forces in Sudan having raped 13 women during protests in Khartoum on December 19.

The demonstration took place to mark the third anniversary of protests that resulted in the overthrow of former Sudanese President Omar Bashir in April of 2019.

Two protesters died after being shot and some 300 others were injured during the demonstration, the release said. Sudanese security forces used live ammunition and tear gas, according to the release.

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US Consumer Prices Up 5.7% in Year to November, Fastest Gain in 39 Years - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew by 5.7% in the year to November, data from the Commerce Department showed Thursday as wages and other costs continued to soar in an economy expanding aggressively from the coronavirus pandemic. Historical data from the department showed it was the largest annual growth in the index in 39 years.

"The PCE [or Personal Consumption Expenditures] price index for November increased 5.7 percent from one year ago, reflecting increases in both goods and services ... Excluding food and energy, the PCE price index for November increased 4.7 percent from one year ago," the statement said.

The rise in PCE matched the general inflation trend set so far by the Consumer Price Index, a broader inflation gauge which also grew by its fastest pace in almost four decades in November.

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US Intelligence Believes China Helping Saudis Build Ballistic Missiles - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US intelligence agencies have concluded that China has transferred missile technology to Saudi Arabia to help the desert kingdom build its own ballistic missiles in addition to the actual missiles it has bought from Beijing in the past, CNN reported on Thursday, citing sources.

Several US intelligence organizations have assessed that Saudi Arabia is already making its own ballistic missiles using technology supplied by Beijing, according to the report. The broadcaster said it had seen US satellite images identifying one Saudi location at least where the missiles are being made, the report added.

This intelligence has been circulated across the US government this year including to officials at the National Security Council, CNN said.

The Saudi initiative could add further complications to the Biden administration's efforts to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran to restrain Tehran's nuclear programs, the report noted.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told CNN in a statement that Beijing and Riyadh were comprehensive strategic partners and continued to cooperate in all areas, including military trade.

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Taliban Halted Evacuation Flights From Afghanistan for Past Two Weeks - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) have suspended US-chartered Qatar Airways evacuation flights out of Afghanistan for the past two weeks, NBC reported on Thursday, citing sources.

Flights were halted over disagreements both about how the Kabul airport is managed and who is provided with seats on the evacuation flights, the report said, citing a congressional source, two refugee advocates and a source in the know.

"We are hopeful that flights will resume shortly, though as usual, winter weather conditions and airport operations remain additional factors to be aware of," a State Department official told the channel.

The Taliban allegedly demanded several seats on the flights for their fighters and sympathizers so that they can work in other countries, NBC said, citing a congressional official and the source familiar with the matter. According to the TV channel, the Taliban argue that they are running the country and Qataris use their airspace, so the radical group should receive seats on the flights. Prior to the flight suspension, the Taliban were using the seats to send migrant workers to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other countries to find work, the report noted. The Taliban were deciding who would get the seats, and it was not known who was leaving Afghanistan – Taliban fighters, sympathizers, civilians, or a combination of these groups, according to the broadcaster. When the Qatari government declined to continue providing seats, the Taliban halted evacuation flights, NBC said.

The Taliban and the Qatari government are also reported to be at odds over how the Taliban are running the airport. Qatar maintains that the airport and its security are not up to international standards, and they have denounced instances of the Taliban harassing Afghan refugees at the airport or preventing them from boarding their flights, according to NBC.

The Taliban took over Afghanistan in August, which led to the collapse of the previous government and mass evacuations from the Kabul airport. As crowds amassed at the airport and the area was hit by two terrorist attacks, the Taliban ordered all foreign evacuations to end before August 31. Later, evacuations resumed.

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US Jobless Claims at 205,000 for Last Week, Unchanged From Previous Period - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 205,000 for last week, unchanged from the previous week's revised level, as the employment market continued to consolidate after a stretch of dynamic recovery, Labor Department data showed Thursday. "In the week ending December 18, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 205,000, unchanged from the previous week's revised level," the department said.

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Four Injured After Fire Breaks Out at ExxonMobil Plant in Texas – Sheriff's Office

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A fire broke out at an ExxonMobil oil refinery in the Texas city of Baytown on Thursday, leaving four people injured, the sheriff's office said. ExxonMobil reported that a fire occurred at around 1:00 a.m. local time (7:00 GMT). In early reports, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said that preliminary information indicated that some type of explosion happened inside the plant.

"There have been 4 confirmed injuries, 3 of which were life flighted and 1 was taken to the hospital via ambulance. No fatalities have been reported. There is currently no shelter in place," the Sheriff's Office wrote on Twitter.

Local residents are recommended to avoid the plant area.

The ExxonMobil facility in Baytown suffered a fire in July 2019, with 37 injured.