

12/27/21 Monday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

'France Pisses Us Off': Malians Hail Russian Advisers' Arrival as Paris Quits Anti-Terror War
By - Morgan Artyukhina

France's five-nation war across Africa's Sahel region is as unpopular there as it is at home, where French President Emmanuel Macron faces slugging popularity just months away from elections in which he will seek another term.

Malians have welcomed the reported arrival of Russian advisers in the West African country, where France has continued to disengage from a nine-year War on Terror-style campaign against Muslim rebel groups. However, over a dozen Western nations have protested Moscow's help.

"We just need to make sure that the government assumes its responsibility and says today that Mali is ready to sign with the devil for peace. The people need peace. The north of Mali and the center of Mali are now suffering from insecurity. And we welcome everyone, all those who can help us achieve peace," Kebab Diallo, a resident of the country's capital of Bamako, [told Africa News](#) on Saturday.

France's Operation Barkhane is [winding down](#) in Africa's Sahel, with the French Army handing over the [last of its bases](#) in northern Mali to the Malian government earlier this month. The war, which has spanned five former French colonies, began in 2012 after a [coup in the Malian capital](#) of Bamako created a national crisis in which Tuareg rebels took over nearly half the country and declared their own state of Azawagh.

However, while the war has devastated Mali and several other countries, it has failed to contain the threat from the Muslim rebel groups, which contain elements loyal to Al-Qaeda and Daesh* that have thrived in the vacuum created by the NATO-directed destruction of Libya in 2011. In October, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga [told RIA Novosti](#) that French forces have been secretly funneling support to terrorist groups like the al-Qaeda-aligned Ansar el-Din front and had no intention of winning the war.

"France pisses us off," Fatoumata Doukara, another Bamako resident, told Africa News.

"It has been in our country for 10 years or more with no results. Our children are dying, our soldiers are dying every day in the north. I welcomed the arrival of the Russian forces. If they manage to put everything in order, it will make us happy," she added.

Lassana Coulibaly, another Bamako resident, said the people "will welcome them with open arms, without shame really. Let the European forces go where they want. It was the people themselves who asked for the Russian forces to come. It is not the authorities in place, it is the people themselves."

Their complaints are as old as Barkhane, which [has long been protested](#) by Malian antiwar group Yerewolo - Debout sur Les Remparts (The Worthy Sons - Standing on the Ramparts), which called large protests in June when Macron announced the end of Barkhane in reaction to the second coup in two years by Col. Assimi Goïta, who is now Mali's interim president.

[Less than half](#) of the 5,000 troops deployed in Barkhane are actually going home, though: most are shifting south, toward the tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Niger, to fight other terrorist groups there. However, the French forces are no less hated there, and a massive French military convoy bound for southern Mali from Cote D'Ivoire [machine-gunned its way](#) through massive Burkinabe and Nigerian demonstrations last month.

NATO Protests Africans' Turn Toward Russia

On Thursday, France and 15 other NATO allies [signed a joint statement](#) denouncing what they claim is Bamako's contracting of "foreign mercenaries" in the form of the Wagner Group, a private security contracting corporation falsely stated as having connections to the Russian government. The US issued a [separate protest](#) earlier this month.

Both Moscow and [Bamako have denied](#) that either Russian troops are deployed in Mali or that [very real discussions](#) with "a private Russian military company" earlier this year actually yielded a contract for their use.

"We don't have any connection to that," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in September.

Pyotr Ilyichev, director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of International Organizations, told [RIA Novosti on Monday](#) that the withdrawal of French troops from Mali has the potential to intensify terrorist activity, since neither the Sahel Five nations or Task Force Takuba have the strength to tackle the emerging threat.

"Under these circumstances, Mali, just like other countries of the Sahara and Sahel region, has the right to collaborate on tackling extremists with any partners," Ilyichev said, adding that "attempts to interfere with the decision of the sovereign country through blatant blackmailing and threats are a clear manifestation of neocolonialism."

"We believe that the fight against international terrorism in Africa is a common task for all non-regional players. In this context, abstract arguments about the traditional spheres of influence of individual states look simply inappropriate," Ilyichev added, noting that Russia and Mali have long-standing links and that Moscow would "continue to protect the legitimate interests of Bamako at the UN, as well as provide active assistance to the Malian partners in the military and military-technical spheres along existing inter-state lines."

Paris has levied similar accusations against Russian military advisers before: in June, Macron [canceled a security training deal](#) with the Central African Republic (CAR), another former French colony, claiming the government hadn't done enough to get rid of claimed Russian influence in the country, including the claimed presence of Wagner Group mercenaries. Last week, the EU made [the same decision](#), citing alleged presence of Wagner Group mercenaries, which both Bangui and Moscow deny.

However, due to the French cancellation, Bangui soon requested substantially more Russian advisers, which helped the country's military to turn the war around and make [substantial gains](#) against rebel forces.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Damascus Condemns Israeli Plan to Double Jewish Settler Population in Occupied Golan Heights

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Syrian government has raised objection to an Israeli plan to double the settler population in the Golan Heights, a territory east of the Sea of Galilee and River Jordan that was seized from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War and largely depopulated of its Arab residents.

Syria's Foreign and Expatriates Ministry condemned what it called a "dangerous and unprecedented escalation" by Israel in a [statement carried Monday](#) by the state-owned Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).

"The Syrian government reaffirms its permanent and strong support for its Syrian citizens, the people of the occupied Syrian Golan who resist the Israeli occupation and who reject the annexation decision and the policy of seizing lands by force," the statement said.

Damascus added that it would "work to return it completely to the homeland with all available means guaranteed by international law," noting the Israeli occupation and claimed annexation is in violation of multiple United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett convened a meeting of its cabinet in the Golan kibbutz of Mevo Hama at which he announced a [\\$317 million plan](#) to double the territory's population of Jewish settlers. The plan involves building two new towns and 7,300 housing units over the next five years, as well as expanding the housing stock of existing settler towns.

The population of the territory is about 50,000: 27,000 Jewish Israeli settlers, 24,000 Druze Arabs who remained after the 1967 conquest, and 2,000 Alawites, an ethnoreligious group who originated from Shia Islam, according to the [Times of Israel](#). During the 1967 war, in which Israel launched simultaneous sneak-attacks on Egypt, Jordan and Syria, [roughly 100,000 Syrian Arabs](#) fled from the Golan and were denied the ability to return by the Israeli government, becoming refugees.

Syria briefly recaptured most of the Golan [during the 1973 war](#), but an Israeli counteroffensive reclaimed nearly all of the lost territory. In 1981, the Knesset declared the territory formally annexed as part of the State of Israel. The UNSC decried this decision in [Resolution 497](#), calling Israel's legal authority in the Golan "null and void and without international legal effect" and demanding it withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, which were endorsed by the UN.

The United States remained silent on the issue of the Golan until 2019, when then-US President [Donald Trump signed](#) a proclamation recognizing Israel's claim. In response, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet renamed a town on the plateau "[Trump Heights](#)."

By contrast, the US has [spoken out strongly](#) against Bennett's plans to expand settlements in the West Bank, a region of dense Palestinian settlement that Israel also seized from Jordan in the 1967 war, which the UN also considers to be illegally occupied, and which was determined in the Oslo Accords to be part of the territorial basis for a future Palestinian state.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Iran Insists Petrol Export Sanctions Be Removed as Eighth Round of JCPOA Revival Talks Begin

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The eighth round of talks in Vienna aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear deal began on Monday, just days after the seventh round ended. Earlier this month, US posturing that Tehran's sincerity was dubious nearly torpedoed the talks, which could defuse a four-year showdown in the Middle East.

"Today all parties have agreed to come back to activate the eighth round of negotiations even in (the) Christmas and New Year's holiday. This in itself fully shows a greater sense of urgency on the part of all parties concerned," Wang Qun, China's ambassador to the United Nations institutions headquartered in Vienna, Austria, which includes the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) nuclear watchdog, told [reporters on Monday](#).

China is just one of several parties to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal, who also include Russia, France, Germany, the UK, the European Union, the US, and Iran. However, since Tehran refuses direct negotiations with Washington, which is responsible for shredding the deal in 2018, the deal's other parties have headed up the talks.

"Today, we have a mutually acceptable document on the negotiating table, which we consider as the (result of) documents of December 1 and 15, about both the nuclear issue and the sanctions," Iranian Foreign Minister Houssein [Amirabdollahian told reporters](#) in Tehran on Monday.

The chief diplomat explained that the seventh round earlier this month, the first since last summer, when Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office, had thrown out the joint document produced by earlier rounds of talks and had produced a wholly new, [mutually agreed-upon text](#). "As of today, our negotiation will start revolving around that joint document," Amirabdollahian said.

Tehran presented three draft documents in the seventh round, concerning, separately, the removal of US "maximum pressure" sanctions against Iran put in place after then-US President Donald Trump pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018, and Iran's return to limitations on quality and quantity of purified uranium under that deal. A third text, which Amirabdollahian said is the focus of the eighth round, concerns "assurances and verification" for sanctions removal.

"The most important issue for us is to reach a point where, firstly, Iranian oil can be sold easily and without hindrance," Abdollahian said.

'Maximum Pressure' Sanctions

US sanctions had intended to reduce petroleum export, which [in 2018 accounted for](#) 18% of Iran's gross domestic product and 25% of government revenues, ["to zero."](#) However, from a 2017 high of 2.5 million barrels per day, Iran's exports have only fallen to about 650,000 barrels per day as of September, according to [Iran International](#), with the product being sold through intermediaries and [China reportedly](#) being its largest customer.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US' ambassador to the United Nations, [told the UN Security Council](#) on December 14 that the US was fully prepared to lift sanctions inconsistent with JCPOA commitments, which would allow Iran to receive the economic benefits of the deal.

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

Numerous other sanctions also plague the country's economy and society, including bans on trade in other sectors, most notably financial transactions via the SWIFT bank wire transfer system. Tehran and the EU attempted to [create a SWIFT bypass](#) called the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), which largely failed to alleviate the pressure. As a result, Iran has been unable to buy medicine and equipment to treat rare diseases, as well as COVID-19, amplifying the pandemic's death toll and forcing them to [develop their own](#) SARS-CoV-2 vaccine.

Earlier this month, [OilPrice.com reported](#) that the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) was preparing to shift its price benchmark to the ICE Brent settlement, a metric used for petrol sales in Europe, at the start of the new year. This has been interpreted as anticipation of oil sales to European buyers soon resuming.

US Plays at Impatience

The talks have resumed as Washington's impatience becomes an important part of its posturing. Last week, White House national security adviser [Jake Sullivan said](#) that talks could cease "within weeks" if the US becomes unconvinced of Iran's sincerity in the negotiations - echoing [a similar threat](#) made earlier this month that nearly ended the seventh round of talks before they began.

The US faces particularly heavy pressure from Israel, which claims Iran is secretly pursuing a nuclear weapon it intends to use against the country and has postured as [ready to strike](#) Iran's nuclear facilities immediately and [alone, if necessary](#), in order to avert that possibility. Its Mossad intelligence agency has waged a yearslong [espionage campaign](#) against Iran's nuclear program, as well.

Despite official political posturing, Israel's [own military intelligence](#) has said that while Iran's enriched uranium has approached a fairly high purity - 60% uranium-235 - it's made no parallel effort to develop the technology necessary to turn it into a bomb.

A purity of at least 90% uranium-235 is necessary to produce a nuclear weapon, and while Iran has long pursued a strategy of increasing purity to pressure the US into returning to the deal, Mohammad Eslami, the head of the country's Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI), [told Sputnik on Saturday](#) that even if US sanctions remain, the country won't increase its uranium's purity past 60%.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Special Envoy Heyzer Calls for New Year's Ceasefire in Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS, December 27 (Sputnik) - All parties in Myanmar should exercise utmost restraint, seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the interest of the people and establish a New Year's ceasefire throughout the country, UN Special Envoy on Myanmar Noeleen Heyzer said.

"The people of Myanmar have already suffered tremendously and the socio-economic and humanitarian situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Those inflicting

suffering on its own people need to silence their guns and protect people in time of great need. The future of Myanmar's children counts on this," Heyzer said on Monday.

Heyzer said her statement echoes the earlier call by the UN Security Council calling for a ceasefire that comes out of the deep concern about the continued escalation of violence in Kayin State and other parts of Myanmar, which has displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians.

The UN Special Envoy also said she urges all parties in Myanmar to act in the greater interest of the nation and to fully respect their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians. Heyzer also appealed for allowing humanitarian assistance to be provided to those in need, including those forced to flee the violence.

Heyzer, who begun her assignment earlier this month, reaffirmed her full commitment to support the people of Myanmar and promote peace as well as said continue to focus on mobilizing coherent international support to achieve these goals.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Shortens Isolation Period for People Who Acquire Coronavirus From 10 to 5 Days - CDC

(Updates with more details in paras 7, 8)

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that it recommends shortening the isolation period for people infected with novel coronavirus from ten to five days on the condition that they do not show any symptoms related to the virus and can wear a mask after they finish isolation for an additional five days.

"CDC is shortening the recommended time for isolation from ten days for people with COVID-19 to 5 days, if asymptomatic, followed by 5 days of wearing a mask when around others," the agency said in a statement on Monday. "[P]eople who test positive should isolate for 5 days and, if asymptomatic at that time, they may leave isolation if they can continue to mask for 5 days to minimize the risk of infecting others."

The agency said it has also changed its recommendation regarding people who were either not vaccinated or have not yet received a third "booster" dose but were exposed to the virus. In this case, the CDC said it also advises to quarantine for five days and strictly use a mask for additional five days, the statement said.

As an alternative, those exposed can choose to wear a mask for ten days if a five-day quarantine is not feasible, the statement also said.

The new recommendations are in line with the latest scientific data on the COVID-19, which show that the majority of viral transmission takes place in the first 1-2 days prior to onset of symptoms and no later than 2-3 days after, the statement added.

The latest seven-day average of the number of cases has increased to nearly 176,000 cases per day amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant, according to CDC data.

Officials want to be careful about not having too many individuals out of work, particularly essential workers, Presidential Medical Adviser Anthony Fauci said on Monday.

"The CDC decision to halve the isolation period was a "very prudent and good choice," Fauci said, adding that they spent a considerable amount of time discussing the matter.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Police Confirm 2 Children Killed, Four Others Injured in Florida Hit-and-Run

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Two children were killed and four others injured in a vehicular hit-and-run in the US state of Florida, Broward Sheriff's Office spokesperson Miranda Grossman said.

"Wilton Manors PD, Broward Sheriff's Office, and Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue all responded to what turned out to be a hit-and-run. Two children were found to be deceased and pronounced deceased on-scene, and four others were transported to area hospitals," Grossman said during a press conference on Monday.

Detectives are asking the public for any information as they investigate the circumstances of the fatal incident, Grossman added.

The ages of the victims are between one and ten years old, Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Battalion Chief Stephen Gollan said during the press conference.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Bechtel Wins 2 US Navy Nuclear Propulsion Contracts Totaling \$823Mlm - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The Bechtel Corporation has won two contracts totaling more than \$823 million in value to provide nuclear propulsion components for the US Navy, the Defense Department said in two press releases.

"Bechtel Plant Machinery [of] Monroeville, Pennsylvania, is awarded a \$621,969,749... modification... contract for naval nuclear propulsion components," the first release said.

The company was also awarded a second \$201,576,723 modification contract for naval nuclear propulsion components, the Defense Department said in a second release.

Work on both contracts will be performed in Monroeville in the US state of Pennsylvania (77%) and in Schenectady, New York (23%), the release added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Unidentified Foreign Nation Orders Variant F-35 Jet Version Design - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 27(Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has won an almost \$50 million US Navy contract to design a version or variant of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter for an unspecified foreign nation, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Fort Worth, Texas is awarded a \$49,059,494 cost-plus-incentive-fee-contract that provides engineering and other related activities in support of the design and development of a Joint Strike Fighter aircraft variant tailored for an unspecified Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customer," the release said on Monday.

The Defense Department said more than three quarters of the work on the contract will be performed in Fort Worth, Texas with another 14% performed at Redondo Beach in California. Small quantities of work will be further carried out in Orlando, Florida (6%); Baltimore, Maryland (1%); Owego, New York (1%) and Sarnesbury, United Kingdom (1%), the release added. Work on the project is scheduled to take five years and is expected to be completed in December 2026, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Orders Emergency Management Agency to Assist With Coronavirus Testing - White House

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has issued an executive order for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to assist with coronavirus testing across the United States, the White House announced in a memorandum.

"The administrator of FEMA shall issue a mission assignment to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), on a fully reimbursable basis, to provide testing sites, launched and operated by HHS in close coordination with State, local, Tribal, and territorial public health departments," the memorandum said on Monday..

The order was given to enable FEMA to use the emergency and disaster assistance available to it to get testing to the places that need it most, the memorandum said.

"FEMA's mission assignments will require HHS to adjudicate State, Tribal, and territorial requests through the Emergency Support Function Eight Advisory Council," the memorandum added.

FEMA shall fund 100 percent of the cost of activities associated with the mission assignments to HHS to provide COVID-19 testing sites, according to the memorandum.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Nearly 3,000 Flights Canceled, Over 12,000 Delayed Globally on Monday - Tracker

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Nearly 3,000 flights have been canceled and more than 12,000 have been delayed globally on Monday over concerns among airlines about the coronavirus Omicron variant, according to the tracking website Flightradar24.

Despite the fact that the world is in the midst of the winter holidays celebrations, a total of 12,528 delays and 2,959 cancellations have been reported on Monday. Airlines and airports in the United States have accounted for nearly a half of all the delays and cancellations, Flightradar24 data showed.

Over the Christmas weekend, the air travelers witnessed a similar number of flight disruptions with 2,513 flights canceled on Sunday and 2,850 on Saturday.

On Sunday, representatives of several airlines, including United, JetBlue and Delta, said flights were being canceled over concerns of Omicron infections among staff.

The latest seven-day average of cases has increased to nearly 176,000 cases per day amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Shortens Isolation for People Who Catch Coronavirus From 10 to 5 Days - CDC

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that it recommends shortening the isolation period for people infected with novel coronavirus from ten to five days on the condition that they do not show any symptoms related to the virus and can wear a mask after they finish isolation for an additional five days.

"CDC is shortening the recommended time for isolation from ten days for people with COVID-19 to 5 days, if asymptomatic, followed by 5 days of wearing a mask when around others," the agency said in a statement on Monday. "[P]eople who test positive should isolate for 5 days and, if asymptomatic at that time, they may leave isolation if they can continue to mask for 5 days to minimize the risk of infecting others."

The agency said it has also changed its recommendation regarding people who were either not vaccinated or have not yet received a third "booster" dose but were exposed to the virus. In this case, the CDC said it also advises to quarantine for five days and strictly use a mask for additional five days, the statement said.

As an alternative, those exposed can choose to wear a mask for ten days if a five-day quarantine is not feasible, the statement also said.

The new recommendations are in line with the latest scientific data on the COVID-19, which show that the majority of viral transmission takes place in the first 1-2 days prior to onset of symptoms and no later than 2-3 days after, the statement added.

The latest seven-day average of the number of cases has increased to nearly 176,000 cases per day amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant, according to CDC data.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Quarter of Sailors on US Navy Ship Milwaukee Test Positive for COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Approximately one quarter of the sailors aboard the US warship Milwaukee have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, Military.com reported. Roughly two dozen members of the ship's crew of more than 100 sailors tested positive for COVID-19, the report, released on Monday, said. The number of infected sailors aboard the warship remains relatively constant, the report said on Monday citing defense officials. The outbreak forced officials to pause the ship's deployment last week. It is the first US Navy ship to have its deployment interrupted due to a novel coronavirus outbreak, the report noted. The US Navy said on Friday that the ship's crew was 100% immunized and that the sailors who tested positive for the novel coronavirus were isolated from other crew members.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

S&P500 Hits New Record Amid Wall Street 'Santa Rally' Monday

NEW YORK, December 27 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's S&P500 index soared to a new record high on Monday as US stocks experienced what appeared to be the "Santa Claus rally" that typically starts at around Christmas and lasts through the year-end.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, closed up 1.4% at an all-time peak of 4,791. Year-to-date, the index is up 28%.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, also rose 1.4% to settle at a session high of 15,871.

Nasdaq's record high of 16,212 was set on November 22. It is up 23% on the year.

The blue-chip Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists a wide variety of stocks from leisure to banking and agriculture, rose almost 1% to settle at 36,302. The Dow hit an all-time high of 36,565 on November 8. Year-to-date, it is up 19%.

Monday's rally came after Mastercard said its SpendingPulse report for the holiday season showed an encouraging 8.5% growth from last year, with many Americans notably doing their shopping earlier in the period due concerns about supply snarls from the coronavirus pandemic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Shortens Isolation for People Who Catch Coronavirus From 10 to 5 Days - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that it recommends shortening the isolation period for people infected with novel coronavirus from ten to five days on the condition they do not show any symptoms related to the virus and can wear a mask after they finish isolation for additional five days.

"CDC is shortening the recommended time for isolation from ten days for people with COVID-19 to 5 days, if asymptomatic, followed by 5 days of wearing a mask when around others," the agency said in a statement on Monday. "[P]eople who test positive should isolate for 5 days and, if asymptomatic at that time, they may leave isolation if they can continue to mask for 5 days to minimize the risk of infecting others."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Nat'l Security Advisor, Polish Counterpart Discuss Russia Military Buildup Near Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Polish counterpart Pawel Soloch spoke by phone to discuss the situation on the border between Russia and Ukraine, US National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"They exchanged views on Russia's military build-up near Ukraine's border and affirmed the importance of Allied unity in diplomatic and deterrence efforts," Horne said.

Sullivan reiterated the United States' support for the NATO Article 5 on collective defense and underscored the country's readiness to support the alliance's eastern flank as they defend their countries, she added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Two Children Killed, 3 Others Injured After Hit By Vehicle in State of Florida - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Two children were killed and three others injured after a vehicle ran into them Monday afternoon in the state of Florida, the Local 10 media outlet reported.

The report said the driver of the vehicle left the scene after it plowed into the children, the report said.

Two of the children were pronounced dead on the scene of the incident and one of the three injured children is in critical condition, the report said. The two other injured children are in stable condition, the report added.

The ages and names of the victims have not been released, according to the report.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

World Bank Loans \$221Mln to Vietnam for Economic Recovery From COVID-19

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The World Bank issued a release saying it has signed an agreement with Vietnam in the amount of \$221.5 million to finance the country's recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"The government of Vietnam and the World Bank has signed an agreement for financing of US\$221.5 million to support Vietnam's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic through policy reforms aimed at improving financial inclusion and spurring greater environmental resilience," the release said on Monday.

The loan will be provided in a form of budget support for a period of 30 years with a grace period of five years, the release said.

The loan-linked reforms will include easing the existing tax burden on business entities, improving access to financial assistance for vulnerable groups, and reducing gender gaps in workplace, the release added.

The environmental part of the recovery plan will focus on green trade policies, acceleration of the e-government adoption, and renewable energy uptake, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US LNG Cargoes to Europe Jumped by a Third Over Christmas Weekend - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The number of vessels carrying US liquefied natural gas to European ports multiplied by a third over the Christmas weekend as frigid temperatures deepen the continent's energy crisis, data compiled by Bloomberg showed Monday.

Some 20 tankers laden with US LNG were headed for Europe over the weekend, up from 15 on the day before the Christmas Eve holiday, according to the data. Separately, another 14 vessels were headed in the general direction of Europe while awaiting further orders.

European gas prices are about 10 times higher than a year ago due to an acute shortage of heating supplies this winter, despite market corrections over the past four sessions due to reports of some imminent relief coming from the US LNG cargoes.

US dry gas prices, on their own, are on track to finish 2021 up 55%, after rising more than 100% at one point.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

- * The Russian Defense Ministry expects NATO to respond as quickly as possible to the proposals on security guarantees and is ready to start negotiations at any time, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said on Monday.
- * NATO's deliberate provocations near Russia's borders can develop with a high probability into an armed conflict, Fomin said.
- * NATO activity in the Arctic is increasing and the alliance's strategic forces are increasingly involved in exercises here in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders, Fomin said.
- * NATO is preparing for a large-scale armed conflict with Russia, Fomin said.

BELARUSIAN DRAFT CONSTITUTION

- * The newly published draft amendments to the Belarusian constitution suggest that the president may be removed from office by the Assembly in the event of a systemic violation of the country's constitution or for committing treason.
- * In the event of the Belarusian president's death, state agencies must act in accordance with the orders of the country's Security Council, according to the draft amendments.
- * The amendments to the Belarusian constitution published on Monday suggest that a person cannot be elected president more than for two terms.
- * The incumbent president of Belarus during the day of entry into force of constitutional amendments may be elected as the chairman of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, the draft amendments said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Monday Russia does not rule out that the West is striving to provoke a "small war" in Ukraine and then blame on Russia.
- * Accusations of the Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office against the Russian Transport Ministry over the organization of illegal transportation of people across the state border are unacceptable, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, said.
- * Turkey is in favor of dialogue between NATO and Russia on Ukraine and excludes the possibility of a military conflict, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

COVID-19

- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed by phone with World Health Organization (WHO) Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus the registration of Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V by the WHO and the need for all countries to recognize documents on vaccination against COVID-19 on a reciprocal basis, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Russia can not make exhaustive decisions on the Omicron coronavirus variant over lack of data, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * More than 2,500 flights have been canceled and more than 7,500 have been delayed globally on Monday following the coronavirus Omicron variant spreading over the weekend, according to the tracking website Flightradar24.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Calls on Congress to Eliminate Problems Regarding Gitmo Detainee Transfers

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday called on the US Congress to eliminate existing restrictions concerning the transfer of Guantanamo Bay detainees in comment while signing the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2022.

"The limitations in section 1032 of the Act constrain the flexibility of the executive branch with respect to its engagement in delicate negotiations with foreign countries over the potential transfer of [the Guantanamo] detainees and thus may in some cases make it difficult to effectuate the transfer of detainees in a manner that does not threaten national security. I urge the Congress to eliminate these restrictions as soon as possible," Biden said.

The US president noted that sections of the NDAA are banning the use of funds to transfer the Guantanamo Bay detainees to certain foreign countries.

"It is the longstanding position of the executive branch that these provisions unduly impair the ability of the executive branch to determine when and where to prosecute Guantanamo Bay detainees and where to send them upon release. In some circumstances these provisions could make it difficult to comply with the final judgment of a court that has directed the release of a detainee on a writ of habeas corpus," Biden said.

Established by the Bush administration in 2002, the Guantanamo Bay detention facility has long been criticized for mistreatment and abuse of prisoners, with human rights activists and international organizations calling that it be closed. Former US President Barack Obama vowed to shut down the detention center, but faced strong opposition from Congress. His successor, Donald Trump, signed an order to keep the detention camp open indefinitely, while incumbent Joe Biden has promised to close it.

The US authorities have since shut down the secretive Camp Seven, where highly classified prisoners were kept, and transferred them to other blocks. In July, the White House announced that the Biden administration is aiming to close the detention facility for good and working to transfer its remaining prisoners out, but no date has been set.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Appoints Stuart Eizenstat as Special Adviser on Holocaust Issues - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has appointed Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat to serve as special adviser on Holocaust issues, a similar position the diplomat held during the Trump administration, the State Department said on Monday.

"Secretary Blinken has appointed Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat as his Special Adviser on Holocaust Issues," the State Department said in a press release. "He served as an Expert Advisor on Holocaust Issues during the Trump Administration."

Before becoming an expert advisor on Holocaust in October 2020 under former US President Donald Trump, Eizenstat served as a deputy secretary of the treasury, under secretary of state for economic affairs, ambassador to the European Union, and is currently a senior law counsel at the Covington & Burling law firm, the release said.

During the Clinton administration, Eizenstat was responsible for negotiating agreements with the Swiss, Germans, Austrians, and French on the restitution of property, compensation payments to slave and forced laborers, and other issues, the release said.

Eizenstat's main task in the new position will be to offer policy advice on Holocaust-related matters, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Appeals Court Schedules Arguments in Texas Abortion Case for January 7 - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals scheduled to hear oral arguments for January 7 in the lawsuit challenging a Texas abortion law, a court document said on Monday.

"The court has decided that oral argument is appropriate before ruling on the State's Motion to Certify or Alternate Motion to Set a Briefing Schedule, and the Response thereto. Consequently, the argument will be held at 9:00 a.m. in New Orleans on Friday, January 7, 2022," the filing said.

The law being challenged in the case, known as the Texas Heartbeat Act, criminalizes abortions after six weeks of pregnancy when a heart beat is first detected.

Earlier in December, the US Supreme Court ruled that abortion providers in Texas can sue the state over the law, but declined to stop its enforcement while the matter is sorted out in lower courts. The Supreme Court did not rule as to whether the law itself is unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court has yet to rule on a separate Mississippi abortion law that bans the procedure starting at 15 weeks of pregnancy.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Thousands of Telegram Users Report Problems With App Globally - Downdetector

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Some 4,000 users of the popular messenger Telegram have reported problems with the application worldwide and the number continues to grow, according to the monitoring portal Downdetector.

Most of the complaints are coming from Russia, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom, but also involve other countries.

The last time Telegram users reported issues with the functioning of the application was in October as the platform experienced mainly server connection issues.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Chief Justice Tops Job Approval Poll of US Public Officials – Gallup

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Chief Justice John Roberts has the best job approval numbers among 11 American public officials, and with bipartisan support, according to a Gallup poll out on Monday.

Sixty percent of those polled between December 1-16 approve of how the US Supreme Court chief is doing his job.

"Roberts is the only one of the leaders rated this year who receives majority approval from Republicans (57 percent) and Democrats (55 percent) as well as political independents (64 percent)," the poll stated. "Most of the other leaders are viewed positively by two-thirds or more of one party versus less than a quarter of the other."

The poll shows the deep partisan divide that has riven the United States, but the poll's authors say they are encouraged that "half of the leaders receive higher approval than disapproval from Americans as a whole is evidence of some national harmony."

These 11 public officials were rated and chosen because they are some of 2021's more high-profile figures in the federal government. Besides Roberts, the other 10 political leaders are regarded more positively by Democrats than Republicans. These include Biden appointees Fed Chair Jerome Powell, US Attorney General Merrick Garland and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Kamala Harris.

A key exception is Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, whose job approval is seen as positive by only 46% of Republicans. He earned the lowest ratings of the group from Democrats (21%) and independents (35%). Further, a majority of all three groups disapprove of McConnell's job performance: 52% of Republicans, 75% of Democrats and 64% of independents.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 2,500 Flights Canceled Globally as Omicron Spreads Over Weekend - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - More than 2,500 flights have been canceled and more than 7,500 have been delayed globally on Monday following the coronavirus Omicron variant spreading over the weekend, according to the tracking website Flightradar24.

A total of 7,690 delays and 2,529 cancellations have been registered globally on Monday with nearly one third of all flight disruptions taking place in the United States, the Flightradar24 data showed.

The new data on flights disruption shows that airlines continue to have concerns over the Omicron variant after it became the predominant strain of new infections. However, medical experts have said the cases are mild and there have been no reported deaths.

The numbers of cancellations and delays did not deviate significantly over the weekend with 2,513 flights canceled on Sunday and 2,850 on Saturday.

Representatives of several airlines, including United, JetBlue and Delta said on Sunday that flights were being canceled over concerns of Omicron infections among staff.

The latest seven-day average of cases has increased to nearly 176,000 cases per day amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Essential NY Workers Exposed to COVID Can Forego Test After 5-Day Isolation If No Symptoms

NEW YORK, December 27 (Sputnik) - Essential workers in New York who have been in contact with COVID-infected people can return to work without testing for the virus themselves as long as they spend five days in isolation and have no symptoms to show, health commissioner Mary Bassett said Monday.

"New York will allow people to return to work after five days of isolation without testing," Bassett told a live-streamed media briefing. She added, however: "I just want to be really clear that this is not about sending back to work people who're sick. Having symptoms is probably your best test. People who are sick, at all times, should not be at work."

The new rule is applicable to fully vaccinated essential workers.

The New York decision came after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cut the length of time health care workers have to isolate after they test positive for COVID-19 from 10 to seven days.

US hospitals and their intensive care units are being swamped again with COVID-infected people amid a resurgence of the coronavirus prompted by the Omicron variant. Nearly three-quarters of new US COVID cases have been attributed to the Omicron, and as many as 90% in some areas such as the East Coast.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Compulsory Vaccination for US Domestic Flights Should be Seriously Considered - Fauci

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US government should seriously consider mandating compulsory vaccination against the coronavirus for all domestic airline passengers, President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci said on Monday.

"When you make vaccination a requirement, that's another incentive to get more people vaccinated," Fauci told an MSNBC interview. "If you want to do that with domestic flights, I think that's something that seriously should be considered."

Fauci said the spread of the coronavirus Omicron variant among the more than 100 million Americans who were not yet vaccinated all threatened to put new pressures on the overworked national hospitalization system.

"[E]ven if this virus is inherently less severe, just the volume of the number of cases that we're going to have could actually put a stress on the hospital system," Fauci said.

As of Monday, 204,740,321 Americans had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 out of a total population of around 334 million, according to US media.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Says COVID-19 Pandemic Solved at State, Not Federal Level

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic will be solved at a state rather than a federal level, US President Joe Biden told a group of bipartisan governors on Monday.

"There is no federal solution. This gets solved at a state level," Biden said during a call with the National Governors Association and the White House COVID-19 Response Team.

The governors should voice their needs related to the coronavirus pandemic response and the White House will have their back in any way it can, Biden said.

The United States will get through the coronavirus pandemic and the most recent Omicron variant wave by working together, Biden said, noting that the efforts of the bipartisan group of governors are indicative of that approach.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Mobilizing Military Doctors, Federal Personnel to Assist Hospitals - Biden

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The White House is mobilizing military and federal medical personnel in order to mitigate the risk facing some hospitals of possibly getting overrun with coronavirus infections in unvaccinated individuals, President Joe Biden said during a call with the National Governors Association on Monday.

"With rising cases, we still have tens of millions of unvaccinated people, and we're seeing hospitalizations rise. It means our hospitals in some places are going to get overrun, both in terms of equipment and staff. That's why we stockpiled and pre-positioned millions of gowns, gloves, masks and ventilators. We're mobilizing an additional 1,000 military doctors and nurses and medics to help staff hospitals. FEMA is deploying hundreds of ambulances and EMS crews to transport patients," Biden said.

The US president claimed the country has not seen hospitalizations rise as sharply as they have during previous waves due to increased numbers of vaccinated individuals.

However, the White House wants to ensure the American people that they are prepared and know what it takes to handle the pandemic, Biden added.

Biden also thanked the National Governors Association for their efforts during the pandemic and noted that the United States will get through the pandemic by working together.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Says Administration Has 'More Work to Do' to Make COVID-19 Tests Available

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has more work to do to make tests for the novel coronavirus widely available to the US public, President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"We have more work to do," Biden said during a call with the National Governors Association. Biden noted that since the beginning of his term in office, his administration increased significantly the number of entities where residents can get tested free of charge.

"We have now more than 20,000 places where you can get tests for free," Biden said, adding that in many instances people can book appointments online.

However, Biden also said that the authorities should deal with the issue of testing on a state level.

While the coronavirus Omicron variant is a source of concern, it is not a source of panic, Biden added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Signs 2022 \$768Bln Defense Budget - White House

(Update with background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday signed the \$768 billion defense spending bill for 2022 which includes \$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative and \$300 million in security assistance for Ukraine, the White House said.

"On Monday, December 27, 2021, the President signed into law: S. 1605, the 'National Defense Authorization Act [NDAA] for Fiscal Year 2022,' which authorizes fiscal year 2022 appropriations principally for Department of Defense programs and military construction, Department of Energy national security programs, and intelligence programs," the White House said in a press release.

The NDAA does not include sanctions against Russian sovereign debt or against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite attempts by lawmakers to add them to the legislation amid rising tensions with Moscow over the alleged buildup of forces near Ukraine.

The legislation, however, requires biennial reporting on alleged Russian influence operations and campaigns targeting US military alliances.

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

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Pandemic Adviser Suggests US Public Cancel New Year's Eve Parties - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - White House pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci on Monday advised the US public not to hold New Year's Eve parties in order to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus Omicron variant.

"I would stay away from that," Fauci said told CNN when asked about whether residents should hold New Year's Eve parties. "[W]hen you're talking about a New Year's Eve party, we have 30, 40, 50 people celebrating. You do not know the status of their vaccination, I would recommend strongly stay away from that this year."

However, Fauci approved of small family gatherings with individuals who are fully vaccinated. Last week, the United States reported an average of 150,000 new daily coronavirus cases and no deaths.

Health officials in South Africa, where the Omicron variant was first detected, have said infections occurred in vaccinated individuals and the cases are mild.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Signs 2022 \$768Bln Defense Budget - White House

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday signed the \$768 billion defense spending bill for 2022 which includes \$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative and \$300 million in security assistance for Ukraine, the White House said.

"On Monday, December 27, 2021, the President signed into law: S. 1605, the 'National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022,' which authorizes fiscal year 2022 appropriations

principally for Department of Defense programs and military construction, Department of Energy national security programs, and intelligence programs," the White House said in a press release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Holiday Season Retail Sales Up 8.5% From 2020 - Mastercard Report

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US retail sales for the year-end holiday season increased by an encouraging 8.5% from last year, with many Americans shopping earlier in the period due to concerns about supply snarls from the coronavirus pandemic measures, Mastercard said in a report Monday.

"It's been a resurgent season for retailers as consumers stocked their carts with gifts and gadgets," the Mastercard SpendingPulse report said,

The credit card company said the report measured shopping, minus purchases of cars, between November 1 and December 24.

Mastercard Senior Advisor Steve Sadove explained that "Shoppers were eager to secure their gifts ahead of the retail rush, with conversations surrounding supply chain and labor supply issues sending consumers online and to stores in droves."

Within the total 8.5% retail sales growth, apparel sales accounted for 47.3%, jewelry 32% and electronics 16.2%.

Sales were also broken down in the report by online and in-store categories, with 11% done via e-commerce and 8.1% within stores.

The Mastercard SpendingPulse report for the 2020 holiday season showed a 10.7% increase from the previous year.

The US government's official report for retail sales, released by the Commerce Department on December 15, showed a 0.3% growth in November, down from October's expansion of 1.7% amid an inflation spike that has raised prices of all products ranging from food to cars.

The economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic restrictive measures. Growth in 2021 has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for all this year and 4% for 2022. The US central bank's problem remains inflation, which is 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.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

USAID Running Out of Money for Biden's Pledge to Help Vaccinate World – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US Agency for International Development's (USAID) funding, which is expected to cover the Biden administration's efforts to support the global COVID-19 vaccination campaign, is drying up, Politico reported on Monday, citing agency officials.

During 2021, the agency has relied on more than \$1.6 billion provided by the American Rescue Plan to aid efforts to ship and administrate coronavirus vaccine doses across the world, the report said.

USAID reportedly has either used the funding or will disperse it over several months in 2022 for nations to obtain and distribute the vaccines.

If the agency doesn't receive more money, it will lag behind its pledge to help the White House distribute hundreds of millions of doses to low- and middle-income countries by the mid-2022, the officials told Politico.

Last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States has allocated an extra \$580 million to support the pandemic response of seven multilateral organizations, including the WHO, UNICEF and FAO.

The secretary recalled that the US has shared more than 330 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to over 110 countries and economies worldwide.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Modern-Day Darwin, Edward Wilson, Dies at 92

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – Prominent US naturalist Edward Wilson, known as "Darwin's natural heir," has died at the age of 92, his foundation said on Monday.

"The E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation is deeply saddened to share the passing of preeminent scientist, naturalist, author, teacher, and our inspiration, Edward O. Wilson, Ph.D. One of the most distinguished and recognized American scientists in modern history, Dr. Wilson devoted his life to studying the natural world and inspiring others to care for it as he did," the statement read, without providing the cause of death.

Wilson died on December 26 in the state of Massachusetts. He is survived by his daughter, Catherine.

"Ed's holy grail was the sheer delight of the pursuit of knowledge. A relentless synthesizer of ideas, his courageous scientific focus and poetic voice transformed our way of understanding ourselves and our planet," Paula J. Ehrlich, the CEO and president of the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, said. "His greatest hope was that students everywhere share his passion for discovery as the ultimate scientific foundation for future stewardship of our planet. His gift was a deep belief in people and our shared human resolve to save the natural world." Wilson was a renowned expert on ants and discovered more than 400 species thereof. He also authored pioneering research on social behavior in ants. His scientific and popular science books received two Pulitzer Prizes for nonfiction. Wilson was also awarded with the National Medal of Science.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

House Committee to Probe Trump Phone Call Made Before Capitol Attack - Chair

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US congressional committee probing the January 6 riot will launch an investigation into a phone call former President Donald Trump made a few hours before a crowd tried to protest the certification of the 2020 election results, chairman Bennie Thompson told The Guardian.

In November, The Guardian reported Trump had phoned some of his subordinates at the Willard hotel in Washington from the White House late at night on January 5 and urged them to find ways to prevent Congress from formally confirming the presidential election result by which current President Joe Biden defeated him.

"That's right," Thompson said when asked whether the select committee would look into Trump's phone call, and suggested House investigators had already begun to consider ways to investigate the Trump's demand that Biden not be certified as president on January 6.

Thompson said his committee now plans to study it carefully, if they succeed in gaining access to Trump's presidential records.

The House select committee is waging a legal battle to gain access to the records against the objections of Trump's lawyers, who claim they must remain confidential due to executive privilege.