

12/30/21 Thursday

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.

Israeli Pharma Giant Teva Found Responsible for Opioid Addiction Epidemic in New York Trial
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The explosion of powerful, readily available painkillers on the US market has helped drive a massive increase in overdose deaths as Americans attempt to self-medicate chronic illnesses. Half a million have died in the past 20 years from opioid overdoses, but only recently has the government attempted to reign in the corporate drug makers.

A New York jury ruled on Thursday that Teva Pharmaceutical Industries and some of its units had helped to create the opioid addiction epidemic in the United States through its marketing and distribution of painkillers.

The ruling did not address the subject of damages, but it opens the Petah Tikva-based corporation up to lawsuits by claimants.

While other companies in the case reached [separate settlements](#) with the State of New York, which required them to pay a total of \$1.7 billion in fines, Teva and its subsidiary, including Anda and Cephalon, remained defiant until the end.

The state argued that by using deceptive advertising and failing to adequately monitor or report suspicious orders of large amounts of opium-based painkillers in New York's Nassau and Suffolk Counties, Anda caused state and county authorities to divert billions of dollars in spending toward law enforcement, health and welfare costs needed to address various effects of a [massive opioid trade](#).

In turn, Teva argued it had followed existing state and federal regulations on drug marketing and distribution, and that tracking pharmacists' behavior was the state's job, not theirs.

[1883 is Now Streaming](#)

"While no amount of money will ever compensate for the human suffering, the addiction, or the lives lost due to opioid abuse, this money will be essential in helping every corner of the state - from the North Country to Western New York, from the Southern Tier to Long Island, and up and down the Hudson - recover from this epidemic," New York Attorney General [Leticia James said](#) in a statement following conclusion of the trial on December 14.

The growing epidemic of opioid addiction and associated death, which has topped 500,000 over the last two decades, has led to both state and federal pushback on the pharmaceutical giants who produce them.

However, health experts say the drug [addiction is a symptom](#) of a much larger problem: painkillers have become a stopgap measure for millions of poorer Americans unable to afford expensive treatments for [chronic illnesses](#).

Unique among industrialized nations, the US has no public health care or insurance system, beyond the truncated Medicaid program for the extremely poor and the Medicare system that provides elderly care. According to [Census statistics](#), 28 million Americans, or 8.6% of the

population, have no health insurance, and several times that number have [inadequate insurance](#).

In one case in 2019, an Oklahoma judge found Johnson & Johnson guilty of driving the opioid epidemic in the Sooner State, fining the company \$475 million. However, last month, the state's supreme court [threw the ruling out](#) following an appeal by J&J, saying the company couldn't be held liable for the public health disaster.

That decision came just days after a California court [ruled the same](#) in a case involving J&J as well as Teva, Endo, and Allergan.

However, earlier this month a federal judge in [New York threw out](#) the bankruptcy plan by Purdue Pharma, makers of the popular opioid [drug OxyContin](#), which threatened to shield the company's owners from thousands of liability lawsuits for opioid deaths.

Also in November, a [federal jury in Ohio](#) found three of the nation's biggest pharmacy chains - CVS, Walgreens and Walmart - guilty of fueling the epidemic, as well.

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.

Sirens Activated in Baghdad's Green Zone - Reports
By - Morgan Artyukhina

After his party made gains in October parliamentary elections, Iraqi politician Muqtada al-Sadr blasted the US on Thursday, saying that no military personnel should be present in its Baghdad embassy after the US declared an end to combat operations in the country earlier this month. Warning sirens were heard sounding in the Green Zone in central Baghdad, Iraq, early on Friday morning. The area comprises the massive US embassy and several other diplomatic buildings.

No explosions or firing of air defense systems have been reported. Online observers suggested it could either be a test, or caused by an intrusive drone.

The area has been [targeted for bombardment](#) numerous times in recent years, becoming a focal point for militants angered by the continued US presence in the country.

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.

Videos: Four Protesters Reportedly Shot by Soldiers at Sudan's 11th 'March of Millions' Against Coup
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are widely blamed in Sudan for the October 25 military coup, which ousted a civilian-military transition government. The Arab powers had once been allied with the former military regime in their war in Yemen, and Israel reportedly sees greater benefit from its military leaders.

Sudanese protesters took to the streets again across the country on Thursday, braving tear gas and live ammunition in their 11th massive demonstration against the military government that seized power in October.

Massive demonstrations in the capital city of Khartoum and neighboring cities of Khartoum North (Bahri) and Omdurman were met by security forces with tear gas and stun grenades as they all marched toward the presidential palace.

"Earlier in the day, the impression was that the protest was less violent and in smaller numbers than previous demonstrations," [Al Jazeera reporter](#) Mohamed Vall reported from Khartoum.

"But as the day progressed, it became clear that because the security forces prevented the protesters in Omdurman from crossing the bridges and reaching central Khartoum, the main confrontations took place there," he added.

According to a [statement](#) by the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors (CCSD), four protesters were killed on Thursday by the security forces, who fired live rounds at the demonstrators.

Three were killed in Omdurman.

Their deaths bring the number killed since the October 25 coup to 52 and the number killed since the military junta and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok reached a deal on November 21 to 10.

The bridges to Khartoum across the Blue and White Nile rivers were reportedly blocked with shipping containers and other barricades topped with barbed wire, although a military checkpoint reportedly kept one bridge from Omdurman open. Security forces first used the tactic during December 25 demonstrations, but protesters on that occasion [rolled them over](#).

"As much as we sacrifice and die, we won't be ruled by the boot," protesters were heard chanting in Bahri as they marched toward the blocked El-Mek Nimir bridge.

"If I die, it isn't a problem. This is a matter of an entire country. The ongoing lesson is about the country, this is our Sudan," was another chant heard, according to social media reports.

Other large demonstrations were also reported in the eastern cities of Kassala and Port Sudan, in the southern cities of Wad Madani and Sennar, and Darfur's Gineina and Zalingei.

The demonstrations have continued since October 25, when military chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan launched a coup that dissolved the 2-year old joint civilian-military Sovereign Council led by Hamdok. The Sovereign Council was formed in the aftermath of the [December Revolution](#) that began in late 2018 and resulted in the resignation of longtime military ruler Omar al-Bashir in April 2019.

Hamdok and al-Burhan [came to an accommodation](#) in mid-November in which the ousted leader would return to power at the head of a transitional government, with elections planned for 2023. The deal also saw the release of political prisoners by the junta.

However, the leading civilian resistance groups, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) civilian coalition, which had shared power with the military, and the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), both [rejected the agreement](#), saying "the pact had been struck with a gun to his head."

The demonstrations have been severely repressed, with 52 killed and thousands wounded.

Protests on December 19 reportedly included numerous [instances of rape](#) by security forces, which the United Nations condemned and called for investigations.

The US, which had quietly cooperated with Bashir but supported the transition government, appealed to the military for moderation and to restore democratic freedoms. On Thursday, the US embassy in Khartoum [condemned the killing](#) of protesters.

However, the military government is supported by other states, such as Israel, which according to the daily paper [Israel Hayom](#) feels that Burhan is the leader more likely to forge stronger ties with Israel and the West. However, it was Hamdok's government that [signed the Abraham Accords](#) in October 2020, extending political recognition to the state in violation of a deal signed by Arab League members in 1967 - ironically enough, in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

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.

Beijing Says 'Fundamental Solution' to Situations at Sea is End to US Drills in Chinese Waters
By - Morgan Artyukhina

After a US attack submarine was severely damaged by an underwater collision in the South China Sea earlier this year, the Chinese government called the US "irresponsible," accusing it of a lack of transparency about what its sub was doing 7,000 miles from home.

After a year's lapse, Chinese and American military leaders resumed talks on maintaining maritime safety earlier this month.

The three-day virtual talks were held from December 15 to December 17 and included representatives from the US Indo-Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet and US Pacific Air Forces on one side, and from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Air Force (PLAAF) on the other. They were held under the auspices of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), a 1998 deal that Maj. Gen. Christopher McPhillips, INDOPACOM's director for strategic planning and policy, described in a [recent news release](#) as "a guardrail for military encounters to reduce risk in the air and at sea, helping the two sides manage competition responsibly."

At the meeting, they discussed ways to update the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters, signed in 2015.

"The prolonged and intensive reconnaissance and exercises by the US military ships and aircraft and their frequent provocative activities are the source of Sino-US maritime and aerial security risks," Senior Colonel Tan Kefei, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, told the [South China Morning Post](#) on Thursday, reflecting the comments the Chinese representatives had passed to their American counterparts.

"Cessation of hostile naval and aerial operations by the US is the fundamental solution to the Sino-US military security issues," he added.

For the first time last year, the talks didn't happen, although it wasn't because of the COVID-19 pandemic: China decided not to come, [saying US actions](#) had made the meeting impossible.

The meeting would have come at a time that tensions were especially high: it wasn't just a US U-2 spy plane flying [through Chinese airspace](#), but that due to then-US President Donald Trump's contestation of the November 2020 US presidential election, senior military officials in China feared he might deliberately [provoke a war](#) with China as an excuse to hold onto power. US Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress in September

that he phoned his Chinese counterparts twice in Trump's final months to assuage their fears about a surprise attack.

For several years, US reconnaissance and maritime patrol aircraft have zigzagged their way across the South and East China Seas, with multiple flights per day. They've taken some pretty risky practices, including [disguising themselves](#) as civilian airliners in order to fly close to Chinese airspace, and [hiring out civilian contractors](#) to fly business jets rigged up with monitoring equipment over the waterway, as well.

US warships have also regularly performed what Washington calls "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPS), in which they deliberately sail through waters claimed by China - or another country, such as Russia or Vietnam - in order to protest what they say are "excessive maritime claims."

In the South and East China Seas, Chinese [territorial claims overlap](#) with those of several other nations, including Japan in the East China Sea and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei in the South China Sea. While Beijing has been working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to advance a [mutually agreed upon](#) Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, the US has postured as if the only solution is military confrontation that will force China to give up its claims.

However, a year later, the situation is scarcely warmer. The [Quad Security Dialogue](#) between the US, Japan, Australia and India has taken shape and the US, UK, and Australia forged a new [AUKUS alliance](#), both of which are clearly aimed at "containing" China.

Tan condemned the AUKUS deal to provide Australia, a country with no nuclear technology, with nuclear-powered attack submarines, saying it risked nuclear proliferation across the region. He said that the disastrous US occupation of Afghanistan, which ended in August with a Taliban victory, had demonstrated the chaos expanding US military deployments could produce.

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's Year in Review: Highs, Lows, and What's Next for the White House
By - Evan Craighead

Over 11 months, US President Joe Biden's administration has managed to lower unemployment, sign a \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill into law, and reverse a number of Trump-era executive orders. Despite these and more accomplishments, a large portion of US voters remain unimpressed by the work of Biden and Democrats, who control Congress. Upon entering office in January, one of Biden's main goals was to carry out a proper rollout for COVID-19 vaccines, setting a goal of administering 100 million jabs within his first 100 days in the White House.

The US president would go on to [achieve this goal within 58 days](#), just days after he signed into law the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus bill geared toward repairing the US economy amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The legislation not only delivered direct cash payments to Americans, but also provided enhanced unemployment benefits and additional funding for COVID-19 vaccine distribution.

However, the Biden administration has not been as successful with managing misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines, which likely explains why the US is [trailing behind other countries with comparable means](#).

As of this article's publication, more than 204 million Americans have been vaccinated against COVID-19, representing 61.7% of the US population, [according to the CDC](#).

In September, the administration received staunch legal pushback from Republicans and even Democrats after issuing two executive orders that required federal employees and government contractors to be vaccinated against the contagious disease and called for companies of 100 or more individuals to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for employees, or implement regular testing schedules.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), in November, moved to suspend the government's vaccine mandate for companies with 100 or more workers, pending a court order.

The US 6th Circuit Court of Appeals, however, has since lifted its legal block on the matter, which opens the way for enforcement in 2022. OSHA has said it will not issue citations for non-compliance prior to 9 February, though the federal mandate is slated to begin 10 January.

Climate Change and Environmental Protections

Combating climate change was also a top priority and campaign promise of the Biden administration — so much so that the US president moved to immediately sign two executive orders on climate change during the same day as his inauguration.

The move included [Biden's commitment to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement](#), which the US officially withdrew from in November 2020, under then-President Donald Trump.

Earlier this month, Biden issued another related executive order that set new greenhouse gas emission reduction standards in three major areas: buildings, electricity generation, and transportation.

Per the order, the government plans to use 100% net-zero electricity by 2030, with 50% of that energy being generated from wind and solar sources. Federal buildings are expected to halve their emissions by 2032, and reach net-zero by 2045.

The US is currently committed to a clean energy path to achieve net-zero emissions, economy-wide, by 2050 at the latest.

Biden achieved another environmental win for his base with the rejection of a key border crossing permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, a contentious tar sands pipeline project intended to transport crude oil from western Canada to Steele, Nebraska. The 1,200-mile (1,931-kilometre) pipeline project spanned three presidential administrations and endured opposing executive orders.

Despite appeals from Canadian government officials, Biden refused to reverse his decision, which led to the termination of the Keystone XL pipeline project by government agencies and TC Energy, a Canadian energy infrastructure company providing corporate backing for the project.

While many Americans lauded the act and subsequent abandoning of the project as a win for the environment, critics claimed that Biden's order was responsible for [the loss of well over 10,000 US jobs tied to the construction](#).

The Biden administration has expressed commitment to reversing a number of Trump-era environmental rollbacks, including one regarding water regulations. In November, the

Environmental Protection Agency announced the reinstatement of a law that effectively restored federal protections to hundreds of thousands of water sources around the nation.

Judicial Appointments

During Trump's tenure in the White House, Congress confirmed approximately 234 Trump-nominated judges, including Supreme Court of the US Associate Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett.

With a conservative-stacked US Supreme Court, Democrats have found themselves on the offensive regarding judicial appointments. Since Biden took office, the Senate has confirmed a total of 40 nominated judges, the most appointed in a president's first year since former US President Ronald Reagan was in office.

Of those appointed, 80% of the judges are women and 53% are people of colour, according to the White House.

A total of 76 nominations have been submitted by Biden.

While Trump averaged around 61 judicial appointments per year, the Senate only confirmed 18 circuit and district court judges during his first year.

West Wing vs Vice President Kamala Harris

Despite these accomplishments over the past several months, it would appear that the White House has not been running as efficiently as possible.

Both current and former White House staffers broke their silence on the inner discord last month, after a USA Today-Suffolk University poll found that 28% of US voters approve of Vice President Kamala Harris' work, while a whopping 51% of those surveyed disapprove of Harris' efforts. Biden was not popular with the masses either, as his approval rating at the time plummeted to a new low of 38%, with 58% of respondents disapproving of the president's performance.

White House aides, as well as nearly three dozen former and current aides of Harris, Biden administration officials, Democratic operatives, political donors, and outside advisers were interviewed by CNN and documented their side of the squabble between the president and vice president's camps.

According to key West Wing aides at the time, Biden's team was worn out by Harris and her camp amid a frenzy of public criticism and an approval rating worse than that of the US president.

On Harris' side, aides and supporters claimed that, despite the campaign promise of bringing about a transformational government, Harris was being left out and placed in a losing situation with the public, likening the sidelining to a satirical article from The Onion: "White House Urges Kamala Harris to Sit at Computer All Day in Case Emails Come Through".

One of those losing situations happened to be her appointment as the Northern Triangle diplomacy point-person, which Harris' allies viewed as a "no-win political situation" and an attempt to dash any future presidential aspirations.

Other individuals were also caught in the report's crosshairs, like Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, a former contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

Those from Harris' camp pointed out that the White House was quick to come to Buttigieg's defence when he received backlash for being granted paternity leave, but appeared laissez-faire when it came to media criticism of the vice president.

Neither Biden, Harris, nor Buttigieg engaged in commentary on the report, and the White House [rebuked the claims](#), arguing that the vice president is valuable to the administration.

But Harris' allies are not letting up on the issue.

In a 23 December report from The New York Times, both Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA) and Mark Buell, a prominent Democratic donor in San Francisco, California, came to the vice president's defence.

"I think she was an enormous help to the ticket during the campaign", said Mark Buell, one of Harris' earliest fundraisers since her first race for district attorney in San Francisco. "I would like to see her employed in the same way, now that they're implementing their objectives or goals".

"What the White House could've done is been clearer with the expectations of what was supposed to happen under her watch", said Rep. Bass, who was on Biden's vice presidential shortlist.

Their comments came ahead of Harris' interview with CBS' Margaret Brennan, who directly asked the vice president to name her "biggest failure" during her vice presidency.

"To not get out of DC more", Harris said with a laugh.

"People have a right to know and believe that their government actually sees and hears them", she said during a "Face the Nation" broadcast. "And my biggest concern is I don't ever want to be in a bubble when it comes to being aware of and in touch with what people need at any given moment in time".

AUKUS and Relations With France

In September, Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson each delivered an address in which they announced the [formation of AUKUS](#), a trilateral security partnership for advanced defence-tech sharing between the three nations. The moment of unity did not last too long, however, as [the leaders also revealed](#) that their first initiative would be to deliver Australia its first nuclear-powered submarine fleet. The initiative, which relies on the US and US-based contractors, ultimately led to Australia cancelling an estimated \$37 billion deal with France's Naval Group, which expressed "deep disappointment" in the decision to reject its diesel-powered submarines.

France, despite being a Western ally, only found out about AUKUS hours before the announcement.

At the time, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the pact as a "stab in the back" and the French government recalled its ambassadors to Washington and Canberra for consultations.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has since met with French President Emmanuel Macron and has spoken with Le Drian on several occasions.

"We could and we should have communicated better", [Blinken told Macron in October](#), speaking in French. "We sometimes tend to take for granted a relationship as important and deep as the one that links France and the United States".

A test of US-French communication may be on the horizon, as the US State Department has approved a \$9.4 billion foreign military sale geared toward the modernisation of Greece's Hellenic Navy MEKO Class frigates and the delivery of four Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships.

However, Naval Group is also intending to secure a tentative \$3.4 billion deal to sell Greece three frigates, with the option for the future procurement of a fourth frigate. Athens has also signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" regarding negotiations.

2022 and Beyond

Per a recent Politico-Morning Consult survey, some 41% of registered US voters claimed Biden and the Democrats in Congress have failed to meet expectations and underperformed during 2021. Meanwhile, 32% of respondents said their expectations were met, and 10% claimed Biden and his Democratic allies performed beyond their initial belief.

The Biden administration and Democrats' inability to pass voting rights legislation following the 2020 presidential election has unnerved many, including religious leaders led by Martin Luther King III and his wife, Arndrea Waters King, [who recently urged Congress to take action](#) "for the work that remains unfinished".

The stalling has been mainly due to Republicans successfully filibustering the proposed legislation on four separate occasions.

On the most recent occasion, it was the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, named after the late civil rights leader and long-term congressman. The proposed legislation seeks to outlaw excessive gerrymandering, and implement early voting, mail-in voting, and same-day voter registration.

"If the only thing standing between getting voting rights legislation passed and not getting passed is the filibuster, I support making the exception of voting rights for the filibuster", Biden recently told ABC News.

The removal of the filibuster would move the vote threshold for passage from 60 to 50 votes, and, in the event of a tie in the 50-50 split Senate, Harris, president of the Senate, will be the deciding vote.

Another key issue up in the air is Biden's "Build Back Better Act", which is now in jeopardy of being shaved down yet again after Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) refused to back the bill.

Per The Washington Post's Jeff Stein, [Manchin's proposal to the White House](#) included a wealth tax for billionaires, which may trigger backlash from Senatore Krysten Sinema (D-AZ), who has expressed opposition to raising revenue through such means.

With pandemic pressures progressing into their third year and the 2022 midterm elections drawing near, it will be on the Biden administration next year to increase Democrats' favourability and electability by making further progress on a wide range of issues, like racial equity, climate change, healthcare, and immigration.

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.

American Comedian And 'Golden Girls' Actress Betty White Dead at 99

By - Evan Craighead

Citing law enforcement sources, TMZ reported on Friday that Betty White, 99, passed away at her home earlier that day. White, real name Betty Marion White Ludden, died just weeks shy of her 100th birthday.

No further details were provided about the Emmy-award-winning actress' passing.

"Even though Betty was about to be 100, I thought she would live forever," [said Jeff Witjas, White's agent and close friend](#). "I will miss her terribly and so will the animal world that she loved so much. I don't think Betty ever feared passing because she always wanted to be with her most beloved husband Allen Ludden. She believed she would be with him again."

White's career spans several decades and dates back to 1939, when she booked her first professional acting gig at the Bliss Hayden Little Theatre in Beverly Hills, California. She would go on to work in both radio and TV for several years before scoring a variety program co-hosting gig alongside actor Al Jarvis.

White made television history in the 50s as the first woman to produce a sitcom. The program, entitled "Life with Elizabeth," was based on a character she originally portrayed on "Hollywood on Television," a talk show.

Between 1958 and 1978, White starred in several iterations of "The Betty White Show"—the first of which was a variety show. She was also a frequent guest on "Tonight Starring Jack Paar," an NBC late night show.

White's breakout role came about in 1973, when she portrayed Sue Ann Nivens on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," which ran until 1977.

However, it was White's role as Rose Nylund in "The Golden Girls" that catapulted the actress into Hollywood .

Other notable productions involving white include "Date with the Angels," "The Love Boat," "Mama's Family," "The Golden Palace," "Ladies Man," "Higglytown Heroes," "Boston Legal," "The Bold and the Beautiful," "Pound Puppies," "Hot in Cleveland."

Over the course of her career, White racked up several awards, including five Primetime Emmys and even a 2012 Grammy for Best Spoken Word Album.

Fans worldwide—including US President Joe Biden—have expressed their condolences for the late actress and American icon.

"Who didn't love Betty White?" [said Dr. Jill Biden, First Lady of the US](#). Meanwhile, Biden referred to the news of White's passing as "a shame."

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.

West Virginia Approves Key Permit for Controversial Natural Gas Pipeline
By - Evan Craighead

The Mountain Valley Pipeline, led by Equitrans Midstream Corporation, seeks to transport natural gas to US markets in Mid- and South Atlantic regions. The 303-mile natural gas pipeline was originally projected to be in service by the end of 2018, but faces significant hurdles due to local opposition and environmental concerns.

West Virginia's Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) moved to grant on Friday a key permit to the Mountain Valley Pipeline, certifying that the proposed pipeline project has met the state's water quality standards.

The water protection individual permit allows for the construction of the proposed pipeline to proceed in West Virginia. According to the department, the pipeline is estimated to impact 1,276 feet of streams, and less than one-half of an acre of wetlands.

Over 20,000 feet of streams and 12 acres of wetlands will be temporarily impacted by construction, the WVDEP noted.

West Virginia's approval was also required before the US Army Corps of Engineers could proceed with the project's dredge-and-fill permits.

The fossil fuel pipeline, currently projected to cost \$6.2 billion, is slated to run from Northern West Virginia to Southern Virginia. The 303-mile system will pass through the West Virginia counties of Wetzell, Harrison, Doddridge, Lewis, Braxton, Webster, Nicholas, Greenbrier, Fayette, Summers, and Monroe.

Equitrans has projected that the pipeline could begin service by summer 2022. However, the project will likely be impeded by [legal challenges that have already commenced in Virginia](#).

The Friday announcement was immediately opposed by both the Protect Our Water, Heritage, Rights (POWHR) coalition and Appalachian Voices.

"Contrary to robust evidence that the MVP cannot be built without violating state water quality standards — and despite the company's wretched environmental track record — the West Virginia's DEP has regrettably granted MVP new permission to pollute, [noted Appalachian Voices Virginia Policy Director Peter Anderson](#).

Anderson also called on the administration of US President Joe Biden to intervene and join public opposition to the "unneeded project" that "is not in the public interest."

Roberta Bondurant, co-chair of the POWHR coalition, panned the project as "unnecessary and harmful," and called on West Virginians to fight climate change by relinquishing an ongoing "greed and gluttony for massive fossil fuel infrastructure."

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.

Israeli FM Vows to Counter 'Iranian Threat,' Says Israel Has Capabilities Some 'Cannot Even Imagine'

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, the Iranian Foreign Ministry accused the Israeli government of attempting to sabotage renewed talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna, after Tel Aviv warned that it was prepared to "act alone" against Tehran. At the time, Israel claimed to have "intelligence that proves Iran is deceiving the world."

In a Friday Channel 12 broadcast, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid bragged that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is prepared to bring to bear an array of "capabilities" to protect itself against what it claimed was an Iranian threat.

"Israel has capabilities, some of which the world, and even some experts in the field, cannot even imagine," [Lapid said in the Friday broadcast](#), which marked the decade since the FM had entered politics. "And Israel will protect itself against the Iranian threat."

When asked about Tel Aviv's ability to strike Iranian uranium enrichment facilities and what were described as weapon sites, Lapid declared that Tel Aviv was both capable and prepared to carry out such a strike.

Lapid also said that an Israeli attack against Tehran could occur without prior correspondence with the US.

"Israel will do whatever it needs to do to protect its security. And we don't need anybody's permission for that," Lapid told Channel 12. "That's been the case since the first day we established this state."

He also reiterated that allies have been shown information he claimed "proves the Iranians are lying" in regard to recent nuclear activities.

Despite vocal pushback from the Israeli government, which opposed the original 2015 JCPOA pact, Tel Aviv would support a "good deal," as "it is only against the wrong deal."

Lapid has previously stated that he would rather the US and other JCPOA signatories walk away from renewed talks than reach an agreement that lacks what he characterized as "real oversight" of Iran's nuclear program.

In May 2018, then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the JCPOA agreement - also known as the Iran nuclear deal - and reimposed sanctions that crippled the Iranian economy. Tehran soon after abandoned its commitments under the agreement.

Following the election of US President Joe Biden, negotiations to revisit the agreement kicked off in April but stalled in June, when Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office. More recently, talks saw a pause from the US after American officials concluded that Iran was "not serious" about the ongoing talks in Vienna.

Despite delays, Monday kicked off an eighth round of JCPOA discussion. [The US communicated earlier this week](#) that progress had been made in defining what it claimed were the main issues preventing Tehran from returning to the pact.

[According to Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani](#), nearly all delegates have agreed on the need to lift sanctions against Tehran, and expressed plans to consider conditions for their removal.

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.

Variants & Vaccines: How the US Tackled Its COVID Spread in 2021

By - Nevin Brown

As 2021 comes to an end, the United States and much of the world remains gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. This is the story of 2021 as told through the effects of COVID on the United States.

How it started: Getting to 1 January 2021

The United States ushered in 2021 amidst lockdowns and a world completely foreign to that known 365 days prior. The term "social distancing" was reserved for introverts, masks were

worn on Halloween, and only curious toddlers and Hollywood horror movie makeup artists stuck items resembling cotton swabs up their noses.

COVID-19 was first reported by the World Health Organisation on 9 January 2020, in Wuhan, China, but this wasn't the first time a mysterious viral outbreak had cropped up in East Asia only to never reach American shores.

The very first case in the United States was reported on 21 January 2020, but even then it did not register in the American consciousness that it was a threat. Over the next few weeks, the situation in Wuhan deteriorated, prompting the Chinese government to shut down a city of over 8 million people.

On 3 March, US President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, and over the next month states imposed lockdowns to help curtail the spread of COVID. The next nine months saw the United States struggle to effectively contain the spread of the disease.

By the end of the year, it was estimated that 385,000 people had died from COVID.

2020 was an election year and there is ample evidence that Trump's handling of the pandemic played a role in him losing the White House. While his "Operation Warp Speed" saw the unprecedented rapid development of vaccines, they only became available after election day.

[According to polling data from FiveThirtyEight](#), the public perception of Trump's handling of the pandemic went from somewhat positive to mostly negative as soon as cases started showing up in the United States.

By the end of May, when the US had passed the 100,000 death mark, 53.6% of Americans disapproved of Trump's handling of the pandemic. Heading into election day, Trump's handling of the pandemic had a disapproval rating of 57.2%.

Democratic candidate Joe Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 presidential election. His 8 million vote lead in the popular vote obscured the fact that he won Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin by less than 45,000 combined votes. The coronavirus pandemic upended 2020, and according to some, it helped hand Biden the presidency.

2021: The Year in COVID

If 2020 was a year ambushed by COVID, then 2021 was going to be the counteroffensive.

Armed with vaccines, therapeutics, and a year's worth of knowledge, COVID wasn't going to stand a chance against the United States.

As in all great conflicts, the fog of war and an unpredictable enemy can foil even the best-laid plans. While America, and the world-at-large, attempted to restore normal, COVID had other plans.

This is 2021, the year in COVID as told through vaccines, the Biden administration's response, the conspiracies, and the variants.

The Year in COVID Vaccines

"Operation Warp Speed" saw the development of vaccines at an unprecedented rate. The plan was officially announced on 15 May 2020, and by 18 December 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave emergency use authorisation to Moderna's double-dose mRNA COVID vaccine.

Two months later, the FDA gave emergency use authorisation to Johnson & Johnson's non-replacing viral vector single-dose vaccine. In less than a year, the \$18 billion endeavour had produced two vaccines that were ready for 2021.

However, Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID vaccine, which also utilised mRNA technology to combat the coronavirus, was actually the first COVID vaccine to gain emergency use authorisation from the FDA when it was approved on 11 December 2020. The early promise of the vaccine prompted the Trump administration to purchase 300 million doses of the vaccine. Heading into 2021, the United States was armed with two COVID vaccines, with a third shortly on the way.

[According to data collected by the Mayo Clinic](#), after 12 months of vaccination efforts, only 61.7% of Americans are presently fully vaccinated, with another 72.9% having received a single dose.

The goal to vaccinate every American has proved a struggle. In April of 2020, the [US Department of Health and Human Services launched a nationwide campaign](#) to improve access and encourage Americans to get vaccinated.

The multibillion-dollar campaign sought to use social media and a community-oriented focus to create grassroots momentum to increase vaccination rates. The campaign coincided with a slowdown in vaccination rates that peaked in February and began to trail off in March.

Older Americans, who have been shown to be more vulnerable to COVID, have a much higher vaccination rate than younger Americans. The correlation between age and COVID vaccination rate is consistent. Ninety percent of those between the ages of 65 and 74 are vaccinated, 78.2% of 50-64 year-olds are, 71.1% for 40-49, 62.8% for 25-39, 58.4% for 18-24, and 53% for 12-17. The success of COVID vaccines, the Moderna and Pfizer examples particularly, in preventing COVID infection saw that as the months passed, a clear trend emerged that vaccines were losing some of their efficacy.

However, while the vaccines had lost some of their ability to prevent infection, they were still effective at preventing [hospitalisation, serious illness, and death](#). The reality that the first round of COVID vaccines might not last prompted the development of COVID booster shots.

Over the summer, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began offering booster shots to immunocompromised individuals, and all adults six months after their final dose of their initial two-shot vaccination.

[According to reports](#), the FDA plans to expand the eligibility of boosters to Americans 12 to 15 years old. It is also expected that the FDA will reduce the time between an individual's booster and final dose of the initial vaccine from six to five months because of the spread of the Omicron variant.

On December 22, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization for Pfizer's Paxlovid. The antiviral pills were shown to reduce the risk of hospitalisations and death in [88% of unvaccinated patients](#).

[The following day](#), the FDA issued another emergency use authorization for an antiviral pill, Merck's molnupiravir. The pills have been shown to be less effective and have more health risks associated with them than Paxlovid, but there is a strong belief the pills will be more widely available in early 2022.

The two antiviral drugs give health care professionals another therapeutic to combat severe Covid cases.

The Year in COVID Variants

Variants have come to define COVID in 2021. The Delta variant was first detected in October of 2020, and alongside the Omicron variant, first discovered in November of 2021, both became dominant strains in 2021.

The Delta variant took its time to make it to the United States - first discovered in India in October 2020, it wasn't until May 2021 that it was first detected in the US. The variant was found to be [97% more transmissible](#), cause hospitalisation in [85% more patients](#), and have a [137% higher mortality rate](#). Compared to previous variants, Delta was a triple threat.

Available vaccines are still highly effective against the Delta variant, although not as effective as they were against the Alpha variant. By July, the Delta variant had become the dominant strain in the United States, setting off another deadly surge.

[Starting in mid-July](#), COVID deaths in the United States began to climb from around 200 a day - a low for 2021 - to nearly 2,000 deaths a day by mid-September. The death totals from the Delta variant were lower than those from January, but they represented the largest death totals since vaccinations became widely available.

COVID cases began to taper off through November and into early December. The improving situation had Americans dreaming of a holiday season unencumbered by the virus, but those dreams were dashed by the Omicron variant.

Detected in South Africa at the end of November, the emergence of the Omicron variant prompted governments around the world to limit travel with several southern African nations - a move too little, too late.

Omicron would be first [identified in the US on 1 December](#), and in a matter of weeks would overtake the Delta variant as the dominant strain in the country. By 20 December, Omicron accounted for nearly three-fourths of all COVID cases.

The rapid spread of Omicron is explained by its higher transmission rate than any other COVID variant and the observation that current COVID vaccines are less effective against preventing infection. Behavioural factors, including a stubborn refusal by many Americans to engage in preventative health care practices, have also contributed to Omicron's success.

Due to the success of vaccines and an easing of restrictions, many Americans began to behave as they did in the pre-COVID world, allowing lax attitudes to encourage the further spread of the respiratory disease.

While Omicron has been shown to be more transmissible than the Delta variant, it is also believed to be less deadly. Early research estimates that it leads to [41% fewer hospitalisations](#) than Delta.

There is still much that is unknown about Omicron, however, its perceived lessened severity does not make it less dangerous than the Delta variant. A virus that spreads twice as much, but is half as deadly, still leads to more deaths, particularly among those who refuse the vaccine.

The Year in the Biden Administration's Response

US President Joe Biden took office on 20 January 2021 as the pandemic was at its deadliest, and effectively defined the early part of his presidency by his administration's response to the pandemic.

Early returns on the Biden White House's efforts soon proved promising as COVID death rates began to fall, a trend that would continue into the summer months. The availability of vaccines provided his administration with the tools necessary to tackle the pandemic, and policy decisions were crucial to the response.

Over his first 100 days in office, Biden signed 15 executive actions related to the pandemic. Of the 15 measures, only two were reversals of Trump administration policy. The creation of the COVID-19 Response Coordinator, COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, and the Pandemic Testing Board are among those actions.

The administration mandated that masks be worn in airports and on most forms of transportation. At one point, officials launched the "100 Days Masking Challenge" and ordered that federal employees - including government contractors - wear masks and adhere to social distancing measures in federal buildings and on federal lands.

The year also saw Biden reverse a Trump-era move by rejoining the World Health Organisation, the health agency that his predecessor withdrew the nation from over accusations that it had protected China before the world learned of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

One of the key policy points of the Biden administration was to provide schools with the necessary resources to open safely after various institutions switched to remote learning plans. With vaccine approvals for children on the horizon, the administration aimed to provide US states with enough resources to keep staff and children safe and upgrade buildings previously designed without social distancing in mind.

As the nature of the pandemic shifted, the administration adjusted its rhetoric and policies. With COVID cases subsiding significantly in early spring and into the summer, the administration focused on other goals, while still pushing for all Americans to get vaccinated.

Yet, as the Delta variant surged in August and September, Biden began to issue executive actions to combat the rising case counts. On 9 September, he signed two executive orders, one pertaining to [federal contractors](#) and [one for employees](#).

His executive mandate requiring federal employees to be vaccinated led to pushback, especially as most federal employees had been in a position to get a COVID vaccine over the previous nine months.

With the realisation that COVID vaccines lose efficacy over time, the administration soon turned to boosters. Early debates were over the need for boosters, but the administration ultimately decided that all vaccinated Americans would be allowed to receive a booster shot six months after their final COVID shot.

The Biden administration doubled down on efforts to make vaccines available for all Americans, going so far as making them free to underserved and remote communities. Local organisers were also mobilised to push vaccine efforts throughout the nation.

Many states have followed the administration's lead and pushed for vaccinations, but others have questioned the need for vaccines and health mandates such as mask-wearing and social distancing. The administration's power to achieve its goals was ultimately in the hands of Americans themselves. Thus far, 71% of Americans have at least gotten a single shot, but the other 29% have proven to be difficult to find a breakthrough.

The Year in COVID 'Infodemic'

Vaccine hesitancy and the embrace by some extremists of coronavirus conspiracies have been a consistent thread of the pandemic. From the onset of the pandemic, conspiracies have followed over the origin of the virus, the most notable claiming that it was developed in a Wuhan lab.

[An Annenberg Public Policy Centre poll](#) found that 31% of Americans believed the Chinese government created the coronavirus as a biological weapon, 8% in the poll improbably believe

"the vaccine against COVID-19 being developed with support by Microsoft founder Bill Gates contains microchips that can track the person who has been vaccinated", and 27% of Americans believe the CDC exaggerated the danger posed by COVID as a means of mitigating the Trump presidency.

As the pandemic has evolved, so have conspiracies. As therapeutics and vaccines are developed, conspiracies shift away from the origin of COVID and now tend to focus on the tools designed to combat the pandemic.

Conspiracy theories have pushed some Americans to reject vaccines, but that portion of the population remains small.

That same Annenberg poll found that 22% of Americans participating in the survey were not sure if the Chinese government created the coronavirus as a biological weapon, 13% were not sure if "the vaccine against COVID-19 being developed with support by Microsoft founder Bill Gates contains microchips that can track the person who has been vaccinated", and 14% of Americans were not sure if the CDC exaggerated the danger posed by COVID to harm the Trump presidency.

[A study conducted by the National Centre for Biotechnical Information](#), found that exposure to COVID misinformation correlated to vaccine hesitancy.

The White House has appealed to large social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, to reign in vaccine misinformation. In March, a [Center for Countering Digital Hate study](#) found that close to two-thirds of all vaccine misinformation came from 12 accounts.

The study was often cited by officials in the Biden Administration to highlight how social media platforms had failed to protect the public. In July, President Joe Biden held platforms like Facebook for the surge in Covid deaths.

"They're killing people -- I mean they're really, look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated," [Biden said](#) at the time.

However, Biden would walk back the claim a few days later, [saying](#), "Facebook isn't killing people -- these 12 people are out there giving misinformation. Anyone listening to it is getting hurt by it. It's killing people. It's bad information."

He added, "My hope is that Facebook, instead of taking it personally, that somehow I'm saying Facebook is killing people, that they would do something about the misinformation, the outrageous misinformation about the vaccine. That's what I meant."

The back and forth between the government and social media platforms has led to some small changes and accounts being banned. Unfortunately, [studies indicate that misinformation travels faster than truth](#) on social media platforms. Without proactive interventions by social media platforms, misinformation, much like Covid, has largely stayed one step ahead.

The Year COVID Death Toll Surpassed 800,000

Entering 2021, there had been at least [364,000 deaths](#) due to COVID in the United States. On 15 February, death totals reached 500,000. On 16 June, the 600,000 mark was reached and 29 September saw 700,000. By 15 December, the 800,000 mark was passed.

As of 22 December, there have been in total at least 809,300 deaths from COVID. There were 31.3 million confirmed coronavirus cases in the US in 2021, compared to 20.3 million cases in 2020. However, the chances of survival improved dramatically in 2021 compared to the year prior.

Statistics showed that before 2021, every 55.8 confirmed cases would lead to death, whereas in 2021 every 115.9 cases led to a fatality. Increased testing, vaccinations, and therapeutics have vastly improved Americans' chances of surviving COVID as researchers have learned more about the virus.

An estimated 236 million Americans have received a single dose of the coronavirus vaccine, 203.1 million are fully vaccinated, and an additional 64.3 million received boosters in 2021.

The United States weathered multiple COVID surges in 2021, with another underway. Although 2021 was thought by some to be the year that the United States and the world would beat COVID, that has yet to be the case.

Two new variants and the waning efficacy of vaccines have given COVID the chance to undo many gains. The government response since the pandemic's inception has - until recently - not fully unified, allowing a disease that does not know borders to run rampant.

2021 has proven to be the year America learned that the coronavirus would take more than a few jabs to overcome the pandemic.

As the calendar flips to 2022, the US will face a situation similar to where it was a year ago. With improved therapeutics, the proliferation of boosters, and improved outreach, there's a chance that 2022 could be the year things settle down into a new normal.

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.

Real Madrid Reportedly in Pursuit of Erling Haaland And Kylian Mbappe
By - Nevin Brown

Real Madrid have set their sights on a summer for the ages. In an almost unprecedented move, the Spanish football giant has ambitions to bring both Erling Haaland and Kylian Mbappe to the Bernabeu.

Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland are, at the moment, far and away the two most valuable players in the world. [TransferMarkt](#) has Mbappe valued at €160 million and Haaland at €150 million, with the next most valuable player coming in at €100 million.

Acquiring the pair, however, will only cost Madrid €75 million - plus the pair's wages. Mbappe is a free agent and Haaland has a €75 million release clause in his contract that can be activated next summer.

While Madrid are known for flexing financial muscle, they've secretly been one of the more austerely-run clubs. Beginning in 2017-18, a five-season span, Real Madrid's [net-spend has been €3.95 million](#).

Looking at Madrid's expenditures, it appears the club has been eyeing a big splash. In 2019-20, Madrid had a [net spend of €220.5 million](#). In the two transfer windows since, they've spent €31 million on new players and sold €181.7 million worth of players.

Madrid also worked hard to get high earners off their books over this period. They allowed James Rodriguez to go to Everton on a free transfer, let Sergio Ramos leave as a free agent, and Gareth Bale, Luka Modric, Marcelo, and Isco are all out of contract at the summer.

Madrid's quartet of free-agents-to-be will open up a whopping €1.63 million in weekly wages and €84.8 million over the entire year. Next summer, Karim Benzema, Toni Kroos, Nacho Fernandez, Mariano Diaz, Marcos Asensio, and Dani Cabellos are all out of contract as well. It has been reported that Haaland will seek a £30 million contract, and it is likely that Mbappe will look for a contract with a similar annual value. Real Madrid can financially afford the two, but that doesn't mean they'll be successful.

While Mbappe has for months signaled that he intends to sign with Madrid when his contract at Paris Saint-Germain runs down, Haaland has shown no overt preference for the club.

Sources have suggested that Madrid are the frontrunners for Haaland's signature, but a host of Premier League clubs and PSG - if they lose Mbappe to Real - will all make a run at the Norwegian.

If Madrid are successful in their pursuit to acquire the two best young players in the world for €235 million less than their value, it may go down as the heist of the century.

Mbappe & Haaland are in Their Own Tier

Their combination of age and production is nearly unmatched in the history of the sport. There is overwhelming evidence that the pair have had superior starts to the careers of Portuguese sensation Cristiano Ronaldo and Argentine star Lionel Messi.

Looking at Mbappe, Haaland, Ronaldo, and Messi's statistics, from age 19 through 21, it becomes apparent that either Haaland or Mbappe could go down as the greatest player in the history of the sport.

Over this age range, Ronaldo played a total minute-load equivalent to 105.2 90 minute matches between the Premier League and the Champions League, and produced 58 goal contributions. Messi played 94.6 90s between La Liga and the Champions League, and produced 96 goal contributions.

Mbappe featured in 94.3 90s between Ligue 1 and the Champions League, and secured 127 goal contributions.

Haaland, who is still in the midst of his age 21 season, has played 65.6 90s, between the Bundesliga and the Champions League and produced 92 goal contributions.

On a per-minute basis, Haaland and Mbappe blow Ronaldo and Messi out of the water. While it's what Messi and Ronaldo would end up doing that put them in the running for best ever, Mbappe and Haaland are well on their way to making a run for the distinction of the greatest of all time.

The best comparison for what Haaland and Mbappe have been able to accomplish at such a young age, according to some, is the "original" Ronaldo. Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima earned the nickname O Fenômeno for a reason, he was the greatest young player the world had ever seen.

Ronaldo had already bagged 54 goals in 57 appearances for PSV Eindhoven as a 17 and 18 year-old when he went to Barcelona for a world-record transfer fee. His age 19 through 21 seasons, spent at Barcelona and Inter Milan, saw him score 73 goals and 21 assists in 83.9 90s between La Liga and Serie A.

Factor in his exploits for the Brazilian national team, and Ronaldo appeared destined to take the mantle of the greatest player. Unfortunately, Ronaldo suffered a series of knee injuries that

sapped him of the game-altering athleticism that he possessed. While he remained one of the best players in the world, he ceased to be the most unstoppable player. Mbappe and Haaland have both produced like Ronaldo at the same age. What the future holds for them is unknown, but the idea of one team having two phenomenons, dos fenómenos, harkens back to the days of the Galacticos.

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.

Minnesota's Mall of America Put on Lockdown After Shooting Injures Two Shoppers

Two people are injured following a shooting late Friday evening at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota.

According to police, the victims' injuries are not life-threatening and it is not considered an active shooter situation. The shooting occurred around 5 p.m., US central time.

It is believed that the suspects fled the scene and are no longer at the mall. Police are currently searching for suspects. It is unclear if police have taken any suspects into custody.

Police are expected to release more details later.

Some stores went into lockdown, but the entire mall did not. As of 5:45 p.m., local time, the scene was secured and the mall had resumed normal operations.

The Mall of America is reportedly the seventh-largest shopping mall in the world and the largest in the Western hemisphere. The mall claims approximately 40 million visitors annually.

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.

Ghislaine Maxwell Prevented Vanity Fair 20 Years Ago From Airing 'Thoroughly Untrue' Epstein Abuses

By - Nevin Brown

Some 20 years ago, Vanity Fair almost revealed the truth about Jeffrey Epstein. A report by Vicky Ward, with testimony from Annie and Maria Farmer, was set for publication before Ghislaine Maxwell and Jeffrey Epstein fought the magazine for a more 'positive portrayal' of the man who would later be convicted for sex abuse.

The testimony of Maria Farmer and her sister Annie would later prove consequential in the conviction of Ghislaine Maxwell, a British socialite and partner of Jeffrey Epstein who was found guilty on Wednesday of facilitating the sexual abuse of underage girls.

According to journalist Vicky Ward, formerly of Vanity Fair, the sisters' accounts of Epstein and Maxwell should have come to light 20 years earlier. Ward, while doing a profile of Epstein, was made aware of his dark side when she interviewed the Farmer sisters.

When Vanity Fair fact-checkers contacted Maxwell with the allegations, she immediately contacted Ward to defend herself and Epstein from the allegations. Ward kept the recording and [released it following Maxwell's conviction on Thursday](#).

"The implication is thoroughly outrageous. Thoroughly untrue. And in every which way disgusting. And I cannot be party to anything like that," Maxwell said at the time.

She added, about the Farmer sisters, "These are two girls that benefited greatly from Jeffrey's generosity, and absolutely nothing untoward in any stretch of the imagination ever took place with them."

She would add, "I can tell you something. Those two girls got a lot of Jeffrey's generosity. He was very, very good to them."

Maxwell defended herself in the same way that she defended Epstein. The sisters accused her of giving them nude massages.

"I can assure you I have never given a massage, nor am I about to. I have better things to do with my time," Maxwell stated at the time.

When Ward pushed back against Maxwell, the latter immediately attacked the credibility of the sisters.

"You're going to believe somebody that you don't know who just comes up with a story about Jeffrey ... over me? Is that what you're just saying right now? I just want to be perfectly clear." Maxwell reportedly became irate and suggested that Ward was "crazy," calling Vanity Fair a "tabloid".

According to Ward, Epstein met with Graydon Carter, then Vanity Fair's editor, and the testimony of the Farmer twins would be cut. Carter would explain to Ward that their allegations lacked sufficient reporting. The article published by Vanity Fair was instead called ["The Talented Mr. Epstein."](#)

Some 20 years later, Ward's initial trust in the Farmer sisters' testimony was validated although Maxwell's denials took two decades to be proven false.

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.

RPT: YEAR IN REVIEW - Vaccines, Bans, and Politics: World in Second Year of Pandemic

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - Having borne the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world appeared to be entering the second year of the crisis well-armed with vaccines of all sorts, yet new and more contagious variants of the virus emerged one after another, and international tensions got in the way of mutual vaccine recognition and the global fight against the disease.

GRIM MILESTONES

Despite worldwide mass-vaccination campaigns, coronavirus cases continued to rise throughout the year. As of late December, nearly 300 million cases have been confirmed worldwide, with over 5 million deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In November, the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe expressed grave concern about a surge of COVID-19 on the continent. In Germany, the number of coronavirus-related deaths topped 100,000 in November, while France reported a sharp rise in virus incidence among minors ages 6-10, in a 148% spike over just one week in fall.

In December, the Pan American Health Organization announced that coronavirus infections in the Americas had tripled in 2021 despite a vaccination rate of 56% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Asia was also setting records in terms of numbers of cases, with Indonesia and Olympic Japan dealing with a spike over the summer. In December, Russia announced that in October 2021, mortality in the country had increased by 20.3% year-on-year, with the coronavirus accounting for the spike almost entirely.

The rise in cases in the outgoing year was mostly linked to the emergence of new viral mutations. While the Alpha and Beta strains appeared in 2020, the start of 2021 saw the emergence of Gamma in January and, ultimately, Delta in May. Delta and Delta Plus were of great concern due to being more transmissible. And in November a new variant, Omicron, was detected in South Africa.

The global consensus is that the world will keep facing more and more coronavirus variants. "How many is impossible to tell because there are likely to be many more that are never detected. It is important to realise that the virus has also to be able to survive in the hostile environment of a mammalian body that has a terrifying immune response (if you are a virus). We have cells that produce chemicals that kill viruses and cells that can swallow viruses whole and digest them," Simon Reid, an associate professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Queensland, Australia, told Sputnik.

All variants have different abilities to survive and replicate, Reid explained.

The Omicron strain contains more mutations in the spike protein — 32 — than all previous variants, meaning that it could spread more easily and be more vaccine-resistant. The emergence of the new strain prompted governments to place restrictions on travelers from African countries, and major vaccine manufacturers launched efforts to update their coronavirus shots.

The WHO has theorized that the strain may have originated in an infected human who was receiving treatment over a long period, giving the virus ample time to mutate and adapt. While the new variant appears to be more infectious, it does not cause more severe disease, so the overall impact may be limited, Jan Jones, professor of virology from the University of Reading, Britain, told Sputnik.

"It will not change the course of the pandemic but it does serve to remind everyone that the virus is still in circulation and that vaccination is a good idea," he explained.

The expert admitted that variants of COVID-19 will emerge continually, being a natural part of viruses' survival.

"But as time goes by, there is less likelihood the virus will get worse, as it will have already tried many of the variations possible. So while the virus will continue to evolve, the impact of each new variant long-term is likely to get less," Jones said.

VACCINATION CAMPAIGNS

In December 2020, the European Union, Russia, and the United States all embarked on vaccination campaigns, introducing shots for front-line medical and essential workers.

By the end of this year, national regulatory authorities had granted emergency-use authorization to 25 COVID-19 vaccines, eight of which — Pfizer/BioNTech, Oxford/AstraZeneca, Sinopharm BIBP, Moderna, Janssen, CoronaVac, Novavax and Covaxin — have been given full approval. By December 2021, nearly 9 billion doses of COVID 19 vaccines had been administered worldwide.

While Russia's trailblazing Sputnik V has been approved in 70 countries, the World Health Organization has so far not given its approval.

In addition, the vaccine is still undergoing evaluation at the European Medicines Agency, as the European Commission's recognition of COVID-19 certificates issued in San Marino — where 90% of the population has been vaccinated with Sputnik V — does not amount to authorization of the Russian shot.

The WHO and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) discussed the need to obtain extra data on the quality, safety, and effectiveness of Sputnik V in late November. The RDIF promised to present a plan for data submission so that the WHO could speed up assessment. The latter has recently announced that it will be ready to conduct on-site inspection of vaccine production sites in February 2022, if the requisite part of the documents is submitted by the end of December.

In the absence of WHO approval, those vaccinated with Sputnik V have to put up with travel restrictions. The US and Canada, for instance, only recognize vaccines approved by the WHO itself.

BOOSTED MEASURES

Throughout 2021, national governments wrestled with finding a balance between safety and freedom. Lockdowns were alternated with easing of restrictions, after which the authorities reinstated lockdowns, making this year a seesaw of COVID-19-related announcements with which one could hardly keep up.

The majority of countries introduced mandatory vaccination for certain categories of the population, including medical staff and military, as well as those employed in the service sector, food industry and others. Nations imposed entry bans, rapid testing, QR codes for public places, and some barred the unvaccinated from visiting public places altogether.

Social media, which unsurprisingly became even more popular under lockdowns, have been seen as a haven for vaccine-hesitant people as well as those spreading misinformation. In September, Telegram shut down the popular Italian anti-vaccination channel, Basta Dittatura, which had over 40,000 subscribers. Twitter has repeatedly suspended the account of US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene for sharing misinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines.

In October, YouTube announced the removal of prominent channels for contradicting officially-approved information on COVID-19 and vaccines. In particular, it axed channels belonging to American alternative medicine proponent Joseph Mercola, the Children's Health Defense fund (affiliated with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.), blogger Erin Elizabeth, and physician Sherri Tenpenny. The company also removed channels associated with doctor Rashid Bhuttar, and Ty and Charlene Bollinger.

While seen by some as positive, the crackdown on such content reaffirmed a wider trend of social media giants shifting from the status of neutral observers to the role of judge, Erik Qualman, an author and social economics expert, told Sputnik in October.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg of a massive change that is coming around disinformation. While some may view it as good that YouTube and parent company Google are stepping in at this particular instance to help reduce disinformation (something Facebook has epically failed to do), there [are] massive implications beyond this when the social media companies are no longer neutral parties but are playing both judge and jury on what content we see," Qualman said.

MASS DISCONTENT

Not all the measures introduced by governments in an effort to rein in the virus were met with approval by the public.

France saw perhaps the largest wave of discontent when, in August, sanitary passes became mandatory to visit cafes and restaurants, as well as for flights and trips on long-distance trains. Demonstrations against these measures frequently turned violent in Paris, with protesters throwing bottles and firecrackers at police. Dozens were arrested as a result of intense rioting on Guadeloupe in November and December. Groups of people, many of whom were armed, looted and smashed shops in the region. As a result, France temporarily backed off mandatory vaccination for medical workers there.

Neighboring Belgium was rocked by similar demonstrations, with protesters hurling rocks at law enforcement, who responded with tear gas and water cannon. Police estimated that tens of thousands of people attended the rallies following the announcement of strict measures in November.

In the Netherlands, one of the most violent rallies against COVID-19 restrictions took place in Rotterdam in November, with demonstrators launching fireworks and again throwing rocks at the police. Acting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte called the protests "pure violence" perpetrated by "idiots," adding that they had nothing to do with genuine demonstrations.

Germany experienced one of the largest anti-lockdown protests held by the COVID-skeptic movement Querdenken. August protests, which were held in spite of a ban by Berlin authorities, led to the arrest of over 600 people.

In Britain, people took to the streets both to protest the government's handling of the pandemic and demand the cancellation of COVID-19 vaccination passports.

Japan, the host of the 2020 Olympics, saw an array of protests against the international sporting event, as COVID-19 infections hit record highs in the summer. Yet the Summer Olympics, postponed by a year due to the pandemic, did take place in Tokyo from July-August. The event was held without spectators and with scrupulous restrictions in place.

Thousands of protesters repeatedly swarmed the streets of the Australian state of Victoria to challenge government-imposed measures and mandatory vaccination for construction workers.

In November, the Solomon Islands, a tiny Pacific nation, appealed to Australia to send peacekeeping troops to quell an escalation of violence in the capital, Honiara, where anti-government demonstrators defied lockdown orders.

Brazilians gathered in major cities to demand the impeachment of President Jair Bolsonaro, a coronavirus vaccine skeptic, at least five times. Most of the banners and slogans chanted by the protesters concerned the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, whose number has surpassed 600,000; delays in acquiring vaccines; unemployment; hunger; and high gas prices.

US PROBE INTO COVID ORIGINS

The origins of the virus continued to occupy the minds of global leaders in 2021. The World Health Organization sent several fact-finding missions to Wuhan and released a full report in March, which concluded that a lab leak was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts concluded that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals that may have consumed bats.

Newly-elected US President Joe Biden did not brand the virus "Chinese," as did his predecessor, Donald Trump. However, in May, he directed the US intelligence community to redouble efforts to investigate the matter. The request came after reports that three lab employees in Wuhan, China, fell ill in November 2019 with symptoms similar to COVID-19. The first case of coronavirus was reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in the central Chinese province of Hubei.

In October, US intelligence finally released a declassified report on the origins of COVID, concluding that the virus had not been developed as a biological weapon. It still accused Beijing of hindering the global investigation and resisting information-sharing.

Beijing dismissed the report as politicized, false and lacking any scientific basis.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology insists that it did not create the coronavirus and, therefore, that it did not escape from its laboratory. "Until December 31, 2019, the Wuhan Institute of Virology had never studied and faced COVID-19. The Wuhan Institute of Virology has never synthesized, created COVID and never let it leak. Moreover, no employee or student of the institute had been infected with COVID-19 until that moment," the institute said.

THOSE HIT HARDEST

While affluent nations are speeding up their vaccination campaigns, developing and low-income countries remain under-supplied with vaccine doses.

According to an October report from the People's Vaccine Alliance, which is comprised of over 70 organizations advocating fair vaccine distribution, developing economies have received only 261 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, which make up 14% of the total number which wealthy countries promised to supply. Developing countries have encountered a flurry of unfulfilled promises by rich economies and pharmaceutical giants, the report said.

Through the WHO-led COVAX vaccine-sharing initiative, Western pharmaceutical companies have shipped only 12% of vaccine doses allocated for the purpose, the alliance noted. As a result, a total of 1.3% of the population of low-income countries has been fully vaccinated, as of October.

Syria, for years ravaged by civil war, is one such vulnerable nation. The country is facing a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, as less than 2% of the population has been vaccinated, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said in October. The UN official pointed out that nearly 2 million people in northwest Syria live in refugee camps, which are often overcrowded and lack basic sanitation.

Humanitarian organizations also paint a bleak future for Afghanistan, where the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) gained full control in August.

Speaking in December, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi stressed that challenges facing refugees worldwide, as well as displaced people and their hosts, are immense, and COVID-19 is part of that. UNHCR is seeking \$9 billion for its activities in 2022.

A NEW NORMAL?

With a third year of the pandemic around the corner, people are being forced to adapt to a "new normal" – mask mandates, testing, self-isolation and fines. In Australia, even a couple of cases

were enough to put entire apartment blocks on harsh lockdowns. In China, a man received a 200,000 yuan (\$31,000) fine and a two-year suspended jail sentence for concealing COVID-19 symptoms after a trip abroad and breaking quarantine rules.

Even presidents are not exempt from restrictions. Having arrived in New York for the UN General Assembly in September, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro had to eat pizza on the sidewalk, as cafes allow only those vaccinated inside. In October, he was denied entry to a Santos vs Gremio football match for lack of a COVID-19 vaccination certificate.

Media churn out headlines that would have seemed surreal before the pandemic, such as a story about the first international flight arriving at the Sydney airport in November after almost 600 days of COVID-19 restrictions, or a Canadian bride who organized her American wedding on the border with the US because her family was not allowed to enter due to pandemic travel bans.

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.

YEAR IN REVIEW - Vaccines, Bans, and Politics: World in Second Year of Pandemic

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - Having borne the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world appeared to be entering the second year of the crisis well-armed with vaccines of all sorts, yet new and more contagious variants of the virus emerged one after another, and international tensions got in the way of mutual vaccine recognition and the global fight against the disease.

GRIM MILESTONES

Despite worldwide mass-vaccination campaigns, coronavirus cases continued to rise throughout the year. As of late December, nearly 300 million cases have been confirmed worldwide, with over 5 million deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In November, the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe expressed grave concern about a surge of COVID-19 on the continent. In Germany, the number of coronavirus-related deaths topped 100,000 in November, while France reported a sharp rise in virus incidence among minors ages 6-10, in a 148% spike over just one week in fall.

In December, the Pan American Health Organization announced that coronavirus infections in the Americas had tripled in 2021 despite a vaccination rate of 56% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Asia was also setting records in terms of numbers of cases, with Indonesia and Olympic Japan dealing with a spike over the summer. In December, Russia announced that in October 2021, mortality in the country had increased by 20.3% year-on-year, with the coronavirus accounting for the spike almost entirely.

The rise in cases in the outgoing year was mostly linked to the emergence of new viral mutations. While the Alpha and Beta strains appeared in 2020, the start of 2021 saw the emergence of Gamma in January and, ultimately, Delta in May. Delta and Delta Plus were of great concern due to being more transmissible. And in November a new variant, Omicron, was detected in South Africa.

The global consensus is that the world will keep facing more and more coronavirus variants.

"How many is impossible to tell because there are likely to be many more that are never detected. It is important to realise that the virus has also to be able to survive in the hostile environment of a mammalian body that has a terrifying immune response (if you are a virus). We have cells that produce chemicals that kill viruses and cells that can swallow viruses whole and digest them," Simon Reid, an associate professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Queensland, Australia, told Sputnik.

All variants have different abilities to survive and replicate, Reid explained.

The Omicron strain contains more mutations in the spike protein — 32 — than all previous variants, meaning that it could spread more easily and be more vaccine-resistant. The emergence of the new strain prompted governments to place restrictions on travelers from African countries, and major vaccine manufacturers launched efforts to update their coronavirus shots.

The WHO has theorized that the strain may have originated in an infected human who was receiving treatment over a long period, giving the virus ample time to mutate and adapt. While the new variant appears to be more infectious, it does not cause more severe disease, so the overall impact may be limited, Jan Jones, professor of virology from the University of Reading, Britain, told Sputnik.

"It will not change the course of the pandemic but it does serve to remind everyone that the virus is still in circulation and that vaccination is a good idea," he explained.

The expert admitted that variants of COVID-19 will emerge continually, being a natural part of viruses' survival.

"But as time goes by, there is less likelihood the virus will get worse, as it will have already tried many of the variations possible. So while the virus will continue to evolve, the impact of each new variant long-term is likely to get less," Jones said.

VACCINATION CAMPAIGNS

In December 2020, the European Union, Russia, and the United States all embarked on vaccination campaigns, introducing shots for front-line medical and essential workers.

By the end of this year, national regulatory authorities had granted emergency-use authorization to 25 COVID-19 vaccines, eight of which — Pfizer/BioNTech, Oxford/AstraZeneca, Sinopharm BIBP, Moderna, Janssen, CoronaVac, Novavax and Covaxin — have been given full approval.

By December 2021, nearly 9 billion doses of COVID 19 vaccines had been administered worldwide.

While Russia's trailblazing Sputnik V has been approved in 70 countries, the World Health Organization has so far not given its approval.

In addition, the vaccine is still undergoing evaluation at the European Medicines Agency, as the European Commission's recognition of COVID-19 certificates issued in San Marino — where 90% of the population has been vaccinated with Sputnik V — does not amount to authorization of the Russian shot.

The WHO and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) discussed the need to obtain extra data on the quality, safety, and effectiveness of Sputnik V in late November. The RDIF promised to present a plan for data submission so that the WHO could speed up assessment. The latter has recently announced that it will be ready to conduct on-site inspection of vaccine production sites in February 2022, if the requisite part of the documents is submitted by the end of December.

In the absence of WHO approval, those vaccinated with Sputnik V have to put up with travel restrictions. The US and Canada, for instance, only recognize vaccines approved by the WHO itself.

BOOSTED MEASURES

Throughout 2021, national governments wrestled with finding a balance between safety and freedom. Lockdowns were alternated with easing of restrictions, after which the authorities reinstated lockdowns, making this year a seesaw of COVID-19-related announcements with which one could hardly keep up.

The majority of countries introduced mandatory vaccination for certain categories of the population, including medical staff and military, as well as those employed in the service sector, food industry and others. Nations imposed entry bans, rapid testing, QR codes for public places, and some barred the unvaccinated from visiting public places altogether.

Social media, which unsurprisingly became even more popular under lockdowns, have been seen as a haven for vaccine-hesitant people as well as those spreading misinformation. In September, Telegram shut down the popular Italian anti-vaccination channel, Basta Dittatura, which had over 40,000 subscribers. Twitter has repeatedly suspended the account of US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene for sharing misinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines.

In October, YouTube announced the removal of prominent channels for contradicting officially-approved information on COVID-19 and vaccines. In particular, it axed channels belonging to American alternative medicine proponent Joseph Mercola, the Children's Health Defense fund (affiliated with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.), blogger Erin Elizabeth, and physician Sherri Tenpenny. The company also removed channels associated with doctor Rashid Bhuttar, and Ty and Charlene Bollinger.

While seen by some as positive, the crackdown on such content reaffirmed a wider trend of social media giants shifting from the status of neutral observers to the role of judge, Erik Qualman, an author and social economics expert, told Sputnik in October.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg of a massive change that is coming around disinformation. While some may view it as good that YouTube and parent company Google are stepping in at this particular instance to help reduce disinformation (something Facebook has epically failed to do), there [are] massive implications beyond this when the social media companies are no longer neutral parties but are playing both judge and jury on what content we see," Qualman said.

MASS DISCONTENT

Not all the measures introduced by governments in an effort to rein in the virus were met with approval by the public.

France saw perhaps the largest wave of discontent when, in August, sanitary passes became mandatory to visit cafes and restaurants, as well as for flights and trips on long-distance trains. Demonstrations against these measures frequently turned violent in Paris, with protesters throwing bottles and firecrackers at police. Dozens were arrested as a result of intense rioting on Guadeloupe in November and December. Groups of people, many of whom were armed, looted and smashed shops in the region. As a result, France temporarily backed off mandatory vaccination for medical workers there.

Neighboring Belgium was rocked by similar demonstrations, with protesters hurling rocks at law enforcement, who responded with tear gas and water cannon. Police estimated that tens of

thousands of people attended the rallies following the announcement of strict measures in November.

In the Netherlands, one of the most violent rallies against COVID-19 restrictions took place in Rotterdam in November, with demonstrators launching fireworks and again throwing rocks at the police. Acting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte called the protests "pure violence" perpetrated by "idiots," adding that they had nothing to do with genuine demonstrations.

Germany experienced one of the largest anti-lockdown protests held by the COVID-skeptic movement Querdenken. August protests, which were held in spite of a ban by Berlin authorities, led to the arrest of over 600 people.

In Britain, people took to the streets both to protest the government's handling of the pandemic and demand the cancellation of COVID-19 vaccination passports.

Japan, the host of the 2020 Olympics, saw an array of protests against the international sporting event, as COVID-19 infections hit record highs in the summer. Yet the Summer Olympics, postponed by a year due to the pandemic, did take place in Tokyo from July-August. The event was held without spectators and with scrupulous restrictions in place.

Thousands of protesters repeatedly swarmed the streets of the Australian state of Victoria to challenge government-imposed measures and mandatory vaccination for construction workers.

In November, the Solomon Islands, a tiny Pacific nation, appealed to Australia to send peacekeeping troops to quell an escalation of violence in the capital, Honiara, where anti-government demonstrators defied lockdown orders.

Brazilians gathered in major cities to demand the impeachment of President Jair Bolsonaro, a coronavirus vaccine skeptic, at least five times. Most of the banners and slogans chanted by the protesters concerned the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, whose number has surpassed 600,000; delays in acquiring vaccines; unemployment; hunger; and high gas prices.

US PROBE INTO COVID ORIGINS

The origins of the virus continued to occupy the minds of global leaders in 2021. The World Health Organization sent several fact-finding missions to Wuhan and released a full report in March, which concluded that a lab leak was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts concluded that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals that may have consumed bats.

Newly-elected US President Joe Biden did not brand the virus "Chinese," as did his predecessor, Donald Trump. However, in May, he directed the US intelligence community to redouble efforts to investigate the matter. The request came after reports that three lab employees in Wuhan, China, fell ill in November 2019 with symptoms similar to COVID-19. The first case of coronavirus was reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in the central Chinese province of Hubei.

In October, US intelligence finally released a declassified report on the origins of COVID, concluding that the virus had not been developed as a biological weapon. It still accused Beijing of hindering the global investigation and resisting information-sharing.

Beijing dismissed the report as politicized, false and lacking any scientific basis.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology insists that it did not create the coronavirus and, therefore, that it did not escape from its laboratory. "Until December 31, 2019, the Wuhan Institute of Virology had never studied and faced COVID-19. The Wuhan Institute of Virology has never synthesized, created COVID and never let it leak. Moreover, no employee or student of the institute had been infected with COVID-19 until that moment," the institute said.

THOSE HIT HARDEST

While affluent nations are speeding up their vaccination campaigns, developing and low-income countries remain under-supplied with vaccine doses.

According to an October report from the People's Vaccine Alliance, which is comprised of over 70 organizations advocating fair vaccine distribution, developing economies have received only 261 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, which make up 14% of the total number which wealthy countries promised to supply. Developing countries have encountered a flurry of unfulfilled promises by rich economies and pharmaceutical giants, the report said.

Through the WHO-led COVAX vaccine-sharing initiative, Western pharmaceutical companies have shipped only 12% of vaccine doses allocated for the purpose, the alliance noted. As a result, a total of 1.3% of the population of low-income countries has been fully vaccinated, as of October.

Syria, for years ravaged by civil war, is one such vulnerable nation. The country is facing a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, as less than 2% of the population has been vaccinated, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said in October. The UN official pointed out that nearly 2 million people in northwest Syria live in refugee camps, which are often overcrowded and lack basic sanitation.

Humanitarian organizations also paint a bleak future for Afghanistan, where the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) gained full control in August.

Speaking in December, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi stressed that challenges facing refugees worldwide, as well as displaced people and their hosts, are immense, and COVID-19 is part of that. UNHCR is seeking \$9 billion for its activities in 2022.

A NEW NORMAL?

With a third year of the pandemic around the corner, people are being forced to adapt to a "new normal" – mask mandates, testing, self-isolation and fines. In Australia, even a couple of cases were enough to put entire apartment blocks on harsh lockdowns. In China, a man received a 200,000 yuan (\$31,000) fine and a two-year suspended jail sentence for concealing COVID-19 symptoms after a trip abroad and breaking quarantine rules.

Even presidents are not exempt from restrictions. Having arrived in New York for the UN General Assembly in September, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro had to eat pizza on the sidewalk, as cafes allow only those vaccinated inside. In October, he was denied entry to a Santos vs Gremio football match for lack of a COVID-19 vaccination certificate.

Media churn out headlines that would have seemed surreal before the pandemic, such as a story about the first international flight arriving at the Sydney airport in November after almost 600 days of COVID-19 restrictions, or a Canadian bride who organized her American wedding on the border with the US because her family was not allowed to enter due to pandemic travel bans.

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.

NPT Review Conference May Take Place August 2022 - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 30 (Sputnik) - The Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) may be held in August, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

On Thursday, the United Nations decided to postpone the NPT Review Conference planned to be held though January 4-28.

"The conference might take place in August," the source said, noting that an official letter with specific dates has yet to be received.

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 Welcomes Dialogue Between US, Russia After Putin-Biden Call - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the dialogue between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US leader Joe Biden on security and strategic issues, UN associate spokesperson Florencia Soto Nino told Sputnik.

On Thursday, the two presidents held a telephone call to discuss escalating tensions over Ukraine and the upcoming talks on the issue.

"We always welcome dialogue between the Member States," Soto Nino said when asked about the phone call.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have increased in the past several weeks amid an alleged Russian troop buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying that Russia has the right to relocate the troops within its territory at its own discretion, while NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its security.

On December 17, Russia released proposals on security guarantees to NATO and the United States that seek to prevent the alliance's further expansion eastward and ban the deployment of US and Russian intermediate and short-range missiles within reach of each other's territory, among other items.

Negotiations on security guarantees between Moscow and Washington are scheduled for January 10, followed by a Russia-NATO Council meeting to discuss the issue on January 12, and the summit of Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe the following day.

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.

Raytheon Wins Engineering Contract for US, NATO Seasparrow Missile Programs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The Raytheon Company has won a more than \$55 million US Navy modification contract to provide engineering and technical services for the

Evolved Seasparrow Missile and NATO Seasparrow Missile Systems programs, the Defense Department said.

"Raytheon Company [of] Tucson, Arizona, is awarded a \$55,121,826 ... modification to a previously awarded contract for engineering and technical services in support of the Evolved Seasparrow Missile and NATO Seasparrow Missile Systems programs," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The contract combines purchases for the US government (99%); and the governments of Japan and United Arab Emirates (1%) under the Foreign Military Sales program, the release said.

Most of the work on the contract will be performed in Tucson in the US state of Arizona (82%) with almost all the rest in Portsmouth, Rhode Island (17%) and some work in Aranjuez in Spain, Brisbane in Australia and Koropi Attica in Greece, 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.

Quebec Re-Imposes Curfew, Bans Public Gatherings Amid New Coronavirus Wave - Premier

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Quebec has reimposed a full curfew, shutting down the dining rooms of restaurants and forbidding all public gatherings, including those on New Year's Eve, Premier Francois Legault announced.

"I'm announcing new restrictions starting tomorrow," Legault said in a television broadcast on Thursday. "Restaurants will have to close except for deliveries. Private gatherings in homes will now be prohibited. ... I am also announcing a curfew from 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., starting tomorrow [Friday] night."

The premier said the new restrictions will come into force at 5:00 p.m. local time on Friday and will include closing of schools until January 17.

The Quebec authorities reported 14,188 new coronavirus cases on Thursday with another 16,000 due to be reported on Friday, Legault said.

"We are at the worst of the pandemic so far. Cases are under evaluated due to rapid tests and we risk surpassing hospital capacity in coming weeks," Legault said.

In addition, the provincial government will now impose fines of \$1,000 to \$6,000 on people who break the curfew across Quebec, Legault 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.

Talks on Security Must Not Turn Into Meaningless Chatter, Results of Essence- Kremlin Aide

MOSCOW, December 30 (Sputnik) - The upcoming bilateral talks on security guarantees between the United States and Russia must not turn into meaningless chatter but must reaching meaningful results as a key priority, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov told reporters after a

conversation held by telephone between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden.

"Putin said that we assign high importance to the negotiations, but they should not turn into chatter. We are not waiting for the negotiation process itself, but for specific results," Ushakov told reporters on Thursday. "Let's see how the negotiations go - a day or two, three rounds - then we will draw conclusions."

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.

Boeing Wins \$471Mln Contract to Develop New Systems for Japan's F-15 Fleet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$470 million US Air Force contract to develop new systems for Japan's fleet of upgraded F-15 Eagle Super Interceptors, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] St. Louis, Missouri has been awarded a not-to-exceed \$471,313,000 undefinitized contract action for the F-15 Japan Super Interceptor Program," the release said on Thursday.

The contract provides for the design and development of an integrated suite of aircraft systems to support modification of the Japan Air Self Defense Force F-15MJ aircraft and the development, test and delivery of four Weapon System Trainers, the Defense Department said. Work on the contract will be performed in St. Louis in the US state of Missouri, and is expected to be completed seven years from now by December 31, 2028, the department 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.

US-Russia Bilateral Talks in Geneva to Be Monitored by Biden, Putin – Kremlin Aide

MOSCOW, December 30 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden will personally monitor the bilateral talks between their countries on January 10 in Geneva, Switzerland, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said.

"Most notably, the presidents have agreed that negotiations on a such important issue [of security guarantees] for us and for Europe, in general, and the world will be held in three directions, that is, in Geneva, in Brussels through Russia-NATO and in Vienna through the OSCE. But, as it was noted, the parties will treat the bilateral negotiations with all seriousness, and the process of the Geneva talks will go under the personal supervision and under the personal control of the two presidents," Ushakov told reporters on Thursday following a phone call between the two leaders.

Both presidents have also agreed to maintain telephone contact and to instruct their respective administrations' assistants to do the same, Ushakov 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.

Success of Talks on Guarantees Would Lead to Normalizing US-Russia Relations - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 30 (Sputnik) - The success of the negotiations on security guarantees in Eastern Europe will lead to normalization of bilateral relations between Russia and the United States, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov told reporters.

"It was emphasized that if the negotiations on security guarantees are successful, this will naturally lead to a certain normalization and, perhaps, even an improvement in bilateral relations," Ushakov said after the phone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden earlier on Thursday.

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 Understands Russian Concerns But Has Its Own, Biden Ready to Pursue Dialogue - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States seems to understand Russia's concerns although it has its own, yet US President Joe Biden is ready to continue the dialogue with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov told reporters.

"It seems to me that Washington understands Russia's concerns, although Washington has its own concerns. Yet, President Biden is ready to continue the dialogue with President Putin, and this is what, in fact, our leaders have agreed upon - the dialogue will continue. Moreover, the Presidents, as I have already said, will not only continue to maintain a dialogue but also push the negotiations that our respective interdepartmental teams will be conducting in Geneva," Ushakov said when asked about the emotional background of the conversation between the two presidents on Thursday.

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.

Putin Told Biden About Key Principles of Submitted Propositions on Security – Kremlin Aide

MOSCOW, December 30 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin has shared in detail with US President Joe Biden the key principles of Moscow's security proposal for Europe and underscored the importance of all upcoming talks in January, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said.

"Vladimir Putin outlined in detail the basic principles that were put in the documents we handed over, and stressed that negotiations on these three tracks are important for us [bilateral talks in

Geneva, Russia-NATO council in Brussels, and OSCE summit in Vienna],” Ushakov told reporters on Thursday following a phone call between the two leaders. “But the main thing is that we need a result, and we will achieve a result in the form of ensuring the guaranteed security of Russia.”

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 Deeply Troubled by Sudan Government's Use of Lethal Force Against Protesters - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is "deeply concerned" about reports that the Sudanese authorities are using lethal force to suppress protests, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said

“Deeply troubled by reports that Sudanese security forces used lethal force against protesters, blacked out the internet, and attempted to shutdown media outlets,” Blinken said via Twitter on Thursday.

The United States stands with the people of Sudan as they demand freedom, peace and justice, Blinken added.

Earlier in the day, the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors released a statement saying that four civilians were killed in Omdurman when security forces opened fire on the participating in anti-coup protests.

The death toll among civilians has risen to 52 since the military coup of December 19, 2019, the statement said.

Protesters have taken to the streets since the Sudanese military led by Gen. Abdel Fattah Burhan arrested Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok on October 25. Hamdock was reinstated on November 21 after signing a deal that seeks to install a civilian cabinet that will be subject to military oversight. The protesters have demanded a transition to a fully civilian rule.

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 to Continue Intensive Talks With Allies on Ukraine Over Next 10 Days - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue over the next week to ten days to engage in intensive consultations with its allies and partners regarding the tensions on the Ukraine border, a senior Biden administration official said after the call between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the issue.

"Over the next week to ten days ... we expect to continue what's been a very intensive period of consultations on the US side with our allies and partners, including providing an account of this conversation to those allies and partners, in particular, of course, to the government of Ukraine, as well as to NATO," the official said during a press briefing on Thursday evening.

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.

No Declaration of Intentions From Biden-Putin Talks, US Focus on Actions – US Official

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – As a result of negotiations between the presidents of Russia and the United States, no declarations of intentions have been made, but the US will continue to pay attention to actions, not words, when assessing Russia's dealings in and around Ukraine, a senior administration official said during a press briefing following a phone call between the two leaders.

"We are not going to draw conclusions, and there were certainly no declarations as to intentions from this conversation, but regardless, our focus is really on actions and on indicators, not on words at this point," the official said on Thursday when asked whether Putin had made a decision to invade Ukraine.

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.

More than 2,800 Flights Canceled, 12,000 Delays Globally on Thursday - Flight Tracker

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - More than 2,800 flights were canceled and nearly 12,000 more were delayed around the world on Thursday as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus caused staff shortages at airlines, the tracking website FlightAware showed.

"We strongly urge flyers with non-essential travel scheduled before January 2, 2022, to consider changing their travel to a later date using our flexible travel policy," the airline JetBlue said in a statement, encouraging passengers to think about rescheduling nonessential flights during the holidays.

JetBlue said it expects the number of cases to surge in the US northeast, where most of its crew are based.

Along with the Omicron variant overrunning the United States and sickening flight crews, winter weather has caused numerous flight cancellations.

Health officials have acknowledged that the Omicron variant is more transmissible but the cases are mild and no deaths have so far been reported.

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 in Call With Putin Urges Russia to De-Escalate Ukraine Tensions - White House

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin urged Russia to de-escalate tensions over Ukraine and made

clear that the United States and its allies would respond should a Russian invasion occur, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," Psaki said in a statement on Thursday. "President Biden urged Russia to de-escalate tensions with Ukraine. He made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine."

Biden conveyed support for a diplomatic solution to the situation, especially through the bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue, at NATO through the NATO-Russia Council, and at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, but he underscored that substantive progress can occur only in an environment of de-escalation, Psaki said.

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.

Tone of Conversation Between Putin, Biden 'Serious and Substantive' - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The tone of the talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden was "serious and substantive" as the two leaders addressed concerns over Russian military activity near Ukraine and NATO's expansion near Russia's border, a senior US administration official said.

"The tone of the conversation between the two presidents was serious and substantive," the official said during a conference call on Thursday evening.

Biden laid out the path of the United States' approach that will depend on Russia's actions, the official 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.

Russian Envoy to US Says Situation With NATO Crawling Into Ukraine 'Extremely Dangerous'

(Updates with details in paras 4-9)

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The situation with NATO attempting to move closer to the Russian borders is extremely dangerous and Moscow may be forced to create vulnerabilities against the alliance if it continues to boost its military presence in the region, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in an article published by the US media outlet Foreign Policy.

"The situation is extremely dangerous," Antonov said in the article published on Thursday. "No one should doubt our determination to defend our security. Everything has its limits. If our partners keep constructing military-strategic realities imperiling the existence of our country, we will be forced to create similar vulnerabilities for them."

Antonov added that Russia has come to a point where it has no room to retreat and military exploration of Ukraine by NATO countries is an existential threat to Russia.

NATO's criticism of alleged Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia is predictable, but Russia's actions have disrupted the alliance's plans of further encroachment on its borders, Antonov said.

The United States and Russia require urgent action to restore the principle of equal and indivisible security, Antonov said. European security is at crossroads at the moment and the way in which events develop depends on the readiness of Western partners to engage in a substantive dialogue with Moscow, he added.

The Russian ambassador also said the United States must join the Russian unilateral moratorium on the deployment of ground-based intermediate-range missiles and seriously consider Russia's proposal to withdraw exercise areas from the Russia-NATO contact line. Russia's proposals do not infringe on the security of the United States or NATO member states, instead they create conditions for de-escalation in Europe and restore trust, Antonov said. Antonov pointed out that in recent years, NATO's military activity has intensified and the alliance held some 40 major military exercises annually in close proximity to Russia's territory. In addition, the United States significantly increased its strategic flights along Russian borders, during which it trains cruise missile launches at targets inside Russia. Moreover, Russia has tracked an upsurge of naval activities of the alliance in the Black and Baltic seas, Antonov said. The combined military expenditures of NATO countries exceed Russia's defense budget by at least 25 times, he 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.

Authorities Evacuate Second Colorado Town Over Raging Wild Fires - Emergency Services

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The Colorado Office of Emergence Management (OEM) issued an emergency message that it has ordered the evacuation of a second town in the state as wild fires fanned by high winds continue to rage there.

"Fire Command has issued an order of evacuation for the City of Louisville," OEM said via Twitter on Thursday. "If you're in the area, please act quickly."

OEM also confirmed in a subsequent message that an "Entire town evacuated due to wildfires." Louisville, which is located in northern Colorado, has a population of 22,200.

Earlier, the entire population of Superior, which has about 13,000 residents, was also ordered to evacuate because of a fire that has spread northwest of the town, according to a notice sent to residents. The town is about 20 miles (32 kilometers) northwest of Denver.

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.

European Security Direction Depends on West's Readiness for Dialogue – Russian Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – European security is at crossroads at the moment and the way in which events develop depends on the readiness of Western partners to engage in a substantive dialogue with Moscow, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said in an article published by Foreign Policy magazine.

“European security is now at a crossroads. The way in which events will develop further depends on the readiness of our Western colleagues for substantive dialogue, not delaying tactics and obfuscation,” the article said on Thursday. “The Russian initiative to conclude legally binding agreements on security guarantees is aimed at ensuring equal and reliable security for all.”

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.

Russian Envoy to US Says Situation With NATO Crawling Into Ukraine 'Extremely Dangerous'

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The situation with NATO attempting to move closer to the Russian border is extremely dangerous and Moscow may be forced to create vulnerabilities against the alliance if it continues to boost its military presence in the region, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in an article published by the US media outlet Foreign Policy.

"The situation is extremely dangerous," Antonov said in the article published on Thursday. "No one should doubt our determination to defend our security. Everything has its limits. If our partners keep constructing military-strategic realities imperiling the existence of our country, we will be forced to create similar vulnerabilities for them."

Antonov added that Russia has come to a point where it has no room to retreat and military exploration of Ukraine by NATO countries is an existential threat to Russia.

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, Russia Need Urgent Action to Restore Principle of Indivisible Security – Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – The United States and Russia require urgent action to restore the principle of equal and indivisible security, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said in an article published by Foreign Policy magazine.

“Urgent action is needed. The principle of equal and indivisible security must be restored. This means that no single state has the right to strengthen its security at the expense of others. With political will, this can be achieved through the development of serious long-term and legally binding security guarantees,” Antonov said on Thursday.

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's Call With Putin Ends at 4:25 P.M. EST, Lasts 50 Minutes - White House

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The telephone call between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday ended at 4:25 pm EST (21:25 GMT), lasting about 50 minutes, according to a White House official.

"President Biden's call with President Putin concluded at 4:25 PM EST," the official said.

The two leaders were expected to discuss security and strategic issues including escalating tensions over NATO expansion and Ukraine.

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.

Wall Street Down Broadly, Bucking Hopes for Restart of 'Santa Claus Rally'

NEW YORK, December 30 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell modestly but broadly on Thursday, bucking hopes for a restart of the so-called "Santa Claus rally," which emerged briefly just before and after Christmas this year.

Prior to Tuesday, the three main equity indexes on the New York Stock Exchange rose with noticeable vigor for four straight days, prompting many to think the market will benefit handsomely from the Santa Claus rally that typically starts at around Christmas and lasts through the year-end.

The past three days, however, shattered that hope, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average, S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite indexes showing mixed results after last week's promising start.

In Thursday's session, the blue-chip Dow, which lists a wide variety of stocks from leisure to banking and agriculture, slid 0.3% to settle at 36,398. For the year, the Dow is up 18%.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, closed the day down 0.3% at 4,780. For the year, the S&P 500 remains up 27%.

Nasdaq, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, slid 0.2% to finish at 15,742. Year-to-date, however, the Nasdaq is up 22%.

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 30 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday wished US President Joe Biden Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and said Russia and the United States can and should interact constructively by joining efforts to tackle threats, the Kremlin press service reported.
- * Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow was the initiator of the phone talks between Putin and Biden that will be held later on Thursday and mentioned it will be an ordinary phone call without a public part.
- * A phone conversation between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Biden after the US president's talk with Putin is not excluded, Zelenskyy's spokesman Serhiy Nykyforov said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov said on Thursday that he did not see the threat of a full-scale invasion of Russia, and there were no plans to introduce martial law in the country.
- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested listening to those people in Kiev who say that there is no buildup of the Russian military at the state border.

US STRATEGIC PETROLEUM RESERVE

- * The United States has released an additional 2 million barrels from its strategic oil reserve to ExxonMobil under a third sale-and-exchange deal aimed at reducing pump prices of fuel, the Department of Energy said on Thursday.

PUTIN-ABBAS CALL

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin is holding a phone conversation with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * Putin and Abbas underlined the need for prompt resumption of constructive Israeli-Palestinian dialogue under the auspices of Quartet on the Middle East.

AFGHANISTAN

- * Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday that Russia have not received any Taliban's (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities) notifications on their decision to send an envoy to Moscow and mentioned that Russia's recognition of the Taliban's government is out of question for now.
- * Approximately 4,000 Afghan soldiers were killed and 1,000 more went missing from July 1 to August 15 ahead of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism), Washington Post reported, citing Yasin Zia, the former chief of staff of the Afghan military.

COVID-19

- * The European Union has enough doses of vaccines to conduct booster vaccination, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on Thursday.
- * JetBlue Airways has informed its employees that it will cancel 1,280 flights in the first half of January because its staff has been affected by the coronavirus Omicron variant, CNBC reported.
- * Americans should avoid all cruise travel even if they have been vaccinated for the novel coronavirus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said.

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 Defense Secretary Austin Now Sole National Guard Director in Washington - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will be the sole and centralized authority to approve the deployment and to direct the use of the National Guard in Washington, DC, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby announced on Thursday.

"Secretary Austin directed actions to improve [the Department of Defense]'s preparedness to support civil authorities in the NCR [National Capital Region], including formally clarifying the process by which Federal and local partners request assistance for both pre-planned and time sensitive events," Kirby said in a statement.

Austin has established the Defense Department Executive Secretariat as the single entry point for these requests, Kirby said.

"By clarifying and refining the request process, including outlining the required information needed to assess requests from Federal and local partners, the [Defense] Department will be able to respond to requests efficiently, quickly, and effectively," Kirby added.

The new announcement came less than two weeks before the first anniversary of the protest that breached the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 as the House of Representatives was confirming President Joe Biden's victory over his predecessor Donald Trump in the November 3, 2020 presidential election.

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's Call With Putin Begins at 3:35 EST - White House

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The call between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin has started at 3:35 EST (20:35 GMT), the White House confirmed on Thursday.

"President Biden's call with President Putin convened at 3:35 PM EST," a White House official said.

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 Air Force Flew Second Spy Plane Over Eastern Ukraine on Thursday Morning - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has conducted a second overflight over eastern Ukraine just hours before the planned phone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden, US media reported on Thursday. The overflight was carried out on Thursday morning to collect intelligence about the Russian military situation on the ground, CNN reported, citing a source close familiar with the mission. On Wednesday, CNN reported citing European Command (EUCOM) spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Russ Wolfkiel that the US spy plane JSTARS E-8 had conducted its first flight over eastern Ukraine to collect ground intelligence.

The first overflight in Ukrainian airspace took place on December 27 and was done with the permission of the Ukrainian government, the report said.

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.

ExxonMobil Takes Another 2Mln Barrels from US Oil Reserve to Help Curb Pump Price - DOE

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has released an additional 2.0 million barrels from its oil reserve to ExxonMobil under a third 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, and a separate 250,000-barrel arrangement with Marathon Petroleum. "Today, the US Department of Energy (DOE) approved a third exchange of two million barrels of crude oil for release to ExxonMobil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)," a news release from the agency said.

The DOE announced earlier this month 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 this year 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.

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.

Richmond's Confederate Statues to Be Moved to Black History Museum in January - Attorney

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – Authorities in the US state of Virginia will relocate eight confederate statues, including a controversial statue of General Robert E. Lee, to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia (BMHVA) in late January, the museum's legal counsel Greg Werkheiser told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The museum will receive eight statues and a couple of cannons. Ownership will transfer them in late January," Werkheiser said.

All of the artifacts will be secured and will remain city-owned property until their future is decided, he added. "Some may end up at the facility while others may end up elsewhere," he said.

Asked how the museum would explain to visitors why it decided to accept the confederate statues, the legal counsel said there would be a lengthy, thoughtful and inclusive public process to determine that question. That process may take between six months and a year, he added.

"I do not think it will be too difficult. A lot has happened in the US," Werkheiser said, adding that people are now aware that the statues were erected for various reasons.

Any public display would include descriptions that elaborate on the statues' controversial history, he said. "It is going to be a very open and public process," he said.

Governor Ralph Northam and Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney on Thursday announced plans to transfer ownership of the statues and pedestals of Richmond's Confederate monuments to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. The complete list includes monuments of Robert E. Lee, J.E.B. Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, Matthew Fontaine Maury, Joseph Bryan, Fitzhugh Lee, Confederate soldier and sailors, and a ceremonial cannon.

During the Civil War in the United States, Lee led the forces of the Confederacy - a group of southern states that sided with the preservation of the institution of slavery. Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy for most of the Civil War.

Calls for the removal of monuments honoring Confederate figures became widespread following nationwide protests against systemic racism in the aftermath of the 2020 killing of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody.

But several past attempts to remove Confederate statues in Virginia have ignited controversy, and at times violence. Plans to remove a monument of General Lee in August 2017 drew both protesters and counter-protesters who engaged in violent street brawls. The rival demonstrations turned deadly when a self-professed Nazi sympathizer drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one person and leaving dozens of others injured.

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.

Children 5-11 Years of Age Report Systemic Reactions to Pfizer Vaccine - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Children who are 5-11 years old are reporting local and systemic reactions after receiving the coronavirus vaccines produced by Pfizer and BioNTech, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report on Thursday.

"After authorization of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for children aged 5-11 years during October 2021, and the administration of approximately eight million doses, local and systemic reactions after vaccination were commonly reported to VAERS and V-safe for vaccinated children aged 5-11 years," the report said. "Serious adverse events were rarely reported."

VAERS refers to the CDC's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, according to which some million Americans have so far reported experiencing adverse affects and nearly 21,000 deaths. The CDC emphasized that parents and guardians of children 5-11 years old should be advised that such reactions are expected after receiving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and are more common after the getting the second dose.

In November, the CDC authorized the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 5 to 11 years. On Wednesday, Presidential medical adviser Anthony Fauci said that a coronavirus vaccine for children younger than five years old may take months to approve. Fauci said vaccine tests have not met the criteria for approval by the authorities.

In addition, US media reported on Thursday that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is planning to allow the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine "booster" to be used on 12 to 15-year-old adolescents.

The FDA is also expected to authorize vaccine "booster" shots for children with immune deficiencies in the 5-11 age range, the report said.

The vaccine advisory committee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will meet next week to vote on the changes in case FDA endorses the injections.

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.

Jury Finds Teva Pharmaceuticals Responsible for Opioid Crisis in New York - Atty. General

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - A jury in New York State found that Teva Pharmaceuticals and other opioid manufacturers are responsible for the opioid crisis in the state, Attorney General Letitia James said on Thursday.

"A jury has found opioid manufacturer Teva and others responsible for the destruction they caused Americans by fueling the opioid crisis," James said via Twitter. "This ruling in our trial is a victory for every family and community torn apart by opioids."

James added that her office will immediately seek a trial to determine how much Teva Pharmaceuticals and other opioid manufacturers will pay in damage fees.

New York State sued Teva Pharmaceuticals, Purdue Pharma and several distributors, claiming that opioids such as oxycodone and hydrocodone were marketed as safe and less addictive alternatives to common opiates such as morphine.

Opioid overdoses killed more than 100,000 Americans in the past six years, according to media reports. Many of the victims either overdosed on prescription opioids or initially became hooked on prescribed painkillers and later switched to deadly black-market alternatives such as heroin.

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 Health Agency Recommends Avoiding Cruise Ship Travel Regardless of Vaccination Status

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Americans should avoid all cruise travel even if they have been vaccinated for the novel coronavirus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Thursday as it raised to the highest level the risk level for travelers from the Omicron variant.

"Avoid cruise travel, regardless of vaccination status," the CDC said in a travel caution posted on its website. "The COVID-19 Travel Health Notice level has been updated from Level 3 to Level 4, the highest level. This reflects increases in cases onboard cruise ships since identification of the Omicron variant."

The Omicron variant, first detected in South Africa in November, is said to be more transmissible but causing mild cases and being far less deadly than the Delta variant that had spiked earlier this year.

On Wednesday, US presidential medical adviser Anthony Fauci said that Omicron cases were likely to peak in the United States by the end of January.

CDC data on Tuesday showed that Omicron accounted for 58.6% of all new infections in the United States in the week to December 25. The seven-day average for coronavirus cases was at 240,400 per day, some 60% higher than the previous week.

"Getting vaccinated is still the best way to protect yourself from severe disease, slow the spread of COVID-19, and reduce the number of new variants," the CDC said. "People who are not fully vaccinated should follow additional recommendations before, during, and after travel."

According to the CDC, more than 61% of the total US population is fully vaccinated, and over 32% of fully vaccinated adults have received a "booster" dose.

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 Postpones Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference Set for January - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has decided to postpone the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), a diplomatic source at the Russian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday.

The conference was planned to be held on January 4-28.

"On Wednesday, it was decided to postpone the NPT Review Conference. New dates have not yet been agreed upon. Most member states are in favor of holding it face-to-face," the source said.

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 Postpones Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference Set for January - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has decided to postpone the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), a diplomatic source at the Russian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday.

The conference was planned to be held on January 4-28.

"On Wednesday, it was decided to postpone the NPT Review Conference. New dates have not yet been agreed upon. Most member states are in favor of holding it face-to-face," the source said.

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 to Clear Pfizer's COVID-19 Booster Vaccine for 12-15 Year Old Adolescents - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is planning to allow the Pfizer coronavirus "booster" vaccines to be used on 12 to 15-year-old adolescents, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

The FDA is also expected to cut the period of time after which both, adolescents and adults can get Pfizer's booster shot six months to five months after their second vaccine dose, the report said.

In addition, the FDA will also authorize booster shots for children with immune deficiencies in the 5-11 age range, the report said.

The vaccine advisory committee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will be meeting next week to vote on the changes in case FDA endorses them.

On Wednesday, the US authorities reported nearly 500,000 coronavirus cases amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant. Health experts have said the Omicron variant cases are mild and no deaths have so far been reported.

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.

JetBlue Cancels 1,280 Flights in January Due to COVID-19-Driven Staff Shortages - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - JetBlue Airways has informed its employees that it will cancel 1,280 flights in the first half of January because its staff has been affected by the coronavirus Omicron variant, CNBC reported on Thursday.

The past week has been one of the most difficult operating periods during the pandemic, the report cited three JetBlue department leaders as saying in a note to staff on Tuesday. The significant growth in Omicron cases over just a couple of days is at a level that no one could have reasonably prepared for, the department leaders added.

The report said JetBlue is reducing the number of flights because the company is aware Omicron cases have yet to peak in the Northeast of the United States in a week or two, where the vast majority of its crew members are based.

The proposed flight cuts represent almost 10 percent of the airline's daily schedules, the report also said, adding that JetBlue canceled 173 flights on Thursday or 17 percent of its schedule. JetBlue has said it will allow staff to return to work if they show no symptoms of infection within a period of five days - as per the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance.

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.

Ten Richest Billionaires in World Add Combined \$402Bln to Their Wealth in 2021 - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The ten richest billionaires in the world added \$402 billion to their wealth in 2021, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The group of wealthiest individuals is led by Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk, who added \$121 billion to his net worth in 2021 to bring his total wealth to \$277 billion, the report said. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos added \$5 billion to his net worth in 2021, totaling \$195 billion, the report said.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg added \$24 billion to his net worth this year, which brings his total wealth to \$128 billion, the report added.

Other billionaires include luxury goods conglomerate LVMH CEO Bernard Arnault, Microsoft chief Bill Gates, Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Berkshire Hathaway CEO Warren Buffett and Oracle founder Larry Ellison, 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.

US Jobless Claims Hit Near 50-Year Low During Christmas Week

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Filings for US unemployment benefits hit a near 50-year low during the week to Christmas with some 198,000 claims that came in about 8,000 lower from the previous week's total, data from the Labor Department showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending December 25, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 198,000, a decrease of 8,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a news release. Three weeks prior to that, filings for US unemployment were at 184,000, the lowest for a week since September 6, 1969.

Economists polled by US media had forecast on average 206,000 filings for weekly unemployment benefits last week.

"At this time of year there are heavy seasonal adjustments and problems compensating for holidays but the trend lower in jobless claims is undeniable," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "Jobs are plentiful in the United States."

The United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as the COVID-19 crisis upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

Analysts say US workers were enjoying some of the greatest opportunities ever as acute labor shortages and post-pandemic shifts enable them to demand higher wages and prioritize child-care and health concerns.

In a separate report released last week, the Labor Department said the number of Americans quitting their jobs fell from a record high in October while employment opportunities rose, easing some of the tight labor situation.

After staggering unemployment initially triggered by the outbreak of the COVID-19, the labor market has steadily picked up this year, showing a jobless rate of just 4.2% in November from a high of 14.8% in April 2020.

November's jobless rate of 4.2%, interestingly, came in just above the 4% mark that the Fed defines as maximum employment in the United States.

The central bank needs maximum employment, inflation at 2% or more per annum and steady economic growth to hike interest rates, which it has kept at between zero and 0.25% since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic nearly two years ago.

The economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to the pandemic measures. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.0% in the third.

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