

1/6/22 Thursday

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'Low Vaccination Rates' Created 'Perfect Conditions for Emergence' of Omicron, WHO Chief Says

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The head of the World Health Organization (WHO) blasted the world's richest nations for refusing to share vaccines with the world's poorest nations, allowing the COVID-19 pandemic to persist and new variants of the virus to emerge.

"To end the acute stage of the pandemic, the highly effective tools science has given us need to be shared fairly and quickly with all countries of the world," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told [reporters on Thursday](#).

"Vaccine inequity and health inequity overall were the biggest failures of last year," he said, calling on all nations to support an initiative to vaccinate 70% of people in every country by the middle of 2022.

Tedros has [long criticized](#) the world's richest nations, where the pharmaceutical companies that created and own the recipes for nearly all SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are located, for keeping vast stockpiles of shots for their own citizens and charging high prices for buyers in poorer nations, creating huge disparities in the reception of vaccines.

"While some countries have had enough personal protective equipment, tests and vaccines to stockpile throughout this pandemic, many countries do not have enough to meet basic baseline needs or modest targets, which no rich country would have been satisfied with," he said.

"Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma and Omicron reflect that in part because of low vaccination rates, we've created the perfect conditions for the emergence of virus variants," the WHO chief noted. "Booster after booster in a small number of countries will not end a pandemic while billions remain completely unprotected."

Indeed, just days before South Africa detected the first cases of a new variant later revealed to be Omicron, [Tedros warned](#) that it was "a biological certainty that at some point, another virus will emerge that we simply can't contain."

Each time the virus enters a new host, it is given a new chance to subtly change its genetic makeup, producing a slightly different form of the virus. The vast majority of changes are benign, but some can grant the virus a qualitative advantage it didn't have before, such as the ability to spread more quickly or to more effectively get around a person's immune system defenses. It can even make the virus more deadly, although pathogens generally become less lethal over time.

Tedros also criticized the increasingly common use of "mild" to describe the Omicron variant, which is [far more infectious](#) than other variants and can infect fully vaccinated people, but [hospitalizes fewer](#) people it infects.

"While Omicron does appear to be less severe compared to Delta, especially in those vaccinated, it does not mean it should be categorized as 'mild,'" he said. "Just like previous

variants, Omicron is hospitalizing people and it is killing people. In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick, that it is overwhelming health systems around the world. Hospitals are becoming overcrowded and understaffed, which further results in preventable deaths from not only COVID-19, but other diseases and injuries where patients cannot receive timely care.” Last month, [Nature reported](#) that just 7% of Africa’s 1.2 billion people had been fully vaccinated, with significant disparity between the continent’s 53 nations - Morocco has vaccinated 62% of its population, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo has vaccinated less than 1% of its people.

By comparison, [70% of the United Kingdom](#) is fully vaccinated and 62.4% of the United States is fully vaccinated. On top of that, many First World nations have been giving out third “booster” shots for several months, with 73 million given out in the US alone, and Israel now rolling out a [second round](#) of boosters.

“At the current pace of vaccine rollout, 109 countries would miss out on fully vaccinating 70% of their populations by the start of July 2022,” Tedros said on Thursday. “But we can and must turn it around.”

US-made vaccines like those by Moderna and Pfizer are expensive, and their makers have drawn condemnation for refusing to offer lower prices to poorer nations. Thanks to intellectual property laws, those nations are also prevented from making their own generic versions. As a result, most of Africa, Asia and Latin America have gotten their vaccines from Russia, China, and India.

At a China-Africa summit hosted by Senegal in November 2021, [Beijing pledged](#) 1 billion SARS-CoV-2 vaccines to Africa and it has [signed several deals](#) with South Africa, Morocco, Egypt and others to produce millions of vaccines for the continent, as well. China exported [2 billion vaccines](#) in 2021, even while immunizing [more than 80% of its own](#) massive 1.4 billion-strong population.

The WHO isn’t alone in its warnings about the dangers of allowing the pandemic to continue: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), rarely a friend of the world’s poorer nations, [said in October](#) that even if richer nations fully immunize themselves, COVID-19’s persistence in other parts of the globe would continue to drag global economic recovery. Further, richer nations are projected to recover faster and sooner than poorer nations.

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Belt & Road Expands in Africa as Morocco Signs Joint Implementation Plan With China
By - Morgan Artyukhina

China and Morocco agreed on Wednesday on a joint implementation plan for the North African country's integration into the Belt and Road Initiative, a globe-spanning infrastructure megaproject initiated by Beijing.

The deal was signed by Ning Jizhe, vice chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, whose delegations met via video link.

Morocco is the first North African country to sign such an agreement, which lays out the practical cooperation on construction between the two countries.

"The Implementation Plan depicts the road map of jointly building the BRI between China and Morocco by clarifying cooperation principles and guidelines, cooperation priorities, coordinating mechanisms, etc.", [China's NDRC explained](#) in a news release.

"The two sides will seek to better identify the areas of shared interests between the BRI and the Economic Take-off Plan, as well as Industrial Strategy of Morocco by deepening pragmatic cooperation in infrastructure construction and logistics, trade and investment, industry, agriculture and fisheries, energy, finance, culture, sports and tourism, education, science, technology and green development, health, security, non-governmental cooperation, and other relevant fields", the commission added.

Bourita emphasised that the deal "was not born yesterday ... It is supported by long-standing diplomatic relations", according to [Morocco World News](#). The two nations signed a memorandum of understanding on the BRI in 2017.

Ning said the deal "carries a spirit of peace and cooperation" and is based on prior deals, such as [a July 2021 deal](#) for Morocco's Sothema to produce 5 million doses of Sinopharm's SARS-CoV-2 vaccine at its factory in a Casablanca suburb.

"Currently, the direct investment from China to Morocco reaches \$380 million. Most goes into infrastructure, mobile parts, telecommunication, and fishery. In 2020, the bilateral trade reached \$4.76 billion with a 2% increase compared with last year, even with COVID-19 pandemic and a recession in international trade", he said, adding that bilateral trade would break \$6 billion this year.

According to [2019 data](#), China bought just 1.47% of Morocco's exports, buying minerals like lead, zinc, copper, and calcium, and Morocco obtained 9.09% of its imports from China, the largest of which were broadcasting equipment, tea, and pile fabric. In both categories, Spain and France were Morocco's largest trade partners.

Trade with Morocco has come under increased scrutiny of late, with the European Union Court of Justice [ruling in September](#) 2021 that a fisheries deal was invalid since it had been made without the consent of the Polisario Front, a liberation front recognised by the United Nations as the legitimate representatives of the Saharawi people, who are indigenous to Western Sahara. Polisario has long sought to deter other nations from investing in or buying products made in Western Sahara, saying it endorses what they call [a colonial occupation](#) by Morocco.

China isn't one of the 41 United Nations member states that recognises the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) declared by the Polisario in Western Sahara in 1976, making them the only socialist state never to do so. However, in October 2021, Luoyang-based China Molybdenum ended the importation of phosphate rock mined in Western Sahara by its Brazilian subsidiary, Copebras, under pressure from its investors, [according to Western Sahara](#) Resource Watch (WSRW).

BRI's African Partners Expand

Other African nations have recently expanded their cooperation with China as well, [including Eritrea](#), where Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with President Isaias Afwerki and Foreign Minister Osman Saleh on Wednesday.

The two nations' foreign [ministries jointly announced](#) a new Strategic Partnership, saying it was "rooted on the tradition of mutual support, based on similarities in the historical trajectories of

the two countries and their shared values, predicated on respect of the rule of law, independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and cooperation, aimed at promoting global and regional peace, stability and prosperity". The Red Sea state joined the BRI last November. After visiting Eritrea, Wang proceeded to Kenya on Thursday, which the [Global Times described](#) as "a model for jointly building the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a vital player in settling the turmoil in the Horn of Africa".

According to the Chinese [Embassy in Kenya](#), Wang will meet with President Uhuru Kenyatta in discussions that will "promote the implementation of the outcomes of the 8th FOCAC Ministerial Conference, dovetail new measures for practical China-Kenya cooperation, and support African countries in defeating COVID-19 and achieving economic recovery at an early date".

Wang will also reportedly tour a new \$353 million oil terminal being built by the China Communication Construction Co. in Mombasa, just one of several infrastructure projects Chinese firms are building in the East African state. Others include a 480-kilometre-long Standard Gauge Railway linking the port city of Mombasa to the inland capital of Nairobi and a 27.1-kilometre elevated expressway in Nairobi.

Several western institutions have accused China of forcing African states into its sphere of influence with BRI contract clauses they call "[debt trap diplomacy](#)". However, Beijing maintains a strict policy of non-interference in other nations' affairs and regularly forgives large parts of the debts owed to Chinese institutions by other nations. This is in sharp contrast to Western institutions like the International Monetary Fund, which mandates [neoliberal economic restructuring](#) when it gives nations loans.

Of the 53 nations in Africa, only Ethiopia has never been a colony of European powers, which waged bloody and [often genocidal wars](#) of conquest across the continent in the 19th and 20th centuries that left tens of millions dead.

At a China-Africa summit hosted by Senegal in November 2021, [Beijing pledged](#) 1 billion SARS-CoV-2 vaccines to Africa, the world's [least-vaccinated continent](#), and that it would help African nations recover from pandemic-related economic troubles "without imposing its will".

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Video: Renewed Shooting in Central Almaty as Gas Price Riots Continue

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Gunfire was heard again in the city early in the morning on Friday, however, the barricades have been dismantled and there are no police officers or protesters on the streets, a Sputnik correspondent said.

The local newspaper Vlast reported gunshots and explosions in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and former capital, which has experienced several days of [violent riots](#). The shooting was reported in the area of Republic Square, a large public space downtown that has been the site of several incidents involving rioters and police.

Police reportedly used a loudspeaker to demand people leave the streets, and all residents received text messages on their phones reminding them of the curfew, according to Mir-24.

Calmer protests were also reported in Aktau, a city on the opposite side of the country, on the Caspian Sea where the crisis began several days ago. Rich in petroleum, locals demonstrated over a sharp rise in the price of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) used in homes and vehicles. Kazakh television reported demonstrators were proceeding to the city's central square, but did not report any clashes with police. However, another report also said a group of activists had blocked the road to the city's airport. This came after reporters earlier on Thursday suggested demonstrators were dismantling tents and preparing to leave the square.

On Friday, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced that six gas companies would be investigated for potential price collusion that might have caused the unpopular price spike. According to Kazakh TV channel Khabar 24, members of the government in the Mangystau Region, where Aktau is located, met with protesters on Thursday to discuss the possibility of resolving the situation, including by lowering gas prices and obtaining guarantees of preserving public safety.

Tokayev has declared a state of emergency, dismissed the government, and removed the head of the country's Security Council, former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, from his position. The violence has spread to numerous cities around the country, where violent clashes with police have left [nearly 750 officers injured](#) and 18 dead, two of whom were reportedly beheaded. More than 2,200 demonstrators have been arrested and at least 168 have been injured, including 77 who have been hospitalised.

Because of the rioting, which has seen demonstrators seizing arms, torching public buildings, and killing police and national guardsmen, Tokayev invoked the mutual self-defence clause of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), for which Russia and Armenia agreed to [provide peacekeeping forces](#) in the Central Asian country. The soldiers have been assigned duties defending Kazakh public buildings and have authority to return fire if attacked by rioters. They will not be assigned to disperse protesters, the CSTO said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has said it views the events in Kazakhstan as an outsider-inspired attempt to undermine the country's security and integrity.

A source in the United Nations told RIA Novosti that Kazakhstan's permanent envoy to the international forum had given the Security Council a document updating them on the measures taken to stabilise the situation and noting that no rallies can justify attacks on law enforcement officers.

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On Anniversary of 6 January Capitol Attack, GOP Is Still Divided on How to Respond

Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), who first objected to President Joe Biden's election on 6 January 2021, said in a Senate Rules Committee hearing on Wednesday, "We are approaching a solemn anniversary this week. And it is an anniversary of a violent terrorist attack on the Capitol".

Cruz, who argued for forming an election commission to evaluate voter fraud claims in response to Biden's 2021 win, then asked, "What could have prevented the breach of the Capitol? What could have prevented the riot getting as far as it did?"

Other GOP leaders have not been as quick to condemn the events of 6 January.

Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) was accused of being "very disrespectful" by Sandra Garza in a meeting with Capitol Police. Garza is the partner of deceased Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick who died on 7 January after being sprayed with chemical substances, suspected to be bear spray, during the insurrection.

Although both Garza and Sicknick were supporters of Trump previous to the events of 6 January, Garza now holds Trump and those who "enabled" him "100 percent [responsible](#)".

Garza, along with Sicknick's mother and two other 6 January officers, has lobbied Congress to create an independent commission to investigate the attacks. During the meeting, Graham's "bored and distracted" demeanor reportedly upset [Garza](#).

Graham ultimately opposed the commission, believing it would "turn into a partisan food fight". However, he agreed in the meeting that there should be some accountability for the attack.

Thus far, more than 725 people [have been arrested](#) in connection with the Capitol riots.

Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI), who also opposed the request for an independent commission, has been accused of downplaying 6 January 2021. During a Capitol security hearing on 23 February 2021, during his questioning time, Johnson [referred to the rioters](#) as "fake Trump protesters".

20 hours ago

In early February on a conservative 1130 WISN radio talk show, Johnson also said of the attacks, "This didn't seem like an armed insurrection to me", even though the weapons that were seized by law enforcement included: Molotov cocktails, bear spray, guns, and knives. Others used baseball bats, a fire extinguisher, a wooden club, a spear, and a stun gun.

Other Republicans have accused the White House and Democrats of politicising 6 January to promote their own legislation.

"Their [Democrats] brazen attempts to use January 6 to support radical election reform and changing the rules of the Senate to accomplish this goal, will not succeed", Senator Graham [tweeted](#) this morning.

An October poll from Quinnipiac University showed that 93 percent of Democrats believe the 6 January attack was the fault of former President Trump, while only 66 percent of Republicans believe the same.

Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD), who worked to establish the 9/11 Commission, believes "disinformation and the use of algorithms and social media" played a major role in instigating the Capitol attacks.

Meanwhile, Reps. Matt Gaetz of Florida and Marjorie Greene of Georgia [plan to "expose the truth](#) about the Jan 6 protests" on Capitol Hill later this afternoon.

Republican strategist John Thomas sees any defending or rationalising of the 6 January attacks as damaging to Republicans running for election. His advice to the GOP? "Dodge the question [about 6 Jan] and pivot to the broader question of election integrity".

Former VP Dick Cheney also commented on the events of 6 January 2021, making an appearance at the Capitol on the anniversary of the riots.

"It's an important historical event. You can't overestimate how important it is", he said. "I'm deeply disappointed we don't have better leadership in the Republican Party to restore the Constitution".

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Scientists Name Tree in Honor of Leonardo DiCaprio For Helping to Stop Logging of Ebo Forest
The *Uvariopsis dicaprio*, named after the actor, is a small evergreen tree with glossy yellow flowers which grow at its trunk. The tree was discovered by British researchers from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Actor Leonardo DiCaprio, aged 47, is having a tree named after him for his efforts to halt the logging of the Ebo forest in Cameroon.

In July of 2020, the Cameroon government [revealed approved logging plans](#) for the forest. Of the 500,000 acres which makes up the Ebo forest, 169,000 acres had been approved for logging.

"We think [DiCaprio] was crucial in helping to stop the logging of the Ebo forest," Kew botanist Dr. Martin Cheek told the [BBC](#).

DiCaprio has campaigned to protect the Ebo forest located in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, where the tree was discovered. The forest is home to diverse wildlife including endangered gorillas, elephants, and tool-using chimps. It [is also the home](#) of the Banen people who live in about 40 communities and have existed in the area for generations.

The government's excuse for logging the forest was the promotion of wealth and jobs. However, conservationists pointed out that previous logging in Cameroon had not benefited residents economically.

DiCaprio used his social media exposure to fight the logging plans, asking followers to sign a petition.

The actor has been a long-standing advocate of the environment and wildlife. His foundation, which is dedicated to addressing climate change and environmental threats, has been active since 1998.

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Sen. Majority Leader Schumer Recounts Jan. 6 Chants: 'There's the Big Jew, Let's Get Him'

Schumer, along with other members, was on the Senate floor when the Jan. 6 rioters breached the Capitol building in a bid to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. Videos of the Jan. 6 riots include Schumer being evacuated by his security detail in the midst of the mayhem, as they had to change course and run from the crowd.

"I was within 30 feet of these nasty, racist, bigoted insurrectionists. Had someone had a gun, had two of them blocked off the door, who knows what would have happened. I was told later

that one of them reportedly said, 'There's the big Jew. Let's go get him,'" said Schumer. The anti-Semitic recounting was originally told to NYT in March 2021.

According to media reports, one rioter was wearing a sweatshirt that read "Camp [Auschwitz](#)" on January 6, which was also the day Schumer learned he would become the Senate majority leader. The news came after Jon Ossoff won the final Georgia Senate race.

More Democratic senators had prepared speeches to mark the one-year anniversary of the 2021 attacks on Capitol Hill, in which they also [blasted GOP politicians](#), including Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, and Lindsey Graham.

Schumer, who has been criticized by Democrats as being 'too' cautious, is threatening to upend Senate traditions by addressing the Senate's legislative [filibuster](#) rules. He will do so if Republicans vote to block the Democrats' voting rights legislation.

"If Senate Republicans continue to abuse the filibuster to prevent this body from acting, then the Senate must adapt," Schumer said on Tuesday.

The vote is currently planned for January 17.

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US Creates New Special Operations Command Headquarters in Albania - European Command

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US armed forces have created a new forward coordinating headquarters in Albania in southeastern Europe, the European Command (EUCOM) announced in an official report on Friday.

"As part of an ongoing effort in enhancing Special Operations Forces capabilities as a keystone for regional stability, US Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) has made the decision to locate a forward-based SOF headquarters, on a rotational basis, in Albania," the report said.

EUCOM explained in the report that the location of the forward headquarters in Albania will provide increased interoperability with US Albanian allies, important access to transportation hubs in the Balkans and greater logistical flexibility.

"The ability to rapidly move and train within the Balkans, in close coordination with other allied and partner forces, made Albania the best location for this effort," Special Operations Command Europe Commander Maj. Gen. David Tabor said in the report.

Albania remained a strong NATO ally and the United States enjoyed a strong relationship with the Albanian government and Ministry of Defense, which made the placement of a forward headquarters there a natural fit and it would increase the flexibility of both special operations and conventional forces in the region, the report said.

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US Diplomat Sherman, OSCE Secretary General Discuss Ukraine, Russia – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and with the OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmidt in a phone call agreed to seek diplomatic ways for de-escalation during the upcoming council meeting next week amid ongoing tensions between Russian and Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

“Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman spoke today with OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmidt to discuss their shared concern about Russia’s military build-up along Ukraine’s borders,” Price said in a press release. “They agreed that the OSCE Permanent Council meeting next week will be an opportunity to call for de-escalation and diplomacy as well as discuss approaches to reduce regional tensions. The OSCE is a forum where all participating States have an equal voice.”

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US Cuts Interval for Booster Shot to 5 Months for Adults Receiving Moderna COVID Vaccines

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Friday that it has shortened the waiting interval between receiving the initial COVID-19 vaccine doses produced by Moderna and getting a booster shot from six months to five in American adults aged 18 years and older.

“Today, the US Food and Drug Administration amended the emergency use authorization (EUA) for the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine to shorten the time between the completion of a primary series of the vaccine and a booster dose to at least five months for individuals 18 years of age and older,” FDA said in a press release.

On Thursday, the US Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted to recommend shortening the interval between primary series of vaccination against the coronavirus and the Pfizer booster shot from six to five months in adolescents who are 12-17 years old.

At present, only the Pfizer-BioNTech booster vaccine is authorized and recommended for use in adolescents 12-17 years old.

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US State of Georgia Joins \$26Bln Opioid Settlement With J&J, Pharmaceutical Distributors

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia announced in a statement on Friday that it has signed on to the \$26 billion multi-state settlement with opioid producer Johnson & Johnson, as well as with the pharmaceutical distributors Cardinal, McKesson and AmerisourceBergen.

"Attorney General Chris Carr today announced that the state of Georgia has signed on to the \$26 billion multi-state agreement with Cardinal, McKesson and AmerisourceBergen - the

nation's three major pharmaceutical distributors - and opioid manufacturer and marketer Johnson & Johnson," the statement said.

Carr said the authorities are dedicated to holding those accountable who have played a critical role in contributing to the ongoing opioid epidemic in the United States.

"Today's announcement is the result of our tireless efforts to achieve the best possible outcome for our state and fellow citizens. This includes working with our litigating local governments so that our state is positioned to maximize its recovery under this settlement. We are confident that joining the settlement at this time will prove beneficial to our state, our citizens and our communities, as we continue our fight to end this epidemic and address the widespread damage it has caused," Carr said.

Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate there were an estimated 100,306 drug overdose deaths in the United States during 12-month period ending in April 2021, an increase of 28.5% from the 78,056 deaths during the same period the year before.

Many of the victims either overdosed on prescription opioids or initially became addicted to prescribed painkillers and later switched to deadly black-market alternatives such as heroin.

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US Adds 199,000 Jobs In December, Unemployment Rate Declines to 3.9% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US employers added 199,000 jobs in the month of December, underperforming economists' expectations by more than a half and the unemployment rate fell to 3.9%, Labor Department said on Friday.

"Total non-farm payroll employment rose by 199,000 in December, and the unemployment rate declined to 3.9 percent," the Labor Department said in a news release.

An unemployment rate of 4% or below is defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated an addition of 450,000 jobs in December, versus a previous gain of 210,000.

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US Has Not Yet Seen Omicron-Surge Peak - CDC Director Walensky

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet seen the peak of the cases caused by the Omicron variant of COVID-10, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"I don't believe we've seen the peak yet here in the United States. I will say that hospital right now are full of people who are unvaccinated," Walensky told NBC News, speaking on the surge of the Omicron variant.

Omicron has emerged as the dominant COVID strain in the United States, causing 95.4% of new US coronavirus cases last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday. Despite this, the variant has proven to be less lethal than Delta, which caused a resurgence in hospitalizations and deaths last year after a respite from the original COVID-19 strain.

The Omicron strain contains more mutations in the spike protein — 32 — than all previous variants, meaning that it can 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.

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RPT - US Should Provide COVID-19 Vaccines to Poor Countries, Not Boosters to Children - Doctor

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US government should distribute more coronavirus vaccines to poor countries around the world instead of administering booster shots to children in the United States, prominent US cardiologist and surgeon Dr. Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"The United States should send additional doses to low-income countries instead of boosting a very low risk group. You can potentially save millions of lives abroad," Novick said.

On Monday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it had issued an emergency use authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech's booster coronavirus vaccine for 12-15-year-old adolescents.

Novick, who leads the Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance and has operated on thousands of children around the world, called the FDA decision a "waste of doses" that could go to other countries where people do not have adequate vaccine coverage.

"Many prominent physicians in the United States also share this view," he said.

Novick emphasized that he does not advocate booster shots for children at all.

"If they go down to the 5 to 12-year-olds, I think that is complete lunacy to do boosters for kids that age," he said.

Novick noted that the coronavirus latest Omicron variant is highly transmissible, but the cases are mild and hospitalizations are significantly less than what was seen with the two previous variants. He also said the Biden administration is sending mixed signals to the public over the current situation, causing unnecessary fear in many people.

"To be clear, I am not saying that children in the United States should not be protected. But what I am saying is the risk for those kids is so low that they have already been fully vaccinated," he said.

Novick pointed out that a risk of myocarditis in adolescents who received the vaccine is low despite being more prevalent in this age group than in others.

"The risk of myocarditis in this group is extremely low," he said.

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RPT - UNSC President Sends Note by Kazakh Mission to UN About Situation in Country - Source

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The President of the UN Security Council sent an information note by the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations about the situation in the Central Asian country, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

"The President of the UN Security Council sent an information note to the Council's member states from the Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the United Nations about the ongoing situation in the country and measures taken by the authorities to stabilize it," the source told Sputnik.

The document stresses that any protests or demonstrations can not justify attacks and killings of law enforcement officers.

"Attacks against governmental buildings, airports, vital infrastructure and gun stores are indicative of the planned nature of the conspirators' actions," the note by the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations said.

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RPT - US Cardiologists to Visit Russia Twice in 2022 to Operate on 20 Children - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Pediatric cardiologists from the US-based Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance will visit the Russian city of Kemerovo on two occasions this year in order to operate on at least 20 children with complex heart problems, team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"We have plans for two trips in 2022 - one in April-May and the second one in the fourth quarter of this year," Novick, a renowned US cardiologist and surgeon, said.

The Cardiac Alliance's specialists plan to operate on 20 to 25 children, Novick said.

"Our colleagues from Kemerovo are picking complicated cases for us. Such cases can take six to eight hours to operate on," he said.

The surgeon underscored that each of such operations requires intense concentration and a lot of time.

Novick and his colleagues have been working with specialists in Kemerovo for many years. In the period November-December, they operated on 11 pediatric patients with complex heart problems.

"We and our colleagues in Kemerovo are happy with this cooperation. As long as everybody continues to be happy, we will be going there," Novick said.

Asked about general plans for cooperation in Russia, Novick said his team has worked in different cities in the past but currently only cooperates with Kemerovo.

The Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance has done some 500 surgeries in Russia since 2008. The group is comprised of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in "hot spots" around the world. Previously, the Novick Cardiac Alliance performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

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RPT- IMF Carefully Monitoring Kazakhstan Amid Ongoing Protests - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is carefully monitoring the situation in Kazakhstan amid ongoing protests throughout the country, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

"It is still too early to comment on the implications of recent events in Kazakhstan, but we are monitoring the developments carefully," the spokesperson said on Thursday.

Mass protests began throughout Kazakhstan in the early days of 2022 over opposition to a two-fold increase in the price of liquified petroleum gas.

Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency in the country until January 19 and invited CSTO peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control.

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RPT - Dozens Gather Outside DC Jail in Support of Imprisoned US Capitol Rioters

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Dozens of demonstrators gathered outside the jail in Washington, DC to show support for detainees being held at the facility in connection with events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The demonstrators at the so-called "Justice for J6" candlelight vigil gave brief speeches sympathetic towards the January 6 breach of the US Capitol and sang songs and hymns for the detainees.

One of the speakers was the mother of slain demonstrator Ashley Babbitt, who was killed by law enforcement during the Capitol breach.

Alexander, a DC resident, told Sputnik he attended the event to protest inhumane treatment of prisoners worldwide and the taking of political prisoners in the United States.

All that demonstrators can hope for is to create awareness about the violation of people's rights, Alexander said.

"The situation needs to change," Alexander said. "We need the people that are held here to be charged and to have their days in court and be allowed the legal system to operate functionally."

Right now, he added, there are totalitarians from the top of the US government to local officials who are making the inmates stay "as inhumane and tortured as possible."

39 of the inmates have been jailed for charges in connection with the Capitol riot, a DC Department of Corrections spokesperson said earlier this week.

More than 700 individuals have been arrested for crimes related to the January 6 US Capitol breach, including over 220 facing charges of impeding law enforcement, according to the Justice Department.

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RPT - January 6 Riot Exposed America's Vulnerabilities to Disinformation - Ex-US Attorneys

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - The storming of the US Capitol by a violent mob last January exposed how susceptible Americans are to disinformation, in addition to shining a light on the weaknesses of the electoral system, two former US Attorneys told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden in his speech commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Capitol attack condemned former President Donald Trump for "spreading a web of lies" about the 2020 election being stolen. Biden also called the storming of the Capitol an "armed insurrection."

"January 6 showed that there are a lot of people susceptible to misinformation. There are so many social media platforms spreading this," former Assistant US Attorney for the District of Columbia Kami Chavis said.

Chavis, who is also director of the Criminal Justice Program at Wake Forest University School of Law, citing recent polling, said a large percentage of Republicans believe Biden was not legitimately elected.

"With January 6, can it happen again? Absolutely," Chavis said.

Former US Assistant State Attorney in Broward County, Florida, David Cannady, said the US is still "very vulnerable," even without Trump at the forefront, but does not believe January 6 was a dry run for 2024.

"I don't think they laid the seeds for another insurrection. I think something can happen but not that," Cannady said. "I relate it to Bin Laden in 9/11. They're not going to do the same things again, but they will do something. Donald Trump is currently on a tour with Bill O'Reilly stoking the fire for the next thing."

What concerned Americans should be watching, Cannady said, are the ways in which the Republican Party is institutionalizing voter suppression, the erasure of votes of Black and brown voters, Native Americans, Asians and young people who are likely to vote Democratic and using institutions like the courts to cement their power.

"The Ku Klux Klan is big in the South and in Maryland. They took off their hoods and put on suits. They institutionalized it," Cannady said. "Now, Republicans are putting political supporters in place to implement voter suppression, for example. That's where our vulnerability is. And Biden is not doing what he needs to do to effectively combat this."

LACK OF CRITICAL THINKING / EXTREMISM

BLAQUESMITH Psychological Consultative Services President, Dr. Ramel Kweku Akyirefi Smith, told Sputnik the events of that day demonstrated that lack of critical thinking and in some cases, illiteracy, have become America's biggest vulnerability.

"It comes from people's inability to be critical thinkers. Some people actually believe that the vote was stolen," Smith said. "It shows a low level of intelligence and ease with which some people can be manipulated by the media."

Smith said anti-government sentiment, racial animus and the decision by Republicans in Congress and public officials in the states to use the co-called "Big Lie" to cement political control is what is driving the party at the moment.

"If you look at and focus on what happened, you see America's inability to confront truth," Smith said.

Smith lamented the erasure of subjects and programs that would enhance critical thinking.

"It's a civil war, a fight for the soul of the country. It's like a cancer. The disease stays dormant for a while and then comes back more aggressively than before. When you are unaware or ignore the signs, cancer will take you," Smith added. "The republic is weak now; we're very vulnerable and the fact that Trump is contemplating another run shows idiocy of this country. The country is sick and more vulnerable than ever before."

Renowned musician, composer and writer Aurora Flores told Sputnik she remains deeply concerned that the US will see a reoccurrence of this type of violence.

Flores, a two-time Emmy Award winner, said America's standing globally has been damaged by the coup attempt and the continuing attempts by Republicans and white nationalist extremists to undermine or overthrow the US government.

She said it is mind-boggling and deeply infuriating that the participants who committed these acts have gotten incredibly light sentences.

Flores also said there is no doubt the situation would have been different if the rioters were not white.

"If this was Black people or Latinos, it would have been a bloodbath on those steps. But the rioters walked in after police opened the doors there," she said.

The rioters, she added, carried mace, were fully armed, and wore uniforms.

"Everyone will end up killing each other," Flores warned. "I am very, very sad at what's happening but most of all, I'm really terrified."

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RECAST - January 6 Riot Exposed America's Vulnerabilities to Disinformation - Ex-US Attorneys

(Recast to correct name in para 3)

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UPDATE - Dozens Gather Outside DC Jail in Support of Imprisoned US Capitol Rioters

(Adds new quotes in paras 6,7)

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One of the speakers was the mother of slain demonstrator Ashley Babbitt, who was killed by law enforcement during the Capitol breach.

Alexander, a DC resident, told Sputnik he attended the event to protest inhumane treatment of prisoners worldwide and the taking of political prisoners in the United States.

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"The situation needs to change," Alexander said. "We need the people that are held here to be charged and to have their days in court and be allowed the legal system to operate functionally."

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Harris Inside DNC Building on January 6 When Bomb Discovered Outside - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris was inside the Democratic National Committee (DNC) building on January 6, 2021, when a pipe bomb was discovered outside, Politico said in a report, citing four people familiar with her movements on that day.

Harris was evacuated from the DNC building approximately seven minutes after US Capitol police began investigating the possible pipe bomb that was described as "viable" by the FBI, the sources said on Thursday. Another pipe bomb was discovered outside of the Republican National Committee (RNC) building that day.

In March, the FBI released a video of the suspect that planted the pipe bombs at the DNC and RNC buildings and offered a \$100,000 reward for information leading to identifying the individual.

Harris's presence at the DNC on January 6 has raised questions about her security on that day amid the protest at the US Capitol. Federal law enforcement have been criticized for failing to anticipate the events of January 6.

US President Joe Biden praised in remarks on Thursday the law enforcement officers who defended the Capitol building on January 6 and pledged to protect the nation from further attacks on democracy.

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Chinese National Pleads Guilty to Stealing Trade Secrets From Monsanto - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - A Chinese national pleaded guilty in a US court to stealing trade secrets from Monsanto agribusiness corporation to benefit Beijing, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"Xiang Haitao, 44, a Chinese national formerly residing in Chesterfield, Missouri, pleaded guilty today to conspiracy to commit economic espionage," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday. "According to court documents, Xiang conspired to steal a trade secret from Monsanto, an international company based in St. Louis, for the purpose of benefitting a foreign government, namely the People's Republic of China."

Xiang, who was then living in the US state of Missouri, was employed by Monsanto and its subsidiary, The Climate Corporation, from 2008 to 2017 as an imaging scientist before quitting his job and buying a one-way ticket to China.

Federal officials searched the Chinese national at a US airport in June 2017 and discovered copies of a Monsanto proprietary algorithm, which is considered a trade secret and intellectual property, in an electronic device as he was waiting to board a flight to China, the release said. Xiang continued his trip to China where he worked for the Chinese Academy of Science's Institute of Soil Science, but he was arrested when he returned to the United States, the release said.

Xiang will be sentenced on April 7. He faces up to 15 years in prison and a potential \$5 million fine.

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Dozens Gather Outside DC Jail in Support of Imprisoned US Capitol Rioters

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US, Japan to Collaborate on Developing Hypersonic Missile Defenses - Blinken
(Updates with details, background in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan will soon sign an agreement that will enable bilateral cooperation on developing defenses against hypersonic missiles and on new space-based capabilities, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. "We're launching a new research and development agreement that will make it easier for our scientists, for our engineers and program managers to collaborate on emerging defense related issues from countering hypersonic threats to advancing space-based capabilities," Blinken said during a virtual meeting with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and their Japanese counterparts on Thursday.

Blinken also said that in the coming days the United States and Japan will sign a new five-year host nation agreement that will support framework which will invest greater resources to deepen military readiness and interoperability.

Austin in his remarks underscored the significance of the US-Japan alliance to confront challenges from North Korea and China in the Pacific.

Austin, Blinken, US Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel are meeting virtually with Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo to discuss a range of issues that are of mutual concern.

Hayashi said the United States and Japan must be prepared to respond effectively to challenges of the present and future in the region, especially to have a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said earlier in the day that Japan filed a protest against North Korea through diplomatic channels in Beijing over Pyongyang's latest missile launch which it claims was a hypersonic missile.

On Wednesday, the Japanese Coast Guard and the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff said they had observed an unknown projectile, presumed to be a ballistic missile, fired by North Korea in the direction of the Sea of Japan. This was the first test of North Korean weapons this year. The last one took place on October 19, 2021, when North Korea tested a new submarine ballistic missile.

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UPDATE - First US Pandemic-Era Rate Hike Likely in March - Federal Reserve Officials

(Updates with additional comments in paras 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The first pandemic-era interest rate hike in the United States could be implemented as early as March as the Federal Reserve moves to rein in soaring inflation, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said after the US central bank's December meeting minutes released a day ago suggested the same.

"The FOMC could begin increasing the policy rate as early as the March meeting in order to be in a better position to control inflation," Bullard said on Thursday, referring to the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee. "Subsequent rate increases during 2022 could be pulled forward or pushed back depending on inflation developments."

Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco President and CEO Mary Daly struck a similar tone. Daly said the central bank had little choice but to move quickly in reining in inflation growing at its fastest pace in 40 years due to an economy expanding aggressively from the downturn forced by the coronavirus pandemic.

"To keep the economy balanced, we'll have to hike interest rates," Daly said. "We've reached a stage where it's evident that inflation is rising in areas that aren't immediately affected by COVID-19. Even if we raise interest rates a couple of times, policy will remain accommodative." The Federal Reserve has kept interest rates at virtually zero since the COVID-19 outbreak which sparked record unemployment in 2020 and the first recession since the 2008/09 financial crisis.

Minutes of the FOMC's December 14-15 meeting, released by the Federal Reserve on Wednesday, showed policy makers had considered faster rate hikes in 2022 than previously intended when they met last month.

While the central bank has not explicitly set a deadline for the first interest rate hike, there are expectations that the Federal Reserve will pull the trigger on this as soon it wraps up the monthly asset-purchasing program it launched two years ago to support the economy from the downturn that followed the coronavirus pandemic measures.

The Federal Reserve has been tapering its monthly bond and asset-buying of \$120 billion by \$30 billion a month since December and could wrap the program by March - putting a rate hike on track right after that.

A reading of bond market traders' expectations also shows a more than 70% chance of the Federal Reserve imposing a rate hike by March.

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Falcon 9 Rocket Carries 49 Starlink Communications Satellites Into Orbit - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - SpaceX announced that it has successfully launched a Falcon 9 rocket carrying 49 Starlink communications satellites as its payload.

The launch took place on schedule at 4:50 pm EST (21:50 GMT) on Thursday. The first stage jettisoned as planned and landed successfully after a 20-second landing burn, SpaceX said.

Payload deployment of the 49 Starlink system satellites was scheduled for only a few minutes after 5 pm but was not due to be confirmed by ground tracking stations for another hour, SpaceX said.

The launch from Pad 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida marked the first Falcon 9 mission for SpaceX in 2022 after it set a new company record for the greatest number of rocket launches in a year with 31 rockets launched in 2021, SpaceX added.

On December 10, SpaceX announced the successful liftoff of 52 Starlink communication satellites into the Earth orbit.

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Armenia Informs UN Security Council of CSTO Troops Deployment to Kazakhstan - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - Armenia informed the UN Security Council about the decision to deploy Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) peacekeeping forces into Kazakhstan, Armenia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Mher Margaryan said in a letter seen by Sputnik.

"On behalf of the states of members of the CSTO..., I have the honour to transmit herewith the letter from the Secretary General of the CSTO Stanislav Zas, informing about the decision of the

CSTO Collective Security Council to deploy CSTO collective peacekeeping forces to the Republic of Kazakhstan, based on the application of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev," Margaryan said in the letter also addressed to the United Nations chief Antonio Guterres.

Mass protests in Kazakhstan began earlier in the week as residents of Zhanaozen and Aktau opposed a two-fold increase in prices for liquefied petroleum gas. The protests then spread to other cities, resulting in violent clashes with the police, looting and vandalism.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency until January 19 and invited the CSTO peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control.

Peacekeeping contingents from Russia and Belarus have arrived in Kazakhstan to protect strategic infrastructure facilities, including the Baikonur cosmodrome. According to CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas, the peacekeeping force is comprised of 2,500 troops on the ground and this number may increase if necessary.

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US, UK, France Request UN Security Council Meeting on Latest Launch by N. Korea - Source

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States, France, Ireland, Albania and the United Kingdom requested the UN Security Council to gather on Monday to discuss the most recent ballistic missile launch by North Korea, a source at the UN Security Council told Sputnik. "The United Kingdom, United States, Ireland, Albania and France requested UN Security Council consultations for Monday," the source said on Thursday.

A day earlier, the Japanese Coast Guard and the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff said they had observed an unknown projectile, presumed to be a ballistic missile fired by North Korea, heading in the direction of the Sea of Japan.

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Wall Street Down Ahead of Jobs Data That Could Expedite US Interest Rate Increase

NEW YORK, January 6 (Sputnik) - Wall Street slid for a second day in a row on Thursday as investors awaited US jobs data for the month of December that could influence the Federal Reserve's pace of monetary tightening in the world's largest economy.

All three major equity indexes on the New York Stock Exchange ended in the negative, with the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average sliding the most, on concerns about the first interest rate hike due anytime between the end of the first quarter and middle of the year.

The Federal Reserve has kept interest rates at virtually zero since the COVID-19 outbreak that sparked record unemployment in 2020 and the first recession since the 2008/09 financial crisis. Minutes of the central bank's December 14-15 meeting, released on Wednesday, showed

policymakers had considered faster rate hikes for 2022 than previously intended when they met last month.

Troubled US relations with other powers and inflation growing at its fastest pace in 40 years were other issues needling investors who still expected another annual rally on Wall Street after gains averaging 20% for the three indexes in 2021.

"Most of Wall Street has an upbeat outlook for 2022, but the risks of a Fed policy mistake, US geopolitical tensions with both Russia and China, and inflationary pressures pose serious risks to the stock market later in the year," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. The Dow, an index which groups blue chips of mostly industrial stocks, fell 171 points, or 0.5%, on the day to 36,236. The Dow started the week strongly with gains for the first two days but has slid since and now shows a drop of 0.3% on the week.

The Nasdaq Composite, which groups highly-valued tech stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Netflix, lost about 0.1% after swinging between negative and positive through the day. Nasdaq was down 3.6% on the week, heading for its worst week since February 2021.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, was also down 0.1% on Thursday. The index is headed for a weekly loss of 1.5%, its most since 2021.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which groups blue chips of mostly industrial stocks, had the smallest drop, losing just about 1% or its most in two weeks.

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US Cardiologists to Visit Russia Twice in 2022 to Operate on 20 Children - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Pediatric cardiologists from the US-based Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance will visit the Russian city of Kemerovo on two occasions this year in order to operate on at least 20 children with complex heart problems, team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"We have plans for two trips in 2022 - one in April-May and the second one in the fourth quarter of this year," Novick, a renowned US cardiologist and surgeon, said.

The Cardiac Alliance's specialists plan to operate on 20 to 25 children, Novick said.

"Our colleagues from Kemerovo are picking complicated cases for us. Such cases can take six to eight hours to operate on," he said.

The surgeon underscored that each of such operations requires intense concentration and a lot of time.

Novick and his colleagues have been working with specialists in Kemerovo for many years. In the period November-December, they operated on 11 pediatric patients with complex heart problems.

"We and our colleagues in Kemerovo are happy with this cooperation. As long as everybody continues to be happy, we will be going there," Novick said.

Asked about general plans for cooperation in Russia, Novick said his team has worked in different cities in the past but currently only cooperates with Kemerovo.

The Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance has done some 500 surgeries in Russia since 2008. The group is comprised of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in "hot spots" around the world. Previously, the Novick Cardiac Alliance performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

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RPT- IMF Carefully Monitoring Kazakhstan Amid Ongoing Protests - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is carefully monitoring the situation in Kazakhstan amid ongoing protests throughout the country, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

"It is still too early to comment on the implications of recent events in Kazakhstan, but we are monitoring the developments carefully," the spokesperson said on Thursday.

Mass protests began throughout Kazakhstan in the early days of 2022 over opposition to a two-fold increase in the price of liquified petroleum gas. Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency in the country until January 19 and invited CSTO peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control.

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US Diplomat Sherman to Meet With European Allies Ahead of Russia Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will meet with European allies in Switzerland and Belgium to jointly prepare for a series of security meetings with Russia next week, US State Department said.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Switzerland and Belgium from January 8 to January 13," the State Department said in a press release said on Thursday. "On January 11, she will meet with representatives from the EU institutions and jointly prepare with Allies for the NATO-Russia Council meeting."

Sherman will lead the US delegation during a session of the United States-Russia bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue and will be joined by Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Chris Robinson, the release said.

During the bilateral meeting with Russia on January 10, the US Defense Department will be represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper and Lt. Gen. James Mingus, the release said.

Deputy Secretary Sherman will also lead the US delegation to the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Brussels, the release said.

Ambassador Michael Carpenter will head the US delegation during the OSCE meeting in Vienna, the release said.

The US-Russian negotiations on January 10 will be followed by a Russia-NATO Council meeting on the Russian security proposals on January 12 and a summit of Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe on January 13.

Earlier this week, US State Department spokesperson Den Price said the talks on January 10 as well as in subsequent meetings with NATO and the OSCE will focus on a narrow set of bilateral issues, including confidence-building measures.

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MF Carefully Monitoring Kazakhstan Amid Ongoing Protests - Spokesperson

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) -

KAZAKHSTAN PROTESTS

* Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary-General Stanislav Zas told Sputnik on Thursday that the situation in Kazakhstan was already changing for the better, but the Kazakh colleagues needed some help as the situation was still difficult.

* The peacekeeping force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Kazakhstan will consist of about 2,500 people, but the number can be increased if necessary, Zas told Sputnik.

* An anti-terrorist operation is underway in Kazakhstan's southern region of Kyzylorda, where 168 people were injured in the riots, Gulshara Abdykhalikova, head of the regional government, said.

* The number of law enforcement officers killed during protests in Kazakhstan has increased to 18, the Kazakh news agency Tengrinews.kz reported citing the country's Interior Ministry.

* The United States hopes the government of Kazakhstan will be able to address its economic and political issues which have sparked unrest in the country, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

JANUARY 6 PROTESTS ANNIVERSARY IN US

* The Democrats are using the first anniversary of the events at the US Capitol on January 6 to distract Americans from the failures of President Joe Biden's policies, stoke fears and divide America, but the people see through their lies, former President Donald Trump said on Thursday.

* US President Joe Biden accused former President Donald Trump of creating a web of lies about the 2020 election and putting his own interests above those of the nation.

* Biden said that the US Constitution faced its greatest threat during the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

US-RUSSIA DEFENSE LEADERS TALKS

* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a phone conversation with his US counterpart, Lloyd Austin, on security issues on Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Austin and Shoigu discussed over the telephone risk reduction near Ukraine's borders, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

EUROPEAN ENERGY MARKETS

* New sanctions on Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline would undermine US relations with European partners, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

* Signs of market collusion and price fixing have been detected in the actions of major sellers of liquefied gas in Kazakhstan, according to the national antimonopoly agency.

NORTH KOREA MISSILE LAUNCH

* North Korea's recent missile launch increases the need for restarting diplomatic negotiations to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

* Japan has lodged a protest against North Korea through diplomatic channels in Beijing over a missile test conducted by Pyongyang on Wednesday, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said.

JCPOA TALKS

* The United States will have to consider another path forward if it does not soon reach an agreement on the mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal with Iran, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

COVID-19

* The technical lead for the World Health Organization (WHO) Health Emergencies Programme, Maria Van Kerkhove, said on Thursday that the number of worldwide COVID-19 infection has increased by 71% in the last seven days.

* The anti-COVID measures introduced by China ahead of the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics are enough to ensure that the games are held safely and with little risk of the disease spreading, Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, said.
* Russia has confirmed 15,316 new COVID-19 cases over the past 24 hours, bringing the cumulative total to 10,601,300, the federal response center said.

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UNSC President Sends Note by Kazakh Mission to UN About Situation in Country - Source

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The President of the UN Security Council sent an information note by the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations about the situation in the Central Asian country, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

"The President of the UN Security Council sent an information note to the Council's member states from the Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the United Nations about the ongoing situation in the country and measures taken by the authorities to stabilize it," the source told Sputnik.

The document stresses that any protests or demonstrations can not justify attacks and killings of law enforcement officers.

"Attacks against governmental buildings, airports, vital infrastructure and gun stores are indicative of the planned nature of the conspirators' actions," the note by the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations said.

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Biden Administration Remains Committed to Close Guantanamo Bay - State Department

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration continues to remain committed to responsibly closing Guantanamo Bay, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"When it comes to Guantanamo, we remain dedicated to a deliberate and to a thorough process focused on responsibly reducing the detainee population in Guantanamo Bay and eventually closing the facility," Price said in a conference call with reporters.

The State Department is currently seeking to identify and negotiate transfer agreements with countries for eligible detainees, Price said.

The Guantanamo Bay detention facility established by the Bush administration in 2002 has long been criticized for mistreatment and abuse of prisoners, driving human rights activists and international organizations to call for it be closed.

Former US President Barack Obama vowed to shut down the detention center, but faced strong opposition from Congress. His successor, Donald Trump, signed an order to keep the detention camp open indefinitely, while incumbent Joe Biden has promised to close it.

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

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Biden Nominates Airborne Corps Commander to Lead CENTCOM - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US administration has nominated Army Lt. Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, who is currently overseeing operations in the Middle East, as a new chief of the Central Command (CENTCOM), The Wall Street Journal said on Thursday.

The nomination came up a day before, the report said, citing US officials and congressional records. If confirmed by the US Senate, Kurilla will succeed Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, and also would be promoted to four-star general.

Kurilla currently leads the 18th Airborne Corps in the state of North Carolina. Previously he was a former chief of staff for CENTCOM.

In his future capacity, he would assume the role in combating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (both terrorist groups banned in Russia) wing in Afghanistan, the report said. He also will cover issues related to Iran's nuclear program, as well as situations in Syria and other countries in the region, it added.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on Eight Cuban Officials - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration imposed visa restriction on eight officials from Cuba, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Due to harsh and unjust sentences handed down to peaceful protesters, the Department of State today took steps to impose visa restrictions on eight Cuban officials implicated in attempts to silence the voices of the Cuban people through repression, unjust detentions, and harsh prison sentences," Blinken said in a statement.

He did not specify officials names but noted that all of them were connected to the detention, sentencing, and imprisonment of peaceful July 11 protesters. He also noted that approximately 600 protesters in Cuba remain jailed after the July 11 protests.

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US Says Will Consider Different Path Forward if Deal on Return to JCPOA Not Soon Reached

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States will have to consider another path forward if it does not soon reach an agreement on the mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal with Iran, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Time is absolutely running short, and we have not been shy in making that clear. If we don't soon reach an understanding on mutual return to compliance, Iran accelerating nuclear steps will hollow out those non-proliferation benefits the JCPOA conveyed, and we will have to consider a different path forward. That is a matter of weeks. It is certainly not a matter of months," Price said.

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First Pandemic-Era US Rate Hike Looks Likely to Be in March - St. Louis Fed Chief Bullard

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The first pandemic-era interest rate hike in the United States could be as early as March as the Federal Reserve moves to rein in soaring inflation, senior Fed banker James Bullard said Thursday after the central bank's December meeting minutes released a day ago suggested the same.

"The FOMC could begin increasing the policy rate as early as the March meeting in order to be in a better position to control inflation," Bullard, president of the St. Louis chapter of the Fed, said, referring to the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee.

"Subsequent rate increases during 2022 could be pulled forward or pushed back depending on inflation developments."

The Fed has kept interest rates at virtually zero since the COVID-19 outbreak which sparked record unemployment in 2020 and the first recession since the 2008/09 financial crisis.

Minutes of the FOMC's December 14-15 meeting, released by the Fed on Wednesday, showed policy makers had considered faster rate hikes in 2022 than previously intended when they met last month.

While the central bank has not explicitly set a deadline for the first pandemic-era rate hike, there are expectations that the Fed will pull the trigger on this as soon it wraps up the monthly asset-purchasing program it launched two years ago to support the economy from the downturn that followed the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Fed has been tapering its monthly bond and asset-buying of \$120 billion by \$30 billion a month since December and could wrap the program by March - putting a rate hike on track right after that.

A reading of bond market traders' expectations also shows a more than 70% chance of the Fed imposing a rate hike by March.

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Biden Not Directing US Justice Dept. by Calling January 6 'Insurrection' - White House
WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden was not directing the Justice Department to act in a certain way or pursue certain charges when he described the breach of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 as an "armed insurrection", White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"The President wants the Justice Department and the Attorney General to act independently... He was not making a judgement about or direction of what the Justice Department should do or how they should behave or act, and I don't think the Justice Department or Attorney General sees that he did either," Psaki said in response to a question about Biden's use of the phrase to describe the Capitol breach.

On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters entered the US Capitol to protest the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. A group entered the building, resulting in the death and injury of several law enforcement officers and protesters.

More than 700 individuals have been arrested for crimes related to the January 6 US Capitol breach, including over 220 facing charges of impeding law enforcement, according to the Justice Department.

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US Hopes Kazakhstan Gov't Will Be Able to Address Economic Problem - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes the government of Kazakhstan will be able to address its economic and political issues which have sparked unrest in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We do hope that the government of Kazakhstan will be able to address problems that manifested in these protests, problems that are fundamentally economic and political in nature," Price told reporters.

Price said the United States remains concerned about the unrest in Kazakhstan and urges authorities and protesters to seek a peaceful solution. The United States also calls on the government to restore internet in the country, he added.

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US State Dept. Says New Sanctions on Nord Stream 2 Would Undermine Relations With Europe

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - New sanctions on Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline would undermine US relations with European partners, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"This amendment is not in our estimation a genuine effort to counter further Russian aggression or to protect Ukraine, our concern is that the legislation would only serve to undermine unity amongst our European allies in a crucial moment," Price said when asked about the Senate's plan to hold a vote on Senator Ted Cruz's amendment for the NDAA that would impose new sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

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Perpetrators, Intent of Recent Attacks on US-Led Coalition Forces Unknown - White House

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States does not officially have any attribution for recent attacks on US-led coalition forces in Iraq and Syria or clarity on the reason for the uptick in violence, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday during a press briefing.

"Here officially, we don't have any specific attribution today in terms of a particular group by name or groups who might be responsible for this," Psaki said. "In terms of intent, it's also difficult because of that for us to ascribe intent with any real specificity or certainty in these types of attacks. We can't say definitively who caused them or why the attacks seem to have stepped up."

It is possible that they could be related to JCPOA talks with Iran in Vienna or the anniversary of the assassination of Iranian military leader Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike, Psaki said. The Coalition forces have been targeted in a series of attacks in Iraq and Syria, including indirect rocket fire attacks near the Ain al-Asad Airbase in Iraq and Green Village base in Syria.

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US Democracy at Greater Risk One Year After US Capitol Riot - Obama

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The risk to US democracy is greater today than a year ago when the US Capitol was attacked on January 6 and a sizable number of Republican voters and elected officials have since embraced the claims of election fraud that led to violence in the first place, former President Barack Obama said on Thursday.

"While the broken windows have been repaired and many of the rioters have been brought to justice, the truth is that our democracy is at greater risk today than it was back then," Obama

said in a statement. "Although initially rejected by many Republicans, the claims that fanned the flames of violence on January 6 have since been embraced by a sizeable portion of voters and elected officials - many of whom know better."

Obama pointed out that Republican officials across the United States have used the claim that the 2020 presidential elections was fraudulent in order to introduce and enact legislation to control states' election processes.

Meanwhile, those Republicans who pushed back against "anti-democratic forces" in their party have been ostracized, primaried and driven from the party, he said.

Obama noted that it is difficult to defend and uphold democracy and freedom when one of the two major political parties in the United States is actively engaged in undermining democracy.

The former US president said a healthy democracy and system of government are not automatic. The responsibility of defending the United States' fragile democracy falls on all Americans who must nurture and protect it, Obama added.

On January 6, 2021, supporters of former President Donald Trump arrived at the US Capitol complex to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states that Trump claimed were fraudulent. A group of Trump supporters entered Congress and in the melee that followed, police shot dead one unarmed protester while numerous officers and protesters were injured.

US law enforcement has arrested and charged more than 725 people participating in the events on January 6 and at least 325 of those have been charged with felony offenses.

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US Will Watch for Any CSTO Violations of Human Rights in Kazakhstan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to respect human rights amid its deployment in Kazakhstan as Washington will be watching for any violations, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are closely monitoring reports that the [CSTO] has dispatched its collective peacekeeping forces to Kazakhstan. The United States and, frankly, the world will be watching for any violations of human rights," Price said. "We call on the CSTO collective peacekeeping forces and law enforcement to respect human rights in order to support a peaceful resolution."

Price added Washington had questions about the CSTO deployment, because the government of Kazakhstan has its own resources and has been well fortified to defend itself.

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UPDATE - US Closely Monitoring Reports of Peacekeeping Forces in Kazakhstan - White House

(Updates to modify lede, add background in para 5)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely monitoring reports of peacekeeping troops that have started to arrive to Kazakhstan amid the ongoing civil unrest there and has questions about the legitimacy of the foreign forces' presence in the country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We are closely monitoring reports that the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO] have dispatched its collective peacekeeping forces to Kazakhstan. We have questions about the nature of this request, and whether it was a legitimate invitation or not," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The United States is calling on the peacekeeping forces and Kazakhstan law enforcement to uphold human rights in order to support peaceful resolution of the conflict, Psaki added.

A wave of protests against an increase in gas prices led to nationwide unrest earlier this week, leading to clashes with police, looting and overall insecurity in Kazakhstan. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency until January 19 and invited the CSTO peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control.

At present, peacekeeping contingents from Russia and Belarus have arrived in Kazakhstan to protect strategic infrastructure facilities, including the Baikonur cosmodrome. According to the CSTO Secretary General, the peacekeeping force is comprised of 2,400 troops on the ground and this number may increase if necessary.

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US Closely Monitoring Reports of Peacekeeping Forces in Kazakhstan - White House

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The United States is calling upon the peacekeeping forces and the Kazakhstan law enforcement entities to uphold human rights in order to support a peaceful resolution of the conflict, Psaki added.

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US Senior Diplomat Speaks With European Allies Ahead of Russia Security Talks- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke with her counterparts from the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy ahead of next week talks between the United States and Russia on strategic stability issues, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke today with French MFA Secretary General Francois Delattre, German MFA Political Director Tjorven Bellmann, Italian MFA Secretary General Ettore Sequi, and UK Minister of State for Middle East, North Africa and North America James Cleverly," Price said in a statement.

All the parties vowed to continue close coordination between the United States and its European partners to deter Russia's alleged aggression toward Ukraine, Price said.

Sherman and her counterparts reiterated that there will be severe costs for Russia should it decides to invade Ukraine, Price added.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have increased in the past several weeks amid an alleged Russian troops 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 troops within its sovereign territory at its 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 from expanding eastward and to ban the deployment of US and Russian intermediate and short-range missiles within reach of each other's territory, among other items.

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US Arrests Man for Allegedly Working as Foreign Agent of Egyptian Govt. - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have arrested a man from the state of New York for allegedly working illegally in the United States as a foreign agent of the Egyptian government, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A New York man was arrested today on criminal charges related to his alleged acting and conspiring to act as a foreign agent in the United States," the Justice Department said in a press release. "According to court documents, Pierre Girgis, 39, of Manhattan, acted in the United States as an agent of the Egyptian government, without notifying the US Attorney General as required by law."

Girgis worked under the direction of multiple Egyptian government officials in order to further the interests of the Egyptian government in the United States, the release said.

Some of Girgis work included allegedly tracking and obtaining information on political opponents of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, using his US law enforcement connections to collect non-public information, and arranging US law enforcement training for visiting Egyptian officials, the release added.

Girgis could face up to 15 years in prison if he is convicted on all charges, according to the release.

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Blinken Welcomes David Satterfield as US Special Envoy for Horn of Africa

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he looks forward to welcoming David Satterfield as US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa as the current diplomat in that position finishes his appointment in the next several days.

"I look forward to welcoming Ambassador David Satterfield in the coming days as the US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa once Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman ends his appointment," Blinken said in a statement via Twitter.

Blinken noted that the Biden administration invited Feltman to this position in early 2021 but intended his appointment to last less than a year.

"However, the ongoing instability in the Horn of Africa and the region's interlinked political, security and humanitarian challenges demand sustained focus by the United States," he said. Blinken also said he is confident Satterfield will help to promote a peaceful and prosperous Horn of Africa.

Feltman will continue working at the State Department in an advisory capacity, Blinken added.

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CPJ Urges Kazakh Govt. to Cease Detaining Journalists, Ensure Free Flow of Information

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Kazakh government should stop detaining journalists and ensure a free flow of information amid protests in the country, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Gulnoza Said said on Thursday.

"We call on the Kazakh government to cease detaining members of the media, ensure the free flow of information, and take all possible measures to ensure the safety of journalists on the ground," she said in a statement.

CPJ is extremely concerned about the developing situation in Kazakhstan and the reports of journalists being arrested, Said added.

The Kazakhstan authorities have detained since January 4 at least eight journalists who were covering the protests in the country and also blocked several independent websites, according to the CPJ.

"Journalists reported being shot at by unidentified individuals, chased by protesters, and struck by law enforcement officers while reporting on the events," CPJ said acknowledging the impossibility to confirm local media reports due to communication shutdown problems.

A wave of protests against an increase in gas prices led to nationwide unrest earlier this week, leading to clashes with police, looting and overall insecurity in the country.

On Wednesday, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency until January 19. The Collective Security Treaty Organization forces and local army and law enforcement units are working on bringing the situation in the country under control.

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UN Says North Korea Missile Launch Increases Need to Restart Denuclearization Talks

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - North Korea's recent missile launch increases the need for restarting diplomatic negotiations to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"I think it just increases our concern and increases the need for diplomatic discussions to restart, for the DPRK [North Korea] to re-engage with the partners in order to find a way full and verifiable denuclearization of the Peninsula," Dujarric said when asked about North Korea's claim that its latest test launch was of a hypersonic missile.

On Wednesday, the Japanese Coast Guard and the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff said they had observed an unknown projectile, presumed to be a ballistic missile, fired by North Korea in the direction of the Sea of Japan. This was the first test of North Korean weapons in 2022.

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CSTO Informed United Nations About Intention to Send Troops to Kazakhstan - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has informed the United Nations of its intent to send troops to Kazakhstan, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We were informed earlier this morning by the [CSTO] that they were sending troops to Kazakhstan under existing bilateral treaties," Dujarric said. "For us, the important thing is that security forces, whether they are Kazakh or whether they're not Kazakh troops, need to uphold the same human rights standards, which is to show restraint and protect people's rights to demonstrate peacefully."

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Congress Holds Moment of Silence to Honor US Capitol Defenders on January 6 Anniversary

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives and Senate on Thursday reflected on the first anniversary of the January 6 riot by holding a moment of silence to honor the police officers who defended the Capitol.

"I want to acknowledge our fallen heroes of that day: US Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, US Capitol Police Officer Howard Livingood, Metropolitan Officer Jeffrey Smith, US Capitol Police Officer Billy Evans, [who died] of a later assault," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during remarks in the chamber. "Now I ask all members to rise for a moment of silence in their memory."

Several Democratic senators gave remarks in the upper chamber of Congress, recalling their experiences inside the Capitol while Trump supporters breached the building to protest the lawmakers certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election from several US states. Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy said Americans turned into a mob on January 6 and turned their back on the US Constitution.

On January 6, 2021, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol building to protest lawmakers for certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election from several states that the former president claimed were fraudulent. The proceedings were interrupted but the lawmakers returned and certified the results of the election that then candidate Joe Biden won the race. One protester was shot dead by police and numerous law enforcement and protesters were injured.

The January 6 siege was the biggest attack on the US Capitol since the British army burned the building and other landmarks down in the War of 1812.

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UN Says Hard to Confirm Reports of Police, Protesters Killed in Kazakhstan

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has seen reports that police officers and protesters have been killed in Kazakhstan, but it is hard for the organization to confirm this information, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"We've seen the press reports. It's hard for us to confirm that but what is clear is that all demonstrations need to be peaceful," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "People have a right to express their grievances. It needs to be done peacefully. Security forces need to protect that right and show and act with restraint."

The spokesman also said all UN personnel, including about 285 international and national staff and 25 employees working from Kazakhstan for the UN Mission in neighboring Afghanistan, are safe and accounted for.

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'QAnon Shaman' Says 41-Month Sentence Not Fair, US Court Made Example of Him - Interview

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Jake Angeli, often referred to as "QAnon Shaman," said on Thursday that the 41-month prison sentence he received for obstruction of an official

proceeding is not fair and the US court was trying to make an example of him by giving him a long term of incarceration.

"I don't think it's fair, if that's what you mean," Angeli said in an interview with Channel 5. "I think that they thought an example had to be made, and I don't think they anticipated that example being a double-edged sword where they try to make an example out of me, but in the process they made clear to the American people that the justice system is not fair or balanced."

Angeli was among the crowd that breached the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, that disrupted the 2020 presidential election certification proceedings by lawmakers.

Angeli denied accusations of being a racist or white supremacist and claimed that he never hurt or threatened anybody that day.

In spite of this, Angeli said his sentence is longer than some of those who did threaten or assault officials and officers on January 6. He cited the lesser 28-month sentence of Cleveland Merideth, a man who arrived in Washington later on January 6 with an assault rifle and 2,500 rounds of ammunition and threatened US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Angeli initially faced up to 20 years in prison and a period of supervised release, but last September he pleaded guilty to obstruction of an official proceeding. Federal prosecutors asked the court during the hearing to sentence Angeli to 51 months in prison, three years of supervised release and a \$2,000 fine.

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Congress Must Defend Democracy in US By Passing Laws to Protect Right to Vote - Schumer

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Congress must respond to the continued and growing threat to democracy in the United States a year after the events at the US Capitol by passing new legislation to protect the right to vote as quickly as possible, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"We must pass legislation to protect our democracy to protect the right to vote," Schumer told the Senate in a session discussing the events of January 6, 2021.

Schumer said the efforts to topple the US democratic system in the storming of the Capitol a year ago was continuing in the efforts of Republican-controlled state legislatures to pass new measures empowering them to set aside the results of federal elections in their jurisdictions.

"We are seeing the most restrictive anti-voting measures since Jim Crow [the system of racial discrimination against African Americans] on the statute book in America and trying to succeed where the big lie failed," Schumer said.

The Capitol riot did not come from foreign soil, but was an attempt to reverse by violent means the result of a free and fair election and it was rooted in previous President Donald Trump's claim that the 2020 election was illegitimate - a claim that tens of millions of Americans still believed the election was rigged, he added.

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US Should Provide COVID-19 Vaccines to Poor Countries, Not Boosters to Children - Doctor

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US government should distribute more coronavirus vaccines to poor countries around the world instead of administering booster shots to children in the United States, prominent US cardiologist and surgeon Dr. Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"The United States should send additional doses to low-income countries instead of boosting a very low risk group. You can potentially save millions of lives abroad," Novick said.

On Monday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it had issued an emergency use authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech's booster coronavirus vaccine for 12-15-year-old adolescents.

Novick, who leads the Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance and has operated on thousands of children around the world, called the FDA decision a "waste of doses" that could go to other countries where people do not have adequate vaccine coverage.

"Many prominent physicians in the United States also share this view," he said.

Novick emphasized that he does not advocate booster shots for children at all.

"If they go down to the 5 to 12-year-olds, I think that is complete lunacy to do boosters for kids that age," he said.

Novick noted that the coronavirus latest Omicron variant is highly transmissible, but the cases are mild and hospitalizations are significantly less than what was seen with the two previous variants. He also said the Biden administration is sending mixed signals to the public over the current situation, causing unnecessary fear in many people.

"To be clear, I am not saying that children in the United States should not be protected. But what I am saying is the risk for those kids is so low that they have already been fully vaccinated," he said.

Novick pointed out that a risk of myocarditis in adolescents who received the vaccine is low despite being more prevalent in this age group than in others.

"The risk of myocarditis in this group is extremely low," he said.

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UPDATE - US Jobless Filings Down Almost 75% in 2021, Pulling Away From COVID-19 - Labor Dept.

(Updates with more details in para 4)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims fell almost 75% for all of 2021, data from the Labor Department showed on Thursday as employment in the world's largest economy continued to progress steadily from disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending January 1, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 207,000," the Labor Department reported in its latest weekly roundup of claims that compared with the 787,000 filings for unemployment benefits in the week to January 2, 2020.

The jobless claims data came ahead of Friday's non-farm payrolls report for the month of December from the Labor Department. Economists said they are expecting the upcoming report

to show an addition of 424,000 jobs for both the private and government sector last month versus November's gain of 210,000.

Also on Thursday, US labor market surveyor Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc said the United States recorded the fewest job cuts ever last month, with just 19,052 positions shed versus 77,030 in December 2020 - marking a drop of 75% on the year.

Another piece of labor market data on Wednesday from payrolls surveyor ADP showed the private sector adding 807,000 jobs in December, nearly twice more than predicted by economists.

In the terms of jobless claims, economists polled by US media had expected 194,500 filings for the week to January 1, almost 13,000 below what the Labor Department reported. Based on what the department reported for the previous week, the latest number was exactly 7,000 higher.

Economists, however, brushed the weekly increase aside and took note instead that unemployment statistics as a whole had fallen by three quarters since the end of 2020.

"Jobless claims continue to track along low levels above and below the 200K level," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive.

Aside from the sheer improvement in jobs numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

After staggering unemployment initially triggered by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the labor market has steadily picked up this year, showing a jobless rate of 4.2% in November from a high of 14.8% in April 2020. That was just 0.2% above the 4% mark that the Federal Reserves defines as maximum employment in the United States. In terms of total job losses, the number stood at around 20,000 at the height of the pandemic before falling to around 4 million now, officials say.

In a separate report released earlier this week, the Labor Department said the number of Americans quitting their jobs stood at a record high in November.

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.

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US Seeks 'Kind of Coexistence' With China, Not Indo-Pacific Domination - White House

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks coexistence with China in the Indo-Pacific and not domination and primacy in the region, White House National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Thursday.

"What I hear a lot of is sustaining a system of partners and friends, working in concert with other countries. I do not believe this is about American domination. In fact, I believe ultimately what the United States seeks is a kind of co-existence with China, with an understanding of China's

critical and important role," Campbell said during a conversation on US-China relations with the Carnegie Endowment.

The United States needs to compete across a number of arenas with China while maintaining positive and productive discussions with them at the same time, Campbell added.

The United States, China and the other permanent members of the UN Security Council put out a joint statement earlier this week on avoiding nuclear war and an arms race in what UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid called "the right message to the entire planet." However, the Chinese Foreign Ministry also recently rejected the validity of US claims that Beijing is building up its nuclear arsenal. Washington is trying to bring Beijing to the negotiation table for the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which currently limits the United States and Russia to 1,550 nuclear offensive warheads per nation. Russia says that it has no intention of forcing China to participate in the talks.

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US Trade Deficit Up Almost 20% in November as Imports Surge - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit rose 19.4% in November to \$80.2 billion, the Commerce Department reported on Thursday, as imports surged after an earlier disruption at ports in the United States prevented the regular flow of goods.

"The goods and services deficit was \$80.2 billion in November, up \$13.0 billion from \$67.2 billion in October, revised," a news release from the Commerce Department said.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a trade gap of around \$77 billion for November.

"There has been a remarkable erosion in US terms of trade," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "Much of that (and rising imports) speaks to the strength of the US consumer. This is also restrained by supply chain issues and could continue to balloon from here."

Imports soared 4.6% to \$304.4 billion as an earlier pile-up of containers at ports due to the easing of the COVID-19 situation. Industrial supplies and materials led imports, with consumer goods, motor vehicles parts and engines also showing substantial increase.

Exports, meanwhile, rose just 0.2% to \$224.2 billion.

The difference between the two accounted for the deficit.

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UN Rights Chief Urges All Sides in Kazakhstan to Refrain From Violence

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Thursday called on all sides in Kazakhstan to avoid violence and seek a peaceful resolution of grievances.

"International law is clear: people have the right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression. At the same time, protesters, no matter how angry or aggrieved they may be, should not resort to violence against others," Bachelet said in a statement.

Bachelet also called on the Kazakhstan authorities to ensure that Internet services are immediately and completely restored.

"Shutting down the Internet - in effecting curbing people's access to information and their right to freedom of expression, assembly and participation, as well as a host of other rights - is not the answer to a crisis but risks fueling the violence and unrest," Bachelet said.