

**1/13/22 Thursday**

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Two Xi'an Hospitals Temporarily Close for Review Due to Non-Covid Death, Miscarriage During Lockdown

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A pair of medical facilities in the Chinese city of Xi'an are being forced to take a serious look at their policies after one person died and another suffered a miscarriage during a recent COVID-19-driven lockdown.

The capital of Shaanxi Province was under lockdown for several weeks beginning in mid-December, when a handful of COVID-19 cases were detected in the city, as per China's "Zero Covid" policy intended to nip potential outbreaks in the bud.

The policy, which included a herculean effort to meet the needs of 13 million quarantined people while health officials tested every resident, tracked down every potential case, and isolated and treated those infected, succeeded at limiting the outbreak there to [just 2,100 cases](#), including just six [reported on Wednesday](#). No deaths from the infectious respiratory virus were recorded.

However, the policy was not without death. At Xi'an International Medical Center, a man suffering from a heart attack was refused admission for several hours due to priority being given to Covid-positive patients, [according to a Weibopost](#) by his daughter detailing the January 2 event. By the time he was admitted, it was too late, but doctors said his life could have been saved if he had been treated earlier. The incident sparked public outcry about the hospital's strictness.

In two other instances, pregnant women were also denied access to a hospital facility, resulting in miscarriages. In one instance, an eight-month pregnant woman at the Xi'an Gaoxin Hospital was refused admission because she lacked a Covid-negative test result, according to a Weibo post by the woman's niece.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the Shaanxi Women's Federation said it would look into the incident, and the city announced on January 5 that city [hospitals should provide](#) treatment and open "green lanes" and hotline services for pregnant women and patients with critical illnesses such as heart attacks.

In addition, Gaoxin Hospital General Manager Fan Yuhui was suspended and the heads of the outpatient department and medical department were fired, Liu Shunzhi, head of the city's health department, said in a public statement at the time. A total of 31 officials were punished in some way.

Liu made the statement in front of the woman who'd lost her pregnancy, bowing in apology to her for "providing poor access to medical treatment and inadequate service for those with special requirements."

However, the rectification effort will go still further: on Thursday, the [SCMP reported](#) that the two hospitals will suspend operations for three months and that city authorities were moving to minimize the shortages created by the closures.

When other Chinese cities also detected clusters of cases in recent days, officials said they applied lessons learned from the mistakes in Xi'an, allowing [all 12.5 million residents](#) of Zhengzhou to be tested in just 6 hours' time.

Zhang Boli, a COVID-19 specialist and president of the Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, told the [SCMP on December 25](#) that an asymptomatic "superspreader" had evaded detection for several days thanks to negligence by local authorities.

US Paper Attacks Lockdowns From World's Most Infected City

An article in the [New York Times](#) published on Wednesday spared no effort to demonize China's "Zero Covid" policy, focusing heavily on the two Xi'an incidents, brushing aside the rectifications, apologies, and corrections by officials to raise hue and cry about "a vast army of community workers" and officials who "now believe that they must do everything within their power to ensure zero Covid infections."

The article's publication is highly ironic, given that New York is one of the world's most heavily-infected places and that a totally unrestrained Covid outbreak has reached never-before-seen levels.

[On December 28](#), the seven-day average for positive tests in New York City was 20%, an astronomically high number, and 2% of the entire island of Manhattan - home to 1.6 million people - was infected. On January 2, the same day that the Xi'an man died of a heart attack, New York recorded a seven-day average of 42,000 new cases per day.

By Wednesday, conditions in city schools had gotten so bad that [students organized walk-out protests](#) demanding the city government take measures to protect them from Covid, including allowing them to attend class remotely.

Nationwide, the situation is no better. On Tuesday, the US set a new world record [of 1.4 million new cases](#) in a single day. On Thursday, the seven-day average of new cases stood at 782,000, [according to US Centers](#) for Disease Control and Prevention data. Hospitalizations hit [a record high](#) as well, although many Covid-positive hospital patients had not been admitted due to Covid symptoms, meaning they likely were infected after arriving.

In the US, 842,873 people have died from Covid-19, 415,000 of whom died in the year 2021. That same year, [just two people died](#) in China of the disease, and less than 4,700 have died overall since it was detected in December 2019.

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As China Declares Type 055 Cruiser Lhasa Battle-Worthy, Two More Reportedly Begun in Dalian

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has declared its second Type 055 missile cruiser to be combat worthy following war games held in the Yellow Sea last week. The stealthy warships are the second-largest non-carrier warships afloat anywhere in the world, closely following the US' troubled Zumwalt-class destroyers.

The warship Lhasa, hull number 102, was first [commissioned in March](#) of last year. However, it was only after months of training on a variety of missions, including missiles and cannonfire, hunting for submarines, defending against nuclear, biological and chemical weapon attacks, visiting, boarding, search and seizure, personnel rescue and damage control, was the warship's crew of 280 sailors declared ready to go into battle.

A vessel training center attached to the PLA Northern Theater Command Navy set up the Lhasa's final test in the Yellow Sea last week, according to the [Global Times](#).

"We will take advantage of scientific and technological methods to explore new ways of training, and set new examples in training with science and tech," said Captain Li Guoqiang, chief of staff at the vessel training center, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

"We will take advantage of scientific and technological methods to explore new ways of training and set new examples in training with science and tech," Li added.

Now being fully operational, the Qingdao-based Lhasa will be expected to take on similar duties to its elder sibling, the first-in-class Nanchang, commissioned in January 2020. Those will include escorting the PLAN's aircraft carriers and [adding extra muscle](#) to task forces sent to fly the flag.

The Type 055s (NATO reporting name Renhai-class) are massive warships, among the largest of their type. Weighing in at roughly 13,000 tons fully loaded, the 590-foot-long Type 055s carry 112 vertical missile launchers, which can be loaded with anything from supersonic, long-range anti-ship missiles to anti-submarine or anti-air missiles. The cruisers also have a single 130-millimeter deck gun mounted on the bow, a close-in weapons system (CIWS) for missile interception, and a rear flight deck for a Z-9 or Z-18 naval helicopter.

In the US Navy, China's major maritime rival, no equivalent warship exists. The [Zumwalt-class destroyers](#), while slightly larger than the Type 055s, are geared toward land bombardment, but have been plagued with problems related to confusion about how to use them. The Type 055s have suffered no such conflict of identity: they are modern Aegis cruisers intended to outperform anything they might go up against.

Washington's older Ticonderoga-class Aegis cruisers are closer to the Type 055s, since both sport high-powered phased radar arrays and carry a huge number of missiles for a variety of missions. The "Ticos" have an anti-ballistic missile capability the Type 055s are believed to lack. However, they are about one-quarter smaller than the Type 055s and decades older, with Washington preparing to [soon begin retiring](#) the oldest ships. The Ticos' duties will be assumed by the US Navy's bread-and-butter warship, the [Arleigh Burke-class destroyers](#), which aren't much younger.

Beijing planned to build eight Type 055s, all of which are now in the water and in various stages of fitting out. However, more could potentially be on the way.

In a Wednesday article for [Naval News](#), naval historian and analyst H.I. Sutton wrote that "new intelligence suggests that at least two more are under construction in Dalian, China." He provided no further evidence for this claim. However, some recent photos of the drydock in Dalian, a city on the northern shore of the Yellow Sea where most of the Type 055s were built, suggests that up to two more Type 055 keels might have already been laid down.

In both photos, observers note that too little of the hull exists at this stage to be positively identified as a Type 055 cruiser, as opposed to the far more common [Type 052D destroyer](#).

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Video: Explosion Reportedly Rocks Baghdad Offices of Iraqi Parliament Speaker's Takadum Party  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

An explosion was reported in northern Baghdad early on Friday morning, hours after a thwarted rocket attack against the US embassy there.

The boom was reportedly heard in Adhamiya, a district in Baghdad about 4 miles north of the heavily fortified Green Zone housing the US embassy campus, according to Al-Arabiya.

The incident happened at the [offices of Takadum](#), the political party of Mohammed al-Halbousi, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament. A day prior, a hand grenade was reportedly thrown at the building.

Video taken of the building's exterior shows broken glass and wood strewn about the area, but two motorcycles still standing upright.

Last week, [Halbousi won re-election](#) to a second term as speaker, following recent national elections in which Takadum came in second place. However, the vote was marred by intense factional disputes and a grouping of Shiite parties abstained from the vote.

Emergency crews were reportedly rushing to the scene.

Earlier in the night, the skies over Baghdad were lit up by US air defenses as a C-RAM system [intercepted two rockets](#) targeting the US embassy. Officially, no damage was caused by the incident, but video posted on social media showed one of the rockets falling on a school and exploding.

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Watch: Air Defenses Gun Down Inbound Rockets Over US' Baghdad Embassy  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Several inbound rockets were detected in the Green Zone on Thursday evening, where the US embassy in Baghdad is located.

At least two rockets were fired at the US embassy in central Baghdad, both of which were shot down without causing casualties or damage, according to Iraq military officials.

Footage posted online purported to capture the intercept. The video shows a C-RAM air defense system firing a blazing stream of bullets at the projectiles.

Another video shows an explosion on the ground which seems to be caused by the rocket plummeting to the ground, challenging official reports that the attack caused not damage. According to a report by OSINT Twitter account [Aurora Intel](#), the rocket landed on Al Elaf School.

The heavily fortified Green Zone dates to the US occupation of Iraq in the 2000s, when US forces responsible for overthrown Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein faced a powerful domestic insurgency. While the vast majority of US troops have left Iraq, those that remain are a reminder of the powerful influence Washington continues to exert over Iraqi politics, and the embassy remains [a favorite target](#) for Iraqi militias angry at the US presence.

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Jan. 6 Panel Subpoenas Records From Alphabet, Meta, Twitter & Reddit After 'Inadequate Responses'

By - Evan Craighead

Back in August, the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol contacted a slew of websites and social media platforms—including Google, Facebook, Reddit, and Tik Tok—demanding a trove of records that date back to the spring of 2020 and, in part, relate to "efforts to overturn the 2020 election"

The 9-member panel, led by Rep. Bennie Thompson, confirmed in a Thursday memo that it had issued subpoenas to Reddit, Meta, Twitter, and Google parent company Alphabet after receiving "inadequate responses to prior requests for information."

Chairman Thompson asserted that the aforementioned social media companies have access to information that could assist in making sense of how the spread of misinformation and violent extremism contributed to the deadly storming of the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

"It's disappointing that after months of engagement, we still do not have the documents and information necessary to answer those basic questions," Thompson [said in a quoted statement](#).

"We cannot allow our important work to be delayed any further," he said.

Alphabet

The House Select Committee believes Alphabet, the parent company of Google and its subsidiary, YouTube, has "significant undisclosed information that is critical" to the panel's probe, according to a memo accompanying the subpoena.

"Alphabet has not demonstrated a commitment to voluntarily and expeditiously producing the information critical to the Select Committee's investigation," the memo read.

The panel is particularly interested in how Alphabet "developed, implemented, and reviewed" its platforms' content moderation, algorithmic promotion, demonetization, and other company policies "that may have affected the January 6, 2021 events."

Alphabet has also been tapped to produce documents on YouTube's policy decisions around the time of the insurrection.

Meta

In a letter to Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive officer of Facebook parent company Meta Platforms Inc., the House Select Committee detailed that "the largest social media company in the world" failed to provide the panel with critical company analyses that examined "misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation relating to the 2020 election" and efforts to overturn its results.

Thompson's letter details that the subpoena was issued due to the committee's belief that the company has been dragging its feet—especially after the company's inner workings were exposed by leaks from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen.

Twitter

The House Select Committee stressed to Twitter that, in 2021, then-CEO Jack Dorsey proclaimed under congressional testimony that the company's social media platform aided in the spread of misinformation on the 2020 election, as well as the planning of the deadly January 6 riot.

"Twitter has failed to produce any documents that fully explain either its decision to suspend President Trump's account on January 8, 2021," the memo claimed.

The panel also noted that, since August 26, Twitter has yet to produce information on the reprimands handed down to those using the platform to "plan or incite violence on January 6th."

Reddit

The panel highlighted that the social news aggregator hosted "r/The\_Donald," a subreddit which gained popularity until most of the community migrated to TheDonald.win, a website, around mid-2020.

That same subreddit underwent restrictions before it was ultimately shut down on June 29, 2020, the panel noted. Another subreddit "r/donaldtrump" also rose to prominence up until it was shut down on January 8, 2021, for violating rules regarding "violent content."

"[T]o date Reddit still has not committed to a thorough review of its records for documents relevant to the Select Committee's investigation and has refused to produce internal documents to support its conclusory public statements that Reddit played no role in January 6th," reads the memo.

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Democrats' Voting Rights Bill in Critical Danger as Sen. Sinema Doubles Down on Filibuster Support

By - Evan Craighead

Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema has been a longtime supporter of the filibuster, a procedural mechanism that allows one or more senators to stop a bill from reaching a vote on the Senate floor. Then, at least 60 senators must approve a cloture motion, which halts debate on the bill, to bring the proposed legislation to a vote.

Another centrist roadblock emerged for Democrats on Thursday, when fellow party member Sen. Kyrsten Sinema reiterated her intent to not entertain changes to the chamber's 60-vote threshold to pass legislation.

"There's no need for me to restate my longstanding support for the 60-vote threshold to pass legislation. There's no need for me to restate its role in protecting our country from wild reversals of federal policy," she said.

Sinema stated that “demands to eliminate this threshold from whichever party holds the fleeting majority amount to a group of people separated on two sides of a canyon, shouting that solution to their colleagues.”

The US senator for Arizona argued that “harried” talks about the Senate rules are a poor substitute for what could have been a “thoughtful public debate” over the past several months. Another Democrat, Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), has opposed filibuster reform. Manchin told reporters on Thursday that his colleague delivered an “excellent speech.”

“I think it’s the [points that I’ve been making for an awful long time](#) and she has too,” said Manchin.

The centrist Democrat’s comments come in spite of her support for the party’s election reforms bill. While Sinema appears steadfast in her decision, her refusal to support filibuster reform likely means that Democrats will be unable to pass voting rights legislation ahead of the 2022 midterm elections season.

Earlier on Thursday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) argued that Democrats owe it to American voters to combat restrictive voting laws passed via simple majority vote on state and local levels.

“If the right to vote is the cornerstone of our democracy, then how can we in good conscience allow for a situation in which the Republican Party can debate and pass voter suppression laws at the state level with only a simple majority vote, but not allow the United States to do the same?” asked Schumer.

Meanwhile, the US House of Representatives passed a bill on Thursday that combines the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, named after the late civil rights leader and long-term congressman, which strengthens the [1965 Voting Rights Act](#). The Senate Majority leader has signaled that he intends to force a vote on changing the legislative chamber’s rules when Republicans, as expected, move to block the voting reforms bill.

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Server's Advantage - Cartoon

Novak Djokovic, the world's top-ranked men's tennis player, was included in the Australian Open's official draw on Thursday, matching up with fellow Serbian tennis pro Miomir Kecmanovic, who is unseeded. Despite his release, it remains unclear whether Djokovic's - who was spotted practicing at Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena - visa will be restored.

As Djokovic, 34, hopes to secure his 10th Australian Open title, his [first-round match against Kecmanovic](#) and the happenings of the Grand Slam tournament are not his only concern while staying in the Victoria capital city of Melbourne.

As of this article's publication, the Serbian tennis player is awaiting a decision from Alex Hawke, Australia's Minister of Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs, regarding the former's visa.

It remains possible that the 34-year-old's visa may again be canceled, resulting in an up to 3-year ban from the country. The decision [has reportedly been delayed](#) due to concerns of international law violations.

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Biden Deploys US Military Medical Teams to Six States With Overwhelmed Hospitals  
By - Evan Craighead

Within the past week, the US has experienced a single-day record of 1.5 million COVID-19 cases and logged a record number of 145,982 related hospitalizations. Despite vaccinations preventing a vast number of hospital trips, medical facilities are being overwhelmed by a spike in COVID-19 cases triggered by the highly transmissible omicron variant.

US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that his administration will deploy more than a hundred medical professionals affiliated with the US military.

"Today, I'm announcing our next deployment of six additional federal medical teams, a total of more than 120 military medical personnel, to six hard-hit states: Michigan, New Mexico, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island," the US president said during a morning address from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

Biden's remarks confirmed a previous USA Today report regarding the move.

New York, once the US epicenter of the disease, is continuing to see surges in cases of the contagious disease. On Tuesday, [some 58,770 individuals in New York](#) tested positive for COVID-19 and, as of this article's publication, there are some 12,671 COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the state.

Deployments were paid for via the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill passed last year.

"I've directed FEMA to work with every state, territory, and the District of Columbia to make sure they have enough hospital bed capacity," Biden added.

The US president also announced that the government has ramped up shipments of COVID-19 treatments, including antiviral pills.

Since November 25 (Thanksgiving in the US), over 800 US emergency personnel have been deployed to 24 states, Tribes, and territories. More than 350 US military doctors make up the emergency personnel.

More than 14,000 members of the National Guard are also active in 49 states.

The US president concluded his address by urging Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19, and telling members of the press to "deal with the misinformation and disinformation that's on your shows."

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## Conor McGregor's \$2.2 Million Dublin Pub Attacked by Petrol Bombs

By - Mary Manley

UFC star Conor McGregor had his Dublin pub attacked on Wednesday when “suspects on scooters” threw Molotov cocktails at the establishment, which had been hosting a taste testing event at the time.

McGregor bought the building in his hometown for a costly \$2.2 million in 2019. The 33-year-old mixed martial artist was hosting a taste testing event at the pub the same night of the attack, but was not present when the incident occurred. No injuries and no damages to the building were found.

“There was no damage done to any patrons, employees, or the Forge, and Mr. McGregor was not on the premises at the time of the incident,” Black Forge Inn management said in their statement to [MMA Fighting](#). “The Gardai have opened an investigation into the event. We are open and busy as always.”

The Gardai is the national police service of the Republic of Ireland. To date, no arrests have been made in the case.

“There were two people allegedly spotted on scooters who passed the establishment at the time and next thing they were being chased by two others who had come out of the property,” unidentified sources told [Dublin Live](#).

The UFC star, whose Irish whiskey brand [Proper No. 12](#) generated \$1 billion in its first year of sales alone, was listed as the wealthiest sportsman in 2021 by [Forbes](#). Before McGregor became a professional fighter, he was a [plumber's apprentice](#) making \$150 per cage fight. Rumors have circulated in Irish and British tabloids regarding McGregor's relationship with Irish gangster Graham 'The Wig' Whelan. In [2017](#), it was believed that McGregor got into a pub brawl with a close tie to Whelan, and McGregor's sister Aoife McGregor paid a second [visit](#) to the Kinahan cartel gangster in prison earlier this month.

McGregor is currently recovering from a broken leg he sustained after his [UFC 264 loss](#) to lightweight rival Dustin Poirier and won't be expected to return to the caged ring until later this year.

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## Roseanne Barr's Daughter Reveals She Has PTSD From Childhood Reform Schools

By - Mary Manley

Jenny Pentland opens up in her new book “This Will Be Funny Later” that between the ages of 13 and 18, she was “locked up” in a series of reform schools, wilderness bootcamps, and psychiatric institutions for troubled teens, which has resulted in PTSD for the now 45 year-old. “The worst abuse I feel I suffered was having my free will removed- the lack of freedom,” she told [People](#). “I was getting bad grades, and I was mouthy, cutting my arms and smoking cigarettes.”

Pentland also says her mother's sudden rise in fame contributed to her depression and “acting out” as a teenager. Roseanne Barr was the star of the popular 1990s sitcom “Roseanne.”

According to Pentland, her older sister Jessica was also sent to a psychiatric hospital in Los Angeles, California, after stealing their mother's car for a joyride.

Pentland clarified she now has a good relationship with both her parents, Roseanne Barr and Bill Pentland, who placed her in the facilities after being referred there by education and behavioral specialists.

Barr's daughter has stated that she is speaking out now because "these places are still out there and I want it to stop." Pentland experienced both mental and physical [abuse](#) in facilities marketed towards parents of 'troubled teens'.

In recent years, celebrity socialite Paris Hilton has also opened up and even advocated as a result of her own experiences concerning these facilities. Hilton herself divulged details of the physical and mental abuse she suffered as a teenager in her 2020 [documentary](#) "This Is Paris," most notably at [Provo Canyon School](#), described as a "psychiatric youth residential treatment center."

In the YouTube documentary, Hilton describes being physically beaten and mentally abused, saying the facilities would force children to take unknown prescription pills that would make her feel "numb," and would go so far as to lock the children in solitary confinement after making them strip off their clothes.

Pentland's book "This Will Be Funny Later" will hit shelves on January 18. As for Hilton, she is currently working as an activist and urging the Biden administration to reform the congregate care facilities responsible for [catering](#) to parents as a part of the troubled teen industry.

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Rules For Thee: Djokovic Breaks All the Rules After Blasting Osaka for Skipping Media Duties  
By - Mary Manley

While Novak Djokovic receives praise from fellow male tennis pro Stefanos Tsitsipas for having the guts to "play by his own rules", like breaking government health rules and lying on his travel papers, it's hard to forget that the former criticized female tennis player Naomi Osaka for refusing to participate in pressers at the French Open.

A timeline of Novak Djokovic's troublesome activities continues to unfold. The 34 year-old was first detained in Australia and had his visa [canceled](#) after attempting to enter the country to play in the Australian Open. He was then released from an immigration detention center and had his [visa](#) reinstated by a judge.

Now it has come to light that he lied when filling out his travel [documents](#), claiming that he had not traveled prior to attempting to enter Australia although he had traveled to Spain despite being unvaccinated and broke his [quarantine](#) to do an interview with a journalist from L'Equipe, despite being aware that he was Covid-19 positive.

Djokovic earlier [addressed](#) the matter on Tuesday, noting that the travel declaration had been submitted by his support staff on his behalf. "My agent sincerely apologises for the administrative mistake in ticking the incorrect box about my previous travel before coming to Australia," the release read.

All the drama is due to the questionable legitimacy of his claim for a personal vaccine [exemption](#).

While other players received vaccinations to compete in the Australian Open, Djokovic claimed a medical exemption. But Marton Fucsovics, Hungary's top men's player, maintained that Djokovic should not be allowed in Melbourne, [offering](#) that it is unfair that an unvaccinated Djokovic should play in the tournament.

"People's health is paramount, and there are rules that were outlined months ago," Fucsovics told M4Sport.

With all the media buzz surrounding the male tennis pro, it may be time to take a look at the criticism Djokovic dished out for the 24-year-old No. 1 female tennis player, Naomi Osaka. In May 2021, Osaka released a statement to social media informing fans and the press that she would not participate in news conferences at the French Open, for mental health reasons, a move that later saw her face [fines](#) from the sport's management for refusing to do so. The tennis pro said in a social media post, "I'm not going to subject myself to people that doubt me." In response to the uproar over Osaka's press refusal, Djokovic criticized her [saying](#), "[the press conference] is part of our sport, it is part of what we do, the media is important without a doubt. It allows us to have a platform to communicate with the fans, but in a more traditional way." For now, media and fans must wait for the Australian government to decide whether to boot Djokovic from the tournament and from the country. The Djokovic saga continues to [unfold](#), and the Grand Slam champ's visa and chance to play in the Australian Open hangs in limbo.

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Two Parties Reportedly Held at 10 Downing Street as UK Quarantined, Mourned Death of Prince Phillip

By - Nevin Brown

The list of social events and parties held at 10 Downing Street, the residence and executive office of the prime minister of the United Kingdom, while the rest of the nation was on lockdown due to COVID, continues to grow.

[New reporting has brought to light two parties](#) held on Friday, 16 April 2021. The two leaving parties, one for James Slack, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's director of communications, and one for a photographer, began as separate events until merging into one large party later that night.

According to reporting, a significant amount of alcohol was consumed, a custom that has reportedly become commonplace at 10 Downing street as the rest of the UK faced COVID restrictions.

The nation had been in mourning following the 9 April death of Prince Phillip, Queen Elizabeth's husband of 73 years, and was in step two of a stringent lockdown plan, which, among other health restrictions, explicitly barred indoor socializing.

Concerns over COVID were so severe that mourners were asked not to leave flowers due to public health concerns.

Prince Phillip's funeral service was held on 17 April, the day after the dual-Downing Street parties. The most lasting image was of Queen Elizabeth masked and alone in a private chapel in Windsor Castle.

Strict adherence to social distancing and public health mandates by the Royal Family, at a time of grieving, stands in sharp contrast to the excess and disregard of lockdown rules by members of the prime minister's staff, according to reports.

At the time, mixing indoors was banned, except within a single household. While people could meet outdoors, it could only be in groups of six, or two households.

According to a partygoer, the two parties consisted of around 30 people. One party started in the main offices and the other was held in the basement. As the events wore on, the two parties migrated to the No 10 garden.

A witness said the party continued well past 12 a.m. into 17 April, and a toy swing belonging to the prime minister's son was broken by an attendee.

Johnson was not at the alleged parties, according to reports. On Thursday, he departed for Chequers, the prime minister's country house, where he would stay until Saturday.

The parties are the first confirmed gatherings at 10 Downing Street in defiance of COVID lockdown mandates from 2021. The prime minister has been under fire for gatherings that occurred in 2020 around the holidays.

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North Korea Warns US After New Sanctions Follow Ballistic Missile Launches  
By - Nevin Brown

On Friday, North Korea warned the United States that Pyongyang will take a "stronger and certain reaction" after the US implementation of new sanctions following a series of missile launches by the DPRK.

[The announcement was made by the state-run Korean Central News Agency.](#)

"If the US adopts such a confrontational stance, the [DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)] will be forced to take stronger and certain reaction to it," the statement said.

In the address, a spokesperson for North Korea's foreign ministry defended the recent launches of hypersonic missiles as an "exercise of right to self-defense."

The announcement comes as North Korea conducted two missile tests this week. [The second test](#), conducted on Tuesday, which according to North Korean state media was attended by the nation's leader, Kim Jung-un, was of a hypersonic missile.

Hypersonic missiles are able to travel at a lower altitude and avoid radar detection.

The US responded to the tests by [imposing new sanctions on Wednesday](#). The sanctions targeted six North Koreans, one Russian, and a Russian firm, Parsek LLC, for their roles in helping North Korea acquire the technology and know-how to advance their missile systems. Brian Nelson, US Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said the sanctions are designed to target North Korea's "continued use of overseas representatives to illegally procure goods for weapons."

Three of the individuals, two North Koreans and one Russian national, are based in Russia, while four are North Koreans based in China.

Questions have been raised as to why no sanctions were brought against companies in China or against Chinese nationals.

The US also proposed that the five be blacklisted by the United Nations Security Council.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price said Washington is still committed to diplomacy to curb North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal.

"What we have seen in recent days ... only underscores our belief that if we are going to make progress, that we will need to engage in that dialogue," said Price.

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Mike Flynn Calls Nancy Pelosi a 'Modern-Day Pontius Pilate'

By - Nevin Brown

On Wednesday, retired Lt. General Michael Flynn called US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi a "modern-day Pontius Pilate," (the Roman governor who purportedly sentenced Jesus Christ to death around the year 30 CE), over the supposed persecution of supporters of former US President Donald Trump.

[In an interview on Lindell TV](#), Flynn was critical of Democrats and the House Select Committee regarding the 1/6 attack. He called the committee "crazy," and suggested that their investigation was an "insurrection persecution by Nancy Pelosi."

The US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol is composed of seven Democratic and two Republican Congress members. Pelosi is not a member of the Committee.

Flynn's disdain for Pelosi saw him claim that she was a "modern-day Pontius Pilate, you know, of this era."

He complained that the US is "persecuting people who are expressing" dissatisfaction and distrust in the government. He clarified, however, that he was not referring to those who are currently facing prosecution over their involvement in the deadly 1/6 Capitol attack.

Who was Pontius Pilate?

Historical records concerning the Roman politician Pontius Pilate are murky at best. His first name is unknown and some historians believe he first rose in the ranks of Roman bureaucracy through the military due to his name being a reference to 'Pilatus', meaning 'skilled with the javelin.' This historical assertion is not universally accepted, however, and is considered by many experts in the field as a hypothesis only.

Little is known of his life before his apparent appointment by the second Roman Emperor Tiberius as governor of the Roman province of Judea around the year 26 CE. The post was considered low prestige, and little of his supposed ten-year stint has survived the historical record.

Pilate is thought to be most famous for purportedly sentencing the Christian religious prophet Jesus Christ to death, via crucifixion, around the year 30 CE. There are no direct historical records concerning Pilate's motivation for sentencing the man to death.

His governorship was dogged by consistent civil disturbance between the ruling Romans and the local, predominantly Jewish, population. Crucifixion was a common tool used in the Roman provinces and there is said to have been little oversight over Pilate during much of his reign. Later depictions of Pilate, particularly those in the Christian Bible, are varied. Some portray him as coerced into the execution of Jesus, while others portray him as a villainous and brutal ruler.

Flynn's Religious Bias

Flynn is likely referencing villainous portrayals of Pilate in his comparison to Pelosi, harkening to the persecution that early Christians faced in the Roman Empire.

He has a history of portraying political opponents through a lens of religious Christian dogma. Flynn has claimed, "Biblically speaking, at the age of 13, Jesus Christ went into the temple and he ransacked it. They would call him a domestic terrorist today."

His reference confuses two distinct sections of Christian biblical myth. According to the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ did visit the temple of Jerusalem as a teenager, but it wasn't until days before his death, purportedly while he was in his 30s, that he "ransacked it."

Flynn has also claimed that the United States should have "one religion," meaning Christianity, and suggesting that all other religions, including Islam and Judaism, be permitted to function, but with vastly reduced visibility.

"If we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion. One nation under God and one religion under God," Flynn said at a conference in Texas.

Flynn's sentiments are in stark contrast to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which prohibits the government from, "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

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RPT - US Says Probing Havana Syndrome Cases After Reports of New Incidents in Paris, Geneva

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is "vigorously investigating" cases of the so-called Havana Syndrome, the State Department told Sputnik after reports of new incidents in Paris and Geneva.

Earlier on Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported that diplomats working at the US diplomatic missions in Geneva and Paris may have been affected by Havana Syndrome. The incidents reportedly happened in the summer of 2021. In Geneva, three American officials reported symptoms similar to Havana Syndrome. At least one diplomat was evacuated to the US for treatment. Senior embassy officials in Paris also informed diplomats by email of one more suspected case and called on the mission's staff to report unusual symptoms.

"As part of the National Security Council-led interagency response effort and in coordination with our partners across the U.S. Government, we are vigorously investigating reports of AHIs [anomalous health incidents] wherever they are reported. The interagency is actively working to

identify the cause of these incidents and whether they may be attributed to a foreign actor, and is focused on providing care for those affected," the spokesperson said.

The department is doing everything possible to ensure that diplomats who reported such symptoms have received immediate attention and care, the spokesperson added.

"More broadly, these health incidents have been a top priority for [State] Secretary [Antony] Blinken, who set clear goals for the Health Incident Response Task Force to strengthen the Department's communication with our workforce, provide care for affected employees and family members, and better protect against these events in the future as we continue to work closely with the interagency to find the cause of these anomalous health incidents," they concluded.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with Havana Syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. American diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported experiencing Havana Syndrome symptoms, including nausea and dizziness

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UPDATE - Biden Meets With Two Dems Who Oppose Senate Rule Change to Pass Voting Rights Bill

(Adds quote from Biden in paras 5,6)

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with Senators Joe Manchin and Krysten Sinema for more than an hour to discuss pending voting rights legislation, the White House said in a statement.

Manchin has said that he opposes changing the Senate filibuster rules to pass two pieces of voting rights legislation – a plan being considered by congressional leadership and the Biden administration – because of the 232-year history of the rule. Sinema similarly said on the Senate floor that she will not back changes to the filibuster rule.

"The President's meeting with Senator Manchin and Senator Sinema started at 5:30 p.m. [EST] and just ended," the White House said after the meeting on Tuesday.

Earlier the White House said the focus of the meeting would be the voting rights bills.

Biden in a moment of brutal honesty earlier in the day signaled that prospects were bleak to get the rule change through.

"The honest-to-God answer is I don't know whether we can get this done," Biden said. "Like every other major civil rights bill that came along, if we miss the first time, we can come back and try it a second time. We missed this time. We missed this time."

The US House on Thursday moved the legislation forward in a vote of 220-203 to be considered by the Senate, where Democrats do not hold the significant majority needed to get over the 60-vote threshold needed to get around a filibuster.

During a speech in Georgia earlier this week, Biden endorsed the elimination of the filibuster so the Democrats could use their slim majority to pass the voting rights bills. The chamber is evenly split currently along party lines with Vice President Kamala Harris, as Senate president, wielding the tie-breaking vote if necessary.

The voting rights legislation, known as the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act, was designed by Democrats to counter some state bills passed last year in Republican-run states that restrict mail-in voting and give more power to elected officials over counting ballots.

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US Senate Rejects Bill to Sanction Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Within 15 Days

(Updates with details, background in paras 2-8)

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The US Senate rejected Republican Senator Ted Cruz's bill that would impose sanctions within 15 days on companies building and operating the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The US Senate on Thursday failed to get the 60 votes needed to pass the legislation. The vote was 55 in favor and 43 opposed, as voting continued into the early evening.

Biden administration officials were on Capitol Hill earlier this week lobbying against support for the bill due to concerns that it could compromise cooperation between the United States and European partners in the security talks with Russia that seek to address pressing issues in Eastern Europe.

The Biden administration believes sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would deprive the United States and its European allies of an item to use as leverage during the negotiations with Russia.

Moreover, the Biden administration warned that sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline could lead to a spike in Russian energy prices that may impact European partners during the winter. Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in an effort to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted the block after US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

Senator Bob Menendez introduced a bill to impose sanctions on top Russian government and military officials and entities, including Russian banks, if the situation with respect to Ukraine escalates, but a vote has not been scheduled on the measure.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed last September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the 2019 EU Gas Directive. The German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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Biden Meets With Two Dems Who Oppose Senate Rule Change to Pass Voting Rights Bill

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with Senators Joe Manchin and Krysten Sinema for more than an hour to discuss pending voting rights legislation, the White House said in a statement.

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Blinken, Jordanian Counterpart Discuss Syrian Political Solution - State Dept.

WASHINGTON January 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi today in Washington where they discussed the political solutions in both Syria and Palestine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The Secretary reaffirmed the US commitment to stability in the region through support of a political solution in Syria and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Price said on Thursday.

The diplomats also discussed the need to put in place reforms that will expand Jordan's economic growth and opportunity, including securing access to water.

On Tuesday, Jordan Prime Minister Bisher Al Khasawneh in an interview with Ammon News denied his country opened secret channels with the Syrian government to discuss reconciliation.

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California Governor Rejects Parole for Man Who Assassinated Robert F. Kennedy

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - California Governor Gavin Newsom said he declined to grant parole to Sirhan Sirhan, who assassinated former presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy in 1968.

"Mr. Sirhan's assassination of Senator Kennedy is among the most notorious crimes in American history," Newsom wrote in an op-ed published in the L.A. Times on Thursday. "After decades in prison, he has failed to address the deficiencies that led him to assassinate Senator Kennedy. Mr. Sirhan lacks the insight that would prevent him from making the same types of dangerous decisions he made in the past."

Newsom said he has idolized Robert F. Kennedy throughout his adult life.

A two-person state parole panel recommended Sirhan be granted parole after two of Robert F. Kennedy's children advocated for it.

Robert F. Kennedy was killed about five years after his brother, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas. Robert F. Kennedy campaigned to end the Vietnam War and was considered a top candidate for president.

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US to Allow Early Release of Federal Inmates Under 'Time Credits' Program - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON January 13 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice said in a press release that it is preparing to implement a program that would allow individuals serving sentences in federal prison "time credits" toward early release if they meet established criteria.

"Today, the Department of Justice announced that a new rule has been submitted to the Federal Register implementing the Time Credits program required by the First Step Act for persons incarcerated in federal facilities who committed nonviolent offenses," the release said on Thursday.

The Justice Department noted that the initiative is a requirement under the 2018 First Step Act and would affect people incarcerated in federal prisons for non-violent offenses.

The First Step Act offers eligible inmates the chance to earn ten to 15 days of time credits for every 30 days of successful participation in Evidence-Based Recidivism Reduction Programs and Productive Activities, the release said. Credits can be applied toward inmates being placed in pre-release custody, such as home confinement or residential reentry centers, it added.

The Justice Department explained that as much as a year of credit can be applied toward supervised release at the discretion of the Bureau of Prisons.

Incarcerated individuals will be able to earn time credits retroactively to December 21, 2018, the date the First Step Act became a law, and the Bureau of Prisons officials will determine eligibility, the release said.

The Bureau of Prisons already begun transferring eligible inmates out of prison into a supervised release program, residential reentry centers or home confinement, the release also said.

Implementation of the program will move on a rolling basis, beginning with the immediate release of those whose amount of time credits is more that the days they have left to serve, but

also applies to those who have less than a year from release or have a supervised release term, the release added.

The final rule will be published in the Federal Register in the coming weeks when it will begin to be applied, according to the release.

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#### White House Says Not Ready to Predict When Future Biden-Putin Meeting Will Take Place

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The White House does not have any information to be able to predict when the next meeting between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin will take place, spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing. "I don't have anything to predict for you on that front. As Jake mentioned, we are just concluding the third round of talks. People [diplomats] are going to go back to their capitals. They're going to discuss and assess and see where things stand. So, in terms of next steps, we'll have to see we'll know more over the coming days," Psaki said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Vienna hosted an OSCE Permanent Council meeting where the attendees discussed Russia's security proposals for Europe. Moscow had published the security proposals for NATO and the United States in late 2021, requesting legally-binding guarantees the alliance would not expand eastward. The United States insists it will not allow anyone to close NATO's so-called open-door policy for new members.

Russia held meetings with the United States and NATO earlier in the week to discuss the security guarantees it had requested from them. The proposed security guarantees, if agreed to, would prevent NATO from further expanding in Eastern Europe and prohibit both, the United States and Russia, from deploying intermediate and shorter-range missiles within striking distance of each other's territory, among other terms.

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#### Pentagon Says 'Aware' of Iranian Leader's Video Depicting Trump Assassination

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon is aware of an animated video posted to the website of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei depicting the assassination of former US President Donald Trump, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said during an interview with Fox News.

"We've just recently been made aware of it and I think we're looking at that right now. This is a piece of the continued malign activities that Iran continues to perpetrate in the region and the threats that they continue to pose to our national security interests" Kirby said on Thursday.

The Department of Defense will stay focused on the Iranian threat and make sure they have the capability to protect US forces in the Middle East amid continued attacks by Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria, Kirby added.

The video - part of a contest to mark the January 3, 2020 killing of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike - shows an Iranian agent remotely controlling a combat robot which infiltrates Trump's residence in Florida, where the former US president is playing golf with other high-ranking officials. The video displays the message "Soleimani's murderer and the one who gave the order will pay the price," before launching the simulated strike on Trump.

Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds Force, was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. On Saturday, Tehran imposed new sanctions against 51 US citizens over their involvement in the assassination, including Head of the United States Central Command Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley and former National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien.

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Maryland State Attorney Indicted for Perjury, Lying to Obtain Loan - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Maryland State Attorney Marilyn Mosby has been indicted for allegedly lying under oath and making false statement to acquire a loan, the US Justice Department said.

"A federal grand jury today returned an indictment charging Marilyn J. Mosby, age 41, of Baltimore, Maryland, on federal charges of perjury and making false mortgage applications, relating to the purchases of two vacation homes in Florida," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

According to court documents, Mosby falsely claimed she faced financial hardship due to the novel coronavirus pandemic and withdrew \$90,000 in COVID-19 relief funds in 2020.

The Justice Department said Mosby received her full yearly salary of \$247,955 for 2020.

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Sullivan Says Feels Good About Convergence Between US, European Allies on Russia Sanctions

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said during a press briefing that he feels very good about the level of engagement between the United States and its European allies on joint sanctions to be implemented in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"I feel very good about the level of engagement and the level of convergence," Sullivan said on Thursday. "On the fundamental proposition that there would have to be severe economic

consequences, and... on both the categories, types, and targets of sanctions that would have to flow. Does that mean the US and Europe are going to have precisely the same list down to every last detail? No."

US media reported earlier on Thursday that the Biden administration is concerned about the slow pace of progress in coming to an agreement on exact sanctions to impose on Russia over the situation with Ukraine.

US officials have warned Russia of severe consequences should they choose to advance on Ukraine and not de-escalate tensions, including economic sanctions on Russian financial institutions and export controls on key industries, as well as a change in NATO's Eastern Flank force posture.

Russia has repeatedly denied Western accusations of preparing for an invasion, saying it reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory as it considers NATO's military activities a threat to the national security of Russia.

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US House Panel Subpoenas Records of Alphabet, Twitter in Capitol Riot Probe - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, said it has subpoenaed the social media companies Alphabet, Meta, Twitter and Reddit for records related to their alleged role in spreading misinformation about the 2020 presidential election and serving as a platform for domestic violent extremists.

"After inadequate responses to prior requests for information, the Select Committee is demanding records from Alphabet, Meta, Reddit and Twitter relating to the spread of misinformation, efforts to overturn the 2020 election, domestic violent extremism and foreign influence in the 2020 election," the Select Committee said in a press release on Thursday. The Select Committee said it specifically wants information about how the spread of misinformation and violent extremism on social media platforms contributed to the US Capitol riot and whether the companies did anything to address the issue beforehand. In addition, the Select Committee said it expects the social media companies to submit all requested records by January 27.

On January 6, 2021, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states that Trump claimed were fraudulent. The authorities shot dead an unarmed protester and

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European Allies Yet to Agree on Russia Sanctions Pushed by US - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned that European partners and allies have yet to agree on the exact sanctions to be jointly implemented should Russia launch an invasion of Ukraine, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing people familiar with the discussions.

The US and European nations have been working for several months on a sanctions package to be implemented should Russia advance on Ukraine, but American officials are worried about the slow pace of progress and are putting pressure on the allies, the sources said.

European officials acknowledged during NATO meetings that they are poorly prepared to respond to Russia's alleged hybrid attacks and wanted to know what the US triggers for action were, one person said.

US officials have warned Russia of severe consequences should they choose to advance on Ukraine and not de-escalate tensions, including economic sanctions on Russian financial institutions and export controls on key industries.

US, NATO and Russian officials have been engaged in a series of meetings this week to discuss bilateral issues and European security, with a focus on risk reduction and arms control. Moscow published its security suggestions for NATO and the US in late 2021 as tensions flared high around Ukraine. It requested, in particular, guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward. The US insists it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

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**Biden Says 'Disappointed' US Supreme Court Blocked OSHA Vaccine Mandate - Statement**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden expressed disappointment that the US Supreme Court issued a decision to block his administration's vaccine mandate for businesses with 100 or more employees.

"I am disappointed that the Supreme Court has chosen to block common-sense life-saving requirements for employees at large businesses that were grounded squarely in both science and the law," Biden said in a statement on Thursday.

This emergency standard allowed employers to require vaccinations or to permit workers to refuse to be vaccinated as long as they get tested once a week and wear a mask, he added.

The US Supreme Court blocked enforcement of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) COVID-19 vaccine mandate for large businesses, but backed the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for healthcare workers, according to two decisions filed earlier in the day.

Despite the court's decision, Biden still called on companies to join those who already imposed mask mandates to institute vaccination requirements as well.

Opponents of the Biden's mandates said the Supreme Courts decision on the OSHA vaccine mandate is a win for worker's rights and a blow to what they call a tyranny of the administrative state. The opponents have continually argued the Biden mandate has not been grounded in science, was unconstitutional and pointed out that it is now unenforceable.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) -

#### OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL MEETING

\* Russia explained its security proposals at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting on Thursday, Russian Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Alexander Lukashevich said on Thursday.

\* Russia will have to take measures if the United States and NATO fail to provide a constructive response on the requested security guarantees within a reasonable time, Lukashevich said.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin will be informed about negotiations on security guarantees with the United States and NATO and he will determine the next steps on the matter, Lukashevich said.

\* US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said the Western allies must be prepared for the eventuality of an escalation with Russia amid troop build-up at the border with Ukraine.

\* The United States "strongly welcomes" the OSCE chairman's proposal to revitalize dialogue on European security and hopes for open and sincere talks in this format, Carpenter said.

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

\* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Ukrainian counterpart during a recent telephone call discussed Russia's military activity and the United States' efforts to build up Ukraine's forces, the Department of Defense said on Thursday.

\* German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the Normandy Four would soon meet to prepare further talks.

\* The European Union is preparing to send experts to Ukraine to support Kiev against possible cyber attacks, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

#### SITUATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

\* In connection with the stabilization of the situation in Kazakhstan, the Defense Ministry's measures to evacuate Russian citizens by aircraft are being completed and regular passenger flights from Almaty airport have resumed, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

\* The nationalist statements of Kazakhstan's new Information Minister Askar Umarov, are unacceptable, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

\* The Russian Aerospace Forces will transport all Belarussian, Tajik and Armenian peacekeepers from Kazakhstan via its military aircraft on Friday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told President Vladimir Putin.

#### GLOBAL ECONOMY

\* The global economy is projected to grow only by 4 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent the following year after a strong recovery in 2021, a new United Nations' World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2022 report revealed.

\* Gas futures prices in Europe continue rally, exceeding \$1,000 per thousand cubic meters, and are now rising by 12.5%, according to London-based ICE exchange.

#### NORD STREAM 2

- \* The European Union can not ban the construction of projects that comply with rules, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Thursday when discussing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.
- \* The situation with the United States and the Nord Stream 2 project showed that Germany does not have freedom in its economic activities, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- \* The function of the Nord Stream 2 project will depend on the development of the situation around Ukraine, Borrell said.

#### RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS

- \* Turkey is interested in the Russian proposal to make space launches from a sea platform as the country's geographic position prevents it from building own space port, director of the Turkish Space Agency (TUA) Serdar Huseyin Yildirim told Sputnik on Thursday.
- \* Moscow expects Turkey to refrain from making ill-conceived statements on Kazakhstan and to avoid attempts to "catch a fish in troubled waters," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- \* Turkey considers close cooperation with Russia on domestic space program, including the launch of a Turkish astronaut to the International Space Station (ISS) using the Soyuz rocket, director of the Turkish Space Agency (TUA) Serdar Huseyin Yildirim told Sputnik.

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**US Says Oil From Strategic Reserve Sale Could Hit Market as Early as January- Energy Dept.**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Oil from the US government's Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) sale could hit the market as early as January after 18 million barrels were initially contracted to be sold to six energy firms under the program aimed at reducing prices of fuel at the pump, the Department of Energy (DOE) said on Thursday.

"On December 17, 2021, DOE issued a Notice of Sale for a price-competitive sale of 18 million barrels of SPR crude oil," the Energy Department said in a statement. "It said 14 companies responded and six were initially picked. "The SPR plans to schedule deliveries between February 1 - March 31, 2022, with early deliveries available in January if arrangements can be made."

The winners then and the allocations given to them were ExxonMobil Oil Corp, (500,000 barrels); Gunvor USA LLC (1.5 million barrels); Marathon Petroleum Supply and Trading LLC (3.9 million barrels); Motiva Enterprises LLC (3 million barrels); Phillips 66 Company (1 million barrels); and Valero Marketing and Supply Company (8.2 million barrels).

More companies have since entered into deals with the Department of Energy and allocations have changed too.

Shell Trading Company, one of those not on the original list, has taken 870,000 barrels, the Department of Energy said in a statement issued on Wednesday. ExxonMobil has also transacted 6.8 million barrels compared to the initial 500,000 announced by the Department of Energy.

Companies that receive Strategic Petroleum Reserve crude oil through the exchange agree to return the amount of crude oil received, as well as an additional amount, dependent upon the length of time in which they hold the oil, the Department of Energy said.

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

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

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**Sullivan Says Russian Officials Were 'Professional and Business-Like' During Recent Talks**

WASHINGTON, January (Sputnik) - The Russian representatives to recent talks between Russia, the United States and NATO were professional and business-like during the discussions, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday. "They were professional and business-like. We clearly disagreed on things and there were areas where both sides saw there was a possibility for progress," Sullivan said during a press briefing in response to a question about the Russian representatives' demeanor.

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**US, European Partners Agree That Diplomatic Path Forward With Russia Possible - Sullivan**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US and its European partners are in agreement that a diplomatic path forward with Russia in regards to the situation with Ukraine is possible, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"I think we're united with the European Union, with NATO, with Ukraine, with the rest of the countries of the Euro-Atlantic community on the notion that there is a diplomatic path forward here," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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### US Intelligence Has No Assessment Yet That Russia Will Invade Ukraine - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – The US intelligence community has not made an assessment yet that Russia has definitely decided to advance on Ukraine, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"The [US] intelligence community has not made an assessment that the Russians have definitively decided to take a military course of action in Ukraine. So, as things stand right now, Russia has the opportunity to come to the table as we go forward to deal with the very real concerns that we've put on the table," Sullivan told a press briefing.

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### US to Respond 'Decisively' if Russia Puts Forces in Latin America - White House

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States will respond "decisively" should Russia put its military forces in Latin America, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"That wasn't raised in discussions at the strategic stability dialogue if Russia were to move in that direction, we would deal with it decisively," Sullivan said during a press briefing when asked to comment on the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov's suggestion that Moscow is considering its military presence in Latin America.

Earlier in the day, Ryabkov said that he will not confirm or deny anything in regard to the possibility of deployment of Russian military infrastructure in Cuba and Venezuela.

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### US Senate Rejects Bill to Sanction Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Within 15 Days

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday rejected Republican Senator Ted Cruz's bill that would impose sanctions within 15 days on companies building and operating the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The US Senate failed to get the 60 votes needed to pass the legislation.

Biden administration officials were on Capitol Hill this week lobbying against support for the bill due to concerns it could compromise cooperation between the United States and European partners in early security talks with Russia to address issues in Eastern Europe.

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#### No Date Set for Any More US-Russia Talks, Communications Ongoing – White House

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – No date has been set for any more US-Russia talks on security in Europe but Washington is in contact with Moscow on what comes next after a week of diplomatic meetings, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"There are no dates set for any more talks. We have to consult with allies and partners. First, we're in communication with the Russians and we'll see what comes next," Sullivan told a press briefing.

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US Wants to Discuss Denuclearization With North Korea, Hasn't Seen Sincerity - Pentagon  
WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with North Korea but has not seen any sincerity from them to achieve that goal, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We want to sit down and to negotiate the denuclearization, we want to see the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but we haven't seen any sincerity on the North Koreans' part to actually do that, to sit down and have a meaningful discussion about how we get at a denuclearized Korean Peninsula," Kirby told CNN in an interview.

Pyongyang said it launched a hypersonic missile on Tuesday toward the Sea of Japan that flew 620 miles. The launch was the second from North Korea this year.

Defense officials from the US, South Korea and Japan discussed the recent missile tests in a trilateral call on Thursday, the Pentagon said. The representatives reaffirmed the importance of trilateral security cooperation and committed to conduct a trilateral defense ministerial on a date yet to be determined.

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#### Biden 'Strongly Opposes' Senate Passage of Bill to Sanction Nord Stream Within 15 Days

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden "strongly opposes" the passage of the bill in the Senate which allows to sanction the Russian Nord Stream 2 project within 15 days, the White House said on Thursday ahead of the vote.

"The Administration strongly opposes Senate passage of S. 3436, imposing further mandatory sanctions requirements with respect to entities responsible for the planning, construction, or operation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline," the statement said.

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## US Nurses Demand Action Amid Staffing Crisis in Hospitals Flooded With Omicron Patients

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - National Nurses United, the largest organization of registered nurses in the United States, on Thursday urged President Joe Biden and the healthcare industry to take action on a staffing crisis in hospitals flooded with Omicron patients. "On Jan. 13, 2022, National Nurses United [NNU] registered nurses will hold a national day of action to demand the hospital industry invest in safe staffing, and to demand that President Biden follow through on his campaign promise to protect nurses and prioritize public health," the organization said in a press release.

Nurses are expected to take part in demonstrations that will take place inside and outside about 33 hospitals across the United States, according to the NNU's announcement.

US nurses are gravely concerned that the healthcare industry cares more about profits than saving lives and doesn't take any steps to hire more medical personnel, or to provide a high degree of protection to those at the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, Zenei Triunfo-Cortez, NNU president, said during a virtual press conference on Thursday.

"We have been traumatized and morally injured by the way our employers chose, yes chose not to protect us by denying us optimal personal protective equipment, testing, exposure notification, infection control measures and the list goes on," Triunfo-Cortez said.

The NNU president of California, Cathy Kennedy, shared a story that took place a few days ago, of a nurse from the city of Modesto who was back at work 24 hours after she tested positive for COVID-19.

"We are on fire because without protections, inadequate staffing nurses are getting sick. We're in crisis," a nurse from the US state of Michigan told the press conference.

The United States is going through an unprecedented surge in new COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations. On Monday, the seven-day average of new cases reached 751,000 with about 146,000 hospitalizations, according to data compiled by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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## US Supreme Court Blocks Large Employer Vaccine Mandate, Backs Healthcare Mandate - Filings

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court blocked enforcement of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) COVID-19 vaccine mandate for large employers but backed the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for healthcare workers, according to two decisions filed Thursday.

"Applicants now seek emergency relief from this Court, arguing that OSHA's mandate exceeds its statutory authority and is otherwise unlawful. Agreeing that applicants are likely to prevail, we grant their applications and stay the rule," the Supreme Court said in a per curiam opinion on the larger employer mandate case.

However, the Supreme Court backed the Secretary of Health and Human Services' mandate to require facilities that receive Medicare and Medicaid funding to ensure that their staff – unless exempt for religious reasons – are vaccinated against COVID-19 to continue receiving the money.

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UPDATE - Fed in Position for US Rate Hike as Soon as Stimulus Taper Ends - Vice Chair  
(Adds comments from Chicago Fed President Evans in para 6)

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will be in a position to raise interest rates as soon as it finishes unwinding its stimulus program for the coronavirus pandemic, Vice Chair Lael Brainard told the US Senate on Thursday as the central bank geared toward a March deadline.

"The committee has projected several hikes over the course of the year," Brainard said, referring to the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, in the Senate hearing held to confirm her appointment as vice chair. "Of course, we, you know, will be in a position to do that, I think, as soon as asset purchases are terminated. We'll simply have to see what the data requires over the course of the year."

Since December, the Fed has been unwinding by \$30 billion a month its monthly bond-and-mortgage-asset purchase program of \$120 billion that began in the first quarter of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. At the rate it is unwinding, the central bank is due to retire the program by March.

The Fed has not raised rates since the outbreak of the pandemic, keeping them at between zero and 0.25% over the past 20 months.

But officials at the central bank say a series of rate hikes will be needed now, to counter inflation as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the COVID-19 crisis due to trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payout and supply chain disruptions.

"The Fed expects two, three, or four rate increases this year; we'll see how that plays out," Charles Evans, president of the Chicago chapter of the Fed, said in a live-streamed speech on Thursday. "Because inflation has been high for a longer period of time, we must act sooner than I anticipated."

Brainard, in her opening speech to the Senate, also said that inflation expanding at 7% or more per annum was "too high" for the United States and the Fed needs to bring this back to its target of 2% per year.

According to the Labor Department, the 7% growth in US consumer prices for the year to December indicated the fastest inflationary growth in 40 years.

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US Defense Chief, Ukraine Counterpart Discuss Bolstering Ukrainian Forces - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Ukrainian counterpart during a recent telephone call discussed Russia's military activity and the United States' efforts to build up Ukraine's forces, the Department of Defense said on Thursday. "Austin III spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart, Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov, to discuss Russia's ongoing and unprovoked military build-up in and around Ukraine," the Defense Department said in a press release. "Secretary Austin reaffirmed unwavering US support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including ongoing efforts to build the capacity of Ukraine's forces through the provision of defensive assistance." Russia has repeatedly denied Western accusations of preparing for an invasion of Ukraine, saying it reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory as it considers NATO's military activities a threat to the national security of Russia.

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US Arrests Leader of Oath Keepers Group in January 6 Investigation - Justice Dept.  
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6; edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US law enforcement has arrested the Stewart Rhodes, leader of the right-wing group Oath Keepers, after charging him and 11 other defendants with seditious conspiracy as well as with other crimes related to the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"The seditious conspiracy indictment alleges that, following the Nov. 3, 2020, presidential election, Rhodes conspired with his co-defendants and others to oppose by force the execution of the laws governing the transfer of presidential power by Jan. 20, 2021," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The indictment alleges that the Oath Keepers are a loosely organized collection of individuals, some of whom with militia associations, the release said. The group focuses on recruiting current and former military, law enforcement and first-responder personnel, it added.

The Justice Department explained in the release that Rhodes and the other defendants are alleged to have conspired through a variety of manners and means - including organizing into teams that were prepared and willing to use force - to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election results on January 6.

The seditious conspiracy charges carry a statutory maximum penalty of 20 years in prison should the defendants be found guilty of the alleged crimes, the release said.

More than 725 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 US states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on January 6 and investigations remain ongoing, the release added.

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Fed in Position for US Rate Hike as Soon as Stimulus Taper Ends - Vice Chair

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"The committee has projected several hikes over the course of the year," Brainard said, referring to the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, in the Senate hearing held to confirm her appointment as vice chair. "Of course, we, you know, will be in a position to do that, I think, as soon as asset purchases are terminated. We'll simply have to see what the data requires over the course of the year."

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But officials at the central bank say a series of rate hikes will be needed now, to counter inflation as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the COVID-19 crisis due to trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payout and supply chain disruptions.

Brainard, in her opening speech to the Senate, said inflation expanding at 7% or more per annum was "too high" for the United States and the Fed needs to bring this back to its target of 2% per year.

According to the Labor Department, the 7% growth in US consumer prices for the year to December indicated the fastest inflationary growth in 40 years.

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#### US Embassy in Baghdad Confirms Rocket Attack Targeted Compound - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in Baghdad on Thursday confirmed in a statement that its compound came under a rocket attack by suspected terrorist groups.

"The US Embassy compound was attacked this evening by terrorist groups attempting to undermine Iraq's security, sovereignty and international relations," the statement said via Twitter.

The Iraq Security Forces said that the rockets were fired from an area south of Baghdad and targeted the so-called Green Zone that hosts diplomatic missions, including the US Embassy.

A woman and a girl were injured as a result of the rocket attack and one rocket landed inside a nearby school, the Iraq Security Forces said, adding that they are still working to assess casualties and damages.

The US-led 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.

The recent attacks were undertaken right before and after the second anniversary of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds Force, who was killed in a US airstrike on the outskirts of Baghdad.

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US FBI Arrest Leader of Oath Keepers Group in January 6 Investigation - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Leader of the right-wing Oath Keepers group Stewart Rhodes was arrested by US law enforcement officials after being charged alongside 11 other defendants with seditious conspiracy and other crimes related to the January 6 breach of the Capitol, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"The seditious conspiracy indictment alleges that, following the Nov. 3, 2020, presidential election, Rhodes conspired with his co-defendants and others to oppose by force the execution of the laws governing the transfer of presidential power by Jan. 20, 2021," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The indictment alleges that the Oath Keepers are a loosely organized collection of individuals, some of whom with militia associations, the Justice Department said. The group focuses on recruiting current and former military, law enforcement and first-responder personnel, they added.

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US Unemployment Claims Up 2nd Week in Row - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US unemployment claims increased for a second week in a row, the Labor Department said on Thursday as policymakers continued to struggle with ensuring consistent jobs growth in an economy struggling to rebound from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures.

"In the week ending January 8, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 230,000, an increase of 23,000 from the previous week's unrevised level of 207,000," the Labor Department said in a press release.

In the previous week to January 6, unemployment claims increased by 7,000.

After staggering levels of unemployment initially caused by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus and the subsequent measures, the labor market has steadily picked up last year, showing a jobless rate of 3.9% by December from a high of 14.8% in April of 2020.

The improvement was just below the 4% mark that the US Federal Reserve defines as "maximum employment." In terms of total job losses, the number stood at around 20 million at the height of the pandemic before falling to around 4 million now, according to officials.

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

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#### NASA Says 2021 Tied as Sixth-Warmest Year on Record

WASHINGTON January 13 (Sputnik) - Last year tied with 2018 as the sixth warmest since modern recordkeeping began in 1880, analyses by NASA and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) found.

"Earth's global average surface temperature in 2021 tied with 2018 as the sixth warmest on record," the statement said.

NASA's temperature record shows that the Earth in 2021 was approximately 1.9 degrees Fahrenheit (1.1 degrees Celsius) warmer than the late 19th century average at the start of the industrial revolution.

"Eight of the top 10 warmest years on our planet occurred in the last decade, an indisputable fact that underscores the need for bold action to safeguard the future of our country – and all of humanity. NASA's scientific research about how Earth is changing and getting warmer will guide communities throughout the world, helping humanity confront climate and mitigate its devastating effects," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said, as quoted in the statement. He called climate change an "existential threat of our time."

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#### Biden Admin. Makes Little Progress in Advancing Racial, Gender Equity in US - Report

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has made little progress in advancing racial and gender equity in the United States despite pronouncements that it would do so, Human Rights Watch said in its World Report 2022 released on Thursday.

"The Biden administration has made some big-picture pronouncements on key issues like racial and gender equity with little evidence so far that the words will translate into real impact for people whose rights have been systematically and historically ignored or trampled," the report said.

African Americans in the United States still suffer from significant economic disparities and they also face problems with systemic racism that impacts them across generations, the report said.

"Among the rights failures in US domestic policy linked to systemic racism, despite some reductions in incarceration rates for Black people, they remain vastly overrepresented in jails and prisons. Black people are killed by police at a per capita rate that is three times the rate of

white people. Black people still make up almost 42 percent of the current death row population despite being only 12.4 percent of the US population," the report said.

In addition, the US government's border policies have effectively shredded the right to seek asylum in the United States while officials continue to subject migrants to violent and abusive treatment, the report said.

"Autocratic leaders faced significant backlash in 2021, but democracy will flourish in the contest with autocracy only if democratic leaders do a better job of addressing global problems," the report added.

The Human Rights Watch report reviews the situation with respect to the state of human rights in about 100 countries.

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US House Democrats Urge FDA to Reassess Blood Donation Restrictions for Gay Men - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Democrats on the US House Oversight and Reform Committee on Thursday sent a letter to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) urging the agency to reassess its current restrictions on blood donations by gay and bisexual men.

"We write to request that the Food and Drug Administration take immediate action to reassess its current blood donation policy, which has had the discriminatory effect of preventing gay and bisexual men from safely donating blood," the letter said.

While FDA has made progress in updating this "troubling policy," the existing recommendation that blood centers turn away men who have sex with men in the past three months continues to stigmatize them and undermine crucial efforts to ensure an adequate and stable national blood supply, the letter said.

On Tuesday, the American Red Cross declared its first-ever national blood crisis in the United States. The American Red Cross also experienced a 34% decrease in new blood donors in 2021.

The Democrat lawmakers said in the letter that the implementation of an individualized risk-based assessment could potentially eliminate the FDA's deferral period for gay and bisexual men as well as other demographic categories subject to deferrals.

The lawmakers also requested the FDA to provide their staff with a briefing regarding the agency's current blood donation policy and with any plans to revise the policy as well as the efforts to ensure an adequate national blood supply.

The letter was signed by Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Liberties Chairman Jamie Raskin and Congresswomen Katie Porter and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

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## Delta Air Lines Reports \$408M In Q4 Loss From COVID, Expects Some Continued Omicron Impact

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US air carrier Delta Air Lines lost a net \$408 million in the final quarter of 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic weighed on its bottom line, with CEO Ed Bastian predicting some more negative impact from the Omicron variant of the virus before a rebound.

"Omicron is expected to temporarily delay the demand recovery (by) 60 days, but as we look past the peak, we are confident in a strong spring and summer travel season with significant pent-up demand for consumer and business travel," Bastian said in a statement accompanying Delta's full year and fourth quarter 2021 results released on Thursday.

For all of last year, Delta reported a \$280 million profit, its first since 2019, partly due to \$4.5 billion in US government aid for airlines mired in the COVID-19 crisis. In the year the pandemic broke out — 2020 — Delta reported a record annual loss of \$12.4 billion as travel virtually ground to a halt for several months.

Delta is the first US carrier to report fourth-quarter results for 2021, which are expected to be negative for most of the industry as the Omicron variant continues to discourage air travel. Thousands of flights, for instance, were canceled during the Christmas period as air crews got infected, leaving airlines without adequate staff to fulfill schedules.

Health officials across the world say the Omicron is far more transmissible than the original strain of COVID-19 and other known mutants, although it is also less lethal, especially among those vaccinated.

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## US Expects to See More Cyber Attacks Against Crypto Currency Transactions - Secret Service

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Cyber actors are expected to increase their technological capabilities to attack the evolving sophisticated crypto currency transactions in the future, Secret Service Office of Investigations Assistant Director Jeremy Sheridan said on Thursday.

"Increasing technological capabilities of the cyber actor as the more advanced digital money transactions evolve certainly will be something I see more of in the future," Sheridan said during a virtual conversation with the Washington Post.

Consequently, US law enforcement agencies should therefore be ready to confront the next wave of attacks against crypto currency transactions, Sheridan said.

In addition to the "standard" threats, the US Secret Service now sees new emerging "smart" scams and fraud as cyber criminals attempt to steal crypto currency money from investors, Sheridan said.

"We have seen cyber criminals be able to insert themselves in that process in order to commit scams, commit frauds, or do takeovers of the crypto value and take it from initial investor," he added.

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**Blinken Says US Raised Havana Syndrome With Russia**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has raised the issue of so-called Havana Syndrome with Russia, but Washington has no indication of who is responsible for the anomalous health incidents among diplomats, Secretary of State Antony Blinken told MSNBC on Thursday.

"We've raised this with the Russians, but we still don't have a determination of who may – of who is responsible. So we've made clear that if they are responsible, or for that matter, anyone who is responsible will suffer severe consequences. But I don't – I want to be very clear we don't yet have a determination," he explained.

Earlier in the day, the State Department told Sputnik that it was "vigorously investigating" cases of Havana Syndrome. The statement came after The Wall Street Journal reported that diplomats working at the US diplomatic missions in Geneva and Paris may have been affected by Havana Syndrome.

The incidents reportedly happened in the summer of 2021. In Geneva, three American officials reported symptoms similar to Havana Syndrome. At least one diplomat was evacuated to the US for treatment. Senior embassy officials in Paris also informed diplomats by email of one more suspected case and called on the mission's staff to report unusual symptoms.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with Havana Syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. American diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported experiencing Havana Syndrome symptoms, including nausea and dizziness.

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**Republican National Committee Intent on Pulling Out of Presidential Debates - Reports**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The Republican National Committee (RNC) is working on plans to require candidates with the party to refuse participation in the US presidential debates sponsored by the traditional Commission on President Debates, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

The report said the RNC sent a letter to the Commission notifying it of its plans to require the party's presidential candidates to refuse participation in the presidential debates.

The new rule must be approved in a vote during the RNC meeting in the state of Utah in February, the report said.

However, the report also said Republicans are concerned that any reforms, if approved, would not be made in time for the 2024 presidential election.

The report added that it is unclear how the RNC what forum the party would use to substitute the traditional presidential debates.

Republicans have long complained that the Commission on Presidential Debates is biased toward Democrats, according to the report.

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RPT - Biden Says Administration to Make 'High-Quality' Masks Free to US Public  
(Repeats to fix headline)

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday his administration will soon have high-quality masks available for free to the American public.

"Next week we'll announce how we are making high-quality masks available to the American people for free," Biden said during a press conference.

In addition, the US administration is acquiring an additional 500 million coronavirus tests to distribute throughout the country, increasing the total amount procured by the federal government to one billion.

Next week the US government will have a website ready that Americans can use to order tests for free, Biden said.

The president noted that the majority of the United States is safe from severe coronavirus consequences, but warned that unvaccinated individuals continue to overwhelm hospitals. US hospitalizations due to coronavirus infections have reached a new record high, data showed on Wednesday, although the Omicron variant itself remains significantly less lethal compared to the original coronavirus strain and the subsequent Delta variant.

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US House Passes Voting Rights Bill, Sends Measure to Senate for Consideration

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday moved forward the voting rights legislation championed by the Biden administration for final consideration by the Senate.

The House of Representatives passed the bill in a 220-203 vote.

"Today is a big day for our democracy and a big day in the House of Representatives. Today, the House will make a major step towards defending our democracy as we vote to send the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act to the Senate for urgent consideration," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during a press conference on Thursday.

The voting rights legislation was designed by Democrats to counter some state bills passed last year in Republican-run states that restrict mail-in voting and give more power to elected officials over counting ballots.

The bill will face a harder road to passage in the Senate, where a debate has been sparked about changing the chamber's filibuster rules to allow for easier passage by Democrats - a move backed by President and former Senator Joe Biden.

Republicans have said the Democrats' bill seeks to federalize elections in the United States and give the Democratic party a significant edge in future elections.

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Global Economic Recovery to Decline in 2022-2023 After Strong Rebound Last Year - UN  
(Adds new details in paras 4-11)

UNITED NATIONS, January 13 (Sputnik) - The global economy is projected to grow only by 4.0 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent the following year after a strong recovery in 2021, a new United Nations' World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2022 report revealed.

"After a global contraction of 3.4 percent in 2020 and following an expansion of 5.5 percent in 2021, the highest rate of growth in more than four decades, the world economy is projected to grow by 4 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent in 2023," the report said.

The new waves of COVID-19 infections, persistent labor market challenges, supply-chain disruptions and soaring inflation affect global economic recovery, the report added.

The report also explained that in 2021, the robust recovery was driven by strong consumer spending and uptake in investment that also pushed trade in goods to surpass pre-pandemic levels.

However, as the effects of monetary and fiscal stimulus began to dwindle and major supply-chain problems emerged by the end of 2021, the momentum for growth, especially in the United States, the European Union and China, considerably slowed, the report said.

The report projected that the number of people facing extreme poverty will remain well-above pre-pandemic levels, specifically in the most vulnerable countries. In Africa, for example, the number of people living in poverty is expected to rise through 2023.

At the same time, employment levels are expected to remain well-below pre-pandemic levels during the next two years, and possibly even beyond, the report said. In the United States and Europe, labor force participation is at historically low levels as many people who quit their jobs during the pandemic have yet to return to work.

In addition, as central banks worldwide have started to unwind their extraordinary monetary responses amid rising inflationary pressures, the report noted that quick withdrawal of monetary stimulus increased global financial vulnerabilities and deepened wealth inequalities.

Fiscal and debt burdens, additional borrowing during the pandemic, and increasing costs to service debt have put many low-income and developing nations on the brink of a debt crisis, it said.

In light of the report's findings, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the global community needs to develop targeted, coordinated measures to close inequality gaps among countries.

"In this fragile and uneven period of global recovery, the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2022 calls for better targeted and coordinated policy and financial measures at the national and international levels," Guterres said.

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Global Economic Recovery to Decline in 2022-2023 After Strong Rebound Last Year - UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 13 (Sputnik) - The global economy is projected to grow only by 4.0 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent the following year after a strong recovery in 2021, a new United Nations' World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2022 report revealed.

"After a global contraction of 3.4 percent in 2020 and following an expansion of 5.5 percent in 2021, the highest rate of growth in more than four decades, the world economy is projected to grow by 4 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent in 2023," the report said.

The new waves of COVID-19 infections, persistent labor market challenges, supply-chain disruptions and soaring inflation affect global economic recovery, the report added.

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US Envoy Calls OSCE Talks With Russia Just a 'Beginning'

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) talks on Russia's security proposals proffered amid tension with Ukraine are just a beginning, which will be followed by further discussions soon, US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said on Thursday.

On Thursday, Vienna hosts an OSCE Permanent Council meeting, with Russia's security proposals taking center stage. Moscow published its security suggestions for NATO and the US in late 2021. It requested, in particular, guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward. The US insists it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

"There was never any expectation that there will be some sort of agreement today," Carpenter told reporters in a virtual press briefing. "Today is the beginning or the announcement of the beginning of a process that will get underway shortly."

The United States hopes to continue having open dialogue, he said. "However, we are going to test that, we have to see if the Russians are prepared to engage," he added.

Carpenter described the whole process as long and complex technical negotiations that take time. "First, you have to have a discussion, and then you have to test whether there is any willingness to engage on specific measures," the diplomat explained.

The US envoy underscored readiness for genuine, serious and high-level dialogue with Russia. However, Washington and its allies are not going to renegotiate core principles, he added.

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US Capitol Police Arrest Woman From Michigan With Guns in Her Car - Statement  
WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police announced in a press release on Thursday that they have arrested a woman from the state of Michigan who parked her car containing guns and ammunition at their headquarters.

"At approximately 1:40 p.m. on January 12, a woman parked a 2001 Chevrolet Silverado in the 'No Parking' zone in front of US Capitol Police headquarters. The woman was identified as Kery Lynn McAttee," the release said.

McAttee told USCP that she had driven to Washington, DC from Michigan and wanted to talk about information she had about the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the release said.

"During that conversation, one of our agents spotted a gun case and the butt of a long gun in the Silverado. McAttee confirmed there were firearms in her vehicle," the release said.

The USPC also recovered from McAttee's truck an unloaded Remington Nylon 66 0.22 caliber rifle, an unloaded Connecticut Valley Arms 0.50 caliber muzzle loader, a loaded Mossberg 0.410 caliber shotgun and a Gamo pellet gun, the release added.

McAttee has been charged with unlawful possession of a weapon and other misdemeanors, according to the release.

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Guterres on Russia-NATO Talks: Conditions Should Be Created for Europe's Peace, Stability

UNITED NATIONS, January 13 (Sputnik) - UN chief Antonio Guterres said on Thursday conditions must be created to achieve peace and stability in Europe following Russia's security talks with NATO and the United States over Ukraine tensions.

"We have seen a rhetoric escalation in the recent past, and what we need is to make sure that we create conditions for this and stability in Europe," Guterres told a press conference.

The UN chief added it is "absolutely essential" that dialogue between parties concerned allows to prevent a confrontation that has a potential of becoming a "disaster" for Europe and the world.

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Biden Says Majority of Americans Safe From Severe COVID-19 Consequences Due to Vaccines

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the majority of Americans are safe from severe consequences from the novel coronavirus disease because of the comprehensive vaccination efforts in the United States.

"Because we've fully vaccinated nearly 210 million Americans, a majority of the country is safe from severe COVID-19 consequences," Biden said during a press conference.

The US president warned that unvaccinated individuals continue to overwhelm hospitals in the United States, adding that an additional six medical teams from the Defense Department are being deployed to hard-hit states, including Rhode Island, Michigan, Ohio, New York, and New Jersey.

Biden also called on social media companies to address what he termed to be misinformation about the novel coronavirus vaccines.

Biden has faced criticism for his statements given that both, vaccinated and unvaccinated people can acquire and transmit the virus to others.

Health experts have said the latest coronavirus Omicron variant results in mild cases and is significantly less lethal compared to the original strain and the subsequent Delta variant.

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**Biden Say Administration to Make 'High-Quality' Masks Free to US Public**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday his administration will soon have high-quality masks available for free to the American public.

"Next week we'll announce how we are making high-quality masks available to the American people for free," Biden said during a press conference.

In addition, the US administration is acquiring an additional 500 million more coronavirus tests to distribute throughout the country, increasing the total amount procured by the federal government to one billion.

Next week the US government will have a website ready that Americans can use to order tests for free, Biden said.

The president noted that the majority of the United States is safe from severe coronavirus consequences, but warned that unvaccinated individuals continue to overwhelm hospitals.

US hospitalizations due to coronavirus infections have reached a new record high, data showed on Wednesday, although the Omicron variant itself remains significantly less lethal compared to the original coronavirus strain and the subsequent Delta variant.

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**Falcon 9 Booster Blasts 105 Payloads Into Orbit From Kennedy Space Center - SpaceX**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - A Falcon 9 booster successfully launched Space X's Transporter-3 mission carrying 105 payloads into orbit from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, the company announced on Thursday.

Transporter-3 took off from Space Launch Complex 40 (SLC-40) at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida on schedule. Main engine cut off, first stage separation and second stage engine ignition all took place on schedule, SpaceX said.

Transporter-3 is SpaceX's third dedicated rideshare mission carrying 105 spacecraft including CubeSats, microsats, PocketQubes, and orbital transfer vehicles, the company said.

The payloads were scheduled to be deployed in space between one hour to 90 minutes after launch, SpaceX said.

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UN Chief Urges Support for Afghanistan Central Bank to Avoid Economic Collapse in 2022

UNITED NATIONS, January 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on the international community to quickly provide assistance to the central bank of Afghanistan and do more to inject liquidity in the country's economy to avoid a collapse in 2022.

"The function of Afghanistan's central bank must be preserved and assisted, and a path identified for conditional release of Afghan foreign currency reserves," Guterres said in a statement. "We must do even more to rapidly inject liquidity into the economy and avoid a meltdown that would lead to poverty, hunger and destitution for millions."

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US Producer Prices Up by Record 9.7% in Year to December, in Line With High Inflation -DoL

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US producer prices rose by a record 9.7% in the year to December, according to data from the Labor Department on Thursday, that kept up with the red-hot inflation seen across most goods and services in an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Final demand prices moved up 9.7 percent in 2021, the largest calendar-year increase since data were first calculated in 2010," the department said in a news release, referring to the Producer Price Index, which is a measure of prices that wholesalers pay for goods and services. For December itself, producer prices rose by 0.2%, contracting from the sharper 0.8% surge in November.

But it was the annual number that caught the eyes of economists polled by US media who almost nailed the figure reported by the Labor Department with an average forecast of a 9.8% growth.

"The thing to focus on is probably the slowing pace of monthly rises, though with the way oil and metals have rallied this week, I don't know if that will last," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive, referring to the 10% surge in crude prices and 2% rise in copper prices since the year began.

Trillions of dollars of federal spending on pandemic relief, higher wages and supply chain disruptions have combined to create price surges in almost everything from cooking oil to houses since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Labor Department reported on Wednesday that US consumer prices rose 7% in the year to December, marking the fastest inflationary growth in 40 years.

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US 'Strongly Welcomes' OSCE Chairman's Proposal on New Security Dialogue in Europe - Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States "strongly welcomes" the OSCE chairman's proposal to revitalize dialogue on European security and hopes for open and sincere talks in this format, US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said on Thursday.

"Today here at the OSCE, the Polish chairman in office proposed a revitalized dialogue at the OSCE on European security. We strongly welcomed that dialog and, I must say, so did the overwhelming number of participating states around the table. We very much believe we should have an open and nice, honest dialogue where any state can articulate its security concerns," Carpenter said during a press briefing.

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US Says Probing Havana Syndrome Cases After Reports of New Incidents in Paris, Geneva

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is "vigorously investigating" cases of the so-called Havana Syndrome, the State Department told Sputnik after reports of new incidents in Paris and Geneva.

Earlier on Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported that diplomats working at the US diplomatic missions in Geneva and Paris may have been affected by Havana Syndrome. The incidents reportedly happened in the summer of 2021. In Geneva, three American officials reported symptoms similar to Havana Syndrome. At least one diplomat was evacuated to the US for treatment. Senior embassy officials in Paris also informed diplomats by email of one more suspected case and called on the mission's staff to report unusual symptoms.

"As part of the National Security Council-led interagency response effort and in coordination with our partners across the U.S. Government, we are vigorously investigating reports of AHIs [anomalous health incidents] wherever they are reported. The interagency is actively working to

identify the cause of these incidents and whether they may be attributed to a foreign actor, and is focused on providing care for those affected," the spokesperson said.

The department is doing everything possible to ensure that diplomats who reported such symptoms have received immediate attention and care, the spokesperson added.

"More broadly, these health incidents have been a top priority for [State] Secretary [Antony] Blinken, who set clear goals for the Health Incident Response Task Force to strengthen the Department's communication with our workforce, provide care for affected employees and family members, and better protect against these events in the future as we continue to work closely with the interagency to find the cause of these anomalous health incidents," they concluded.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with Havana Syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. American diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported experiencing Havana Syndrome symptoms, including nausea and dizziness.

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US Ambassador to OSCE Says 'We Have to Prepare' for Eventuality of Escalation with Russia

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Michael Carpenter said on Thursday that the Western allies must be prepared for the eventuality of an escalation with Russia amid its troop build-up at the border with Ukraine.

When asked whether he believed Russia will move to invade Ukraine, Carpenter said he could not speak about Moscow's intentions.

"We have to take it very seriously. We have to prepare for the eventuality that there could be an escalation," Carpenter said.

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Harris Says 'Could Not Care Less' About Gossip After Idea of Biden-Cheney Ticket Floated

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris said she could not care less about gossips when asked about a possibility of Joe Biden running with Republican Liz Cheney for a bipartisan presidential ticket in 2024.

On Tuesday, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman suggested, citing an Israeli precedent of the current unified government, that Biden could pick Rep. Cheney as his running mate in 2024.

"We are thinking about today," Harris told NBC News in an interview, when asked whether the US will see the same Democratic ticket in 2024.

Asked about Friedman's article, she said that she had not read it and she "really could care less about the high-class gossip on these issues."

She added that she is focused on the "things in front of us."

"We are focused on what we need to do to address issues like affordable childcare ... The American people sent us here to do a job and there is a lot of job to be done and that's my focus," she added.

In November, a report came out of Harris feeling sidelined due to an alleged dysfunctional relationship with the President. The White House dismissed the rumor, calling the vice president not only a "vital partner" to Biden but a bold leader. Harris later said that they were not discussing plans for the 2024 election.

In spring 2021, Biden said he expects to run for another presidential term in 2024 when he turns 82.

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**GlaxoSmithKline Requests Expanding Authorization for COVID-19 Antibody Treatment in US**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The UK pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and its US partner Vir Biotechnology have submitted an application to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for an expanded emergency use authorization (EUA) of their COVID-19 intramuscular antibody treatment sotrovimab, the two companies announced on Thursday.

"GlaxoSmithKline plc and Vir Biotechnology, Inc. today announced the submission of an application to the US Food and Drug Administration requesting an amendment to the Emergency Use Authorization for sotrovimab, an investigational monoclonal antibody for the early treatment of COVID-19, to include intramuscular (IM) administration," the companies said in a press release.

In May, FDA granted an EUA to sotrovimab, a single-dose intravenous infusion monoclonal antibody treatment of COVID-19, for use in adults with mild-to-moderate COVID-19 symptoms and for children aged 12 and older who weigh at least 40kg and are at high risk for progression to severe forms of the disease.

Sotrovimab is not authorized for use in patients who are hospitalized due to COVID-19 or who require oxygen therapy due to the COVID-19, the release said.

On Tuesday, the two companies announced the US government will purchase an additional 600,000 doses of sotrovimab that will be delivered in the first quarter of 2022.

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**Canada Joins Mexico in Opposing US Stand on Auto Origins in Free Trade Deal - Minister**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Canada is joining Mexico in complaining against the US interpretation of automotive rules of origin in the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development Mary Ng said in a statement on Thursday.

"Canada is joining Mexico's request to establish a dispute settlement panel to address the United States' interpretation of the rules of origin governing the regional value content calculations that must be performed for a vehicle to qualify for CUSMA duty-free treatment," Ng said.

The interpretation that the US government adopted in July 2020 was inconsistent with CUSMA and the understanding shared by the parties and stakeholders throughout the negotiations, the Canadian government contended.

"The Government of Canada will always stand up for our auto industry and workers as we build toward a sustainable economic recovery. Canada, Mexico and the United States would all benefit from certainty that CUSMA is being implemented as negotiated, and Canada is optimistic that a dispute settlement panel will help ensure a timely resolution of this issue," the statement added

Canada joined consultations initiated by Mexico with the United States under Chapter 31 of CUSMA in August 2021. Trilateral consultations were held on September 24, 2021. Mexico requested the establishment of a dispute settlement panel on this issue on January 6, 2022 and it is expected to issue a report in summer 2022, the panel noted.

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Biden Admin. Should Stop Misusing Espionage Act to Hinder Press Freedom in US - Report

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration should stop misusing the Espionage Act to hinder press freedom in the United States, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said in a report on Thursday.

"The Committee to Protect Journalists makes the following recommendations to the Biden administration: Stop the misuse of the Espionage Act to hinder press freedom," the report read. The CPJ urged the Biden administration to put in place legislation that would prevent the use of the Espionage Act "as a means to halt news gathering activity."

The report also called on the administration to drop the espionage charges against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and cease efforts to extradite him to the United States.

The Biden administration should instead take decisive actions and impose sanctions against Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman for his role in the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, the report said.

CPJ also expressed frustrations over a lack of direct communications between US President Joe Biden and journalists.

"One key concern among White House reporters is their limited access to Biden. He has given far fewer press conferences and media interviews than either Barack Obama or Donald Trump

in their first years in office, and he has responded to fewer impromptu questions from reporters at White House or public events," the report said.

Biden has held one solo full-scale press conference at the White House and four during his foreign trips as well as gave 22 interviews. By contrast, Trump gave 92 interviews during the same period of time and an Obama gave 150 interviews, the report said.

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**N. Korea Ignores US Efforts to Resume Talks, Answers With More Missile Tests - Blinken**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - North Korea has ignored the Biden administration's initial calls to resume denuclearization talks and instead responded with more ballistic missile tests, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We made clear that we were prepared to engage the North Koreans to sit down with no preconditions to see if we could find a way forward with them at the table, toward the total denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Blinken said in an interview with MSNBC.

"Unfortunately, not only has there been no response to those overtures, but the response we've seen ... in recent weeks has been renewed missile test."

Blinken emphasized that North Korea's latest missile launches are profoundly destabilizing, dangerous and they contravene many UN Security Council resolutions.

North Korea is expected to continue its behavior as a means to gain international attention, but there will be consequences for its actions, Blinken said.

The United States intends to impose new sanctions on North Koreans linked to Pyongyang's missile program, and it will work with South Korea and Japan to craft a response, Blinken added.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said late on Wednesday that the United States is proposing the United Nations impose new sanctions on North Korea for six missile launches conducted by Pyongyang since September 21.

On January 5 and January 11, North Korea conducted two missile tests it has claimed were hypersonic.

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**Majority of Americans Fear Surprise Emergency Room Bills Despite Legislative Ban - Poll**

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - More than 60% of Americans still fear receiving unexpectedly high medical bills after visits to hospital emergency rooms (ERs) even after Congress has passed legislation to limit them, a Morning Consult poll said on Thursday.

"Sixty one percent of US adults said they are concerned about getting a surprise medical bill from the emergency room, while 36% said they hesitated to seek care at the ER or skipped it

altogether because of surprise billing concerns," the poll said. "Nineteen percent of adults said they had seen, read or heard 'a lot' or 'some' about the No Surprises Act."

Congress passed the No Surprises Act in late 2020 which includes a federal ban on surprise medical billing and it takes effect this month.

"The new surprise billing protections, which Congress passed in late 2020, bar health insurers from charging patients the balance when they're provided emergency services from doctors and hospitals that they don't realize aren't covered under their health plan. Instead, payers and providers are expected to work it out among themselves," Morning Consult said.

However, the law does not apply to non-emergency services offered outside of a hospital, so that patients could still be subject to unexpectedly high charges from other providers if they do not check carefully to make sure they are covered, the polling company noted.