

1/19/22 Wednesday

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SIGAR Warned Pentagon Afghan Air Forces Wouldn't Survive US Withdrawal, Declassified Report Reveals
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The declassification on Tuesday of a report dating to January 2021 revealed that the Pentagon's watchdog on the Afghan war had attempted to warn military leaders that the Afghan Air Forces couldn't operate as an independent force nearly eight months before the US withdrawal that imploded the US-backed government.

The office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko [published on Tuesday](#) a declassified version of a report originally submitted in January 2021. According to the report, SIGAR had attempted to warn the Pentagon that the US hadn't properly prepared the Afghan Air Forces to operate on their own without extensive support from the US military.

According to the report, despite pumping \$8.5 billion into the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing since 2010, the military wing remained heavily dependent on contractors to fill key personnel roles, including pilots, maintenance crews, human resources, and financial management, having failed to develop a robust recruitment program.

"DOD currently supports the Afghan air forces sustainment through financial and non-combat support services," the report states, noting that neither Train, Advise, Assist Command-Air or Special Operations Advisory Group advisers believed that the Afghan Air Forces "have the ability to sustain themselves without continued advisor and CLS [contractor logistic support] assistance."

The report further notes that in the fiscal year 2020, the Pentagon spent \$700 million on CLS for the AAF, which continued to perform the majority of aircraft maintenance. The AAF and SMW also relied on US-funded initial pilot training conducted outside Afghanistan. Pilot training was one of the better-funded programs, too: according to Sopko's report, just 14% of non-pilot AAF staff had been prioritized for training, including for essential roles like maintenance.

"While DOD continues to provide assistance, the reduction in US and Coalition forces will alter how advisors conduct their duties and increase reliance on contractors for day-to-day assistance," SIGAR further noted. "The potential withdrawal of contractors from Afghanistan, in addition to US and Coalition forces, may leave the AAF and SMW without the necessary support to sustain and develop the Afghan air forces, if alternative sources are not identified."

It's unclear whether the report was submitted in the final days of the Trump administration or whether US President Joe Biden had taken office by then. Regardless, Biden decided to go ahead with the withdrawal, although he pushed the timeline back by several months from May 1 to August 31 in an attempt to sort out the huge logistical problems created by the pullout.

The US' 20-year occupation war in Afghanistan was ostensibly a "reconstruction" effort following the October 2001 overthrow of the Taliban* by the US invasion. A month earlier, al-Qaeda* had

carried out terrorist attacks against the United States that it coordinated and planned from its bases in Afghanistan, and the George W. Bush administration declared its new mission to be a Global War on Terror to root out terrorist groups like al-Qaeda.

After being thrown out of power, the Taliban regrouped itself and launched an insurgency from the Afghan countryside, steadily gaining ground against the US-backed Afghan government in Kabul until the US signed a ceasefire agreement with the Islamist group in February 2020, allowing US troops to withdraw. However, no similar deal was made with the Afghan government, which crumbled before a new Taliban offensive launched in the spring of 2021. By August 14, the Taliban had recaptured Kabul, which surrendered without a fight, and the last US troops left two weeks later, taking with them tens of thousands of collaborators and refugees. Now back in power, the Taliban has refounded the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that the US destroyed in 2001 and reimposed its strict interpretation of Sharia. However, this time around, the group has inherited a modern military, including the billions of dollars of US equipment given to the Afghan armed forces.

The US spent at least \$145 billion on rebuilding Afghanistan, including its military, and nearly \$1 trillion overall on the war effort. In addition, 2,442 US servicemembers and 3,846 contractors were killed in the war. On the Afghan side, some 241,000 people were killed in the war, 71,300 of whom have been identified as civilians, and another [360,000 are believed](#) to have died due to indirect causes from the war, such as shortages of medicine, stresses caused by the conflict or being a refugee, or illnesses caused by food and water shortages or spoilage.

For years, SIGAR sounded warnings about the [failures of the US reconstruction](#) mission, describing the rampant corruption and waste in both US and Afghan programs, which chronically failed to achieve their stated goals. The reports were further vindicated by the publication of dossiers like the [Afghanistan Papers](#), although the public had long known about them thanks to the Afghanistan War Diary published by WikiLeaks in 2010.

In the final years of the war, the Trump administration even attempted to curb the amount of [embarrassing information](#) getting out about the war, including reports on how many districts were controlled by the Taliban - a number that steadily expanded almost every year. By the eve of the US' peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, Sopko [bluntly told Congress](#) "we don't know" many of the basic facts about the reconstruction effort, including how many Afghan police there were, whose salaries the US was ostensibly paying.

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Aid Planes Depart for Tonga After Main Runway Cleared of Volcanic Ash as Food, Water Shortages Mount

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The massive volcanic eruption and corresponding tsunami on Sunday have imperiled the Pacific island nation of Tonga after wiping out the country's crops and tainting its water supplies with salt water. However, with its only airport covered in ash, aid has been forced to travel by sea.

The International Federation of the Red Cross reported on Tuesday that its teams had made contact with authorities on several of Tonga's islands, including Mango, Fonoifua and Namuka, where homes were completely wiped out by the blast.

"Water supplies across Tonga have been severely impacted by ashfall and saltwater from the tsunami. It's vital to restore access to safe drinking water as there is a mounting risk of diseases such as cholera and diarrhea," the IFRC said in a [news release](#).

Lord Fakafanua, head of Tonga's unicameral legislature, told [Pacific Media Network](#) on Wednesday that "All agriculture is ruined and I hear the farmers have been reassured by the Prime Minister that they will be taken care of, but it's very sad to hear, so on top of the water that we need in Tonga, it seems that we'll be facing a food shortage."

"Farmers spend a lot of money and capital and time in preparing their crops and it's also one of the major exports of Tonga," he added. Agricultural products constitute the [majority of Tonga's exports](#), with top products including cassava, squash, coconuts, bananas, palm oil and vanilla beans. The United States buys 37.7% of Tonga's exports by itself.

The Saturday evening eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano, about 450 miles southeast of Fiji, sent a 49-foot-high tsunami washing over many of the nation's islands, with smaller waves impacting as far away as Japan, California, and Alaska. The US space agency [NASA estimated](#) its explosive power at "no larger than 5-6 megatons of TNT equivalent," or equivalent to one of the more powerful thermonuclear bombs built by the US and USSR during the Cold War.

The ash that coated Tonga's fields has also buried the runway at Fua'amotu International Airport on the main island of Tongatapu in about 20 millimeters of volcanic dust, which workers have labored for days to remove so that [aid aircraft can land](#). A World Health Organization official on the island told [AFP on Wednesday](#) that the airstrip had finally been cleared, and Lord Fakafanua indicated that air force flights from Australia and New Zealand scheduled for Thursday and Friday could go ahead.

A New Zealand Defense Force C-130 Hercules loaded with water, hygiene kits, and other goods has [been kept on standby](#) to depart the moment Tonga's airstrip is clear, and several Australian transport aircraft are ready to go, as well. Both nations are also sending several warships loaded with relief supplies, including the helicopter carrier HMAS Adelaide. The [HMNZS Aotearoa](#) also carries a desalination plant capable of turning 70,000 liters of salty seawater into drinking water each day.

Other nations have pledged aid as well, including the US, whose [embassy announced](#) \$100,000 in aid, and China, whose Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday it would deliver fresh drinking water, food, and protective equipment, as well as rescue devices, once flying to the country was again possible.

However, with all the aid ships and planes en route, Tongans have yet another fear: the island nation is one of the few to have successfully avoided a COVID-19 outbreak, with its first case being [recorded last November](#), and aid workers could bring the virus with them. However, [according to health data](#), 61% of the country's 105,000 people have been fully vaccinated.

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DOJ to Give House January 6 Committee Four Pages of Trump White House Records Not Enjoined

By - Morgan Artyukhina

According to a filing by the US Department of Justice in a federal appeals court, the National Archives released several White House records to the House committee investigating the January 6, 2021, riot at the US Capitol, saying the dossier wasn't included in a previous temporary injunction obtained by former US President Donald Trump.

The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol could soon be getting its first taste of a set of files it has chased for months: Trump's presidential records from the period surrounding the insurrection by his supporters a year ago.

According to the [DOJ's Tuesday filing](#) in the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, the National Archives was to give the Select Committee four pages of documents from a "fourth tranche" over which Trump has attempted to exert executive privilege and block them from release.

"This Court specifically stated in its December 9, 2021 decision, however, that its administrative injunction encompassed only records from the first three tranches, which were the only tranches at issue in the appeal," the filing notes.

The fourth tranche includes six pages of documents, but two won't be released yet due to their similarity to other documents already enjoined. The House committee has sought some 700 pages from Trump overall.

Trump's lawyer, Jesse Binnall, on Wednesday threatened to hold the DOJ in contempt. He argued the [Supreme Court](#), to whom Trump appealed earlier this month, should decide the status of those documents, not the DOJ, [according to CNBC](#).

The committee has been [gathering information](#) for months on the planning and execution of the "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6, 2021, hosted by Trump outside the White House, which preceded the assault on the Capitol. At the rally, Trump urged thousands of his supporters to prevent the Democrats from "stealing" the November 2020 election, insisting his electoral loss to Joe Biden had been achieved by fraud. Thousands stormed the Capitol, where Congress was certifying the election results, temporarily sending lawmakers fleeing to safety and sacking the building.

Five people died in the attack, including a US Capitol Police officer and a woman shot by a USCP officer outside the House chamber while she was attempting to break through the door. The officer was cleared of any wrongdoing in the incident.

Many of those subpoenaed by the Select Committee for documents or testimony have refused to cooperate. Some have even been held in contempt of Congress, including Trump's ex-chief adviser and former Breitbart editor [Steve Bannon](#), and Trump's chief of staff at the time, [Mark Meadows](#).

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Mask Mix Up: Sotomayor and Gorsuch Release Joint Statement After NPR's Supreme Court Mask Claims

By - Mary Manley

Confusion ensued after an article from NPR's Nina Totenberg reported that Chief Justice John Roberts asked all justices to wear their masks, which Justice Neil Gorsuch refused. His refusal thereby forced Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who is diabetic, to work remotely from her chambers, joining court arguments via virtual communication.

NPR's Nina Totenberg wrote an [article](#) this Tuesday claiming that "Sotomayor did not feel safe in close proximity to people who were unmasked. Chief Justice John Roberts, understanding that, in some form asked the other justices to mask up."

"They all did. Except Gorsuch, who, as it happens, sits next to Sotomayor on the bench," Totenberg added.

Mike Davis, a former law clerk for Justice Gorsuch, wasted no time in taking to [Twitter](#) to bash Totenberg's claims. "Fact Check: 100% False. The Chief never asked his colleagues to mask up, for any reason," he posted.

[Fox News](#) also debunked claims: "A source at the Supreme Court says there have been no blanket admonition or request from Chief Justice Roberts that the other justices begin wearing masks to arguments. The source further states Justice Sotomayor did not make any such request to Justice Gorsuch," said Fox News reporter Shannon Bream.

However, a joint statement from Sotomayor and Gorsuch isn't doing much to clarify the mix-up. "JUST IN. SCOTUS releases a short joint statement from Sonia Sotomayor and Neil Gorsuch: 'Reporting that Justice Sotomayor asked Justice Gorsuch to wear a mask surprised us. It is false. While we may sometimes disagree about the law, we are warm colleagues and friends,'" according to the Twitter account [@SCOTUSblog](#).

The statement is odd, considering NPR's article did not claim Sotomayor asked Gorsuch to wear a mask, but states that it was the Chief Justice who did so. "The statement released by Justices Sotomayor and Gorsuch does not contradict the reporting in Totenberg's piece," NPR said in a [statement](#).

A report by [Bloomberg](#) also claimed that while it's true that Gorsuch was reportedly not wearing a mask during Wednesday's hearings, none of the justices said anything about requesting masks to be worn.

Although Justices Sotomayor and Gorsuch have argued frequently on legal matters, the two have been able to work together to promote issues like [civics education](#) and agreed on the threat of [misinformation](#) to national security.

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Study on Suicide Trends in the US Shows Increased Need for Service Accessibility

By - Mary Manley

Psychiatrists, who looked at 484,732 US adults who had attempted suicide, discovered that while suicide attempt rates have increased in the past decade, the use of mental health services has stayed stagnant.

A study published in [JAMA Psychiatry](#) revealed that the suicide attempt rate per 100,000 adults increased from a rate of 481.2 to 563.9 in the last decade. The study also found rates to have a particular increase among groups who were aged 18 to 25, female, unemployed, unmarried, and were using substances.

Of those 484,732 survey participants, 69.8% were 35 years or younger, 51.8% were women, and 65.7% were non-Hispanic White.

But among those who had attempted suicide, there was no significant change in the likelihood of receiving mental health services. In fact, 34.8% to 45.5% reported needing services which were not met. Those percentages had no significant change in the last decade.

Respondents voiced their reasons for not seeking mental health care, which included lack of transportation, lack of information on where to find help, time availability, and the assumption that treatment would not help.

This study focused on pre-pandemic data, though, and it's important to note that as we head into year 3 of the COVID-19 pandemic, that data may change. For example, the CDC released a separate study on data between 2019 to 2020 focusing on [suicide deaths](#). Experts found that while there was an increase in anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts during the first few months of the pandemic, suicide death rates either plateaued or declined.

However, experts say those numbers shouldn't necessarily be seen as a reflection of mental health during the pandemic. "We shouldn't take the numbers and say, 'Oh, fewer people killed themselves in the early part of the pandemic. Things must have been good,'" [said](#) Jonathan Singer, president of the American Association of Suicidology. "Depressive symptoms, eating disorders, all those things have gone up. But, it doesn't mean that because you are suffering, you are going to kill yourself."

The CDC also found that while suicide deaths decreased for white and Asian males during the pandemic, there was an increase in rates for men of color. Dr. Christine Moutier, chief medical officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, [explained](#) the increase in suicidal risks among this demographic is a result of systemic racism, historical barriers and inequities having led communities to face trauma, loss, and generational bias.

In order to combat suicide attempts, experts [say](#) it's important for clinicians to incorporate routine suicidal and mental health screenings into their practice, become familiar with counseling on lethal means, increase the frequency of outpatient visits or communication during periods of increased risk, and when permission is granted, involve patient's family in supportive actions, including making the home environment safe and void of lethal means.

The study focused on data taken between 2008 and 2019.

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2nd Solo Presser: Biden Brags of First-Year Accomplishments Amid Low Approval Ratings

Biden's opening statements during the speech boasted an increase in vaccinations, new jobs, and a drop in unemployment. But when it comes to COVID-19, one message stood clear: the US is not going back into lockdown.

US President Joe Biden held a news conference inside the White House on Wednesday, marking his first year as president.

While the president's [opening](#) remarks were optimistic - 210 million Americans being vaccinated (an increase from 2 million when he started the job), six million new jobs, a drop in unemployment, business growth, and a cut in health insurance premiums, he also acknowledged the administration's setbacks in failing to administer testing for the virus, saying they should have done so earlier on. But the president has revealed that 1 billion tests will be available to the American public for free.

"I know there's a lot of frustration and fatigue in this country, and we know why: Covid-19. Omicron has now been challenging us in a way that- it's the new enemy. But while it's a cause for concern, it's not a cause for panic." The president said.

"The bottom line on Covid-19 is that we're in a better place than we have been thus far, clearly better than a year ago. We're not going back into lockdowns, we're not going back to closing schools."

He then ventured into an equally stressful topic and addressed the increase in economic complications such as a [7% increase in inflation](#), but seemed adamant that inflation control is a job for the Federal Reserve, and isn't something his administration has the tools to address. He then requested the Federal Reserve to "bear down on fighting inflation".

The president also admitted his Build Back Better plan, which encompasses nearly \$2 trillion, will have to be broken up in order to get passed.

And while he believes that Congress will [pass funding](#) for energy and environmental issues, he is less sure whether his child tax credit provision and college cost assistance will be as successful. His voting rights legislation is also struggling to clear the Senate, so much so that Democrats are poised to change Senate rules.

The news conference is a critical point for the president whose current approval rating is 44% according to a [CBS](#) News poll on Sunday, with 50% of Americans having allegedly voiced frustration with Joe Biden's presidency thus far.

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US, NATO Not Seeking to Jeopardize Russia's Security – Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Neither Ukraine nor the United States and NATO members are seeking to jeopardize the right of the Russian people to live in security and dignity, and a military conflict is in nobody's interest, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"To the Russian people, I say: you deserve to live with security and dignity, like all people everywhere, and no one – not Ukraine, not the United States, not the countries of NATO – is seeking to jeopardize that," Blinken said in a speech following a meeting with the German

leadership in Berlin. "At a time when challenges like COVID and rebuilding the global economy demand so much of our attention and resources, is this what you need – a violent conflict that will likely drag on?"

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Russia Entitled to Protect Itself, US to Address Moscow's Concerns Reciprocally – Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Russia, like any country, has the right to protect itself, and the United States along with its European allies is prepared to discuss Moscow's security concerns and address them in a reciprocal manner, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Russia is entitled to protect itself, like any country. And the United States and the countries of Europe are prepared to discuss Russia's security concerns and how we can address them in a reciprocal way," Blinken said in a speech following a meeting with the German leadership in Berlin.

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Blinken Calls Situation in Ukraine 'a Crisis With Global Consequences'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The situation in Ukraine is bigger than a clash between Russia and NATO, it is a crisis with global consequences, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"This is why the United States and our partners in Europe have been so focused on what's happening in Ukraine. It's bigger than a conflict between two countries, and it's bigger than a clash between Russia and NATO. It's a crisis with global consequences. And it requires global attention and action," Blinken said in a speech following a meeting with the German leadership in Berlin.

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Number of Americans Pessimistic About Pandemic Increases to 58% Amid Omicron Surge - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Some 58% of Americans now believe the coronavirus Omicron variant surge has made the COVID-19 pandemic worse and general pessimism about

the course of the contagious disease is growing again across the United States, a Gallup poll revealed on Thursday.

"As was the case last July, when Delta infections began to surge, Americans' worry about contracting the virus is now on the rise," Gallup said in a news release about the poll. "Worry has jumped 12 points to 50% since the previous reading in late November/early December and is now the highest it has been since last winter."

Gallup said in the release that only 20% of Americans think the pandemic is improving, 22% believe it is staying the same and 58% are convinced it is getting worse.

Some 50 % are worried about contracting COVID-19; up 12 points since late November. Also, social distancing behaviors are on the rise and 72% continue to wear masks in public, the release also said.

"The hopefulness Americans felt last spring after the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines was first dashed over the summer by the delta variant, then recovered briefly as cases subsided, and is now being crushed by Omicron," the release added.

Despite the Omicron variant producing mild cases and being significantly less deadly, optimism about the trajectory of the pandemic in the United States has fallen sharply, and worry about contracting the virus has risen to its highest level in a year, according to the release.

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US, Allies Prepare Swift Response If Russia Moves Across Ukrainian Border - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - If the Russian military crosses the border with Ukraine, the United States and its allies will be quick to mount a severe response, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We have been very clear - if any Russian military forces move across Ukraine border and commit new acts of aggression against Ukraine, that will be met with a swift, severe united response from us and our allies and partners," he said at a joint press conference with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

Blinken noted that he is planning to represent the shared view of the US and European partners to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov when they meet in Geneva on Friday.

"In 2014 when Russia invaded Ukraine, we responded to those aggressive actions, part of that response was to provide defensive assistance to Ukraine to make sure that if Russia continues aggression, Ukraine will have to defend itself," Blinken said.

On Wednesday, Blinken met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kiev. The sides discussed American and international security assistance to Kiev, with Blinken underscoring the US commitment to diplomacy, alongside readiness "to impose severe costs for further Russian aggression against Ukraine."

Russia has on many occasions dismissed the allegations that it is preparing to invade Ukraine, pointing to the insecurity created by NATO's military activity in the region. Moscow reiterates that it has no intention of attacking any country, viewing the accusations as a pretext for deploying more alliance's military equipment close to Russian borders.

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Blinken Says Talks With Lavrov Will Show If There Is Diplomatic Way Forward With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that the United States will decide if there is a diplomatic way forward with Russia after he meets with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later this week.

"Tomorrow when I have a chance to see my Russian counterpart, I think it's a good opportunity because since this last week of very intensive discussions with Russia in the strategic stability dialogue between the United States and Russia, the NATO-Russia Council, the OSCE, we've all had an opportunity to think about what we heard from each other. The Russians have had a chance, I assume, to go back and consult with President Putin, we've had a chance to closely consult among ourselves," Blinken said at a joint press conference with his German counterpart. "And now, I think we'll be able to see further, perhaps as a result of tomorrow's meetings whether there is still a clear diplomatic path forward, one that Germany and the United States together are determined to pursue," he added.

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Blinken Says Return to JCPOA Will Be Impossible If No Deal Done With Iran in Coming Days

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - It will be impossible to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) unless a deal is reached with Iran in the coming days, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday,

"We are indeed at a decisive moment," Blinken said at a joint press conference with his German counterpart in Berlin. "If a deal is not reached in the coming weeks, Iran's ongoing nuclear advances which resumed after we withdrew from the agreement will make it impossible for us to return to the JCPOA."

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US Jobless Claims Up 55,000 Last Week, Rising 3rd Week in Row - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US unemployment claims rose by 55,000 last week and for a third week in a row as policymakers continued to struggle with ensuring consistent jobs growth in an economy still adjusting to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending January 15, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 286,000, an increase of 55,000 from the previous week's revised level," he department said in a news release. In the previous week to January 13, jobless claims rose by 8,000 to 231,000. After staggering unemployment initially triggered by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the labor market steadily picked up, showing a jobless rate of 3.9% in December from a high of 14.8% in April 2020. That 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, officials say. Aside from the sheer improvement in jobs numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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Biden's Year 1 Domestic Achievements Meager, Foreign Policy 'Clueless' - Historian

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's achievements in his first year in office have been meager because he failed to show strong leadership while wishfully thinking the Republicans and conservative Democrats would cooperate, American University Professor and eminent historian, Peter Kuznick, told Sputnik.

January 20 marks a year since Biden took the oath of office after being elected with more votes than any previous president in US history. Ahead of his one year mark, Biden's approval ratings have sunk to as low as 40%, his numbers still higher than his predecessor's were at this point in his presidency - but not by much.

"Biden's heart has been in the right place on the home front, but his achievements are meager and his approval ratings have reflected it," Kuznick, who cooperated with filmmaker Oliver Stone in a major history project, said.

Economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has been sluggish and while government spending soared to record levels, the president's Build Back Better ambitious infrastructure spending plan has stalled in Congress and inflation has hit alarming highs unseen for well over 40 years.

"Biden is not a strong leader. He clung too long to hope that Republicans and conservative Democrats would see the light and compromise with him. In that regard, he is still living in the 1970s," Kuznick said.

DOMESTIC FRONT

On the domestic front, Biden was dealt an extremely weak hand and has played it poorly, Kuznick judged. However, this outcome was not entirely the president's fault, he said.

The president had no margin for error given how evenly divided the House and Senate are, he added.

"That gave veto power to [Senators] Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, two corrupt centrists, who Biden hasn't been able to move, especially when it comes to the veto or social spending," Kuznick said.

Manchin in West Virginia and Sinema in Arizona both remain unmoved by the hatred facing them from dominant liberal Democrats on the East and West Coasts, Kuznick said.

"Their rationale for maintaining the veto may be totally nonsensical and irrational, but they can't be cajoled, enticed, pressured, or shamed into acting," he said.

Also, Biden's attempts to reach across the aisle for bipartisan support for measures that would benefit the American people have been almost completely thwarted by power-hungry Republicans, Kuznick observed.

"He scored important victories with his \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package, his trillion-dollar infrastructure bill, his success in getting almost three-quarters of American adults fully vaccinated despite Republican obstructionism, his appointment and confirmation of federal judges and his economic recovery program, compromised as it has been by inflation," he said. However, the president has gotten nowhere on voting rights, police reform, or his Build Back Better (BBB) social infrastructure package, Kuznick continued.

"As a result, his efforts to combat climate change have largely been frustrated as well. Hopefully, he will figure out a way to scale back some of his ambitious programs or break them up into smaller, more digestible parcels and get some of them adopted," he said.

Biden's approval ratings also reflect the fact that, despite his efforts, COVID remains as big a problem as it was when he took office, Kuznick commented.

FOREIGN POLICY

On the foreign policy and national security front, on Biden's watch US relations with both Russia and China have plunged to dangerous lows and levels of insults and invective from US leaders and politicians unparalleled even during the Cold War, he said.

Also, the final US military withdrawal from Afghanistan turned into a chaotic fiasco that devastated US standing around the world, Kuznick recalled.

"Biden's foreign policy has been deplorable. His confrontational stance toward Russia and China has backfired. He has taken the bad situation he inherited from Trump and, in many ways, made it worse. The United States now is closer to war with Russia and China than it has been in 60 years," he said.

China, Kuznick added, stood up to the US during talks in Anchorage while Russian President Vladimir Putin has been doing the same over Ukraine, NATO and Russian security.

"The chances of war over Taiwan and Ukraine have been greatly increased," he said.

Biden does not appear to want global war personally but he does not recognize how his policies and top officials Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Under Secretary of State for Policy Victoria Nuland are driving these potentially catastrophic developments, Kuznick emphasized.

"Biden has shown signs of understanding this, but he seems clueless in figuring out a way to ease the tensions. And the more he listens to Blinken, Sullivan, and Nuland, the worse off we'll be. This trio has no credibility on the world stage," he said.

Blinken had a catastrophic record of foreign policy judgment calls in both the Obama and Biden administration and he was obsessed with ineffectual sanctions that always failed to deliver any effective results, Kuznick recalled.

"To hear Blinken, the proponent of US invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and the bombing of Syria pontificate about spheres of influence and bluster about threatened economy-killing sanctions is absurd," he said.

Blinken, Sullivan Nuland and their colleagues were all still living in an obsolete dream world that had no bearing on 21st century realities, Kuznick explained.

"These people believe in American exceptionalism and unipolarity, but the world has passed them by," he said.

Ironically, Biden himself, now approaching 80 years old, appeared more ready to recognize the changing world than the senior officials he had himself chosen, Kuznick remarked.

"Biden too is an old Cold Warrior, but he may be more open to reason than his chief advisers. He wanted to downplay the role of nuclear weapons in his forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review, but the indications are not promising and the hopes for the United States adopting a no-first-use policy which Biden had advocated, seem to be abandoned." he said.

Meanwhile, the United States has adopted a \$770 billion "defense" budget that only accounts for part of American actual military, intelligence and homeland security expenditures, Kuznick observed.

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New Draft of US Sanctions Seeks Ban on Transactions With Russia's Sovereign Debt

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A new draft of US sanctions proposed by Rep. Jim Banks suggests banning transactions with Russia's sovereign debt, according to the bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall issue regulations to prohibit United States persons from purchasing, selling, or otherwise dealing in Russian sovereign debt that is issued or executed on or after the date that is 60 days after such date of enactment," the document said.

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New Draft of US Sanctions Seeks to Cut Funding for Strategic Stability Talks With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - New US sanctions proposed by Republican Jim Banks envisage funding limitations on strategic stability talks with Russia until the latter reverses the "occupation" of Crimea, according to the bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no funds may be obligated or expended on arms control negotiations or on Strategic Stability dialogue with the Russian Federation until the President certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that the Russian Federation has completely, fully, and verifiably withdrawn all forces, including proxy forces, from Ukraine and has reversed its illegal annexation of Crimea," the document said.

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New Draft of US Sanctions Seeks to Cut Funding for Cyber Dialogue With Russia - Bill

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US congressmen led by Republican Jim Banks want to cut funding for cybersecurity dialogue with Russia until alleged attacks on American entities end, according to the new sanctions bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no funds may be obligated or expended on a cyber dialogue with the Russian Federation until the President certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that cyber attacks from Russian entities and individuals against the United States have ceased," the document said.

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US Congressmen Seek Sanctions on Peskov, Mishustin, Sobyenin - Bill

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US congressmen led by Republican Jim Banks are seeking sanctions against Russian officials, including Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, according to the bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"DETERMINATION WITH RESPECT TO IMPOSITION OF SANCTIONS... PERSONS LISTED.—The persons listed in this subsection, which include Russian persons and current and former Russian officials, are the following: Mikhail Murashko, Minister of Health, ... Margarita Simonyan, Editor-in-Chief of RT,... Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister of Russia,... Dmitry Peskov, Presidential Press Secretary, ...Sergei Sobyenin, Mayor of Moscow," it said.

The proposed sanctions will also target Director of the Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov, the Head of the Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin, Director of the Federal Penitentiary Service Alexander Kalashnikov, Director of the National Guard Victor Zolotov, as well as Sergei Kiriyenko, first deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Executive Office.

Media personality Vladimir Solovyev and Konstantin Ernst and CEO of Channel One TV station are also listed in the document.

In addition, the document proposes sanctions against businessman Roman Abramovich; Alisher Usmanov; Gennady Timchenko; Oleg Deripaska; as well as Igor Sechin, Chairman of the Management Board of Rosneft; Alexei Miller, Chairman of the Management Committee of Gazprom; and Andrey Kostin, President and Chairman of the Management Board of VTB Bank.

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New Draft of US Sanctions Contains Measures Against Nord Stream 2

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A new draft of Russia sanctions proposed by US Rep. Jim Banks entails measures against Nord Stream 2 as well as organizations related to the project, according to the bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"Not later than 10 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall impose sanctions under subsection (b)(1) with respect to (1) any entity responsible for planning, construction, maintenance, technical assistance, engineering assistance, financing or operation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline or a successor entity," the document said.

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Draft of New US Sanctions Seeks to Designate Russia as State Sponsor of Terrorism

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A new draft of US sanctions proposed by Republican Jim Banks seeks to declare Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and "Russian-backed" forces in Donbas as terrorists, according to the draft bill obtained by The Washington Post.

"Designation of the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism and designation of the Russian-supported armed forces in the Donbas region of Ukraine as foreign terrorist organizations. (a) designation of the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism," the document said.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden Admits Differences Within NATO on Response to Russia, Says Sanctions to Be Costly

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a rare solo press conference from the White House admitted that there exists differences within NATO on what member countries are willing to do to respond to Russia over Ukraine and warned that sanctions will be costly for Moscow as well as the United States and its allies.

Biden expressed hope that there is a possibility to hold a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin soon to resolve security concerns on both sides. The US president noted that last week's security talks among the United States, NATO and Russia did not produce any breakthroughs.

"It's very important that we keep everyone in NATO on the same page, and that's what I'm spending a lot of time doing," Biden said on Wednesday. "There are differences in NATO as to what countries are willing to do depending on what happens, the degree to which they're able to go."

Western countries and Kiev have recently expressed concerns about the alleged "aggressive actions" of Russia near the border with Ukraine. Kiev accuses Moscow of military build-up and

preparations for an invasion of the neighboring country. However, Russia denies the allegations and reiterates that it has no intention of attacking any country. Moreover, Moscow views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russian borders. The US president said the American and European response would depend on what Russia does and to what extent NATO will be completely unified on a decision.

"Russia will be held accountable if it invades and it depends on what it does - it's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having to fight about what to do and what not to do but if they actually do what they're capable of doing with the force amassed on the border it is going to be a disaster for Russia if they further invade Ukraine," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday, adding that Russia has overwhelming superiority over Ukraine.

Biden added that the United States and its European allies are prepared to impose severe costs on Russia and its economy should it invade. He said Putin has never seen sanctions like the ones that would be imposed if there is an escalation.

However, Biden also admitted that contingency plans to impose sanctions on dollar transactions with Russia will also hurt the US and its allies.

"The serious imposition of sanctions [on Russia] relative to dollar transactions and other things are things that are going to have a negative impact on the United States, as well as the negative impact on economies of Europe, as well, and a devastating impact on Russia," Biden said on Wednesday.

Russia delivered its security proposals to the United States and NATO, which includes guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will not become part of NATO, emphasizing that the eastward expansion of the alliance is a national security concern.

Biden during his press conference mentioned it is unlikely that Ukraine would join NATO in the near future due to pending issues that must be resolved in the country.

Moreover, Biden previewed that the United States is willing to work on Russia's proposal to limit NATO's strategic weapons deployed in Ukraine.

Biden added that he and Putin in recent talks over the last year have had no problem understanding each other when discussing security issues.

Biden said he thinks Putin does not want a full-blown war with Ukraine or NATO and may currently be calculating the short-term and long-term consequences for Russia should the situation with Ukraine escalate. He added that Putin may be trying to find his place between China and the West as well.

OTHER ISSUES: CHINA, IRAN, PANDEMIC

Biden said there has been no determination on whether the United States will lift tariffs on China but US Trade Representative Katherine Tai is currently working on the matter.

"My trade rep is working on that right now. The answer is uncertain. I'd like to be able to be in a position where I could say they're meeting their commitments, more of their commitments, and be able to lift some of it, but we're not there yet," Biden said on Wednesday during the press conference.

On Iran, Biden said that now is not the time to give up on negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear agreement as some progress has been made.

The United States is currently much better prepared to handle the novel coronavirus pandemic than it was a year ago, which means a lockdowns will not be necessary, Biden said.

"We are in a better place than we have been thus far, clearly better than a year ago. We're not going to back to lockdowns. We are not going back to closing schools. School should stay open," Biden said during the press conference.

He added that it is an appropriate time for the Federal Reserve to recalibrate support for the US economy to address pandemic-induced issues such as galloping inflation.

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REVIEW - Defiant Biden Touts Progress in Year 1 as Approval Ratings Hit Rock Bottom

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has hailed his first-year record in effectively handling challenges on multiple fronts - from the pandemic to the economy - but polls show most voters disagree, a situation exacerbated by a repeated failure to rally his own party to pass key legislation.

Thursday marks twelve months since the day Biden was sworn in as president and vowed to unite the country in his inaugural address.

The president ended his first year in office on Wednesday in a rare solo presser from the White House where he said it has been a year of both challenges and "enormous progress."

When pressed by a reporter about his low approval ratings among moderates and independents, the president snapped back defiantly.

"I don't believe in polls," Biden said at the press conference before calling on another questioner.

DOWNWARD TREND AMID MULTIPLE CRISES

Despite claims of progress and a sudden disbelief in the science of polling, the data makes clear voter discontent with Biden grew throughout the year amid the omicron wave, spikes in gas prices, rising inflation, supply chain issues, and a botched withdrawal from Afghanistan. This in addition to an inability to gain consensus within his own party to pass key social and voting rights legislation.

According to Real Clear Politics (RCP), which averages all of the major polls on a daily basis, Biden's approval rating a week after entering the Oval Office stood at 55.5 percent and has since fallen to 40.9% - the lowest of his tenure.

The figure is almost as bad as his predecessor's, who finished his inaugural year with a 40.1% RCP score. Biden's first-year RCP average approval rating is also below that of Presidents Barack Obama (45.2%) and George W. Bush (58%).

In August, Biden's job approval rating abruptly sunk below the 50% mark, which many surveys attributed to the perceived mishandling of the US exit from Afghanistan, for which the president took heat from both sides of the political aisle.

Despite the administration spinning the fight against covid as a major strong point for Biden, less than half of voters polled in several recent surveys said they approved of the president's handling of the pandemic. Voters have also given Biden low scores on his handling of the economy largely due to rising inflation.

Biden has even drawn the ire of some mainstream media outlets for failing to provide access while members of the White House press pool have expressed confusion over several of his verbal gaffes.

"Biden's popularity rating is sinking rapidly," University of Houston History Professor Gerald Horne told Sputnik. "After initial success with passage of a giant infrastructure bill, things have deteriorated."

SUCSESSES, ROADBLOCKS

Biden did deliver on a number of campaign promises related to issues such as the pandemic, health, and climate change. He met his vow to ensure the distribution of 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots for 50 million people in his first 100 days. And according to the CDC, 75% of Americans have received at least one shot to date, while 63% have been fully vaccinated. On the human rights front, he reversed the Trump administration's Muslim ban, the transgender military ban, and the family separation policy at the border.

He also rejoined the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris climate accord, and resumed ties with the Palestinian Authority.

The White House lauded several of his economic achievements including bringing the unemployment rate down to 3.9% from 6.3% while reducing child poverty by 40 percent. Biden championed pandemic relief legislation that passed in March which provided approximately \$1.9 trillion in aid to US families and businesses. In November, Biden also signed a bipartisan bill that provided \$1.2 trillion in funding for infrastructure development.

However, despite holding a strong majority in the House, Biden and congressional Democrat leadership have struggled to pass legislation through the Senate, which is evenly divided, albeit Vice President Kamala Harris wields the tie-breaking vote as chamber president.

Part of Biden's infrastructure agenda through the Build Back Better Act has yet to make it past the Senate due to concerns from fellow Democrat Joe Manchin. Defections from the party line, both by moderate Democrats in the Senate and progressive Democrats in the House, have raised questions about party unity.

In addition, California State University Political Science Professor Beau Grosscup believes Biden has failed many liberals and progressives by failing to fight the ruling class.

"He has not pushed on promises that would help the economy, like student debt relief reform, upping minimum wage, taxing wealthy tax resisters," Grosscup told Sputnik. "The Biden administration remains guided by the priorities of Wall Street."

Biden's foreign policy agenda was dominated by the Afghan withdrawal, reforging relationships with allies, and tensions with Russia over Ukraine.

Biden came under fire from both sides of the aisle for not being visible during a key stretch when the Taliban seized Kabul in August while many refugees and Americans were stranded at the airport. An attack on US forces during the evacuation left 13 service members dead.

With regard to his aggressive stances against countries like Russia, Grosscup argued that Biden in some cases is using foreign policy as a distraction from his domestic problems.

"His only out is to attempt to convince the citizens that foreign powers - Russia, China - are threatening US national security to the extent that nothing else matters," Grosscup said. "He is trying hard to do that."

The Biden administration in its first year has rebooted negotiations with Iran over compliance with the nuclear agreement. The president on Wednesday said "it's not time to give up," on the talks given some progress is being made.

YEAR TWO PROSPECTS BLEAK

Some experts see grim prospects in the coming year for Biden on the political and economic fronts, which they think will result in the Democrats losing control of Congress.

"The economy looks like it's going into genuine recession because with Bidenomics... rates will have to rise a lot - to 8% on the long bond - to curb inflation," former merchant banker and financial analyst Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik. "Rates won't rise that much, so they'll get the worst of both worlds - stagnation plus inflation."

As a result, Hutchinson projects that in next November's midterms the Republicans are likely to seize control of both chambers by picking up two seats in the Senate and 18 in the House.

US political commentator Sam Hussein told Sputnik he thinks the public is still gripped by fear of covid and many are continuing to face economic distress. Meanwhile, he added, numerous foreign policy crises have escalated.

"This likely means Biden and his political associates will lose seats in November paving the way for a Republican majority in both the House and Senate," Hussein predicted.

Grosscup said the Democrats are in trouble if Biden does not take more aggressive steps to halt the spread of the virus.

"Unless he [Biden] gets more bullish on dealing nationally and internationally with the pandemic, he will fail," Grosscup warned.

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US January 6th Investigative Committee Subpoenas Nicholas Fuentes, Demands Testimony

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 attack on the US Capitol issued a subpoena to the right-wing "Groyper" movement founder Nicholas Fuentes demanding records and testimony given his presence at the Capitol on January 6, the Committee announced via Twitter.

"The Select Committee has issued subpoenas to Nicholas J. Fuentes and Patrick Casey. The committee is demanding records and testimony from the two witnesses who promoted unsupported claims about the 2020 election and were present on the Capitol ground on January 6th," the Committee said on Wednesday.

Fuentes and Casey are leaders of the right-wing "America First" or "Groyper" movement and both participated in events prior to January 6 that promoted unsupported claims about the 2020 election, in addition to being present on the Capitol grounds on January 6, the Committee said. Both individuals also reportedly received tens of thousands of dollars in Bitcoin from a French computer programmer - funds scrutinized by the FBI for connections to the Capitol breach or other illicit activity - the Committee added.

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REVIEW - Biden Admits Differences Within NATO on Response to Russia, Says Sanctions to Be Costly

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a rare solo press conference from the White House admitted that there exists differences within NATO on what member countries are willing to do to respond to Russia over Ukraine and warned that sanctions will be costly for Moscow as well as the United States and its allies.

Biden expressed hope that there is a possibility to hold a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin soon to resolve security concerns on both sides. The US president noted that last week's security talks among the United States, NATO and Russia did not produce any breakthroughs.

"It's very important that we keep everyone in NATO on the same page, and that's what I'm spending a lot of time doing," Biden said on Wednesday. "There are differences in NATO as to what countries are willing to do depending on what happens, the degree to which they're able to go."

Western countries and Kiev have recently expressed concerns about the alleged "aggressive actions" of Russia near the border with Ukraine. Kiev accuses Moscow of military build-up and preparations for an invasion of the neighboring country. However, Russia denies the allegations and reiterates that it has no intention of attacking any country. Moreover, Moscow views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russian borders. The US president said the American and European response would depend on what Russia does and to what extent NATO will be completely unified on a decision.

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Biden added that the United States and its European allies are prepared to impose severe costs on Russia and its economy should it invade. He said Putin has never seen sanctions like the ones that would be imposed if there is an escalation.

However, Biden also admitted that contingency plans to impose sanctions on dollar transactions with Russia will also hurt the US and its allies.

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Russia delivered its security proposals to the United States and NATO, which includes guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will not become part of NATO, emphasizing that the eastward expansion of the alliance is a national security concern.

Biden during his press conference mentioned it is unlikely that Ukraine would join NATO in the near future due to pending issues that must be resolved in the country.

Moreover, Biden previewed that the United States is willing to work on Russia's proposal to limit NATO's strategic weapons deployed in Ukraine.

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Biden said he thinks Putin does not want a full-blown war with Ukraine or NATO and may currently be calculating the short-term and long-term consequences for Russia should the situation with Ukraine escalate. He added that Putin may be trying to find his place between China and the West as well.

OTHER ISSUES: CHINA, IRAN, PANDEMIC

Biden said there has been no determination on whether the United States will lift tariffs on China but US Trade Representative Katherine Tai is currently working on the matter.

"My trade rep is working on that right now. The answer is uncertain. I'd like to be able to be in a position where I could say they're meeting their commitments, more of their commitments, and be able to lift some of it, but we're not there yet," Biden said on Wednesday during the press conference.

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He added that it is an appropriate time for the Federal Reserve to recalibrate support for the US economy to address pandemic-induced issues such as galloping inflation.

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Investigator Sentenced for Falsifying Background Investigation Reports - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A former employee of the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) has been sentenced to three-year probation for falsifying background investigation reports of individuals seeking security clearances, the Justice Department said.

"Michelle Layton, 57, a former background investigator for the National Background Investigations Bureau, now the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, was sentenced today to three years of probation and ordered to pay more than \$100,000 in restitution for falsifying reports of investigation she submitted as part of background investigations of individuals seeking national security clearances," the Justice Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

As part of a plea, Layton admitted to falsifying multiple reports of investigation for background investigations over the course of a year from February 2018 to February 2019, and resigned her position, the statement said.

"Layton admitted that she would submit reports in which she claimed she had interviewed a source about a background investigation subject or that she had collected records about the subject when she had not," the statement said.

The reports included Top Secret clearances and the Defense Department relied on the falsified reports to determine whether a subject was eligible for a security clearance, the statement added.

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US Supreme Court Blocks Trump Attempt to Keep Records From January 6 Congressional Panel

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court blocked an attempt by former President Donald Trump to keep White House records related to the January 6 Capitol riot from the US House Select Committee investigating the incident, according to a court order.

"The application for stay of mandate and injunction pending review presented to The Chief Justice and by him referred to the Court is denied. The questions whether and in what circumstances a former President may obtain a court order preventing disclosure of privileged records from his tenure in office, in the face of a determination by the incumbent President to waive the privilege, are unprecedented and raise serious and substantial concerns," the US Supreme Court said in the order on Wednesday.

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US Army Orders 300Mln More COVID-19 Vaccine Doses From Pfizer - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Pfizer has won a more than \$2 billion US Army modification contract to produce an additional 300 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine for international donation to low and low-middle income countries, the US Defense Department announced.

"Pfizer [of] New York, New York, was awarded a \$2,047,500,000 modification ... contract for an additional 300 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine for international donation to low and low-middle income countries," the Defense Department said in a release on Wednesday. Work on the contract will be performed in New York City in New York State over the next nine months with an estimated completion date of September 30 this year, the release said.

Full funding for the contract has already been approved under the Fiscal Year 2021 Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and it will be overseen by US Army Contracting Command at Aberdeen Proving Ground in the state of Maryland, the release added.

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Biden Says He Thinks Possibility Exists to Have Summit With Putin to De-Escalate Tensions

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he thinks there is a possibility to organize a bilateral summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin soon in order to address security concerns in Eastern Europe.

"I still think that is a possibility," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday when asked if there will be another summit with Putin as a way to de-escalate tensions.

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'Bloodbath' in US Stocks Continue as Interest Rate Hike Fears Pound Market

NEW YORK, January 19 (Sputnik) - The selloff in US stocks showed little signs of slowing on Wednesday as fears of a series of impending interest rate hikes caused major equity indices in the world's largest economy to take their worst pounding since the 2020 coronavirus breakout. Even before January began, Wall Street has been inundated with concerns about overvalued stocks and a selloff that some analysts said was long overdue.

The Nasdaq index, known for highly-priced tech stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, is down more than 8% for January, with half of the decline coming in just the past two sessions. The last time Nasdaq fell more in a month was in March 2020, when it lost 10% at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Nasdaq aside, the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average has dropped almost 4% on the year, losing 3.5% over four days.

The S&P500, an index for the top 500 US stocks, has fallen almost 5%, with nearly 4% of that coming in two days of trade.

The selloff in US stocks has coincided with a spike in bond yields that reflect so-called real interest rates.

"Stocks went on a wild ride as global bond yields reacted to a steady stream of hot global inflation reports, decent earnings, all while the Nasdaq tentatively fell to correction territory," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The yield on the US ten-year Treasury note repeatedly hit this week highs seen in January 2020, when the Federal Reserve was on a rate hike cycle then. Once the pandemic broke out, however, the US central bank slashed rates to almost zero and has kept them at that level since.

But the Federal Reserve has said it has to raise interest rates now to counter inflation as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic and due to trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payout and supply chain disruptions.

The Federal Reserve's target for inflation is 2% per year. The US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982. As a result, the Federal Reserve has indicated that there could be as many as four rate hikes over the next year, with the first beginning in March.

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Biden Says Sanctioning Russia's Dollar Transactions to Have Negative Impact on US, Europe

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The imposition of sanctions on dollar transactions with Russia can have negative impact on the economics of the United States and Europe, US President Joe Biden said during a speech marking his first year in office.

"The serious imposition of sanctions [on Russia] relative to dollar transactions and other things are things that are going to have a negative impact on the United States, as well as the negative impact on economies of Europe, as well, and a devastating impact on Russia," Biden said on Wednesday.

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Biden Says Not Time to Give Up on Iran Talks as Some Progress Being Made

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that now is not the time to give up on negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear agreement as some progress has been made. "It's not time to give up, there is some progress being made, the P5 +1 [group of countries] is on the same page, but it remains to be seen," Biden said during a press conference at the White House on Wednesday.

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Biden Says Meetings With Russia Last Week 'Have Not Produced Anything'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The series of diplomatic meetings last week in Europe with participation of Russia have not produced anything because the Russian diplomats did not know what President Vladimir Putin is going to do next amid tensions with Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said during a speech marking one year in office.

"So far, the three meetings we have had [last week] have not produced anything because the impression I get from my Secretary of State [Antony Blinken], my national security adviser [Jake Sullivan] and my other senior officials that were doing these meetings, is that there is a question of whether the people they're talking to [Russian diplomats] know what he [Putin] is going to do," Biden said on Wednesday.

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NATO Countries Differ About How to Respond to Potential Russian Action in Ukraine - Biden

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - NATO member countries have their differences about how they will respond and what they are willing to do in the event Russia invades Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said during a press conference at the White House.

"It's very important that we keep everyone in NATO on the same page, and that's what I'm spending a lot of time doing," Biden said on Wednesday. "There are differences in NATO as to what countries are willing to do depending on what happens, the degree to which they're able to go."

The US president said the response would depend on what Russia does and "to what extent we're going to be able to get total unity on the NATO front."

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Biden Says 'Not Very Likely' Ukraine Would Join NATO Any Time Soon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said it is not very likely that Ukraine would join NATO in near future.

"The likelihood that Ukraine is going to join NATO in the near term is not very likely based on much more work they have to do in terms of democracy and a few other things going on there," Biden said during a press conference at the White House on Wednesday.

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Biden Says US Can Work on Putin's Offer to Limit NATO's Strategic Weapons in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the United States and its partners can work on the offer of Russian President Vladimir Putin to limit NATO's strategic weapons deployed in Ukraine.

"The two things that he said to me is that he wants, one is - Ukraine will never be part of NATO, and two, that there will not be strategic weapons stationed in Ukraine. We can work out

something on the second piece," Biden said during a press conference at the White House on Wednesday.

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Biden Says 'Uncertain' US Will Lift Tariffs on China, Trade Chief Working On It Now

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - It is uncertain whether the United States will lift tariffs on China but US Trade Representative Katherine Tai is currently working on the issue, President Joe Biden said during his first press conference of 2022.

"My trade rep is working on that right now. The answer is uncertain. I'd like to be able to be in a position where I could say they're meeting their commitments, more of their commitments, and be able to lift some of it, but we're not there yet," Biden said on Wednesday during the press conference.

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Biden Warns of 'Disaster' for Russia Should It Invade Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden warned that Russia will have a disaster on its hands should it decide to allegedly invade Ukraine.

"Russia will be held accountable if it invades and it depends on what it does - it's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having to fight about what to do and what not to do but if they actually do what they're capable of doing with the force amassed on the border it is going to be a disaster for Russia if they further invade Ukraine," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday, adding that Russia has overwhelming superiority over Ukraine.

Biden added that the United States and its European allies are prepared to impose severe costs on Russia and its economy should it invade. He said Putin has never seen sanctions like the ones that would be imposed if there is an escalation.

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China Fast Developing Space Capabilities Represent 'Pacing Challenge' for US - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - China and Russia are both developing space capabilities but the difference is the speed with which China is progressing and it represents a "pacing challenge" for the United States, US Space Force Chief of Space Operations Gen. John Raymond said.

"I think they both are developing capabilities for their own use," Raymond said on Wednesday. "I think what's different is that China has gone very, very fast and the economic engine that they have has allowed them to go at a speed that is really concerning and I think that's why I would consider them our pacing challenge."

Raymond said that China and Russia "demonstrated by their actions that they are developing capabilities to deny us our access to space and advantages that it provides."

The Space Force was established as the fifth branch of the US armed services to provide forces and assets for Space Command.

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Biden Says Putin Trying to Find Place Between China and West

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to find his place between China and the West.

"He is trying to find his place in the world between China and the West," Biden told reporters at the White House on Wednesday.

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Biden Says Russia's Banks Will Not Be Able to Deal in Dollars if Ukraine Invaded

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said Russia's banks will not be able to deal in dollars in the world economy should it allegedly invade Ukraine.

"If they invade, they're going to pay, their banks will not be able to deal in dollars," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday.

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Biden Says 'No Problem' Understanding One Another With Putin

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he and Russian President Vladimir Putin have no problem understanding each other when discussing bilateral security issues.

"We have no problem understanding one another," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday regarding his recent security talks with Putin.

Biden said his recent talks with Putin have been "very frank."

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Biden Says He Thinks Putin Still Does Not Want 'Full-Blown War'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden he thinks Russian President Vladimir Putin does not want a full-blown war with Ukraine.

"I think he still does not want a full-blown war," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday.

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Biden Begins Press Conference Saying 'It Has Been Year of Challenges' But Also Progress

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden began his first formal press conference of 2022 on the eve of the anniversary of his inauguration by saying that it has been a year of both challenges and progress.

"Tomorrow will mark one year since I took office. It's been a year of challenges but it's also been a year of enormous progress," Biden said during remarks at the top of the press conference on Wednesday.

The press conference will be Biden's seventh solo presser since assuming the presidency.

Complaints about Biden's lack of media access have emanated from across the political spectrum - even the White House Correspondents' Association has pressed the administration on the issue

Biden so far has conducted fewer press events than many of his predecessors, according to the American Presidency Project, with Donald Trump having conducted 21 press conferences by this point in his presidency, Barack Obama 16 press conferences, and George W. Bush 14 press conferences.

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Biden Says Appropriate for Federal Reserve to Recalibrate Support for US Economy

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) -President Joe Biden said it is an appropriate time for the Federal Reserve to recalibrate support for the US economy to address pandemic-induced issues such as galloping inflation.

"The critical job at making sure that the elevated prices don't become entrenched rests with the Federal Reserve... Given the strength of our economy and the pace of recent price increases,

it's appropriate, as Federal Chairman [Jerome] Powell has indicated, to recalibrate the support that is now necessary," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday.

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Biden Says US Clearly Better Than Year Ago, Country Not Going Back to Lockdowns

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The situation in the United States with respect to COVID-19 is clearly better than a year ago and the country is not going back to lockdowns amid the surge on Omicron cases, US President Joe Biden said during a speech marking one year in office.

"We are in a better place than we have been thus far, clearly better than a year ago. We're not going to back to lockdowns. We are not going back to closing schools. School should say open," Biden said on Wednesday.

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New York City Man Arrested Over \$1.9M In COVID-19 Unemployment Benefit Fraud - Attorney

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A New York City man has been arrested on charges of involvement in a COVID-19 unemployment benefits scheme that netted more than \$500,000, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"As alleged, the defendant participated in a scheme to fraudulently obtain COVID-19 unemployment benefits under the names and social security numbers of at least 100 other people, which attempted to steal more than \$1.9 million and resulted in the fraudulent disbursement of more than \$500,000," Damian Williams, the attorney for the Southern District of New York, said. "The defendant is now in custody and facing serious federal charges."

Yohauris Rodriguez Hernandez, 40, is charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud; conspiracy to commit theft of government benefits; and aggravated identity theft. If given the maximum sentence, Hernandez could serve as much as 30 years in prison.

The US Attorney's Office alleges that between February and December 2020, Hernandez and a co-conspirator fraudulently filed for COVID-19 unemployment benefits using the names and social security numbers of at least 100 other people. Law enforcement agencies became aware of the scheme when Hernandez and his associate hurriedly exited a hotel room in Yonkers in December 2020, leaving behind more than 500 pieces mail from the New York State Department of Labor (NYS-DOL), as well as NYS DOL-issued debit cards for 76 people. Law enforcement officials said the pair made fraudulent claims for about \$1.9 million and received more than \$500,000 in COVID-19 unemployment benefits.

Seven NYC departments and law enforcement agencies were involved in pursuing and prosecuting the case.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORY OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on Wednesday that he will not deliver a written US response to the Russian security proposals when he meets with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva later this week.
- * Blinken said the United States will update Ukraine on the outcomes of his upcoming meeting with Lavrov in Geneva and discuss next steps.

MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

- * Palestine supports Russia's proposal to convene at the earliest convenience a ministerial meeting of the Quartet on the Middle East in a fresh attempt to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki told the UN Security Council on Wednesday.
- * US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and strongly condemned the terrorist attack earlier this week, the Defense Department said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Moscow has not received any proposals to hold a Russia-Ukraine summit in Jerusalem, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Wednesday.
- * US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he expects that the ambassador to Ukraine will be nominated soon.
- * Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said that he discussed the "Normandy Format" talks with Blinken, adding that Washington supports efforts to restore its functioning.
- * Ukraine is not planning to conduct any offensive military operations in Donbas and makes efforts to just increase its defense capabilities, Kuleba said.
- * Blinken discussed with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy the United States' and international security assistance to Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

IRAN-RUSSIA TALKS

- * The experience of interaction between Russia and Iran in Syria can create prerequisites for its application in other areas, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday.
- * It is important to know Tehran's position on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Putin said.
- * Iran wants to have stable and comprehensive relations with Russia, Raisi said.

KIEV COURT DECISION ON POROSHEKO

* The Pechersky District Court of Kiev on Wednesday ruled to release former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko who is accused of treason on his own recognizance and thus rejected the prosecution's request to detain him.

* Poroshenko said that it is too early to celebrate a victory after a Kiev court rejected the prosecution's request to detain him.

* One police officer and one protester were injured as a demonstration of supporters of Poroshenko clashed with the law enforcement near a court reviewing his case, the Kiev police said.

EUROPEAN SECURITY

* The European Union's proposals for security and stability will be presented in the coming weeks, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Wednesday.

* There are no risks of full-scale military conflict in Europe, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

RUSSIAN COSMONAUTS SPACEWALK

* Russian cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov completed work during their spacewalk and returned to the Russian segment of the International Space Station (ISS), according to Roscosmos broadcast.

* Communication with Shkaplerov and Dubrov was disrupted for more than ten minutes, according to a broadcast on the website of the Russian space agency Roscosmos.

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Most Regions in US to See COVID-19 Peaks in First Half of February - Fauci

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Some US states are already seeing a decline in the number of coronavirus infections, while most of the regions in the United States will reach peak in cases in the first half of February, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Antony Fauci said on Wednesday.

"I would imagine, as we get into the first few weeks of February, it is very likely that most of the states in the country will left turn around with their peak and starting to come down with regard to cases and then obviously hospitalizations," Fauci said during a conversation with Blue Star Families.

New York City and parts of the states neighboring New York State and New Jersey have already reached their peaks, Fauci also said.

However, many big cities, including Chicago, New Orleans and some other metropolitan areas in the South, have not yet peaked and likely will have more slower incline and decline of cases in the foreseeable future, Fauci added.

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Eco-Activists Urge Biden to End Fossil Fuel Production on Public Lands, Oceans – Petition

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Over 360 climate, tribal, religious and conservation groups appealed to President Joe Biden Wednesday to phase out oil and gas production on public lands and oceans.

"We hereby petition you to use your inherent authority to implement a steady and managed decline of all onshore and offshore oil and gas production on public lands and waters such that oil and gas production is reduced by 98% of current levels by the year 2035 in order to avoid disastrous climate change driven by fossil fuels," the petition said.

Petitioners criticized Biden for offering 80 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico for oil and gas leasing just days after pledging to slash emissions in the country by up to 51% over the next nine years. Biden is expected to offer leases on more than 300,000 acres of public lands in March.

The coalition's petition offers the Biden administration a framework to oversee the reduction of oil and gas production to near zero by 2035. This can be achieved with rulemaking, as well as using the National Emergencies Act, the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act and what the coalition describes as long-dormant provisions of the Mineral Leasing Act. Not taking this move will make it very difficult for the United States to meet its pledge to help avoid 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming and the resultant environmental, economic and social carnage caused by climate change, the petition warns.

Biden has broken his campaign promise to cease new oil and gas leasing and drilling on public lands and oceans, the petitioners said. Instead, the administration is approving onshore drilling permits at a pace that exceeds the Trump administration, with more than 3,500 permits approved since Biden assumed office.

Data from the Center for Biological Diversity notes that federal fossil fuel production causes almost 25% of America's greenhouse gas pollution which is exacerbating climate and extinction crises and is also disproportionately putting black, brown, indigenous and low-wealth communities in harm's way.

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University of Michigan to Pay \$490Mln to Over 1,000 Victims of Sex Abuse Doctor - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The University of Michigan has agreed to pay almost half a billion dollars in damages to more than 1,000 sex abuse survivors previously molested by a university doctor Robert Anderson, University of Michigan Record reported on Wednesday.

The \$490 million agreement still must be approved by the university's governing Board of Regents and by 98% of the claimants represented by lawyers in the case and then be approved

by legal courts, the report said. The agreement would resolve all of those survivors' claims against the university, it added.

Some \$460 million will eventually be shared by the 1,050 claimants and another \$30 million will set aside to be paid to potential future confirmed claimants who enter the agreement over the next year and a half up to the cutoff date of July 31, 2023, the report said.

Anderson, who died in 2008, engaged in a "pervasive, decades-long, destructive pattern of sexual misconduct" involving hundreds of University of Michigan students, an official university investigation whose report was released in May of 2021 found.

The report said university officials knew about Andersen's abuses back in 1978, yet it continued for decades.

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UPDATE - US Approves Transfer of Weapons From Ally Countries to Ukraine - Senator
(Changes attribution in headline and lede, adds quote in para 3)

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved requests from certain ally countries to transfer American-made lethal weapons to Ukraine amid rising tensions with Russia, Sen. Jim Risch said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Politico reported that Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania asked the United States for approval to send their US-made weapons such as anti-armor and ground-to-air missiles to Ukraine.

"There's a couple other things we have urged the administration to do, they are taking action in that regard, I think delinquently, but they are," Risch, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during a press conference. "We have additional defensive measures that are weaponry that is headed for the Ukraine as we speak. In addition to that, a couple of our allies have asked for a relief from their licenses so that they can provide material. I understand that that's been done."

US export license regulations require the Baltic countries to first seek approval from the State Department before transferring the weapons to Ukraine.

The three Baltic nations are members of NATO and have been in support of bolstering the alliance's presence in their countries.

The State Department declined to comment on the matter, and the White House did not respond to a request for comment, the Politico report said.

Western countries and Kiev have recently expressed concerns about the alleged "aggressive actions" of Russia near the border with Ukraine. Kiev accuses Moscow of military build-up and preparations for an invasion of the neighboring country. However, Russia denies the allegations and reiterates that it has no intention of attacking any country. Moreover, Moscow views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russian borders.

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White House China Director Says US Will Soon Unveil Common Goals With Indo-Pacific Allies

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US plans to announce common goals on areas of economic cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region, National Security Council Senior Director for China Laura Rosenberger said on Wednesday.

"The conversations that we've had over the previous few months with regional partners have been really important in helping to crystalize our thinking, and we will continue to focus on establishing common goals ... that we would jointly announce in the coming months, early period of 2022," Rosenberger said during a National Bureau of Asian Research event.

Proposed areas of economic cooperation include digital economy standards, supply chain resiliency, infrastructure, and anti-corruption, Rosenberger noted. The US anticipates that different pieces will move at different speeds, Rosenberger added.

President Joe Biden will meet virtually with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Friday to deepen ties between the US and Japan, expand cooperation in the fight against the coronavirus, work on addressing the climate crisis, and partnering on new and emerging technologies, according to the White House.

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US Envoy for Human Rights Meets With Pro-Opposition Belarusian Athletes – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US under secretary of state for democracy and human rights met on Wednesday with six pro-opposition Olympians and athletes from Belarus, including Kristina Timanovskaya, and commended them on their struggle against alleged human rights abuses in the country, the State Department said.

"Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Uzra Zeya met today with six Belarusian Olympians and National Athletes representing the Belarusian Sports Solidarity Foundation. The group included Krystsina Tsimanouskaya ...," the State Department said in a press release. "During the meeting, Under Secretary Zeya conveyed her admiration for the courage of Belarusian athletes who have faced reprisals for exercising their right to freedom of expression."

The diplomat reiterated the US commitment to promoting accountability for those who allegedly committed human rights abuses in Belarus and abroad, the release noted.

Timanovskaya was to compete in the women's 100 meter and 200 meter relays during the Tokyo Olympic Games in August 2021. She was called back from the Olympics after the Belarusian sports authorities entered her in the 4x400m relay without her consent. Belarus said it was concerned about her mental health, but Timanovskaya argued that the authorities tried to send her back to cover up their poor performance.

The athlete refused to return home. Poland has since granted humanitarian visas to Timanovskaya and her husband.

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Biden Says Intends to Nominate US Ambassadors to UK, Brazil - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday that he intends to nominate seven individuals to serve in key posts in his administration, including four diplomats for the positions ambassador to the United Kingdom, Brazil, Denmark and Chad, the White House said in a press release on Wednesday.

"They are: Elizabeth Bagley, nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Federative Republic of Brazil; Jane Hartley, nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland... Alan Leventhal, nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Denmark," the release said.

Hartley served as ambassador to France and the Principality of Monaco between 2014 and 2017. In that role, she helped strengthen the US-France bilateral relationship while focusing on counterterrorism cooperation. Hartley was also CEO of the international economic and political advisory firm Observatory Group.

Bagley has served as advisor to US Secretaries of State John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and Madeline Albright. She has also served as Special Representative to the UN General Assembly, Special Representative for Global Partnerships and US Ambassador to Portugal.

The White House also said Biden intends to nominate Dr. Kathryn Huff for the position Assistant Secretary for Nuclear Energy; Deborah Coen for member of the National Council on the Humanities; and William Brodsky for member of the Securities Investor Protection Corporation.

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White House Will Distribute 400M In Free N95 Masks Across US - Official

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will distribute 400 million N95 masks for free across the United States amid a surge in Omicron variant cases, Senior Advisor for COVID-19 Response Dr. Tom Inglesby said on Wednesday.

The 400 million N95 masks will be widely available and recipients will not be prioritized based on any health or demographic factors, and the Biden administration is "confident that people who want to access them will be able to access them," Inglesby told NBC News in an interview. Providing masks and testing is part of a new administration approach to health equipment supplies beyond the current Omicron variant wave of cases, Inglesby said. The White House is "absolutely preparing" for the possibility of more coronavirus variants in the future, Inglesby added.

People could expect the US government to make N95 masks, which US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognize as offering the best protection against COVID-19, "more and more available," Inglesby said.

Distributing 400 million masks would mark the largest deployment of personal protective equipment in US history, Inglesby noted.

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TransDigm Company Must Repay \$20.8M In Excess Profit Charged to Pentagon - US House Panel

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The TransDigm Group used unscrupulous tactics to make enormous profits on artificially inflated costs and must repay almost \$21 million that it overcharged the US government on spare parts for military equipment, the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform said in a release on Wednesday.

"The documents and information obtained by the Committee reveal TransDigm's unscrupulous tactics to rip off taxpayers," the release said. "TransDigm must immediately return the \$20.8 million it overcharged American taxpayers. These outrageous abuses demand swift action from Congress to prevent this behavior in the future."

The Committee was told at a hearing that the TransDigm Group made excess profits of \$22.5 million on 105 of 107 spare parts it sold to the Defense Department, the release said.

The company had also practiced aggressive tactics to boost the costs it charged for the par components it supplied, dramatically increasing its profit margins, the release also said.

"These tactics included limiting competition, concealing cost data, negotiating for contracts with fewer transparency requirements and avoiding long-term agreements that would lock in prices. Former TransDigm employees also detailed TransDigm's aggressive pricing practices and the company's negative reputation within the aerospace industry," the release added.

The TransDigm Group is a leading global producer, designer and supplier of engineered aerospace components, systems and subsystems and is based in Cleveland in the US state of Ohio.

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Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia Waiting for US Approval to Send Weapons to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia are waiting for US approval to send American-made lethal weapons to Ukraine in order to deter an alleged Russian invasion, Politico reported on Wednesday.

The three Baltic countries are prepared to transfer weapons such as anti-armor and ground-to-air missiles to Ukraine, the report said citing officials from the countries and people familiar with the matter.

Sen. Jim Risch, who is the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Politico he hopes the Biden administration will immediately approve the transfer of weapons to Ukraine.

US export license regulations require the Baltic countries to first seek approval from the State Department before transferring the weapons to Ukraine.

The three Baltic nations are members of NATO and have been in support of bolstering the alliance's presence in their countries.

The State Department declined to comment on the matter, and the White House did not respond to a request for comment, the report said.

Western countries and Kiev have recently expressed concerns about the alleged "aggressive actions" of Russia near the border with Ukraine. Kiev accuses Moscow of military build-up and preparations for an invasion of the neighboring country. However, Russia denies the allegations and reiterates that it has no intention of attacking any country. Moreover, Moscow views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russian borders.

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EU States at UNSC 'Deeply Troubled' by Israel's Evictions in Sheikh Jarrah - Irish Envoy UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - The European Union member states at the UN Security Council expressed serious concern about Israel's evictions and destruction of the home of a Palestinian family in the East Jerusalem's neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and called on both sides to avoid any unilateral actions, Irish Ambassador to the United Nations Geraldine Byrne Nason said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Israeli police said it conducted an operation to forcibly evict residents from a building at the territory reserved for a school for children with special needs in eastern Jerusalem. Several people were detained on suspicion of violating the court ruling and breaching the public order.

"We are deeply troubled by the evictions and demolitions which took place in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood," Byrne Nason said in a joint statement with France and former UN Security Council's member Estonia. "These actions undermine the prospects for peace and risk increasing violence."

Byrne Nason called on Israel to not proceed with the new plan to construct hundreds of housing units in Jerusalem as it will further undermine the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state.

"We call on both parties to refrain from unilateral actions that increase tensions and undermine the two-state solution and call upon them to build on steps taken in recent months to improve cooperation and restore a political horizon," she said.

The conflict over the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood led to an upsurge of violence and ethnic skirmishes between Jewish and Arab residents in mixed cities last spring, which further escalated into the largest military standoff between Israel and the Gaza Strip in May of 2021.

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Israel Envoy Urges for Immediate UNSC Action to Stop Iran From Advancing Nuclear Program

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan called on the UN Security Council on Wednesday to immediately act to prevent Iran from advancing its nuclear program.

"The international community has reached a crossroads. The talks in Vienna are reaching a critical stage and immediate action must be taken. The world cannot allow Iran to continue with their nuclear advancement," Erdan said.

The Israeli ambassador explained he believed Iran advancing its nuclear capabilities would represent a problem not only for the region but also for the entire world.

"This Council's new year's resolution should be to stop singling out the only vibrant democracy in the Middle East and to focus on stopping the region's greatest threats," Erdan said.

The eighth round of Vienna talks to bring Iran back to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) started on December 27. On Friday, the envoys participating in the negotiations returned to their capitals for consultations. The dialogue in Vienna is set to continue this week.

At the end of the previous round of JCPOA negotiations, the sides agreed on two drafts of the deal, which took into account Iranian interests.

JCPOA was signed in 2015 by the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, China, France, Germany, European Union and Iran. The accord stipulates restrictions on the advancement of the Iran nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, then US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from JCPOA and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran responded with a gradual retreat from its JCPOA obligations, abandoning restrictions on nuclear research, centrifuges and the level of uranium enrichment.

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Biden Discusses With US Senators Support for Ukraine, Deterrence Measures - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden met with a bipartisan group of US Senators returning from a trip to Ukraine to discuss support for Kiev and deterrence measures amid ongoing tensions with Russia, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday. "President Biden and the senators exchanged views on the best ways the United States can continue to work closely with our allies and partners in support of Ukraine, including both

ongoing diplomacy to try to resolve the current crisis and deterrence measures," Psaki said in a statement.

Biden commended the strong history of bipartisan support for Ukraine and agreed to continue working closely with Congress to impose significant consequences against Russia should it invade Ukraine, Psaki added.

The congressional delegation traveled to Kiev to meet with the Ukrainian leadership, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and reaffirm the US commitment to defend Ukraine against an alleged Russian aggression.

Senators in attendance at the briefing included Rob Portman, Jeanne Shaheen, Chris Murphy, Roger Wicker and Jim Risch, according to the statement.

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US Launching Programs for Unmanned Strategic Flying Platforms - Air Force Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is launching new programs to develop next generation unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, for both tactical attacks and long-range strategic operations, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall said on Wednesday.

"I am starting programs for uncrewed aircraft, both short range tactical level and long range strategic level," Kendall told a Center for a New American Security podcast.

The new concept was driven in considerable part by budgetary limitations on the development and acquisition of highly expensive large manned aircraft, Kendall said.

"These have got to be cheaper platforms. This opens up a whole range [of possibilities]. ...We are going to work with industry. We are going to bring people in. [The more advanced UAVs] offer a way to bring mass which we cannot afford with the larger manned platforms," Kendall said.

Air Force planners were considering among other options the concept of having a manned aircraft controlling multiple unmanned aircraft that would operate as a team, Kendall added.

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Canada, Ukraine Defense Chiefs Discuss Russia's Activity, Need to De-Escalate - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Defense Minister Anita Anand conducted a video conference with her Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov to discuss Russia's activities near the border of Ukraine, Anand's office said a statement on Wednesday.

"The ministers discussed extensively their concerns with Russia's ongoing aggressive and destabilizing actions in and around Ukraine. Both ministers condemned Russia's actions, and underscored the need for Russia to de-escalate the situation and live up to its international commitments on transparency of military activities," the statement said.

Anand updated Reznikov about her recent contacts with NATO allies and other partners, the statement said.

She underscored that the international community has to send a clear message to Russia about severe consequences of any further aggression against Ukraine, the statement added.

The West has recently accused Russia of a military build-up near the border with Ukraine and alleged that Moscow plans a military invasion. Moscow has denied the allegations and pointed to NATO's activity near its borders, saying the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

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UNICEF Verifies Over 120 Grave Violations Against Children in Sudan - Regional Director

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has confirmed more than 120 serious violations against children in Sudan since the military coup in that country last October, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Ted Chaiban said on Wednesday.

"Over 120 grave violations against children have been verified across Sudan since the military coup on 25 October last year," Chaiban said in a statement.

Chaiban also revealed that nine children were killed during demonstrations in Sudan and another 13 were injured.

"Most violations were against adolescent boys. Boys and girls as young as 12 were detained. Children were impacted as a result of frequent attacks on medical facilities," Chaiban said.

UNICEF reiterates its call on authorities in Sudan to protect children across Sudan from harm and violence at all times and children must not be a target during conflict or political events, Chaiban added.

On October 25, the Sudanese military overthrew the government and arrested many pro-government activists and supporters, ministers as well as journalists and human rights defenders. Many Sudanese nationals have since been protesting against the country's military authorities.

The United States and other Western countries have refused to recognize military transition of power. On October 26, the African Union suspended Sudan's membership in the organization.

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US Trade Commission Warns Marketers of Products Making Baseless Claims About COVID-19 Cure

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) on Wednesday sent letters to marketers in the United States warning them to stop making baseless

claims that their products and therapies can treat or cure COVID-19 and announced the FTC's intention to continue stamping out such claims this year.

"Americans are still suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic and scammers are still taking advantage of them by making false claims about cures and treatments," FTC Bureau of Consumer Protection Director Samuel Levine said in a statement. "Our efforts to stamp out those claims will continue in 2022, and any marketers not heeding our cease-and-desist demands can expect to face consequences, including civil penalties."

The warning letters from the FTC called out several products and alleged treatments for COVID-19 that had already been identified as false, including peptide therapy, herbal remedies, ivermectin and various supplements. Some companies had claimed that "imprinted filtered water," nasal irrigation, and even seaweed extract can fight the novel coronavirus.

"However, currently there is no scientific evidence that any of these products can prevent or treat COVID-19 generally or any specific variant," the statement said.

In its letters, the FTC stated that one or more of the efficacy claims made by the marketers were unsubstantiated because they are not supported by scientific evidence, and therefore violated the Federal Trade Commission Act.

"The demands order the recipients to immediately stop making all claims that their products can prevent or treat COVID-19, and to notify the Commission within 48 hours about the specific actions they have taken to address the agency's concerns," the FTC said, adding that violators were subject to penalties of up to \$43,792 per violation.

The FTC said this was the 11th set of warning letters it had issued since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. It previously sent similar health-related letters to 405 companies and individuals. The latest set was sent to companies using social media platforms to sell their products, and notices were issued to the platforms as well.

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Austin Talks to Crown Prince Al Nahyan, Condemns Terror Attack in Abu Dhabi - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and strongly condemned the terrorist attack earlier this week, the Defense Department said on Wednesday.

"On January 19, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates," the Defense Department said in a press release. "Secretary Austin strongly condemned the January 17 terrorist attack in Abu Dhabi that killed three innocent civilians and targeted civilian infrastructure."

Austin reiterated the United States' unwavering support for the security and defense of UAE against all threats, the release said.

On Monday, Abu Dhabi was hit by missiles from a drone that targeted three oil trucks at a refinery near the city's airport. Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack.

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New US Home Building Hits 9-Month High in December Despite Costlier Lumber - Commerce Dept

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - New US home construction hit nine-month highs in December as builders responded to ever-growing demand from buyers, although a near doubling of duties on imported Canadian softwood lumber will add to costs, data from the Commerce Department showed Wednesday.

US housing starts rose by 1.4% to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.702 million units last month, their highest since March, figures released by the department showed.

Economists polled by US media had expected housing starts to be at around 1.650 million for December.

"Strong data across the board for the US housing starts and building permits," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on Forex Live.

Dire housing shortages in the United States since the financial crisis of 2007/2008 and last year's coronavirus outbreak have led to a scramble among first-time home buyers, triggering record high prices.

The backlog of houses authorized for construction but not yet started rose by 1.1% to 270,000 in December, the highest on record.

Despite such demand, the outlook for home building appears cloudy after the Biden administration nearly doubled in November duties on imported Canadian softwood to 17.9%, after a study of anti-dumping and countervailing duty orders.

The previous Trump administration had initially imposed a 20% duty on Canadian softwood lumber in 2018 before reducing it to 9%. Biden, who took office a year ago, had stuck to that rate until the November review.

Prices for softwood lumber, used for home framing in the United States, soared 24.4% in December after rising 6.9% in November, according to the latest producer price data.

The selling price for a new residence in the United States itself hit record highs above \$416,000 in November.

According to the National Association of Homebuilders, the aggregate cost of home construction materials had risen almost 19% since December. Builders are expected to pass those costs on to buyers.

Compounding the problem for buyers, the Federal Reserve is expected to raise interest rates as many as four times over this year to curb inflation growing at its fastest pace in four decades.

The US Consumer Price Index, one of the inflation barometers closely watched by the central bank, grew 7% in the year to December — its most since 1982.

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US Senior Defense Official Discusses Ukraine Security With NATO Partners - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper discussed the security of Ukraine with four NATO partners, Defense Department spokesperson Anton Semelroth said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

"Department of Defense Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper participated in a virtual meeting of NATO colleagues from Canada, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom today to discuss the security situation in Ukraine," Semelroth said. "They discussed Russia's concerning military buildup on Ukraine's borders and mutually reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Semelroth also said that the defense officials agreed to continue their close coordination on the issue of Ukraine's security.

The United States has accused Russia of a troop build-up near the country's border with Ukraine and for allegedly planning an invasion. Russia has dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders while warning the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

The United States and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to discuss the Russian-proposed mutual security guarantees in Europe.

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US Senators Brief Biden on Trip to Ukraine Amid Tensions With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – A bipartisan group of US senators met with President Joe Biden on Wednesday to brief him on their trip to Kiev amid rising tensions on the Russian-Ukrainian border, Sen. Rob Portman said.

"We just got back last night from a congressional delegation trip to Ukraine. It was bipartisan led by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen and myself, Sen. [Roger] Wicker, Sen. [Kevin] Cramer. We are part of that congressional delegation and this morning we were able to attend a secure briefing by the President and his team," Portman told a joint press briefing with other members of the delegation.

Earlier this week, a bipartisan congressional delegation of senators Portman, Shaheen, Wicker, Cramer, Chris Murphy, Amy Klobuchar, and Richard Blumenthal traveled to Kiev to meet with the Ukrainian leadership, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and reaffirm the US commitment to defend the country against alleged Russian aggression.

"Just finished a meeting with @POTUS [President Biden] on our trip to Ukraine. I conveyed to him my impression that the Ukrainian people are ready to fight, but they will need clear signals that the U.S. is committed to the long fight for Ukrainian sovereignty. @POTUS gets it," Sen. Murphy said in a tweet following the meeting.

Western countries and Ukraine have accused Russia of massing troops and military equipment on its territory near the Ukrainian border, which Kiev perceives as preparations for invasion.

Moscow dismisses the allegation, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov reiterated on Wednesday that the country does not intend to invade Ukraine and is not taking any actions to undermine its security. Russia argues that it has the right to move troops within its territory.

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UN Chief Says Ethiopia Now Sees Opportunity to Resolve Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday there is now an opportunity in Ethiopia to resolve the conflict in the northern region of Tigray and urged the parties again to cease hostilities.

Guterres said that earlier in the day he held a telephone conversation with African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa Olusegun Obasanjo, who recently visited the capital of Tigray, Mekelle.

"Mr. Obasanjo briefed me about the efforts being made by the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) to move towards a resolution of the violent conflict and expressed optimism that there is now a real opportunity for a political and diplomatic resolution of the conflict," Guterres said in a statement.

However, Guterres noted, ongoing fighting in some parts of Ethiopia hinders efforts to secure peace, and undermines confidence-building measures between the parties in the war.

"Let me reiterate my call on all parties to move rapidly towards cessation of hostilities as a critical step in the right direction for peace-making," Guterres stated.

The UN chief also expressed his concern about the humanitarian situation in different parts of the east African country and called on all sides in the conflict to facilitate efforts to bring aid to people in need.

Since November 2020, Ethiopia has been gripped by internal conflict, which began when the government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and subsequently launched a counter-operation.

In December, the TPLF said that it had pulled its troops out of the provinces of Amhara and Afar, and three days later, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that the country's armed forces had completed its operation against the insurgents.

According to the UN's World Food Program, due to the conflict, 9.4 million people across Ethiopia are in need of nutritional assistance, which is now at its lowest level due to attacks on aid workers.

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RPT - US Expects to Nominate Ambassador to Ukraine 'Very Shortly' - Blinken
(Repeats to modify para 3)

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he expects that the United States' ambassador to Ukraine will be nominated very soon.

"I would anticipate that the nomination will be forthcoming very shortly," Blinken said during his visit to Kiev.

Kristina Kvien has served as Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Ukraine since January of 2020.

The position of the permanent ambassador to Ukraine has been vacant since the departure of the previous envoy, Marie Yovanovitch, in May of 2019.

Yovanovitch was removed from her post by former President Donald Trump. The dismissal came at a time when Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was investigating the then a Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden over their alleged corrupt practices in Ukraine during the Obama administration.

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US, UK Start Talks to Address Excess Steel, Aluminum Capacity - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States and United Kingdom began talks on addressing the current excess capacity in the global steel and aluminum markets, the countries said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

"United States Secretary of Commerce Gina M. Raimondo, United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai and United Kingdom Secretary of State for International Trade Anne-Marie Trevelyan today announced the start of bilateral discussions to address global steel and aluminum excess capacity, including the United States' application of tariffs on imports from the United Kingdom under Section 232 and the UK's retaliatory tariffs on certain US exports to the UK," the joint statement said.

The United States and the United Kingdom are committed to working toward an expeditious outcome that ensures the viability of their steel and aluminum industries against the challenge of global excess capacity, the joint statement said.

The officials also discussed the impact of global excess capacity, driven largely by China, on the two countries' industries, the joint statement said.

Distortions resulting from the excess capacity pose a "serious threat" to market-oriented steel and aluminum industries in the United States and the United Kingdom, the joint statement added.

Raimondo, Tai and Trevelyan will now enter into discussions on the resolution of concerns in this area, including appropriate trade measures that preserve critical industries, according to the joint statement.

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Canada Working With World Partners to Support Ukraine Against Russia - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Canada is working with its international partners to support Ukraine against a potential Russian invasion, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We're working with our international partners and colleagues to make it very, very clear that Russian aggression, further incursion into Ukraine is absolutely unacceptable," Trudeau said. "We are standing there with diplomatic responses, with sanctions, with a full press on the international stage to ensure Russia respects the people of Ukraine."

Trudeau added that he had a meeting on Tuesday with several ministers, his chief of defense staff and other officials to receive an update on their strategy for Ukraine. The Canadian Prime Minister mentioned that Foreign Minister Melanie Joly joined the meeting from Kiev following her visit with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other top officials to reiterate Canada's support for Ukraine.

Moreover, Trudeau said Canadian forces are in Ukraine to support and train Ukrainian troops as part of Operation Unifier, which dates back to 2015.

The United States has accused Russia of a troop build-up near the country's border with Ukraine and for allegedly planning an invasion. Russia has dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders while warning the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

The United States and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to address the Russian-proposed mutual security guarantees in Europe.

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Emirates Air Chief Calls US 5G Deployment Controversy 'Delinquent, Utterly Irresponsible'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The head of Emirates airline has called the controversy over the introduction of 5G mobile services near American airports "one of the most delinquent, utterly irresponsible" episodes he has witnessed in his airline career.

Sir Tim Clark told CNN that he had not been aware of the potential interference of 5G signals with critical airplane instruments from communications towers near US airports until major international carriers began scrambling to modify or cancel flights to the United States on Tuesday morning.

"I need to be as candid as I normally am, and say this is one of the most delinquent, utterly irresponsible issue subjects, call it what you like, I've seen in my aviation career because it involves organs of government, manufacturers, science, etc," Clark said.

The 5G C-Band service used by US carriers is close to frequencies used by key instruments of modern aircraft, and the Federal Aviation Administration expressed concerns that it could interfere with aviation systems such as radio altimeters.

"We were aware of a 5G issue," Sir Tim said. "We are aware that everybody is trying to get 5G rolled out; after all it's the super cool future of whatever it may be on communication and

information flow. We were not aware that the power of the antennas in the United States have been doubled compared to what's going on elsewhere. We were not aware that the antennas themselves have been put into a vertical position rather than a slight slanting position, which then taken together compromise not only the radio altimeter systems but the flight control systems on the fly by wire aircraft. So on that basis, we took that decision late last night to suspend all our services until we had clarity."

Air India, ANA, Japan Airlines, and Emirates were among international carriers that canceled some flights to the United States on Tuesday over safety concerns. The chief executives of major US passenger and cargo carriers also warned of an impending "catastrophic" aviation crisis from setting up 5G.

US mobile carriers AT&T and Verizon announced on Tuesday that they have delayed introduction of their 5G network near some airports due to airlines' concerns, and expressed frustration with aviation authorities over the matter.

President Joe Biden later thanked the two companies for prioritizing flight safety over the new technology.

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US, India Discuss Alleged Buildup of Russian Forces on Ukraine Border - State Dept.

WASHINGTON , January 19 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke over the telephone with her Indian counterpart Harsh Shringla and discussed the alleged Russian troops buildup on the border with Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

"They discussed a broad range of issues, including Russia's concerning military build-up on Ukraine's borders and regional issues," Price said. "Deputy Secretary Sherman and Foreign Secretary Shringla agreed to remain closely coordinated on shared goals and priorities and reiterated the importance of a strong US-India partnership to mitigate the COVID-19 Omicron variant's rapid advance."

The United States has accused Russia of a troop build-up near the country's border with Ukraine and for allegedly planning an invasion. Russia has dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders while warning the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

The United States and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to address the Russian-proposed mutual security guarantees in Europe.

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Biden Signs Memo Improving Cybersecurity Across US Defense, Intelligence Communities

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday signed a memorandum to bolster the cybersecurity of the US defense and intelligence communities' networks.

"This memorandum sets forth requirements for National Security Systems (NSS) that are equivalent to or exceed the cybersecurity requirements for Federal Information Systems," the memorandum said. "This memorandum establishes and clarifies additional authority and responsibilities of the Director of the National Security Agency (NSA) in connection with the National Manager responsibilities for NSS assigned to the Director of the NSA."

The memorandum requires the agencies responsible for managing the National Security Systems to improve the visibility of cybersecurity incidents and create binding directives about how to respond against cybersecurity threats.

Biden also requested in the memorandum that a summary of National Security Systems policy be created or adjustments made within 90 days that will include a time-line for implementation. The national security memorandum was sent to individuals including the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, US Attorney General and CIA Director, among others.

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Kazakh Government Has No Intention of Punishing Peaceful Protesters - Ambassador to US

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The government of Kazakhstan will not punish peaceful protesters in the wake of the recent unrest, the Kazakh ambassador to the United States, Yerzhan Ashikbayev, said on Wednesday.

"It's important to know that the government has no intention to punish peaceful protesters whatsoever," Ashikbayev said. "The authorities will definitely ensure due process, respect for human rights and transparency and the rule of law."

Ashikbayev noted, citing official statistics, that 102 individuals are currently in custody, courts have considered 8,354 administrative cases, over 3,300 individuals have been issued warnings without any penalties imposed, while 1,600 others have been fined.

In early January, mass protests swept Kazakhstan after a twofold increase in gas prices.

Despite the government's attempts to quell discontent and promises to bring prices down, protests turned violent and escalated into deadly clashes with police in several regions.

Nearly 1,000 people were injured, the United Nations said. According to the Kazakh Prosecutor General's Office, 4,578 people were injured and 225 people, including 19 security officials, were killed.

The Kazakh government said the protests had been hijacked by terrorist groups aided by foreign actors. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev invited Collective Security Treaty Organization peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control. The situation has since stabilized, and peacekeepers have departed.

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Palestine Backs Russia's Call to Convene Mideast Quartet Meeting - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - Palestine supports Russia's proposal to convene at the earliest convenience a ministerial meeting of the Quartet on the Middle East in a fresh attempt to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki told the UN Security Council on Wednesday.

"We cannot but echo the call made by Russia to convene the Quartet at the ministerial level as soon as possible to mobilize efforts to get out from the current impasse," al-Maliki said.

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US Expects to Nominate Ambassador to Ukraine 'Very Shortly' - Blinken

(Updates with background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he expects that the United States' ambassador to Ukraine will be nominated soon. "I would anticipate that the nomination will be forthcoming very shortly," Blinken said during his visit to Kiev.

The nominee, Kristina Kvien, has served as Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Ukraine since January of 2020.

The position permanent ambassador to Ukraine has been vacant since the departure of the previous ambassador, Marie Yovanovitch, in May of 2019.

Yovanovitch was removed from her post by former President Donald Trump. The dismissal came at a time when Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was investigating the then a Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden over their alleged corrupt practices in Ukraine during the Obama administration.

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Biden Administration to Invest \$14Bln to Strengthen US Supply Chain - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is announcing an investment of more than \$14 billion to strengthen the US supply chain network and the defenses against climate change, the White House said on Wednesday.

"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing that it will invest more than \$14 billion of this funding in fiscal year 2022 for over 500 projects across 52 states and territories," the White House said in a fact sheet. "These key projects will strengthen the nation's supply chain, provide

significant new economic opportunities nationwide and bolster our defenses against climate change.”

Through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Biden administration will make what it calls the single largest investment on the Everglades, while the US Army Corps of Engineers will direct \$1.1 billion to help protect, preserve and restore critical ecosystems and water supplies elsewhere.

The Everglades is the source of drinking water for eight million residents of Florida and a key element of that state’s \$90 billion tourist industry as well as a shelter for endangered animals, flora and fauna.

A key element in the Biden administration’s efforts are investments that add to the so-called Justice40 commitment, which stipulates that 40 percent of the overall benefits from US federal government investments to mitigate climate change and implement clean energy goes to build economies in communities most affected by environmental injustice.

The federal government will invest more than \$5.7 billion in Fiscal Year 2022 through its Disaster Relief and Supplemental Appropriations Act to strengthen disaster mitigation and the recovery efforts in communities still recovering from extreme weather events, the White House said.

The money will help residents to better protect their homes and businesses and reduce the effects of climate change, the White House added.

Some \$3.3 billion is allocated to New York, New Jersey, Louisiana and Pennsylvania, where major disasters were declared because of the devastation caused by Hurricane Ida, according to the White House.