

1/21/22 Friday

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Spectators Barred From Beijing Torch Relay Due to 'Complicated, Severe' Covid Outbreak Before Games
By - Morgan Artyukhina

With the 2022 Winter Olympic Games just two weeks away, China is rushing to keep a lid on its small COVID-19 outbreak. Not only are thousands of athletes coming to Beijing, but hundreds of millions will be visiting family for the Spring Festival three days before the games begin.

As planned, the typically globe-spanning torch relay will be extremely limited for this year's Olympic games, kept to just three days and the city of Beijing and the surrounding Hebei Province. However, officials from the games' organizing committee said on Friday that even those relays would be closed to spectators.

"The torch relay of the Beijing Winter Olympics will be held in Beijing, Yanqing and Zhangjiakou from February 2 to 4, including 11 closed relay areas outside the closed loop and one independent relay area inside the closed loop," Xu Zhijun, secretary-general of the Beijing Winter Olympics Organizing Committee, [told reporters](#).

"We have formulated strict remote monitoring, health monitoring, vaccine injection, nucleic acid testing and other detailed and specific regulations, which will be implemented in accordance with our pandemic prevention regulations 14 days before the torch relay starts," he added. Yang Harbin, deputy director of Beijing's Municipal Bureau of Sports, said their goal was to "prioritize safety."

"Taking into account factors such as epidemic prevention and control, Olympic event preparations, and winter fire prevention, the torch relay and ceremonial activities will be arranged in safe and controllable closed venues. The venues will not occupy public roads, which avoids disruption to local production and life and the operation of the event organization."

Beijing's games are the second to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic, following Tokyo's Summer Games that were originally scheduled for 2020, but were postponed until July 2021.

The torch had only begun its journey from Olympia, Greece, in March 2020 when the virus rapidly spread around the globe, resulting in its being kept on display in Tokyo for several months and resuming its original schedule around Japan's provinces 364 days later than planned.

The torch for the Beijing games [was lit in Olympia](#) last October as well, but it only traveled a short distance in Greece before heading to Beijing, where it's been kept since.

The Olympic organizing committee also announced earlier this week that tickets [would not be sold](#) to any of the games in order to limit Covid spread, but some spectators would still be present, having received their tickets via a private distribution process.

Zero Covid Versus Spring Festival

China has struggled since the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Hubei in December 2019 to contain the virus' spread, successfully limiting its total cases over the past two years to just 122,500 and

deaths to just 4,636, according to a count by the [New York Times](#). However, the Delta and Omicron variants have created new stresses in the socialist country's "Zero Covid" policy, with cities of tens of millions having to be tested and locked down, sometimes for weeks, like [Shaanxi's capital of Xi'an](#).

The policy has been very successful, with the [National Health Commission](#) reporting just 73 new cases on Friday, 50 of which were "imported" from abroad. Just a few cases can potentially infect thousands without strict safety measures, but now, the Chinese government faces a new pressure: the Spring Festival is coming up on February 1, when it's typical to visit family and friends.

Pang Xinghuo, deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, [explained Friday](#) that the city was battling "clusters from two different sources. The first one was infected by international mail. There are five local cases of Omicron and they are all in Haidian district."

"Another cluster was infected by the cold chain, and they are Delta cases. There are 13 symptomatic cases and five asymptomatic cases. They are found in Chaoyang, Fengtai, and Fangshan districts," she said, describing the situation as "complicated and severe."

Spring Festival, or Chinese Lunar New Year, begins on February 1, just three days before the Beijing Games are set to begin. However, the travel season began earlier this week, with about 1.18 billion passenger trips expected over the next 40 days to ring in the Year of the Tiger. In recent weeks, Chinese health authorities have limited transit into and out of cities under lockdown, but some of those rules will be relaxed for the next few weeks. In response, extensive testing facilities have been set up at the country's many high-speed rail stations, including free and mandatory nucleic acid testing services for passengers from medium- and high-risk areas, according to [Xinhua News Agency](#).

Other measures include new self-service ticket verification machines and cleaning robots to disinfect public areas.

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US Navy Bares Teeth With Rare Publication of Cruise Missile Submarine's Cyprus Stopover
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Pentagon has let slip the location of an attack submarine likely to be used in the event of a shooting war, and it's within range of the eastern Ukrainian border with Russia, where the US has claimed for months a Russian invasion is likely.

In a bit of gunboat diplomacy, the US Navy revealed on Twitter on Wednesday that the USS Georgia had made a "brief personnel stop" in western Cyprus a few days earlier. Since such a situation certainly doesn't need to be put on blast for the world to see, the only conclusion is that the Navy intended to publicize that this warship is there, now.

The USS Georgia is one of four Ohio-class submarines converted by the Navy into cruise missile submarines. Its ballistic missile tubes that once carried nuclear-tipped Trident missiles have been switched out for smaller ones used to hold cruise missiles, dramatically increasing

the number of projectiles it can carry from 24 ballistic missiles to 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Two of the former ballistic missile slots were set aside, however, to create special tubes for deploying US Navy SEALs special forces teams.

About 1,000 miles to the north - incidentally, the maximum range of a Tomahawk missile - is Ukraine's eastern border, where the US has postured for months as standing up to a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the unlikely event the United States directly intervened in such a conflict, a warship like the Georgia would be the likely preferred method of doing so: many times in the past, from Afghanistan to Syria, the US has chosen volleys of cruise missiles for its "surgical strikes" instead of risking US service members.

Moscow has said it has no plans to attack Ukraine and that its troop deployments in southern Russia are part of normal drills; however, Russian President Vladimir Putin has noted that the NATO alliance has threatened to cross Russian red lines in the region, which include expanding its membership further east, and to position offensive weapons in Ukraine. However, US President Joe Biden hasn't said US forces would directly attack Russian troops, only that Russia would be met with [punishing sanctions](#) and that Washington would step up its [defensive aid to Kiev](#).

Earlier on Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey [Lavrov met with](#) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Geneva, Switzerland, in an effort to defuse tensions. No breakthroughs came from the talks, which were described as a voicing of opinions rather than negotiations, but both sides are on "a clear path to understanding," according to Blinken.

The Navy has done this before, too: in August 2020, [the service publicized](#) a stop by the attack submarine USS Seawolf at Norway's northern port of Tromsø, which sits at the southwestern edge of the Barents Sea. It was the first time in five years the Navy published a photo of one of its three Seawolf-class boats; further, the Seawolf is normally deployed in the Pacific and is specifically designed to hunt other submarines underneath sea ice. The incident came just before large Russian Navy drills were scheduled in the Barents Sea.

In October 2017, amid high tensions in Korea in which then-US President Donald Trump threatened the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with "fire and fury like the world has never seen," the USS Michigan, another converted Ohio-class like the Georgia, made a [very public port call](#) in the South Korean city of Busan.

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Bereft of Paid Sick Leave, Millions of Ill Americans Are Forced to Work With COVID-19 - Report By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US is almost unique among industrialized nations in refusing its population paid days off for when they're sick - a condition US President Joe Biden's foundered social spending bill would have addressed.

In the last 10 days, [7.6 million new COVID-19 cases](#) have been detected in the United States. Before mid-December, that's the time period for which the US Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC) would have required Americans to quarantine once they test positive for COVID-19 - a practice intended to limit the spread of the highly contagious virus. However, a [sudden policy change](#) on December 27 halved that time, with Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of Biden's coronavirus response team, [telling CNN](#) that "We want to get people back to their jobs, particularly those with essential jobs, to keep our society running smoothly." Having no national paid leave program, Americans have long worked sick despite better wisdom telling them to stay home in bed. However, the shift in US health policy motivated two of the country's largest employers - [Walmart and Amazon](#) - to follow suit and [halve the paid sick leave](#) they offered their employees from two weeks to just one.

According to [surveys conducted](#) by research group The Shift Project, between September and November, roughly 65% of surveyed workers who reported being sick for any reason - not just COVID-19 - went to work despite their illness. When asked why, 55% said they couldn't sacrifice the paycheck and 30% said they didn't have paid sick leave.

Indeed, according to the US [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 41% of services sector employees and 23% of all private sector workers have no paid sick leave at all.

[A 2019 survey](#) by the multinational bank Charles Schwab found that 59% of Americans were one paycheck away from homelessness, and 44% carry a credit card balance - powerful motivators for workers to keep working.

Still, a record number of Americans reported not working in recent weeks due to being sick with COVID-19 or caring for someone who was. According to data from the [Census Bureau](#), between December 29 and January 10, roughly 8.8 million workers stayed home, further exacerbating an already sharp labor shortage in what some media outlets began calling "[the great American sickout](#)." The numbers only hint at how many went to work sick in that period. "Unfortunately, the biggest issue about omicron is it's no longer just fear of contagion and aversion to in-person activity, but it's actually causing acute labor shortages from the sheer number of people who are out sick," Diane Swonk, an economist at accounting firm Grant Thornton, told the [Washington Post](#) on Thursday.

Protection Averted

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, the US and most other countries initiated massive social lockdowns on [the model of China's response](#) to the outbreak in Wuhan.

However, their capitalist systems were unable to withstand the interruption in production and their governments were unwilling to provide the extensive social support for weeks on end that the Chinese method found necessary to totally interrupt the virus' spread. As the US economy saw its biggest drop since the Great Depression, millions lost their jobs and the US leadership committed itself to never repeating the experience, meaning workers would have to keep working through every wave of the pandemic that followed.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, passed in March 2020, provided funding for COVID-19 testing, food stamps, and most importantly 14 days of paid sick leave for all US workers via a tax credit for their employers - but also dependent on the employer accepting it. By October of that year, the provision was found to have definitely "[helped flatten the curve](#)." a phrase at the time used to mean it had limited the number of new cases.

The tax break expired at the end of 2020, [but was extended](#) until September 30, 2021, by the same law that extended many other similar pandemic-era protections: the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). However, like [those other programs](#), the new Biden administration [allowed](#)

[them to expire](#), depriving millions of American workers of essential protections from the economic consequences of the pandemic even as the Delta variant, and now the Omicron variant, swept across the country.

The Build Back Better Act, Biden's massive social spending bill that was an agglomeration of several much larger proposals made earlier in 2021, [included 4 weeks](#) of annual federal paid family and medical leave for workers in the \$1.75 trillion form it passed the House in mid-November. However, unable to woo the right-wing members of his own party in the Senate, [Biden's bill has foundered](#) and now seems unlikely to be revived.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky has defended her agency's decision to halve quarantine times, [telling the Boston Globe](#) on Wednesday that it was based on the Food and Drug Administration's guidance that rapid tests are best used "as a qualitative test, not a quantitative test."

While seeming to admit the decision was a mistake, the CDC chief added that "it's easy to criticize what's there - it's not obvious to provide the alternative."

"We're making decisions in imperfect times, sometimes without all the data that we would like to make them," she said. "If we waited for all the data we wanted on Omicron, the surge would have passed."

"When there's a public health crisis, the public health agency is partly responsible," Walensky added. "The CDC alone can't fix this public health crisis."

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Texas Man Arrested for Allegedly Issuing Death Threats to Georgia State Election Workers
By - Evan Craighead

Election and government officials in Georgia received an influx of threatening messages after then-US President Donald Trump slammed Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (R), the state's top election official, as an "enemy of the people" for rejecting false claims of widespread voter fraud and not contesting the 2020 presidential results.

Chad Stark, a 54-year-old resident of Leander, Texas, was arrested by federal agents on Friday, accused of issuing threatening election-related messages to Georgia state government officials on January 5, 2021—a day before the deadly US Capitol riot.

Stark was scheduled to make a same-day appearance at a federal courthouse in Austin, Texas. The Texas resident, [formally charged with one count of 'communicating interstate threats.'](#) is at the center of the first criminal case to be brought by the US Department of Justice's Election Threats Task Force.

Active since June 2021, the DoJ election task force has been communicating with state and local law enforcement, as well as the election community to assess allegations of threats against election workers, according to the department. The DOJ task force is partnered with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

"The Justice Department has a responsibility not only to protect the right to vote, but also to protect those who administer our voting systems from violence and illegal threats of violence," said US Attorney General Merrick Garland in a quoted statement.

The federal indictment claims that Stark on January 5, 2021, posted to Craigslist.org: "Georgia Patriots it's time to kill [Official A] the Chinese agent - \$10,000."

The bounty post called on "Georgia Patriots" to "take back" the state and "invoke our Second Amendment right" by assassinating an election worker whose name has been redacted in court filings. It also said that "American Patriots" in Georgia have to "spill blood."

If convicted, Stark faces up to five years behind bars. Sentencing will be determined by a federal district court judge.

"Election workers striving to protect our right to a fair and democratic process deserve nothing less than the utmost safety and assurance they can accomplish their roles without interference," said FBI Director Christopher Wray. "The FBI will continue to focus on our mission of protecting these individuals and the important work they do, as well as every American's right to vote."

A June survey by [New York University's nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice](#) found that one in three US election workers feel unsafe on the job, and one in six of those surveyed said they have been threatened doing their job.

"Threats of violence, smear campaigns, laws and lawsuits undermining election officials at every turn—this is what the professionals who uphold our elections and democracy are facing every day," said Lawrence Norden, director of the Center's Election Reform Program.

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THAAD Missile System Records First Successful Combat Operation Amid Houthi Strikes Targeting UAE

By - Evan Craighead

Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) is a ground-based missile defense system developed by Lockheed Martin in response to Iraqi Scud missile attacks during the 1991 Gulf War. The anti-ballistic missile system is designed to take down short-to-intermediate-range ballistic missiles via interceptors using kinetic energy, rather than warheads.

After nearly 15 years of service, THAAD was used in its first known military operation, when a defense system owned by the United Arab Emirates took out a mid-range ballistic missile targeting an Emirati oil facility near Al-Dhafra Air Base, two sources who were granted anonymity told Defense News.

The air base is currently home to American, French, and Emirati forces.

The UAE's engagement came amid a series of hostile attacks by cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones, according to Wednesday comments from Yousef al-Otaiba, UAE ambassador to the US.

"Several attacks, a combination of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and drones, targeted civilian sites in the UAE," [al-Otaiba said](#) during a virtual session sponsored by the Jewish Institute for National Security of America.

At least three individuals were killed during the attacks, as not all missiles were intercepted by UAE defenses.

The attacks resulted in the UAE's first acknowledgment of being struck by Houthi forces. The UAE completed its first live-fire exercises with Patriot missiles in 2014, nearly three years after the initial deal was inked. The UAE notably graduated its first THAAD unit classes at the Texas-based US Army post of Fort Bliss in 2015 and 2016.

The US Central Command confirmed in a Friday statement that "a potential inbound threat" forced American service members into their bunkers at Al-Dharfa Air Base. Troops were ordered to "heightened alert posture" for approximately 30 minutes.

The US statement noted that airmen were instructed to keep protective gear close for at least 24 hours.

The attacks referenced occurred on Sunday night/Monday morning, according to CENTCOM. "Everything was professional and disciplined. The 'all clear' was called at 9:27 p.m. local time," said Captain Bill Urban, CENTCOM spokesperson. "There was no mission impact."

While THAAD has been deployed to several parts of the world, including South Korea, Japan, Israel and Turkey, sales of the batteries have strained tensions in regions like the Pacific, where Beijing has opposed the purchase of the anti-missile system by Seoul.

The US-made system has also attracted the attention of those attempting to best THAAD. In 2019, [a THAAD system at Anderson Air Force Base in Guam](#) was the apparent subject of repeated incursions by unmanned aircraft.

The UAE became the first foreign customer for the Lockheed Martin-made missile defense system in the early 2010s.

Saudi Arabia also secured a controversial THAAD deal with a reported cost of nearly \$15 billion. Riyadh is slated to purchase a total of 44 THAAD batteries, including 360 missile interceptors. The US Army is presently operating below its THAAD fielding requirements, as only seven THAAD batteries are said to currently be in use. The service is expected to build an eighth battery with funding made available in the US fiscal 2021 budget.

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Powerful 6.0-Magnitude Earthquake Rattles the Philippines - USGS
By - Evan Craighead

A 6.0-magnitude earthquake was detected some 231 kilometres from the Philippine province of Sarangani on Saturday, according to the US Geological Survey. The seismic event occurred around 10:26 a.m. local time and is estimated to have a depth of 23.99 kilometres at its epicentre.

The seismic activity is not projected to trigger a tsunami threat for the region, according to the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs).

The Philippine-based group initially logged the earthquake as 6.5 on the Richter scale, with an epicenter depth of 66 kilometres.

Serious structural damage is unlikely, according to the national institution. However, aftershocks and associated damage reports are expected in the surrounding area.

Phivolcs noted that "moderate" shaking, whether indoors or outdoors, was registered in the Davao Oriental municipalities of Baganga and Caraga, as well as Maco, Davao de Oro.

Such tremors are classified as "Intensity IV", the Philippine-based group detailed.

Comparatively, weak, or "Intensity III", shaking was detected in Bislig City, the most populous city/municipality in Surigao del Sur.

The Saturday morning earthquake came less than six hours after a 5.4-magnitude quake with a depth of 119 kilometres rocked the Davao Oriental municipality and waters off the coast of Davao Occidental.

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Royally Cheap: Queen Elizabeth II Offering Minimum Wage Salary for Part-Time Holyrood Housekeeper

By - Evan Craighead

According to the Royal Household listing, Queen Elizabeth II is seeking a new 'Master of the Household's Office' for the palace of Holyrood in Scotland. The job posting noted that the role of housekeeping assistant should be viewed as a pathway to develop one's "housekeeping skills and expertise".

Hospitality workers seeking employment amid the pandemic may want to shy away from a new housekeeping role that opened up at Holyrood Palace, as Queen Elizabeth II appears to be keeping a watchful eye on every pound and pence in her vast pocket book.

"Learning from your colleagues, you'll gain the specialist professional skills needed, always aiming for the highest standards", the post reads. "And you'll welcome and take care of guests at functions and events too".

Though employees are expected to strive for the highest standards, the same cannot be said about the position's hourly wage of less than £10 (around \$13.55 USD).

The Royal Household's listing details that the housekeeping position includes a starting salary of £9.50 per hour (almost \$13 USD per hour), the new UK minimum wage.

With 20 hours of part-time work per week, a Holyrood housekeeping assistant can expect to take home around £190 (\$258 USD) per week, and nearly £760 (\$1,030 USD) per month.

A 15% employer pension contribution is also on offer.

Those undeterred by the minimum wage salary must also possess the legal right to work in the UK, and will have to pass a required vetting process to work for the Royal Family.

Interviews for the hospitality position are slated to take place on 31 January.

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Ex-WH Adviser: Melania Demanded Guests, Including Ivanka, Sign In With Usher for Residential Entry
By - Evan Craighead

Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, a former White House aide and ex-friend of the former US first lady, Melania Trump, followed up a February 2018 resignation with the 2020 publication of "Melania and Me", a tell-all on the trials and tribulations she went through while living in the presidential residence and working under then-US President Donald Trump.

During Trump's single term in the White House, the first lady of the US, Melania Trump, told her husband that all guests who enter the presidential residence must first sign in with the chief usher, according to a series of tweets issued on Saturday by Wolkoff.

"I slept in the WH Residence & was privy to Trump's 'revolving door' policy in & out of the Executive Residence. Melania told Donald everyone needed to sign in with the Chief Usher for access" to their home, tweeted Melania's ex-adviser, tagging the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol Building

She emphasised that even Ivanka Trump, Trump's eldest daughter and adviser at the time, was required to sign in with Timothy Harleth, the former rooms manager at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC.

Harleth held the position until early 2021, when US President Joe Biden assumed office.

Wolkoff's tweet comes not long after former White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham's interview with the 9-person panel.

The former press secretary told members of Congress that, in the days leading up to the deadly insurrection on 6 January 2021, then-US President Donald Trump held a series of secret meetings. She also encouraged the panel to look into White House call logs, as Trump was "paranoid of leaks" at the time.

Ivanka Trump has also been called on to provide the panel with relevant information on Trump's actions amid the 6 January riot.

In a separate Twitter thread, Wolkoff attempted to counter a number of narratives allegedly perpetuated by both the Trump White House [and The New York Times](#).

Wolkoff has repeatedly asserted that the reported \$26 million she received for planning Trump's inauguration was not pocketed, but paid out to vendors.

The thread's first tweet included a copy of her resignation letter to Melania Trump. Wolkoff argued that the work environment was toxic and that Grisham and other staffers were "horribly disrespectful".

Wolkoff, like several others who resigned from the Trump administration, published a White House-focused tell-all in the wake of her exit.

Prior to the publication of "Melania and Me: The Rise and Fall of My Friendship with the First Lady", Wolkoff reportedly failed to follow protocol, which calls for a draft copy to be issued to the US Department of Justice.

Trump's DOJ alleged in a lawsuit filing that the ex-aide breached her non-disclosure agreement. Both Wolkoff and Simon and Simon & Schuster subsidiary Gallery Books panned the suit as an attempt to block the truth from reaching the public.

The suit, which sought out compensation associated with the book, was dismissed by the US Department of Justice's Civil Division in the first few weeks of the Biden administration.

"The Department evaluated the case and concluded that dismissal without prejudice was in the best interests of the United States based on the facts and the law", a DOJ official said at the time.

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Officials Warn of Hazardous Road Conditions as Storm Dumps Snow, Ice on US Mid-Atlantic, Southeast

By - Evan Craighead

Several states in the US mid-Atlantic and southeastern regions are again dealing with hazardous winter weather, subzero temperatures, and major travel disruptions after the area was pounded by vicious snow and ice storms on Friday.

While most state- and locally-issued winter weather alerts expired by Saturday afternoon, those in the hardest-affected areas are being advised to shelter in their homes, as several portions of Interstates 85 and 95 remain treacherous following a solidification of the freezing rain.

Freezing rain poses a particular threat to roadways as liquid droplets freeze upon contact with surfaces. Sleet occurs when the droplets freeze after encountering a dense layer of freezing air near the surface.

Parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia were among the hardest hit by the wintry mix of snow, sleet, and/or freezing rain. Issues associated with the storm have been compounded by below-freezing temperatures and environments with sub-zero wind chills capable of causing frostbite if one's skin is exposed for as short as 30 minutes.

"We've suddenly seen an uptick in citizens out on the roadway, we're also seeing a spike in crashes," tweeted the Fire Department of Huntsville, North Carolina, on Friday afternoon.

"Roads are icy. Please give the sun time to work. Stay off the roadways."

Earlier this month, Virginia endured a major highway closure that impacted a 50-mile stretch of I-95 and, in some cases, stranded drivers for some 24 hours. Soon after, transportation officials revealed that responding crews were faced with downed power lines, accidents involving semi-trucks, and trees that fell due to the stress of snow and ice.

A total of three people died at the scene, and another man was taken to a hospital. Many motorists caught in traffic were forced to periodically endure below-freezing temperatures in an attempt to conserve fuel.

Glenn Youngkin, Virginia's new governor, declared a state of emergency earlier this week "to aid in the response to the impending winter weather" and provide resources to address high accumulations of snow, statewide transportation issues, and potential power outages.

Similar emergency orders were preemptively issued by South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster and North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper, who warned of associated power outages—particularly for residents in the state's southeastern counties.

"That's where a quarter-inch or more of ice is expected on trees and power lines, and that's a recipe for power outages, unfortunately," the North Carolina Governor said on Thursday.

School closures were also announced in an effort to minimize the number of those on the roads. "It's already below freezing, it's already pure freezing rain, so it looks like this is a textbook event to overperform in terms of the ice accumulation," said Accuweather Extreme Meteorologist Reed Timmer, reporting from North Carolina on Friday.

Snowfall amounted to around 6 inches (15 centimeters) in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina.

Operations at Raleigh-Durham International (RDU) Airport have been significantly impacted by the winter downpour, which coated the international airport's runways with ice and likely contributed to a Delta Air Line aircraft sliding accident on Friday.

The incoming aircraft's nose gear briefly exited the taxiway around 9 p.m. local time, according to the airport. RDU claimed the plane ultimately "landed safely and rolled into the mud while taxiing."

"We apologize to our customers for the inconvenience," said Delta, noting that the 13-person flight from Washington, DC, was operated by Endeavor Air, a regional carrier.

At least 70 flight cancellations have occurred at the North Carolina airport since Friday.

No injuries have been reported.

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Light Magnitude 4.1 Earthquake Rattles Israel - EMSC

By - Evan Craighead

Earthquake tremors were felt in Israel, northern Jordan, and southern Lebanon late Saturday night, according to several witnesses who logged their experience with the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre.

The EMSC detailed in an initial report that the late-night earthquake in the Dead Sea region was measured to have a magnitude of 4.1 at a depth of approximately two kilometers.

The event's epicenter occurred some 32 kilometers (20 miles) west of Irbid, Jordan, and just 14 kilometers (9 miles) north of Bet She'an, Israel, the international group announced.

As of this article's publication, no major damage has been reported to infrastructure within the affected areas.

The low-magnitude earthquake was briefly captured in social media footage allegedly recorded in Israel.

One witness in Tirat Carmel, some 49 kilometers (30 miles) from the event's epicenter, said that they were unable to feel the earthquake on the 14th floor of a building, "but everyone around [T]irat Carmel are reporting they felt it."

A majority of witnesses reported that the seismic event was weak, translating to 'MMIII' or less on the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale.

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Virginia Mom Threatens to Bring 'Loaded Guns' to School Over COVID-19 Mask Policy By -- Mary Manley

A Virginia mom voiced her anger at a public school board meeting Thursday, and threatened to bring "loaded guns" to the school if her children were made to wear masks. Though the CDC recommends schools to mask-up, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin has rolled back previous mask policies, stating parents have the right to choose for their children.

The Page County Public School board held a meeting in which they were to listen to views concerning COVID-19 precautions for their schools, when Amelia King of Luray stepped up to the podium and began airing grievances. Among her concerns were how she didn't have enough time to speak at previous meetings; however, at some point, she was cut off by a member of the board who informed her she had used all three minutes of her time.

[Video of the interaction](#) shows a visibly upset King then get to the point and zero in on the school's mask guidelines. "Alright- no mask mandates. My children will not come to school on Monday with a mask on, alright? That is not happening. And I will bring every single gun loaded and ready to - I will call every-"

King's remarks were promptly cut off again by a board member who said, "Mrs. King, that's three minutes. You've gone past your time. It's a policy. Thank you." Unable to finish her remarks, King responded with, "I'll see y'all on Monday."

Although King later left the event, the members of the board sat in stunned silence, with one individual heard sighing, before the next speaker came in.

The [school](#) subsequently issued a statement on the unusual events, stating, "Violence and threats are never tolerated by parents or guests of our school division." As an added measure, the school is communicating with local law enforcement, and is now taking actions to ensure an increase in police presence at Luray's schools on Monday.

While wearing masks has become a political issue in the United States, Virginia's newly inaugurated [Governor Glenn Youngkin](#) rolled back the health and safety efforts of his predecessor on his first day in office on Saturday, writing an executive order allowing parents to choose whether or not their children would wear masks to schools. The order comes in the middle of the latest spikes in COVID-19.

The CDC has repeatedly recommended that individuals wear [masks](#) to slow the spread of COVID-19. [On January](#) 13, 2021, the Old Dominion State had a 7-day average of 3,035 new cases of COVID-19. Now, exactly a year later, the state has a 7-day average of 18,782 new cases.

The school's plan for preventing the spread of COVID-19 and maintaining the health and safety of students and teachers includes wearing [masks](#), washing hands, ventilation, and contact tracing. As for tests, the policy states testing would be provided when available and "appropriate," and also stated that vaccination for eligible people, including students, is encouraged.

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'I Feel Betrayed': Sinema's Volunteers, Staffers Are Fed Up After She Derails Voting Rights Bill By - Mary Manley

On Wednesday, US Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) voted against changing the filibuster, effectively killing Democrat's most recent efforts in passing a voting rights legislation, a key priority for US President Joe Biden. For many of Sinema's staff and volunteers, it has proven to be the last straw.

Despite Biden and other Democrats' efforts to convince the black sheep of their party - Sinema and Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) - to change their stance on the Senate filibuster rule, the two Democratic senators held firm and shot down the proposal. Democrats had hoped that once done away with the filibuster, it would allow their party to pass key [voting bills](#),

"While I continue to support these bills, I will not support separate actions that worsen the underlying disease of division infecting our country," Sinema said [Thursday](#) of last week.

Maria-Elena Dunn, who canvassed and volunteered for Sinema during her campaign in 2018, recently told [VICE](#) News she was "livid" over the lawmaker's latest efforts.

"I can only call her a turncoat. I feel betrayed," she stressed.

Toni Denis, who donated \$3,000 to Sinema's campaign in 2018, says Sinema's voting for the filibuster was nothing more than a slap in the face.

"I'm crushed that she won't support doing away with the filibuster, and especially that she won't explain any of her decisions," Denis told the outlet.

Sinema's approval ratings with Democrats in Arizona first plummeted when she voted against raising the federal minimum wage. The Arizona lawmaker was one of eight members of the Senate Democratic caucus to vote down a \$15 minimum wage, which was to be included in a COVID-19 relief package.

At the time, a video showed the senator giving a somewhat jovial [thumbsdown](#) to the minimum wage initiative during a roll call vote inside the congressional chamber. In response to that particular incident, Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) [tweeted](#), "No one should ever be this happy to vote against uplifting people out of poverty."

Then in October 2021, support for Sinema took another nose-dive when five veterans who sat on her advisory council since 2019 resigned. After her refusal to back abolishing the filibuster, as well as her opposition to a \$3.5 trillion social [policy bill](#), the veterans then accused her of "hanging her constituents out [to dry](#)" in a scathing letter, which was acquired by The New York Times.

"You have become one of the principal obstacles to progress, answering to big donors rather than your own people," the veterans wrote. "We shouldn't have to buy representation from you, and your failure to stand by your people and see their urgent needs is alarming."

Arizona progressives spent months trying to convince Sinema to change the Senate's legislative filibuster. For now, the rule is that a 60-vote majority is required to move most legislation through the chamber. [Republicans](#) have used this rule as a way to block Democrats' bills, including those which enact or protect voter's rights.

Another supporter of Sinema who has spoken out against the senator's recent decisions is EMILY's List, a decadesold national campaign group which focuses on backing female Democrats who support abortion rights. The group spent about \$1.7 million on her last [race](#).

"We have not endorsed or contributed to Sen. Sinema since her election in 2018," The group wrote in [a statement](#). "Right now, Sen. Sinema's decision to reject the voices of allies, partners and constituents who believe the importance of voting rights outweighs that of an arcane process means she will find herself standing alone in the next election."

The group went on to clarify that they support free and fair elections as it is aligned with their pro-choice goals.

"We want to make it clear: if Sen. Sinema can not support a path forward for the passage of this legislation, we believe she undermines the foundations of our democracy, her own path to victory and also the mission of EMILY's List, and we will be unable to endorse her moving forward," they continued.

Now, Rep. Ruben [Gallego](#) (D-AZ) has been having his phone ring with requests from Democrats to run against Sinema in 2024 - among those supporters are Sinema's own Senate Democratic colleagues. Gallego has declined to tell CNN which senators in particular were hoping to back him in a primary challenge, but said it was "more than one."

It's not common for senators to back primary opposition against someone from their own party, but with tension breaking over Sinema's filibuster decision, it may come as no surprise that Gallego is getting a preview of potential support.

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World's Most Popular Shooter Game 'Call of Duty' May Scale Back Release Schedule
By - Nevin Brown

Top executives at Activision are reportedly considering a move away from yearly releases of the "Call of Duty" video game franchise. The best-selling first-person shooter game in history has released a title every year since 2005, although popularity and sales have lagged for recent installments.

The news comes following [Microsoft's announced acquisition of Activision Blizzard](#). While there is, as yet, no decision to slow the pace of release for the "Call of Duty" franchise, [according to a report from Bloomberg](#), the move looks to be gaining steam.

Activision Blizzard's \$69 billion purchase by Microsoft has reportedly spurred employees at the company to embrace changes to the status quo. "Call of Duty", the best-selling first-person shooter franchise and third best-selling video game franchise, had released 19 games and over a dozen handheld, mobile, and console titles since the original "Call of Duty" was released in 2003.

The series, originally centered on World War II campaigns, has branched out to include the popular "Modern Warfare" series, the "Black Ops" series, and other standalone games. [The series commercially peaked](#) in 2010, with the release of "Call of Duty: Black Ops". The title has sold an estimated 30.72 million copies since its release, making it one of the best-selling games in history.

"Call of Duty: Vanguard", however, released in November 2021, saw lower sales and received a tepid response. The title experienced 36% lower sales in the United Kingdom, compared to the previous year's release and was the [worst launch for the franchise in 14 years](#).

Nonetheless, the popularity of the franchise saw "Call of Duty: Vanguard", become within two months of its 2021 release [the second best-selling game of](#) the year behind "Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War".

While Activision owns the intellectual property rights to the series, game developers are tasked with creating individual titles. As the series has continued to produce new titles, year after year, fans and critics have complained of redundancies.

The demand to produce a new game in such a short period of time reportedly led to grueling hours and widespread overtime for developers. Most console games take three to five years to complete.

If Activision does scale back its "Call of Duty" production it would not be expected to take effect immediately, as a new title is set for release this year.

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The Ongoing Beef Between Elizabeth Warren & Elon Musk
By - Nevin Brown

In an interview on New York Times podcast Sway, Democratic Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren responded to Elon Musk's personal attacks following December 2021 back and forth between the two on Twitter.

Elizabeth Warren has never been shy about taking on the wealthiest Americans. Whether it's pushing a progressive tax code or trying to break up massive corporations, Warren has been one of the loudest political voices pushing the Democrats' progressive economic agenda. Which makes it unsurprising that Warren and Elon Musk, Forbes wealthiest human and CEO of Tesla and Space-X, are engaged in a months-long back-and-forth.

On Thursday, Warren reignited the pair's beef when she responded to disparaging comments Musk made about her. Warren wasn't satisfied with setting the record straight and threw some barbs back Musk's way, calling him, "thin-skinned," and mocking his record tax bill.

How the Elon Musk Elizabeth Warren Spat Started

In December 2021, Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and currently the world's richest man, was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year.

On December 13, 2021, Elizabeth Warren poured cold water on Musk's parade. Through Twitter, she called out Musk for dodging federal income taxes.

Elon Musk responded with a tweet the next day with a personal attack against Warren.

The spat didn't end there. On December 21, Musk, in an interview with the Babylon Bee, claimed that Warren, "doesn't pay taxes," and joked, "if you could by irony, [Elizabeth Warren] would be dead."

Warren, [in her interview with Sway](#), responded to both of Musk's attacks.

When asked about their back-and-forth on Twitter, Warren said, "Well, can we just start with the fact that, baby, this isn't random. What I care about is that Elon Musk paid— you want to know how much he paid in taxes in 2018? One of the richest guys in the whole world— how much did he pay in taxes, federal income taxes? Answer, zero. Zero. None. Every nurse who paid taxes, every firefighter who paid taxes, paid more than Elon Musk. That's a broken taxation system." The host of Sway, Kara Swisher, brought up Elon Musk's reported 2021 \$11 billion tax bill. Warren responded, "This year, he will pay a lot because chose to sell a big, big bunch of his stock. But you know, I just want to point out, pretty much everybody in America would be a little richer today or a lot richer today if they had not had to pay any federal income taxes for years and years and years. So to say now that he's in this position where he can sell off a slice of his business and make a bazillion dollars and because he chose to take that action he will pay taxes this year— I'm sorry, I just don't think that wins him the Good Tax-Paying Citizen of the Year Award."

When Warren was asked about Musk referring to her as 'Senator Karen', with the name 'Karen' a popular slang term to denote a white woman who is demanding and entitled, she dove into her perception of Musk's strategy.

"What he's hoping for is that this is personal," Warren noted, adding that, "it's about trying to make it personal instead of talking about what's wrong with the tax system. Because I really— I do want to have that conversation. What is wrong with a tax system that literally the richest people in this country, the billionaires, can get by paying zero? We saw this. We actually saw their tax returns and have learned that they can now structure their lives once they have amassed a big enough fortune to never have to pay the taxes that nurses and firefighters and waitresses are paying, and I think that's wrong."

Later in the interview, Warren talked about her consistent portrayal in the press as a 'schoolmarm' or a 'Karen.'

"You know, I just assume it's the same as anybody who doesn't like someone who challenges them. And they look for what they think is a vulnerability. And somehow, they think that's my vulnerability. [...] I don't actually spend a lot of time worrying about it. I am not a thin-skinned billionaire," she noted.

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Shooting at Mexican Resort Kills Two People, Leaves One Other Injured
By - Nevin Brown

Three Canadian tourists at a resort in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, were shot when an unidentified gunman opened fire at the Hotel Xcaret. Two victims are dead, and one is injured. The severity of their injuries is unknown.

According to authorities, the shooting occurred on Friday afternoon when a gunman carrying a handgun walked onto the hotel property. Pictures of the crime scene indicate the shooting was conducted in a dining area.

All three victims were brought to the hospital. One died in the ambulance and another succumbed to their wounds at the hospital. The status of the third victim remains unknown. Warning Graphic Content: [Graphic unconfirmed video footage of the scene](#) shows resort goers attempting to help the victims, who are seen lying on the ground near pools of blood. Lucio Hernández Gutiérrez, the Secretary of Public Security for the State of Quintana Roo, said the shooter fled the scene and believes he was a guest of the hotel. Hernández Gutiérrez said there is, "A large police operation has been deployed to capture the suspect," and added, "Information leading to his arrest will be deeply appreciated." It is unclear what prompted the shooting. The identities of the shooting victims have not been released. Playa del Carmen is a coastal city on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. The primary economic driver in the city is tourism.

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Billionaire Entrepreneur Mark Cuban Launches Affordable Online Pharmacy of Generic Drugs
By - Nevin Brown

On Thursday, billionaire investor Mark Cuban launched an online pharmacy, The Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drugs Company (MCCPDC), to provide consumers with affordable generic drugs. The online pharmacy will offer over 100 generic drugs and has pledged to be "radically transparent" in its negotiations with drug companies.

Alex Oshmyansky, the CEO of MCCPDC, summed up the company's mission. "We will do whatever it takes to get affordable pharmaceuticals to patients." He added, "The markup on potentially lifesaving drugs that people depend on is a problem that can't be ignored. It is imperative that we take action and help expand access to these medications for those who need them most."

The company is a registered pharmaceutical wholesaler that acts to cut out distributors, the so-called middle man, between consumers and drug manufacturers. [According to a press release](#), MCCPDC drug prices to purchasers will be 15% over the manufacturer selling price, plus what is described as a small 'pharmacist fee'.

The cost savings advertised by MDDPDC for some drugs can be staggering. The current retail price set by medical insurance companies and distributors for Imatinib, a leukemia treatment, is \$9,657 a month. With common vouchers, it can be bought for \$120 a month. MCCPDC will sell the drug for \$47 a month.

To keep prices low, the company will only accept cash. Individuals cannot use insurance to purchase drugs and must request a prescription from their provider to place an order. MCCPDC was hatched after Alex Oshmyansky sent Cuban a cold-call email about starting a low-cost generic drug company. By January 2021 the company was launched, and Cuban, wanting to "show capitalism can be compassionate and to send the message I am all in," put his name on the company.

By the end of the year, MCCPDC expects to have completed construction on a 22,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Texas. Cuban's financial investment in the company has not been made public.

Cuban has an estimated net worth of \$4.5 billion, is the owner of NBA franchise the Dallas Mavericks, and has been a regular investor on the hit reality television show Shark Tank.

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Majority of Americans View Domestic Terrorism and Right-Wing Militias as a Threat - Poll
By - Nevin Brown

A Economist/YouGov poll has found that over a third of Americans believe that domestic terrorism and right-wing militias pose an immediate and serious threat to the United States and a majority of Americans believe they pose somewhat of a serious threat.

[According to the poll](#), 65% of Americans believe that domestic terrorism poses an immediate and serious threat or a somewhat serious threat to the US. Only 8% of respondents said they present no threat at all.

Americans are less concerned about right-wing militias than they are domestic terrorism; 53% of respondents view right-wing militia groups as an immediate and serious threat or a somewhat serious threat to the US. Another 17% of those polled said they present no threat.

Democrats and Biden voter concerns over right-wing militias and domestic terrorism was relatively equal. Of respondents who voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, 65% believe that right-wing militias pose a serious and an immediate threat to the US, and 60% held that same belief about domestic terrorism.

Those that voted for former US President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election and those that identify as Republican were far less concerned by right-wing militias than they were by domestic terrorism. Forty-three percent of Trump voters view right-wing militias as no threat to the US, but only 17% held that belief about domestic terrorism.

Women, Democrats, and those with college degrees are more likely to view domestic terrorism and right-wing militias as a serious threat to the United States. Individuals who identify as conservatives were far more likely to believe that domestic terrorism and right-wing militias present no threat to the US.

Socioeconomic factors and whether an individual lived in a rural, urban, or suburban setting did not appear to be a factor.

The poll, conducted between 15-18 January, surveyed 1,500 people and had a 2.8% margin for error.

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US Senator Chris Coons: Sending American Troops to Ukraine Would Be 'Sacrificing Them'
By - Nevin Brown

US Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) told Greta Van Susteren in an interview set to air on Sunday that, should Russia invade Ukraine, sending US troops to the country's defense, "would simply be sacrificing them."

"I would not support sending American troops into Ukraine in response to a Russian invasion, because frankly, I think we would simply be sacrificing them. I think the Russians would escalate dramatically," [Coons said](#).

The comments come as tensions between Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies have been exacerbated due to allegations that over 100,000 Russian troops have been amassed along the border between the two countries.

Coons explained his response to the hypothetical invasion.

"I do think that we should provide as much support as we possibly can from our NATO allies that are immediately adjacent to Ukraine," he said.

Coons, a vocal political ally of US President Joe Biden, is working to create legislation that "would provide material support to Ukraine," and believes Congress must act quickly to pass additional sanctions on Russia.

Coons came to Biden's defense over comments that the latter made during a Wednesday news conference.

"President Biden was in no way giving Vladimir Putin a green light to invade or occupy Ukraine.... In conversations directly and in-person with Putin, he's made that clear that any Russian crossing of the Ukrainian border will be responded to massively and swiftly," Coons said.

At the time, Biden said of the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine that it "depends on what [Russian President Vladimir Putin] does as to what extent we're going to be able to get total unity on the NATO front."

"I think what you're going to see is that Russia will be held accountable if it invades, and it depends on what it does," Biden added during his conference. "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and we end up having to fight about what to do and not to do."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Russian officials this week over the situation, with the Biden administration urging the use of diplomatic channels to ease the conflict.

Tensions stemming from alleged Russian aggression have been raging for months despite repeated remarks from Moscow that it has zero intention to cross into Ukraine. Russia has previously noted that it sees Western nations using said aggression claims as a pretext for NATO allies to bulk up their presence in the region, especially along Russia's borders.

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Archeologists Uncover Two Giant Sphinxes Built 3,300 Years Ago
By - Nevin Brown

A team of archeologists, while restoring the funerary complex of King Amenhotep III, uncovered two large Sphinxes built around 3,300 years ago. The discovery was made near the modern-day city of Luxor at the "Temple of Millions of Years."

The 26-foot-tall limestone statues depict King Amenhotep III as a Sphinx, a mythical creature with the body of a lion and the head of a human. Amenhotep is depicted with a royal beard and wearing a mongoose headdress and a wide necklace, [according to the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities](#).

The statues were discovered half-submerged in water by an Egyptian-German team of archeologists. Three granite busts of the goddess of war, Sekhmet, were also discovered. The goddess is often depicted as a lion and is associated with healing. She was believed to lead the pharaohs in warfare, protect them in life, and guide them to the afterlife.

The large sphinxes indicate the location of a procession road. After restoration, the sphinxes were found to have the "beloved of the god Amun-Re" written on their chest. Amun-Re was a major god and was worshiped as the creator deity.

King Amenhotep III was the ninth pharaoh of the 18th dynasty. His reign lasted close to four decades, beginning around 1390 BC. Amenhotep ruled at the height of ancient Egypt's international prestige and power. Over 250 statues of him have been identified, the most of any pharaoh.

The funerary complex for Amenhotep was built close to the Nile around the ancient Egyptian capitol of Thebes. It was destroyed by a massive earthquake in ancient times. Over the years, the desert covered the remains.

The site has been continuously excavated and restored since 1998 by archeological teams under the supervision of Egypt's tourism ministry.

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Arizona Dems Formally Censure Krysten Sinema Over Failure to 'Ensure Health of Democracy'
By - Nevin Brown

US Sen. Krysten Sinema (D-AZ) was formally censured by Arizona's Democratic Party on Saturday morning. The move is reportedly in response to Sinema's refusal to change the filibuster rule to pass the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act in the US Senate.

Raquel Teran, the chair of the Arizona Democratic Party and an Arizona state senator, [said in a statement](#). "...on the matter of the filibuster and the urgency to protect voting rights, we have been crystal clear. In the choice between an archaic legislative norm and protecting Arizonans' right to vote, we choose the latter, and we always will."

Teran added, "While we take no pleasure in this announcement, the ADP Executive Board has decided to formally censure Senator Sinema as a result of her failure to do whatever it takes to ensure the health of our democracy."

The decision to censure Sinema comes as the passage of the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act, a top priority for Democrats and US President Joe Biden, has stalled due to a refusal by Sinema and Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) to reform the filibuster and allow the bill's passage.

The Arizona Democratic Party was instrumental in Sinema's narrow victory in the state's senate race and lobbied her for months in an effort to change her stance on the filibuster so as to pass the landmark voting rights reform.

Arizona has become a ground zero in the partisan fight over voting rights. Following Donald Trump's defeat in the state to Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election, Republicans at the state level began passing restrictive voting legislation.

The Arizona Democratic Party, in a statement to censure Sinema, made it clear that voting rights are of the utmost importance to their platform.

"This should not be a partisan issue -- the duty to protect our most fundamental right to vote is one that we all share," said Teran.

Democrats in Arizona are fundraising and organizing to support a challenger to Sinema in 2024. Sinema also recently lost the endorsement of Emily's List, a key political organization that helps fund campaigns.

Sinema was only narrowly elected to the US Senate and now faces significant opposition from within her own party. She is up for reelection in 2024.

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German Naval Chief Resigns After Backlash Over Remarks on Putin, Crimean Peninsula
By - Nevin Brown

Kay-Achim Schönbach, a Vice-Admiral in the German Navy, has resigned after backlash over comments he made on Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Crimea Peninsula.

[The comments that led to Schönbach's resignation](#) came on a trip to India. Speaking at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Schönbach spoke about Russian President Vladimir Putin.

He believes that "What he really wants is respect," and added, "My God, giving someone respect is low cost, even no cost. ... It is easy to give him the respect he really demands — and probably also deserves."

Schönbach's next comments, pertaining to Ukrainian-Russian relations, created a diplomatic incident.

"The Crimea Peninsula is gone: It will never come back — this is a fact," said Schönbach.

The statement is in sharp contrast to the stance taken by the European Union and the United States and their allies. Their official stance is Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimea Peninsula was unacceptable and must be reversed.

The comments prompted Ukraine's Foreign Ministry to summon Anka Feldhusen, Germany's ambassador to Ukraine, to stress "the categorical unacceptability" of his comments.

On Saturday, the Defense Ministry in Berlin also distanced itself from Schönbach's remarks. Schönbach took to Twitter to apologize for his statements. He said that he had been asked the question without prior warning and that his comments were his personal opinion and not the official position of the German military.

The comments came at a poor time. Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have become intense as Ukraine and its allies allege that Russia has amassed 100,000 troops along the Russian-Ukrainian border.

Germany and Ukraine have also seen their relationship become strained as Germany has refused to provide weapons to Ukraine.

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Jan. 6 Panel Has Questioned Trump AG Bill Barr & Pentagon Officials, Chairman Thompson Reveals

By - Evan Craighead

On Friday, Politico released a December 2020 draft executive order prepared for then-US President Donald Trump a month after the presidential election. If it had been issued, the directive authorized the military to seize voting machines, and the appointment of a Special Counsel to head related criminal and civil proceedings.

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), chairman of the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol, revealed on Sunday that the 9-member congressional panel has held several conversations with former US Attorney General Bill Barr, and a number of Pentagon officials.

"To be honest with you, we've had conversations with the former attorney general already," Thompson told CBS' "Face the Nation" host Margaret Brennan, referring to Barr. "We have talked to Department of Defense individuals. We are concerned that our military was part of this big lie on promoting that the election was false."

The panel intends to hold additional talks with Barr regarding reports about [a draft executive order](#) that would have called on US National Guard troops to seize voting machines in several battleground states, including Michigan.

If issued, the order would have granted the US Defense Secretary the authority to "seize, collect, retain and analyze all machines, equipment, electronically stored information, and material records required for retention under" US election records laws.

"If you are using the military to potentially seize voting machines, even though it's a discussion, the public needs to know," said Thompson.

The draft also authorized "the appointment of a Special Counsel to oversee this operation and institute all criminal and civil proceedings as appropriate based on the evidence collected and provided all resources necessary to carry out [the] duties consistent with federal laws and the Constitution."

The directive was said to have been drafted by an unidentified source and was not signed by Trump.

The public release of the draft came alongside a Select Committee statement confirming that the 9-member panel received the last of a number of documents that had been previously obscured.

According to Thompson, the panel is casting a wide net in an attempt to get "all the facts and circumstances" surrounding the deadly January 6, 2020, storming of the US Capitol building. Trump ally and lawyer Rudy Giuliani "is clearly" a key player in the probe, Thompson said. Earlier this week, the panel issued a subpoena demanding Giuliani hand over relevant documents and appear for a deposition on February 8.

Ivanka Trump, the former president's eldest daughter and adviser, has also been asked to voluntarily cooperate with the investigation.

"A number of items attributed to what she's been saying and so we asked her to come in voluntarily and give us the benefit of what she knows," he said, highlighting a February 3 deadline for Ivanka Trump's interview.

Trump and several other Republican leaders have labeled the House Select Committee's investigation as unconstitutional, political, and a personal attack.

"People are entitled to Freedom of Speech, and perhaps there has been no time in our Country's history where Freedom of Speech has been so totally violated," asserted the former US president, who has consistently repeated his baseless claims of election fraud. "They don't want to talk about election results because they know they can't win."

Public hearings are scheduled for the spring.

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Daddy's Favourite: Trump Would Let Don Jr. Go to Prison Before Ivanka, Ex-Fixer Michael Cohen Claims

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this month, NY Attorney General Letitia James issued subpoenas to former US President Donald Trump and his two eldest children, Donald Trump, Jr. and Ivanka Trump, as part of an ongoing civil tax fraud investigation into the Trump Organisation. The AG claims to have uncovered "significant evidence" of fraudulent dealings.

Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer and fixer, told MSNBC on Saturday that there is "not a chance" Trump would throw himself on the line for Ivanka and Don Jr. The NY AG's office has

filed a motion to compel the trio to respond to subpoenas requiring separate sworn testimonies as part of a probe examining the Trump Organisation's valuations and transactions.

"Donald cares only about Donald, more than he would care about his children", said Cohen.

As for Ivanka and Don Jr., Cohen believes the chances they cooperate with the probe are "slim to none".

Cohen, 55, was disbarred and served three years in prison after pleading guilty to eight criminal counts, including five counts of tax evasion. Cohen's crimes were committed while he was retained as Trump's personal attorney.

The New York state legal action is reportedly designed to advance a civil investigation into whether the Trump Organisation committed fraud while reporting the valuation of certain properties to tax authorities and banks.

"For more than two years, the Trump Organisation has used delay tactics and litigation in an attempt to thwart a legitimate investigation into its financial dealings", the NY AG noted in a news release.

"You may recall that there was the district attorney's case here for Trump Soho where it was either Don or Ivanka was in very big trouble as a result of lying about the number of units that had been sold", Cohen recounted to MSNBC.

The ex-lawyer said that Trump explicitly told him something to the effect of "if one or the other has to go to prison, make sure that it's Don because Don would be able to handle it".

Ivanka and Don Jr. notoriously avoided criminal indictments from the Manhattan DA's office in 2012, after long-time Trump attorney Marc Kasowitz contributed over \$50,000 to Manhattan DA Cyrus Vance Jr.'s re-election campaign.

In 2017, a joint probe conducted by ProPublica, WNYC, and The New Yorker found that the Manhattan DA's fraud investigation was dropped some months after the Trump legal team reached a settlement in which they agreed to return 90% of the disgruntled Trump SoHo buyers' deposits, as well as their legal fees.

Vance maintains that his decision was ethical.

"I did not at the time believe beyond a reasonable doubt that a crime had been committed", Vance claimed at the time. "I had to make a call and I made the call, and I think I made the right call".

In an unusual move, the plaintiffs agreed to not cooperate with prosecutors in the future, unless subpoenaed.

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Videos: UAE Air Defences Thwart Two Ballistic Missiles Targeting Abu Dhabi

By - Evan Craighead

Three individuals were killed in Abu Dhabi last week after the Houthi faction launched a series of hostile attacks using cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones targeting an Emirati oil facility near the Al-Dhafra Air Base. The attack saw the first use of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system. Not all rockets were intercepted.

Air defence systems in the United Arab Emirates capital of Abu Dhabi were activated after again detecting incoming hostile projectiles early Monday morning.

The UAE Defence Ministry has confirmed the thwarting of two ballistic missiles targeting the UAE capital city. No casualties have been reported.

Footage, reportedly from the scene, showed air defence systems intercepting enemy targets. At least four loud explosions [were heard by witnesses in the city](#). At least one of the targets engaged by the Patriot Air Defence network is believed to have been a UAV equipped with an improvised explosive device.

Air traffic has been temporarily suspended in the surrounding area.

Last week's deadly strike used a variety of missiles, as well as drones. The latter prompted the UAE's Interior Ministry to [announce the mandated grounding of all commercial drones and light sport aircraft](#).

The ministry warned that those found in violation of the order will face "legal liabilities" that include up to three years behind bars and fines of up to the equivalent of \$27,000, per the Khaleej Times. Certain exemptions will be granted on a case-by-case basis, particularly for companies.

Yemen's armed political Houthi faction claimed responsibility for the early January attack targeting the Abu Dhabi airport and an oil refinery in the district of Musaffah. The group confirmed its deployment of at least five ballistic missiles and several drones.

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'It's Very Suspicious': US Senator Claims Secret Service is Covering for Hunter Biden
By - Nevin Brown

Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) wants answers on Hunter Biden's travel while his father, Joe Biden, was vice president. The senator says there is a lack of documentation on his travel in the years 2010, 2011, and 2013, leading the GOP lawmaker to accuse the Secret Service of covering for the younger Biden.

[In an interview on "Fox and Friends"](#), Grassley observed that, "There's three years we don't have any information for".

"And then in regard to where we did get the information, it was so heavily redacted that it was hard to make sense out of it", he added.

The information gap led some Republican senators to compose a letter to the director of the Secret Service, James Murray, over a lack of transparency.

Grassley believes that the oversight powers granted to Congress in the US Constitution should prevent documents from being redacted.

"It's just like pulling teeth to get answers from the executive branch, particularly on this subject", he said.

Hunter Biden's proximity to his father, US President Joe Biden, while the latter was vice president has dragged him into Grassley's circle of suspicion.

"We know that [Hunter Biden] travelled sometimes in an airplane with his father. I can't make any accusations against the president of the United States, but I think we have a right to know what the son was doing in those instances", he said.

When the Iowa senator was asked if he thought that the Secret Service was covering for Hunter Biden, he demurred from asserting it as truth.

"At this point, you can't draw any other conclusions", Grassley suggested, adding, "It's very suspicious".

The lack of media attention on the subject appeared to trouble the Republican as he said that the press needs to act like "policemen" and hold politicians accountable. He cited the importance of the First Amendment in the matter.

"That's what the First Amendment, freedom of speech and press, is all about – to make sure that government doesn't interfere".

Hunter Biden's business dealings in China, Ukraine, and globally earlier prompted a federal investigation. While his father was vice president, the younger [Biden reportedly earned a \\$10 million a year fee from a Chinese billionaire](#) for introductions.

The US president has denied any connection to his son's business dealings.

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Biden Reportedly Eyeing Troop Deployment to Eastern Europe, Baltic States Amid Heightened Tensions

By - Nevin Brown

US President Joe Biden is weighing the deployment of troops, warships, and aircraft to NATO allies in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states amid increased tensions with Moscow over the possibility of a Russian "invasion" of Ukraine.

According to [administration officials](#), senior Pentagon officials presented Biden with a variety of options that would move US troops closer to Russia. A Saturday meeting at Camp David, the US president's Maryland-based retreat, saw Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confer with the president through video conferencing.

NATO intelligence claims that Russia has amassed over 100,000 troops along the Ukrainian-Russia border and some Western analysts are suggesting that an attack is imminent. The Kremlin has repeatedly denied the allegations and has suggested that the West is using Ukraine for its own ends.

The US Department of State ordered all families of officials at the US Embassy in Kiev to leave the country, and has told Americans in Ukraine to find arrangements to leave the country as soon as possible. COVID-19 and a potential Russian military engagement were the cited reasons.

One reported option would see between 1,000 to 5,000 troops shifted closer to the Russian border, with the ability to dramatically increase the US military presence should NATO deem it necessary.

A ramp-up of the US military presence in its NATO allies closest to Russia would represent a shift away from the administration's previous approach that favoured sanctions and diplomacy. Biden is expected to make a decision as early as next week.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Russian officials earlier in the week and was given a list of Russian security concerns. Moscow would like NATO to stop its eastward expansion and not house offensive military weapons in countries on their border. The US has yet to formally respond.

If Biden were to approve the troop deployments, some would come from the United States while others would come from less vulnerable parts of Europe.

Thus far, deploying troops to Ukraine has been ruled out by the Biden administration. Ukraine is not a member of the NATO military alliance.

The situation is already causing members of the US military hierarchy to reconsider their activities with their easternmost NATO allies.

Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, said, "We need joint exercises in Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, to show Putin that we're serious", adding, "Right now, he doesn't see we're serious".

Others believe troop deployments will do little to resolve the situation.

Jim Townsend, a former top Pentagon official for Russia policy, said, "It's too little too late to deter Putin. If the Russians do invade Ukraine in a few weeks, those 5,000 should be just a down payment for a much larger US and allied force presence. Western Europe should once again be an armed camp".

The United States Air Force has been monitoring the Russia-Ukraine border with increased frequency since December 2021. Of particular interest is any indication of nuclear weapons near the border.

The US and its NATO allies have military advisers in Ukraine. Washington has indicated, should a purported invasion occur, that they would move their military advisers out of the country.

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Aaron Rodgers Slams 'Fake White House' After Biden Jokes About Player's Vaccination Status
By - Nevin Brown

Packers' quarterback Aaron Rodgers took aim at US President Joe Biden and the latter's assertion that the US is gripped by a "pandemic of the unvaccinated". Rodgers called the Biden administration a "fake White House", and questioned the trustworthiness of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in an interview with ESPN.

Aaron Rodgers did not hold back with his criticism of US President Joe Biden and his administration, questioning the latter's pandemic response and taking personal shots at his public speaking abilities.

"When the president of the United States says, 'This is a pandemic of the unvaccinated', it's because him and his constituents, which, I don't know how there are any if you watch any of his

attempts at public speaking, but I guess he got 81 million votes", [Rodgers told ESPN on Thursday](#).

"But when you say stuff like that, and then you have the CDC, which, how do you even trust them, but then they come out and talk about 75% of the COVID deaths have at least four comorbidities. And you still have this fake White House set saying that this is the pandemic of the unvaccinated, that's not helping the conversation".

The [CDC study](#) that Rodgers is referring to states: "Among 1,228,664 persons who completed primary vaccination during December 2020–October 2021, a total of 2,246 (18.0 per 10,000 vaccinated persons) developed COVID-19 and 189 (1.5 per 10,000) had a severe outcome, including 36 who died".

The CDC also found that 77.8% of those who died had four or more underlying risk factors. However, the study only measured the health outcomes of vaccinated individuals who contracted COVID, and of that group 36 people died out of a sample of over 1.2 million.

[An earlier CDC study found that, between](#) October and November of 2021, unvaccinated people were 13.9 times more likely to be infected with COVID-19 and 53.2 times more likely to die from the disease.

Rodgers, in a long speech, voiced his displeasure with what he believes is censorship by the Biden administration.

"When you censor and make pariahs out of anybody who questions what you believe in or what the mainstream narrative is, that doesn't make any sense", Rodgers stated on ESPN, summing up several minutes of claims.

Rodgers' displeasure with Biden may also be personal. Earlier in the year, a video surfaced of Biden making a tongue-in-cheek reference to Rodgers' refusal to be vaccinated.

While touring Kentucky in the wake of a series of devastating tornadoes, Biden was filmed speaking to a woman wearing a Green Bay Packers hat and sweater, knowing, apparently, that Rodgers is currently the quarterback for the team. After a short conversation, Biden ended the encounter by saying: "Tell that quarterback he's gotta get the vaccine".

Rodgers, ahead of the NFL season, notoriously misled the media over his vaccination status, becoming a target of widespread ridicule and polarising the anti-vax movement. When asked in the pre-season if he was vaccinated, he lied: "Yeah, I've been immunised".

The media did not press Rodgers on what he meant by "immunised", and the sports professional continued to behave as if he was vaccinated. The NFL enacted rules that put restraints on unvaccinated players, requiring them to wear masks when engaging with the media, something Rodgers refused to do.

Rodgers' status as unvaccinated likely would have remained outside of public knowledge if it wasn't for a positive COVID test that forced him to miss a game in the beginning of November, 2021.

Shortly after his positive test, Rodgers, during his weekly appearance on the "Pat McAfee Show", explained that he was, in fact, not vaccinated, and that he had no plans to become vaccinated. He claimed at the time to have an allergy to an ingredient in mRNA vaccines, but did not specify the ingredient. He also said that he wouldn't receive the Johnson & Johnson vaccine due to concerns over blood clots.

With the revelation that Rodgers was not vaccinated, journalists and fans alike were scathing in their criticism. Rodgers, unhappy with his portrayal in the media and with fans as a liar, pushed back.

"I had a plan going in for that question to be asked", Rodgers claimed, adding, "It was a pseudo witch hunt going on -- who was vaccinated, who wasn't vaccinated. I was in a multi-month conversation that turned into an appeal process with the NFL at that time, and my appeal hinged on that exact statement [immunised]. So what I said was, No. 1, factually true. I went through a multi-immunisation process. And at the end of that, I don't know what you would call it, I would call it immunised".

Rodgers did not specify the immunisation process he participated in.

Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers fell to the San Francisco 49ers in the divisional round of the playoffs on Saturday. Rodgers had been considered to be the MVP favourite after throwing for 37 touchdowns versus only four interceptions. It would have been his fourth MVP award in his career and second consecutive.

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US State Department Officially Orders Diplomats' Families, Non-Essential Staffers to Leave Ukraine

By - Nevin Brown

The United States Department of State (DOS) has ordered the departure of eligible family members from its embassy in Kiev, Ukraine. The DOS also authorised the voluntary departure of direct hire employees. The orders are in response to reports that "Russia is planning significant military action against Ukraine".

On Sunday, the State Department upgraded Ukraine's level four travel advisory, stating, "Do not travel to Ukraine due to the increased threats of Russian military action and COVID-19". The country had already been at level four due to COVID-19 concerns.

The State Department's alert stressed for all Americans in Ukraine to depart the country as soon as possible.

"On January 23, 2022, the Department of State authorized the voluntary departure of US direct hire employees and ordered the departure of eligible family members from Embassy Kyiv due to the continued threat of Russian military action", reads the statement. "US citizens in Ukraine should consider departing now using commercial or other privately available transportation options".

"There are reports Russia is planning significant military action against Ukraine", it continues, underscoring that the security conditions "are unpredictable and can deteriorate with little notice".

The possibility of a Russian military action in Ukraine would severely limit the US Embassy's ability to provide services to Americans in Ukraine, according to the State Department.

Shortly after the release was issued, the State Department issued "do not travel" notices for Russia, citing ongoing "tensions" along Russia's border with Ukraine.

"Do not travel to Russia due to ongoing tension along the border with Ukraine, the potential for harassment against U.S. citizens, the embassy's limited ability to assist U.S. citizens in Russia, COVID-19 and related entry restrictions, terrorism, harassment by Russian government security officials, and the arbitrary enforcement of local law", the State Department said on Sunday.

A senior US State Department official has indicated that the US Embassy would continue to operate in an uninterrupted manner. Asked about how many Americans were stationed in Ukraine, the official was not able to provide an accurate figure.

Despite its latest actions, the same official further noted that the US was still interested in finding a diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis, adding that the evacuation call was wholly meant as a "precaution".

"I also want to be clear that we're not saying we know that [a Russian invasion in Ukraine] will happen, none of us know what [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin will decide but at the same time we're doing this prudent planning and taking these measures we are still very engaged on a diplomatic path", a State Department official said at a Sunday briefing, explaining the reasons behind the new travel advisory.

Sunday's announcement came days after the US agency denied reports that it would be planning to evacuate relatives of embassy staffers in Kiev.

The US-Russia Tug of War Over Ukraine

Tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine have been building since the Crimea Peninsula joined Russia in 2014. Russia asserts that they legally took over the territory through a referendum, whereas the West has repeatedly referred to it as a military invasion.

On Saturday, [a report out of the United Kingdom](#) claimed that Russia is aiming to replace the current Ukrainian government with a pro-Moscow leadership. The assertion was based on an intelligence assessment to which the UK government provided no evidence to back its claims. Russia's Foreign Ministry has refuted the UK's claims, with officials referring to the accusations as complete "nonsense".

Ukraine, the United States, and its NATO allies have accused Russia of amassing over 100,000 troops along the Ukrainian-Russian border. The Kremlin has refuted the claims and has pointed to NATO military activity near Russia as a threat to their security.

"Ukraine is perceived by the West as an instrument of influence, of carrying out its interests in the region, destabilising the situation, endlessly accusing us [Russia]", Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, [told the newspaper Izvestia](#) on Sunday.

Zakharova has stressed that Russia is waiting on a US response to their security proposals.

"We have submitted written proposals to our Western partners, first of all the United States. We have been very open in our actions ... Now we have responded immediately to their desire to hold some kind of clarification meeting. It was held despite the schedule... We are showing absolute cooperation, we are waiting for written answers to each of the points", Zakharova said. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Russian counterpart this week to de-escalate the situation. The Kremlin has presented the Biden administration with security proposals, including an agreement with NATO to end its eastward expansion and to remove offensive weapons in countries bordering Russia. Washington has yet to provide a formal response.

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DC, Texas, Washington, Indiana Sue Google for 'Deceiving' Consumers About Location Data

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Attorneys general from the District of Columbia, Texas, Washington and Indiana announced on Monday that they are suing Google over what they call a long-established policy of deceiving consumers to obtain access to their location data.

"Google has relied on, and continues to rely on, deceptive and unfair practices that make it difficult for users to decline location tracking or to evaluate the data collection and processing to which they are purportedly consenting. Such practices are known in academic literature as 'dark patterns.' Dark patterns are deceptive design choices that alter the user's decision-making for the designer's benefit and to the user's detriment," the lawsuit from DC says.

Washington, DC Attorney General Karl Racine, who is leading the lawsuit, said the team is seeking to stop Google's illegal use of "dark patterns".

"We're leading a bipartisan group of AGs from Texas, Indiana, & Washington, each suing in state court to hold Google accountable ... Google claims that changing your device and account settings protects your data. The truth is, since 2014, Google has systematically surveilled users no matter what settings they choose," he tweeted.

Tech giants like Facebook and Google have been repeatedly criticized by users and regulators in the past few years for lack of efforts to properly ensure user privacy and protect their personal data.

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UNRWA, UNICEF Renew Agreement to Support Palestine Refugee Children

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) renewed an agreement on Monday to assist Palestine refugee children across the region.

"The two UN agencies renewed today an agreement to extend support to Palestine refugee children, adolescents, and women in the State of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria," the UN Children's Fund said. "UNICEF and UNRWA will primarily cooperate in the fields of child and social protection, education, health, advocacy and emergency preparedness."

The two agencies will conduct studies, situation analysis of women and children, research as well as promote social change.

The agreement was signed for the next four years.

Last week, UNRWA said that the United Nations needs \$1.6 billion from the international community to support Palestine refugees in 2022.

The funding will provide millions of Palestine refugees with lifesaving services and programs, including education, health, and food assistance, and help solve humanitarian issues related to

situations in Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as Syria, and Lebanon, according to the agency.

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US Strike Group Comes Under NATO Command During Drills for 1st Time Since Cold War

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier and its carrier strike group came under NATO command on Monday in the Mediterranean Sea for the first time since the the Cold War during the alliance-led Neptune Strike 2022.

"Today (24 January 2022), Allied ships from the NATO Naval Striking and Support Forces Command and the U.S. Sixth Fleet initiated a series of patrolling activities across the Mediterranean Sea, within the framework of 'Neptune Strike 2022' ... It will be carried out until 4 February, and features the deployment of the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier aircraft carrier, along with its carrier strike group and air wing," the alliance said.

The activities mark the start of the massive Neptune Strike 2022 exercise in the Mediterranean. "It is the first time since the Cold War that a full US carrier group comes under NATO command," the statement added.

Earlier in January, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that the NATO military exercise was not designed or planned with respect to Ukraine. He added that the drills have been planned since last year. However, he did say there was some consideration given to putting the drill on hold due to the situation in Ukraine, but the decision was made to go ahead.

The NATO countries will train in the Mediterranean Sea on coordinated maritime maneuvers, anti-submarine warfare training, and long-range strike training, Kirby added.

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IMF Projects Macao GDP to Grow by 15 Percent in 2022 - Report

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Macao's gross domestic product (GDP) is projected to increase by 15 percent this year as a result of anticipated recovery of domestic demand and tourism, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a report.

"Macao's GDP is projected to grow by 15 percent in 2022 driven by the gradual return of foreign tourists and the recovery of domestic demand," the report said.

The IMF projects that Macao's economic growth will accelerate to 23 percent in 2023 before gradually converging to its long-term potential of around 3.5 percent over the medium term, the report said.

"However, given the depth of the economic losses during the pandemic, the level of GDP is expected to surpass its pre-crisis level only in 2025. In the absence of rapid progress toward

economic diversification, the current account balance is set to return to pre-pandemic levels as tourists return to Macao," the IMF said.

The strong fiscal support and solid positions of casino groups in Macao cushioned employment and consumption in the region. However, despite that, the sharp decline in activity and other factors related to the global pandemic made the economy vulnerable, the report said.

"Short-term risks to the outlook include a re-intensification of the COVID-19 pandemic and increase in Macao's financial sector stress," the report added.

The IMF called on local authorities to diversify the economy beyond the gaming industry in order to protect economic growth despite the challenges posed by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures, according to the report.

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RPT - Russia's Crypto Ban May Impact Price, Yet Not as Severely as in China, US - Coingecko COO

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - A ban in Russia on cryptocurrencies proposed by the Central Bank may impact the price but probably not as large compared to a ban in China or the United States, Bobby Ong, co-founder and COO of Coingecko, told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Russia's central bank published a consultation report on cryptocurrencies, in which it put forward a number of proposals for regulating this area in Russia. The Bank of Russia proposes to legally prohibit the use of the infrastructure of the Russian financial market for any operations with cryptocurrencies. It also wants to ban the issuance, organization of circulation and exchange of cryptocurrencies in Russia, as well as their mining.

"BTC [bitcoin] price is largely dictated by macro movements these days, especially US Fed [Federal Reserve System] decisions. A ban in Russia may impact the price but probably not as large compared to a ban in China or the US," Ong said.

He added that cryptocurrencies will continue to progress globally outside Russia.

"Russia will stand to lose as companies and talent will be forced to relocate out of the country, depriving the country of tax revenues," he said.

Russia's future of crypto will depend a lot on the final details of the crypto ban or clampdown in Russia, Ong said, drawing an example of China which banned crypto multiple times but with each ban "getting increasingly more onerous."

"The latest ban in China has practically shut off crypto to most retail users and also removed the crypto mining industry away from China. Previous bans in China were not as stringent - exchanges could still operate in China and miners were still operating freely," he explained.

Meanwhile, reacting to Russia's move, the largest crypto exchange Binance said that it was ready for a dialogue with Russia on the proposed regulation of cryptocurrencies. Binance is open to dialogue and discussion about protecting the interests of good Russian crypto users and takes its compliance obligations very seriously and is committed to working with regulators

to shape policies that protect users, encourage innovation, and move the industry forward, the exchange's spokesperson said.

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RPT - Kurdish-Led SDC Says Will Ask US for Assistance After IS Attacks Jail in Northeast Syria

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political wing of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, will request a meeting with the US to ask for more security assistance after the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia) attacked a prison in northeastern Syria, Bassam Saker, SDC representative in the United States, told Sputnik.

"We are requesting a meeting to ask for more support," Saker said. "They are helping us with security in general, but it is we who secure the area."

Saker went on to say that they will also appeal to other countries whose citizens are imprisoned in northeastern Syria, to bring them back and prosecute them.

"We should find a solution to this situation with prisoners," he added.

On Thursday, IS terrorists attacked a Kurdish-managed prison in northeast Syria with a car bomb detonated at the entrance of the Ghwairan prison in Hasaka, followed by another blast nearby. The attack was intended to allow prisoners to escape from the facility.

Saker stressed that while it's still unclear whether any prisoners had managed to escape, the prison now is under control of the SDF.

In September, Saker told Sputnik that SDF-managed prisons still contain around 5,000 foreign terrorists, since no country wants to take them back. The number has not changed in many months.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011.

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RPT - Chinese Embassy Urges US to Stop 'Unreasonable' Flight Suspensions

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US retaliatory decision to suspend dozens of flights to China is unreasonable and the disruptions must end, a spokesperson from Beijing's Embassy in Washington told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, the Biden administration announced that it suspended 44 US to China flights in order to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. The suspended flights to China begin on January 30 and include flights from the carriers Xiamen Airlines, China Southern Airlines Company and Air China.

"It is very unreasonable for the US to suspend Chinese airlines' flights on this ground," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said on Friday. "We urge the US side to stop disrupting and restricting the normal passenger flights operated by Chinese airlines."

The Chinese government recently canceled several US flights bound to China due to a surge of passengers testing positive for the novel coronavirus. The Civil Aviation Authority of China as of January 19 has suspended 44 passenger flight segments to China by US carriers despite repeated objections from the Biden administration, according to the order.

Liu explained in his statement that the Chinese government's decision to suspend certain China-bound flights has helped effectively block the cross-border spread of the novel coronavirus amid a notable increase in the number of cases imported to China.

China's policy has been applied equally to Chinese and foreign airlines in a fair and transparent way, Liu said.

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US Feds Seek Info on Azerbaijan-Tied Firms After Raid of Lawmaker's Home - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US authorities are seeking records from Democratic Congressman Henry Cuellar regarding US businesses and organizations that have foreign ties, many of them with Azerbaijan, ABC News reported.

Earlier this week, the FBI raided the Congressman's home and campaign office in Texas as part of the federal investigation.

The report said on Friday, citing a copy of the subpoena, that the US grand jury's probe is seeking records about the Congressman, his wife Imelda Cuellar, and one of his campaign staffers.

The investigation, the report said, appears to be focused on three Texas-based companies which appear to be overseen by Imelda Cuellar. The probe is also looking for records on any US logistics-related firms and cultural advocacy organizations that have ties to Azerbaijan, the report added.

US authorities are specifically looking for records revealing "anything of value" that Congressman Henry Cuellar, his wife, or others close to them may have received from foreign officials or business leaders, the report said citing the subpoena.

Moreover, the report said US authorities are also looking for records of any service, work or favors the congressman or his wife may have done on behalf of foreign officials and companies, or US businesses.

Henry Cuellar, who has served in Congress since 2005, previously served as a co-chair of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus and had met with Azerbaijan officials, including Ambassador Elin Suleymanov, the report said.

Henry Cuellar's office said the congressman will fully cooperate in any investigation, according to the report.

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Liu explained in his statement that the Chinese government's decision to suspend certain China-bound flights has helped effectively block the cross-border spread of the novel coronavirus amid a notable increase in the number of cases imported to China.

China's policy has been applied equally to Chinese and foreign airlines in a fair and transparent way, Liu said

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US Stocks in Multi-Week Loss, Nasdaq Down Most Since Financial Crisis

NEW YORK, January 21 (Sputnik) - US stocks were headed for their worst month since the 2008 financial crisis as Wall Street is beset by a multi-week loss triggered by worries of a streak of interest rate hikes to clamp down on inflation.

The tech-laced Nasdaq index, the darling of investors after the coronavirus outbreak confined Americans to their homes and rely on video streaming and gadgets for work, is down 11% for so far January. That is more than the 10% loss it took in March 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the most since October 2008 when the financial crisis broke.

The S&P 500 index, representing the top 500 US stocks, is down 8% for January versus its previous biggest monthly loss of almost 13% in March 2020.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which represents stocks across US industry, is down 6% for January, its most since the 14% drop in March 2020.

"Wall Street has gone from debating how aggressive one should rotate out of tech into cyclicals, to sell it all," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Investors have two big worries: it seems every day traders are reminded inflationary pressures are not going away anytime soon and could prompt the Fed into becoming overly aggressive in tightening monetary policy."

Moya said the other concern of investors is that profit growth expectations may have been too optimistic and underpriced in the ballooning labor costs. Geopolitical risks are also adding fuel to the selling pressure, he added.

The Federal Reserve slashed US interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, and has kept them there since to aid recovery.

As a result, the US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982, after trillions of dollars of relief spending by the government, higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Federal Reserve now says it may have to execute a series of interest rate hikes to counter such inflation.

From: Barani Krishnan - barani.krishnan@gmail.com

Subject: US Stocks in Multi-Week Loss, Nasdaq Down Most Since Financial Crisis

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JPM Declines Comment After Reports That Russia's Removal From SWIFT Will Hurt Dollar

NEW YORK, January 21 (Sputnik) - JPMorgan Chase declined to comment on a note apparently issued by the investment bank that US sanctions cutting off Russia from the SWIFT interbank payments system, if imposed, could harm the dollar's standing as a reserve currency. The Biden administration is considering all sanctions options against Russia if it escalates the situation with Ukraine, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said this week. This included the possibility of cutting Russia off from the SWIFT interbank payments system, she said.

"Sorry, we'll decline to comment," Patricia Wexler, a spokesperson for JPMorgan, told Sputnik when queried about the note tweeted out by a Wall Street Journal reporter earlier on Friday.

The JPMorgan note tweeted by the reporter appeared to warn about the ill-effects of excluding Russia from the SWIFT system. The note said Russia continues to have significant trade ties to Western Union and the initial shock to the Russian economy and global markets would be large. JPMorgan also apparently cautioned that severing Russia from the SWIFT could influence Moscow and its ally China to find workarounds to the system that could ultimately hurt the dollar's standing as a reserve currency.

US Senator Marco Rubio proposed last week that President Joe Biden impose sanctions on the SWIFT system itself if it refuses to stop servicing Russian banks and companies listed in a bill the senator announced.

Russia has repeatedly denied US and NATO allegations that it is preparing to invade Ukraine. Moscow also views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russia's borders.

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US Congressman Introduces Companion Bill to Senate's for Sanctions on Putin, Nord Stream 2

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks introduced a companion bill to match the Senate measure that would impose sanctions on Russian President Vladimir Putin and Nord Stream 2 pipeline, among others individuals and entities.

A companion bill is a piece of legislation that can be introduced in either the House or the Senate and has identical or similar wording to another bill introduced in the other chamber. The main idea behind introducing a companion bill is to promote a simultaneous consideration of the proposed measure.

"Today, Representative Gregory W. Meeks, Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, introduced legislation that would impose punishing economic and other consequences on Russia if it further invades or undermines Ukrainian sovereignty. This bill is the House companion bill to the Senate's Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act of 2022, introduced by Senator Menendez," the US House Foreign Affairs Committee said in a press release on Friday. The bill mirrors another one introduced by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez last week that would impose sanctions to bring severe costs on the Russian economy in the event of an invasion of Ukraine.

As in the case of its Senate twin, the House bill would entail sanctions on Russian government top officials, financial institutions, and Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

On Thursday, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Kiev expected the United States to take active measures against Russia in the event of an escalation of the crises. US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that the United States and its allies would impose severe costs on Russia if it invaded Ukraine, possibly including prohibiting Russian banks from dealing in US dollars.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) -

LAVROV-BLINKEN MEETING

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken agreed during their a meeting in Geneva it is necessary to conduct dialogue more reasonably and Moscow expects Washington to reduce emotions during the bilateral security talks.

* Blinken promised to explain how the United States sees its commitment to NATO's non-expansion, Lavrov said.

* It would be right for the United States to respond to Russia's security guarantees' proposals publicly, Lavrov said.

* Blinken said that he made clear to Lavrov that if Russia crosses the Ukraine border, it will face a severe response from the United States and its allies.

* Blinken said he feels after his talks with Lavrov that the two countries can work on developing understanding.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that there are many absurd draft laws in response to a question about the draft anti-Russia sanctions project prepared by US congressmen.

* The EU foreign ministers will not discuss sanctions against Russia at their meeting on January 24 since the bloc's position on sanctions in the event the situation concerning Ukraine escalates has already been formed, a high-ranking EU source told reporters in Brussels.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Germany is blocking its NATO ally Estonia from transferring German-made military equipment to Ukraine as the latter seeks to bolster its armed forces against Russia, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that he hopes a conflict over Ukraine will not happen in the present circumstances and that diplomacy will allow for the resolution of all disputes.

* The United States is considering evacuating its diplomats' family members from Ukraine, Bloomberg reported.

* Turkey is ready to invite representatives of the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk to negotiations on Ukraine and it is interesting to know Kiev's opinion on this matter, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

TENSIONS IN SYRIA

* The US-led Coalition provided Syrian Democratic Forces airstrike support during a prison break by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Hasakah, Syria, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

* As a result of an attack on a prison in the Kurdish-controlled area of Syria's Al-Hasakah, terrorists were able to escape from it, Rear Adm. Oleg Zhuravlev, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said.

NORD STREAM 2

* The European Commission (EC) intends to find out Ukraine's opinion on Nord Stream 2 in the process of this project's certification, an EC spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

* If the European Commission appeals to Ukraine about its opinion on Nord Stream 2, the standard two-month period for preparing the commission's opinion on project certification will be extended for another two months, an EC spokesperson told RIA Novosti.

PUTIN-NIINISTO TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin told Finnish President Sauli Niinisto at phone talks that Moscow awaits the promised concrete and detailed response to its proposals on security guarantees, the Kremlin said on Friday.

* Niinisto and Putin discussed the European security and the situation in Ukraine during a phone conversation, the Finnish leader's press office said.

POTENTIAL PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

* Russian President Vladimir Putin is always ready for contacts with US President Joe Biden but such meetings require good organization, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday.

* Switzerland is ready to host another high-level summit between Russia and the United States to promote peace and stability, President Ignazio Cassis said.

* Biden values leader-to-leader engagement and has always been open to it, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said when asked about a possible summit with Putin.

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Ex-Giuliani Associate Igor Fruman Sentenced to One Year in US Prison - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Former Rudy Giuliani associate Igor Fruman was sentenced to one year and one day in prison by a US judge for campaign finance violations, The Independent reported on Friday.

Fruman, who pleaded guilty in September to one count of soliciting campaign contributions from a foreign national, will have to serve one year and one day in prison beginning on March 14 and pay a \$10,000 fine, the report said.

Fruman admitted to soliciting \$1 million in donations from a Russian businessman to Republicans to gain their support for a recreational marijuana business.

The Soviet-born businessman was charged by US authorities in October 2019 alongside Lev Parnas, Andrey Kukushkin and David Correia for funneling donations from foreign nationals to political campaigns and providing false statements and records to election authorities.

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Professor Pleads Guilty to Lying to FBI on Patents in China - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - A University of Arkansas professor has pleaded guilty to making a false statement to the FBI about the existence of patents for his inventions in China and has admitted that he failed to disclose a conflict of interest to the university, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"Simon Saw-Teong Ang, 64, of Fayetteville entered a guilty plea to count 58 on a superseding indictment charging him with making a materially false and fictitious, statement and representation to an FBI Special Agent," the Justice Department said.

According to court documents, 24 patents filed in China bear Ang's name, the press release noted.

The University of Arkansas required individuals such as Ang to promptly provide full and complete disclosures of inventions and was clear that the university, not individual inventors, would own all inventions created by those subject to the policy, the Justice Department noted. Despite this requirement, Ang did not disclose his Chinese patents to the university and, when interviewed by an FBI agent, lied about his involvement in the inventions. Specifically, when asked whether his name would be listed as "the inventor" of numerous patents in China, Ang denied being the inventor, despite knowing he was, the release said.

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Guterres Hopes Wagner Group Will Not Impede Cooperation Between MINUSMA, Malian Army

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday he hopes that the alleged deployment of private military company Wagner Group in Mali will not obstruct cooperation between the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country (MINUSMA) and the national armed forces.

"We haven't to date had any meeting with the Wagner group. That is a sovereign decision taken by the Malian government to cooperate with an organization such as that one," Guterres said.

"The only thing that we wish to see is that this involvement doesn't create any difficulty in achieving what we want. And what we want is effective cooperation between MINUSMA and the Malian army," he added.

MINUSMA was established in 2013 to support the transitional authorities in Mali, stabilize the country and implement the transitional roadmap.

Mali's government has previously denied any deployment of Russian contractors from Wagner Group, calling these allegations "baseless."

Russia has also firmly denied its involvement in paramilitary activities in Africa, saying the presence of Russian instructors in foreign countries is official and done at the request of their governments.

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US, NATO to Conduct Military Drill in Mediterranean Monday Through February 4 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will participate in a NATO exercise in the Mediterranean Sea that will begin Monday and last until early February, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Strike force NATO will kickoff an exercise called Neptune Strike 22 and Neptune Strike 22 is going to run through the fourth of February and it's designed to demonstrate NATO's ability to integrate the high-end maritime strike capabilities of an aircraft carrier strike group to support the deterrence and defense of the alliance," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said the NATO military exercise was not designed or planned against scenarios related to what might happen with respect to Ukraine. He added that the military drill was planned since last year.

However, he did say there was consideration about putting the drill on hold given the situation with Ukraine but the decision was made to go ahead with it.

The nuclear-powered USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group will serve as the center piece of the NATO military exercise, Kirby said.

The NATO countries will train in the Mediterranean Sea on coordinated maritime maneuvers, anti-submarine warfare training, and long-range strike training, Kirby said.

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Blinken Tells Saudi Counterpart US to Help Gulf States Against Houthi Threat - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud reiterated the US commitment to helping improve the defense capabilities of Gulf partners against attacks emanating from Yemen and elsewhere, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken reiterated the US commitment to help Gulf partners improve their capabilities to defend against threats from Yemen and elsewhere in the region and underscored the importance of mitigating civilian harm," Price said in a readout of the call.

Blinken also condemned the deadly January 17 Houthi attacks on civilian sites in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, including Abu Dhabi's international airport, Price said.

The conflict between the Houthis and Yemeni government forces has been ongoing for over six years, with the entrance of Saudi Arabia on the side of the government in 2015 further aggravating the situation.

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Trump Lawyers Tried to Hide Draft Executive Order to Seize Voting Machines - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's lawyers unsuccessfully tried to prevent congressional investigators from finding a draft executive order

that he drew up but never issued to seize voting machines that might have been altered to fake November 2020 presidential election results, Politico reported on Friday.

Investigators from the US House Select Committee to probe the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, uncovered a draft executive order that would have directed the then-Defense Secretary to seize voting machines and a document titled "Remarks on National Healing," the report said.

The executive order would also have appointed a special counsel to probe the 2020 presidential election, but it was never issued and the remarks were never delivered, the report said.

But the draft executive order is dated December 16, 2020, and is consistent with proposals that lawyer Sidney Powell made to Trump at the time, the report said. Two days later, Powell met with former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, former Trump administration lawyer Emily Newman and former Overstock.com CEO Patrick Byrne in the Oval Office, the report said. In that meeting, Powell urged Trump to seize voting machines and to appoint a special counsel to investigate the election, according to an Axios news report.

A spokesperson for the US House Select Committee confirmed on Friday that the panel had received the last of the documents that Trump's lawyers tried to keep from it, according to the report.

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Biden Proposes Increasing Funding for Police Departments

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Us President Joe Biden said on Friday that he supports increasing funding of police departments.

"We shouldn't be cutting funding for police departments, I propose increasing funding," Biden said during the US Conference of Mayors' Winter Meeting. "We ask cops to do everything - including psychologists and social workers. Guess what? They need psychologists and social workers."

The US Department of Justice said at the end of December that it is providing \$1.6 billion in grants to communities throughout the United States to fund programs designed to reduce crime. Some of the funding is intended to address gun violence, to help former inmates transition back to the communities and keep them from recommitting a crime, and to support responses to crises like drug overdoses and mental illness, the release said.

The funding could also help support US law enforcement efforts to advance violence intervention activities and evidence-based police and prosecution strategies, the release added.

The FBI reported recently that murder rates in the United States increased by nearly 30% in 2020 amid the "defund the police" movement that took flight among US liberals after the death of African-American George Floyd in police custody.

A Pew Research Center poll showed in October that growing numbers of US adults want their communities to spend more on police, a significant shift in attitudes that reflects Americans' concern about rising violent crime.

The share of Black adults who say police spending in their area should be decreased has fallen 19 percentage points (from 42% to 23%), while the share of Democrats wanting cuts in police budgets has dropped from 41 percent to 25 percent, according to the release.

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US Seven-Day Average of COVID-19 Cases Down 5% From Previous Week - CDC

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) – The US seven-day average for newly reported cases has dropped by 5% in comparison with the previous week, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"The current seven-day average cases is about 744,600 cases per day, a decrease of about 5% over the previous week," Walensky told a virtual press briefing.

The seven-day average of deaths exceeds 1,700 per day, she said, adding that the number of hospitalizations increased by about 1% compared with the previous week.

"In some parts of the country we are seeing the numbers of daily cases caused by the Omicron variant beginning to decline," Walensky said.

White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients noted, during the same briefing, that about 210 million Americans are fully vaccinated now. He said that about 75% of adults have received two shots of a vaccine

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Germany Blocks Estonia From Providing German-Made Military Equipment to Ukraine - Reports (Updates with details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Germany is blocking its NATO ally Estonia from transferring German-made military equipment to Ukraine as the latter seeks to bolster its armed forces against Russia, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

The report said, citing German and Estonian officials, that Germany declined to approve export permits that would have allowed Estonia to transfer German-made lethal weapons to Ukraine. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said that there has been a lot of hesitation from Germany to deliver military support to Kiev, according to the report.

Germany reportedly has a policy to avoid delivering military support to tense regions. However, Estonia is continuing to try to persuade Germany to approve the transfer, the report added.

The United States, United Kingdom, Poland, are among NATO allies that have provided lethal weapons to Ukraine.

Russia denies the allegations that it is preparing to invade Ukraine 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 Russia's borders.

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US Space Force Successfully Launches Satellite Surveillance Monitoring Mission - ULA

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force (USSF) successfully launched two satellites in a "space situational awareness" monitoring mission 22,000 miles above the Earth on board an Atlas V rocket booster from Cape Canaveral, Florida, the United Launch Alliance (ULA) announced on Friday.

"An Atlas V 511 rocket carrying the USSF-8 mission successfully lifted off at 2:00 pm Eastern Time from Cape Canaveral Space Force Base, Florida," ULA said in a podcast message. The lift off was also podcast live.

The USSF-8 mission will launch two identical Geosynchronous Space Situational Awareness Program (GSSAP) satellites - GSSAP-5 and GSSAP-6 - directly to a near-geosynchronous orbit approximately 22,300 miles (36,000 km) above the equator, ULA said.

"GSSAP satellites are a space-based capability operating in a near-geosynchronous orbit supporting the U.S. Space Command space surveillance operations as a dedicated Space Surveillance network (SSN) sensor," ULA said.

The satellites provide neighborhood watch services in the Geosynchronous Earth Orbit improving flight safety for all spacefaring nations operating in that orbit and increasing the ability to warn a spacecraft owner/operator if there is another object anticipated to approach too closely and create a hazardous situation, ULA added.

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UN Chief Says Hopes Conflict Over Ukraine Will Not Happen in Present Circumstances (Adds new details in paras 3-5, background info in para 6)

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he hopes a conflict over Ukraine will not happen in the present circumstances and that diplomacy will allow for the resolution of all disputes.

"It is clear that my message is that there should not be any military intervention," Guterres said in a press briefing. "In this context, I think that diplomacy is the way to solve problems." "Any invasion by one country to another country is against international law, and I hope that this, of course, will not happen in the present circumstances. I am convinced it will not happen. And I strongly hope to be right."

When asked whether the United Nations is taking any contingency plans to provide safety and security for its personnel working in Ukraine, Guterres said his objective is that no such plans will ever have to be applied in this situation.

"I insist what we must all contribute to avoid a confrontation that would be extremely negative for everybody, and to create conditions for a diplomatic solution of the problem," the Secretary-General stated.

Guterres also pointed out that with the tensions over Ukraine, the world is witnessing a new form of confrontation between the Eastern and the Western blocs, much more chaotic and less predictable than the Cold War.

Tensions around Ukraine intensified over the past several months after Russia was accused of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Moscow has denied the accusations, stating repeatedly that it has no intentions of attacking anyone, but expressed concern about increasing Western defense support for Ukraine. In December, the Russian government proposed a set of mutual security guarantees in Europe to NATO and the United States, with their response still pending.

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UN Chief Calls Houthi Attack on Abu Dhabi 'Regrettable Escalation,' Urges Ceasefire

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday described the Houthi drone attack on Abu Dhabi as a "regrettable escalation" and a serious mistake and called for a ceasefire.

On Monday, several Houthi drones targeted the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi, including the construction site of a new airport and fuel tankers near depots of oil company ADNOC, killing three people and injuring six others. The UAE is part of the Saudi-led coalition that is involved in the ongoing war in Yemen on the side of President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi against the Houthi movement.

"The attack on Abu Dhabi is an escalation that is regrettable, and, in my opinion, is a serious mistake, independently of the fact that it is unacceptable," Guterres told a press briefing.

"What we need is to have, as we have been proposing from long ago, a ceasefire together with the opening of the harbor and airports and then the beginning of serious dialogue among the parties," he said.

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US Official, Ukraine Finance Minister Discuss Sanctions Against 4 Ukrainians - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo and Ukraine Minister of Finance Serhiy Marchenko have discussed the latest Russia-related sanctions introduced against the four Ukrainians, the US Treasury Department said in a readout of the conversation on Friday.

"They discussed economic developments in Ukraine as well as Treasury's recent designation of four Russia-backed influence actors responsible for destabilization activities in Ukraine," the release said. "Deputy Secretary Adeyemo reiterated the United States' firm commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and emphasized that the United States and its allies and partners are prepared to inflict significant costs on the Russian economy if Russia further invades Ukraine."

On Thursday, the Treasury Department said the four Ukrainians targeted in the United States' latest Russia-related sanctions are engaged in running influence and disinformation campaigns on behalf of Russian security services.

The sanctioned individuals are two opposition lawmakers, Taras Kozak and Oleh Voloshyn; a former member of parliament Volodymyr Oliynyk; and Vladimir Sivkovich, former vice prime minister and deputy secretary of the National Security and Defense Council.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on Thursday alleged that Russia's intelligence services have been recruiting Ukrainian nationals in key positions to gain access to sensitive information and added that such officials are allegedly leveraged in an attempt to create instability in Ukraine.

Russia has allegedly used hybrid tactics, including disinformation and other influence campaigns, to destabilize Ukraine for years, Blinken added, noting that there was a comprehensive information operation in 2020 designed to degrade Ukraine's ability to independently function as a state.

The sanctions designations come amid increased tensions between Russia, Ukraine and the West sparked by a buildup of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine.

Russia has denied the Western accusations that it planning an invasion and has said it reserves the right to perform troop movements within its own sovereign territory. Russia has also said that it perceives NATO's activities and intent to increase its military infrastructure in the vicinity of its border as a national security threat.

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Russia's Crypto Ban May Impact Price, Yet Not as Severely as in China, US - Coingecko COO

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - A ban in Russia on cryptocurrencies proposed by the Central Bank may impact the price but probably not as large compared to a ban in China or the United States, Bobby Ong, co-founder and COO of Coingecko, told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Russia's central bank published a consultation report on cryptocurrencies, in which it put forward a number of proposals for regulating this area in Russia. The Bank of Russia proposes to legally prohibit the use of the infrastructure of the Russian financial market for any operations with cryptocurrencies. It also wants to ban the issuance, organization of circulation and exchange of cryptocurrencies in Russia, as well as their mining.

"BTC [bitcoin] price is largely dictated by macro movements these days, especially US Fed [Federal Reserve System] decisions. A ban in Russia may impact the price but probably not as large compared to a ban in China or the US," Ong said.

He added that cryptocurrencies will continue to progress globally outside Russia.

"Russia will stand to lose as companies and talent will be forced to relocate out of the country, depriving the country of tax revenues," he said.

Russia's future of crypto will depend a lot on the final details of the crypto ban or clampdown in Russia, Ong said, drawing an example of China which banned crypto multiple times but with each ban "getting increasingly more onerous."

"The latest ban in China has practically shut off crypto to most retail users and also removed the crypto mining industry away from China. Previous bans in China were not as stringent - exchanges could still operate in China and miners were still operating freely," he explained. Meanwhile, reacting to Russia's move, the largest crypto exchange Binance said that it was ready for a dialogue with Russia on the proposed regulation of cryptocurrencies. Binance is open to dialogue and discussion about protecting the interests of good Russian crypto users and takes its compliance obligations very seriously and is committed to working with regulators to shape policies that protect users, encourage innovation, and move the industry forward, the exchange's spokesperson said.

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Pentagon Says US-Led Coalition Provided Airstrike Support to SDF During IS Prison Break
(Update with background in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US-led Coalition provided the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) airstrike support during a prison break by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in city of Hasakah, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We have provided some airstrikes to support them [SDF] as they deal with this particular prison break," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said he has no details on the number of airstrikes conducted or targets damaged in the operation.

Fighting continues around the vicinity of the prison in Hasakah some 24 hours after the rebellion started, according to media reports.

Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) Representative in the United States Bassam Saker told Sputnik earlier in the day that authorities in Hasaka in northeast Syria have imposed a curfew as they search for Islamic State militants behind the attack on the Ghweran prison.

On Thursday, Islamic State terrorists attacked a Kurdish-managed Ghweran prison when a car bomb hit the entrance of the facility and caused another blast nearby. The attack was conducted to enable prisoners to escape from the facility.

Saker said while it is still unknown whether any prisoners managed to escape, the prison now is under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. He also confirmed that one SDF member died and seven were injured in the attack.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011. In late 2017, the authorities declared that the Islamic State was defeated in Syria and Iraq, but counterterrorism operations are still ongoing.

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UN Chief Says Hopes Conflict Over Ukraine Will Not Happen in Present Circumstances

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he hopes a conflict over Ukraine will not happen in the present circumstances and that diplomacy will allow for the resolution of all disputes.

"It is clear that my message is that there should not be any military intervention," Guterres said in a press briefing. "In this context, I think that diplomacy is the way to solve problems." "Any invasion by one country to another country is against international law, and I hope that this, of course, will not happen in the present circumstances. I am convinced it will not happen. And I strongly hope to be right."

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Pentagon Says US-led Coalition Provided Airstrike Support to SDF During IS Prison Break

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US-led Coalition provided Syrian Democratic Forces airstrike support during a prison break by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Hasakah, Syria, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We have provided some airstrikes to support them [SDF] as they deal with this particular prison break," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said he has no details on the number of airstrikes conducted or targets damaged in the operation.

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Blinken Briefs Ukraine's Kuleba on His Meetings With Allies, Lavrov - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON January 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has briefed Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on his meetings with US allies in Berlin and with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke by phone today with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba at the conclusion of his trip to Europe to address Russia's unprovoked military buildup near Ukraine's borders. The Secretary briefed Foreign Minister Kuleba on his meetings with Allied and Russian officials in Berlin and Geneva and underscored that any further Russian incursion will be met with a swift, severe, and united response from the United States and our Allies," Price said in a press release.

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White House on Possible Evacuation in Ukraine: US Always Conducts Contingency Planning

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Washington conducts rigorous contingency planning if a security situation worsens in any country, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a press briefing when asked about plans to evacuate US citizens from Ukraine.

"We do conduct rigorous contingency planning as we always do in the event... the security situation deteriorates in any country around the world, the State Department does that assessment. I would point you to them for any, any predictions or previews of any steps they may take," Psaki said on Friday.

The United States is considering evacuating diplomats' family members from Ukraine, Bloomberg reported on Friday, citing people familiar with the matter.

It is allegedly planned that non-essential staff would be able to leave Ukraine voluntarily but their families would be ordered to return home.

The State Department is expected to make an announcement in a few days, according to the report.

Tensions around Ukraine intensified over the past several months after Russia was accused of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Moscow has denied the accusations, stating repeatedly that it has no intentions of attacking anyone, but expressed concern about increasing Western defense support for Ukraine. In December, the Russian government proposed a set of mutual security guarantees in Europe to NATO and the United States, with their response still pending.

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White House Confirms US Plans to Transfer Mi-17 Helicopters to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Friday confirmed the recent reports about US plans to deliver Mi-17 helicopters to Ukraine amid the ongoing tensions with Russia.

Several media outlets reported on Thursday that Washington will provide Kiev with five Russian-made Mi-17 transport helicopters that were originally intended for the Afghan armed forces prior to the government's collapse and were being repaired in Ukraine.

"[I]n identifying additional equipment held in DoD [Department of Defense] inventories that can be delivered under the Excess Defensive Articles program among other mechanisms, we recently notified Congress of our intent to deliver Mi-17 helicopters [to Ukraine]," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Earlier this week, the Biden administration approved a request from Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia to send US-made lethal weapons to Ukraine in order to boost the country's military capabilities against alleged Russian aggression.

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 has denied the allegations and reiterated that it has no intention of attacking any country. Moreover, Moscow has said it views the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO military equipment close to Russia's borders.

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Biden Admin Suspends 44 Flights to China in Response to US Flight Suspensions - Order

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration suspended 44 flights to China from the United States in response to the Chinese government's decision to suspend some US flights over COVID-19 concerns, the Department of Transportation said in an official order on Friday .

"As discussed below, the US Department of Transportation (the Department) is further modifying the decision reached in Order 2020-6-1 in order to respond to recent actions by Chinese authorities impairing the operating rights of three US carriers... In the circumstances presented, we have determined to suspend forty-four (44) US to China passenger flight segments," the order said.

The suspended flights to China begin on January 30 and include flights from the carriers Xiamen Airlines, China Southern Airlines Company and Air China, the order added.

The Chinese government recently canceled some US flights bound to China due to a surge of passengers testing positive for the novel coronavirus. The Civil Aviation Authority of China as of January 19 has suspended 44 passenger flight segments to China by US carriers despite repeated objections from the Biden administration, according to the order.

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Biden Says US, China Need Not Have Confrontation But Have Economic Competition

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and China do not need to have confrontation but have technological and economic competition instead and Washington does not intend to confront Beijing, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"In fact, I made it clear to President Xi [Jinping] of China: we need not have confrontation, but we have economic and technological competition," Biden told reporters.

The United States is ready to help other countries, including China, to engage in competition and avoid tensions, Biden said.

Biden and Xi held a virtual summit in mid-November during which time they discussed their positions on Taiwan, the possibility of entering a new Cold War, the situation in Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the White House.

In December, the Biden administration announced that the United States would not send an official delegation to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing because of alleged human rights violations by China. The move has been supported by the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Athletes from these countries are still free to compete in the Olympics.

China said attempts to politicize sports violate the Olympic Charter and the boycott wins no support but isolates the boycotting countries.

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US Judge Blocks Biden's Vaccine Mandate for Federal Workers, Bars Firing of Unvaccinated

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - A US judge blocked the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for federal workers and barred the firing of employees who are unvaccinated, a court filing revealed on Friday.

"Executive Order 14043 amounts to a presidential mandate that all federal employees consent to vaccination against COVID-19 or lose their jobs," US Judge Jeffrey Brown wrote in the court document. "Because the President's authority is not that broad, the court will enjoin the second order's enforcement."

Brown explained that it is "a bridge too far" for the US president, with a stroke of a pen and without consulting Congress, to require millions of federal employees to undergo a medical procedure as a condition of their employment.

Moreover, Brown pointed out that an overwhelming majority of the federal workforce is already vaccinated but vaccine mandates for federal workers will not stop the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Last week, the US Supreme Court blocked enforcement of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) COVID-19 vaccine mandate for large businesses, but backed the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for healthcare workers.

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Biden, Kishida in Close Alignment on Russia, Japan to Be by US Side - Official

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during a virtual meeting on Friday conveyed close alignment on Russia over Ukraine, a senior US administration official said.

"I think we were in very close alignment on the challenges Russia is presenting to Ukraine," the US official said during a conference call. "The prime minister complimented the president on his handling and made clear that Japan would be fully behind the United States in the challenging days ahead."

Russia denies the allegations that it is preparing to invade Ukraine 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 Russia's borders.

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White House on Possible Summit With Putin: Biden Always Values Leader-to-Leader Contacts

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden values leader-to-leader engagement and has always been open to it, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday, when asked about a possible summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Of course, the President always values leader-to-leader engagement but we'll determine if that's the appropriate next step," Psaki told a press briefing. "He's always been open."

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US Inflation to 'Substantially Abate' by 2023 But Significant Risks Remain - Yellen

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US inflation could ease substantially by next year with the Federal Reserve's planned interest rate hikes but significant risks will remain to the

economy until it is well past the coronavirus pandemic, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Friday.

"It's important to note that professional forecasters think that inflation will substantially abate next year," Yellen told a virtual event on The Davos Agenda. "Part of this view is likely driven by the expectation that the Federal Reserve will continue to account for these pressures as it fulfills its dual mandate."

The Federal Reserve is mandated with ensuring healthy economic growth by keeping inflation at around 2% a year and targeting "maximum employment" among Americans, defined by a jobless rate of 4% or below.

On its first goal, the Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus in March 2020, and has kept them there since in order to aid recovery.

As a result, the US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982, after trillions of dollars of relief spending by the government, higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Fed now says it may have to execute a series of rate hikes to counter such inflation.

On the employment front, however, the US central bank has been more successful, bringing the jobless rate down to 3.9% by December from a record high of 14.8% in April 2020.

Yellen said even after inflation abates, policymakers are expected to have multiple challenges on their hands in the early stages of the post-pandemic era.

"Our economic recovery will face significant risks until we have moved more decisively past the pandemic," she added.

The economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for 2021 and 4% for 2022.

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Biden to Meet With National Security Team This Weekend to Discuss Ukraine Crisis - Psaki

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with his national security team at Camp David this weekend to discuss Ukraine-Russia tensions, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The President will meet this weekend at Camp David with his national security team to discuss the situation, some will be virtual, some will be there in person. We will also continue to consult with our allies and partners and we will respond [to Russia's security proposals] next week in writing as I conveyed," Psaki told a press briefing.

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Curfew Imposed in Syria's al-Hasaka Amid Search for Jail Attackers - SDC Representative

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The authorities in the city of al-Hasaka in northeast Syria have imposed a curfew amid the search for the perpetrators of the attack on the Ghwayran prison who attempted to free terrorists belonging to the Islamic State (banned in Russia), Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) Representative in the United States Bassam Saker told Sputnik.

"There is a curfew now in place and we ask people to help in search operation, as they [attackers] are hiding in this neighborhood," Saker said on Friday.

On Thursday, Islamic State terrorists attacked a Kurdish-managed Ghwairan prison when a car bomb hit the entrance of the facility and caused another blast nearby. The attack was conducted to enable prisoners to escape from the facility.

Saker said while it is still unknown whether any prisoners managed to escape, the prison now is under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Saker also confirmed that one SDF member died and seven were injured in the attack.

"Three civilians were killed by the terrorists when they entered the neighborhood," he said. "The local residents living in the vicinity are scared."

In September, Saker told Sputnik that SDF-managed prisons in Syria still host about 5,000 foreign terrorists because no country is willing to take them back.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011. In late 2017, the authorities declared that the Islamic State was defeated in Syria and Iraq, but counterterrorism operations are still ongoing.

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FBI Charges Texas Man for Issuing Threats to Official Election Workers - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - FBI officers have arrested a resident of the US state of Texas and charged him with making threats to government election officials, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"A Texas man was arrested today in Travis County, Texas, for allegedly sending threatening election-related communications to government officials on Jan. 5, 2021," the Justice Department said in a press release. "Chad Stark, 54, of Leander was arrested this morning in a law enforcement operation carried out by the FBI."

Stark was arrested in the first criminal case brought by the Justice Department's Election Threats Task Force that was announced by US Attorney General Merrick Garland and launched by Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco in late June 2021, the release said.

"[T]he task force is leading the Department's efforts to address threats of violence against election workers, and to ensure that all election workers - whether elected, appointed or volunteer - are able to do their jobs free from threats and intimidation," the release added.

The task force engages with the election community and state and local law enforcement to assess allegations and reports of threats against election workers, and investigates and prosecutes those cases in partnership with FBI field offices and Attorneys' Offices throughout the United States, according to the release.

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US to Work With Tokyo, Seoul on Next Steps to Discourage N.Korea's Provocations - Official

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a virtual meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio made clear that Washington will work closely with Tokyo and Seoul to discourage North Korea from engaging in further provocations, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"The President made clear that we would be working closely with South Korea and Japan on next steps to discourage possible provocations that might follow on," the US official said during a conference call regarding North Korea's multiple missile launches this month.

Pyongyang confirmed it launched on Monday two tactical guided missiles that it claims precisely hit an island target in the East Sea of Korea. It became its fourth missile test in a month. On the first two occasions, Pyongyang claimed to have successfully tested hypersonic missiles.

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Biden to Discuss Russia Talks With Blinken, National Security Team Saturday - White House

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will inform President Joe Biden about his meeting with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and the president will then meet with his national security team over the weekend, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken is meeting with his Russian counterpart this morning, and he's going to be talking to the President tomorrow. [Biden's] going to be talking to his national security team tomorrow. He gets everyday updates," Psaki said.

Blinken said he will be consulting with Biden, his National Security Team and members of Congress as well as critical allies and partners in the coming days on the meeting with Lavrov.

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Biden During Talks With Kishida Expressed Intention to Visit Japan This Spring - Official

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during his talks with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Friday indicated his intention to visit Japan this spring for a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a senior administration official told a briefing.

The Quad brings together the US, India, Japan and Australia.

"Prime Minister Kishida invited President Biden for an official visit to Japan and, at the same time his intention to host a Quad meeting in late spring, President Biden accepted the invitation," the official said.

The official added that Biden did "indicate his intention to visit Japan next spring."

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FBI Investigating Whether Hostage Taker at Texas Synagogue Acted With Others - Garland

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The FBI is investigating whether the British national who held four people hostage for several hours at a Texas synagogue before being killed by police acted alone or with others, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Friday.

"The FBI is now working full time to determine whether this perpetrator acted alone or with others," Garland said during remarks at the US Conference of Mayors meeting.

On Thursday, two men were arrested in Manchester and Birmingham as part of an ongoing investigation into the attack on the Texas synagogue.

The attacker, who was later identified as Malik Faisal Akram, took four people hostage in the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, during Sabbath services.

After a standoff that lasted for several hours, the hostages managed to escape and Akram, who had reportedly arrived in the United States via New York City's JFK International Airport two weeks earlier, was killed by the police.

US media reported that Akram claimed to be the brother of convicted terrorist Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman who allegedly had ties to al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia). Akram was reportedly demanding freedom for his sister, who is serving an 86-year sentence in a US federal prison for trying to kill US officers in Afghanistan.

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US Rate Hikes Could 'Throw Cold Water' on Countries With High Dollar Debt - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Impending rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve could "throw cold water" on countries already experiencing weak recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, and the central bank needs to communicate its actions clearly to avoid more distress to them, the International Monetary Fund managing director said Friday.

"What the Fed does has implications for us and has implications for other countries, especially for those that have a high level of dollar-denominated debt," Kristalina Georgieva told a virtual event on The Davos Agenda. "And that could throw cold water on some countries already in a weak recovery. And this is why, what the Fed is doing needs to be clearly communicated to prevent surprises. It's hugely important."

The Fed slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, and has kept them there since to aid US recovery from the pandemic.

But the central bank now says it may have to execute a series of rate hikes to counter runaway inflation, triggered by trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payouts and supply chain disruptions.

The US Consumer Price Index, an important barometer for inflation, grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982. The Fed's own target for inflation is a mere 2%.

Georgieva said countries with high levels of dollar-denominated debt should try to restructure their payments as soon as possible.

"Act now. If you can extend maturities, please do it. If you have currency mismatches, now is the moment to address them," she said.

Georgieva said two-thirds of such countries were either in "debt distress" or in danger of falling into one, and that was double the number from 2015.

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Kurdish-Led SDC Says Will Ask US for Assistance After IS Attacks Jail in Northeast Syria

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political wing of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, will request a meeting with the US to ask for more security assistance after the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia) attacked a prison in northeastern Syria, Bassam Saker, SDC representative in the United States, told Sputnik on Friday.

"We are requesting a meeting to ask for more support," Saker said. "They are helping us with security in general, but it is we who secure the area."

Saker went on to say that they will also appeal to other countries whose citizens are imprisoned in northeastern Syria, to bring them back and prosecute them.

"We should find a solution to this situation with prisoners," he added.

On Thursday, IS terrorists attacked a Kurdish-managed prison in northeast Syria with a car bomb detonated at the entrance of the Ghwairan prison in Hasaka, followed by another blast nearby. The attack was intended to allow prisoners to escape from the facility.

Saker stressed that while it's still unclear whether any prisoners had managed to escape, the prison now is under control of the SDF.

In September, Saker told Sputnik that SDF-managed prisons still contain around 5,000 foreign terrorists, since no country wants to take them back. The number has not changed in many months.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011.

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US Imposes Global Terrorism Sanctions on 3 Individuals, 10 Entities in Lebanon – Treasury
(Updates with more details , background in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) on Friday added three individual and, ten entities in Lebanon, Zambia, and Germany to its list of designated persons for an alleged facilitation of global terrorism by Hezbollah.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC's SDN List: AYAD, Adnan..., AYAD, Jihad ... DIAB, Ali Adel," OFAC said in a press release.

The sanctions also target companies in Lebanon, Zambia, and Germany for their alleged links to the sanctioned individuals, including Golden Group Sal Off Shore, Golden Group Trading SRL, Hamer and Nail Construction Limited, Hamidco Investment Limited and Top Fashion Gmbh Konfektionsbugelei.

The US Treasury alleges that Adnan Ayad is a Hezbollah member who used the Lebanon-based company Al Amir Co. for Engineering, Construction, and General Trade SARL to raise funds for the terror group.

Jihad Adnan Ayad is a son of Adnan Ayad and allegedly a member of Hezbollah. He is designated for providing financial, material and other kinds of support to Hezbollah, the release said.

Ali Adel Diab is a son of Adel Diab who has also been designated for supporting terrorism and is the director of Zambia-based Hamer and Nail Construction which is also sanctioned for assisting and supporting Hezbollah, the release said.

"Today's action exposes and targets Hizballah's misuse of the international financial system to raise and launder funds for its destabilizing activities as the Lebanese people suffer during an unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanon," the release added.

US law requires blocking of all properties and interests in property of designated persons and entities, which remain under US control. The sanctions regime also prohibits Americans citizens from having transactions with them, according to the release.

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Canada to Offer Ukraine Loan of Up to \$96Mln - Trudeau

(Updates with additional information in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Canada will offer a loan of up to \$96 million to the government of Ukraine to help support the country's economy, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"Canada will offer a loan of up to 120 million dollars to the government of Ukraine," Trudeau said. "This loan will help support Ukraine's economic resilience."

Trudeau explained that the Canadian government is also exploring other options to provide additional financial and other support to Ukraine.

Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joy assured Ukraine of Canada's support amid the current tensions in and outside the country.

"The situation in Ukraine is complex, and we are prepared to provide support for the country's economic resiliency," Joy said in a separate statement, adding that Ottawa will continue cooperating with partners on the issue of support for Ukraine.

In addition to the loan, Canada has offered up to \$4.7 million to support the implementation of the loan, the statement said.

Officials from the two countries are already holding discussions on the potential terms of the loan and a timeline for its implementation, the statement added.

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Attacks on UAE by Yemen's Houthis Not Acceptable - UN Security Council President

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - The recent attacks carried out by Yemen's Houthi movement on targets in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are unacceptable and the UN Security Council strongly condemns them, Norway's Ambassador to the United Nations Mona Juul, who presides with the UN Security Council in the month of January, said on Friday.

On Monday, several Houthi drones targeted the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi, including the construction site of a new airport and fuel tankers near depots of oil company ADNOC, killing three people and injuring six others. The UAE is part of the Saudi-led coalition that is involved in the ongoing war in Yemen on the side of President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi against the Houthi movement.

"From our side, we have certainly condemned... the attack," Juul said. "We just were told this morning that there has been another attack from the coalition forces. And we are very much concerned on what's going on and call for de-escalation and hopefully back to the negotiating table."

Juul emphasized that the attacks are not acceptable and the UN security Council "absolutely" calls for restraints on all sides.

"The escalation of the military conflict in Yemen is really very, very alarming," she said.

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Ohio Accepts \$3.5Mln Deal With Volkswagen in Carbon Gas Fraud Case - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US state of Ohio on Friday agreed to a \$3.5 million settlement with Volkswagen over allegations that the German automaker broke environmental laws by tampering with computer software in its products to hide the true levels of their carbon dioxide emissions, the Ohio Attorney General Office said.

"Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost has agreed to a \$3.5 million settlement with Volkswagen over claims the auto manufacturer violated state environmental laws by manipulating the computer

software in its vehicles to mask carbon dioxide emissions," the Attorney General's Office said in a press release.

The settlement resolves a lawsuit filed in Franklin County Common Pleas Court in 2016 by the Ohio Attorney General's Office and is separate from another related lawsuit settled in 2016 by the same office on behalf of consumers who were misled by Volkswagen's claims of vehicle performance, the release said.

"The damage to the environment and consumer trust required us to hold Volkswagen accountable and this settlement does that. These funds will go toward protecting Ohio from other environmental hazards," the release added.

Volkswagen has also agreed to pay restitution of at least \$5,100 directly to each affected Volkswagen owner and either buy back their vehicle or make repairs to their vehicle to reduce emissions. There were 13,998 vehicles sold in Ohio that were subject to the buyback program, according to the release.

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UN Chief Calls for Resolving All Issues in Ukraine Exclusively Through Diplomacy

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN chief Antonio Guterres on Friday pledged to make every effort to promote de-escalation of tensions in Ukraine and resolution of all disputes through diplomacy.

"I pledge to spare no effort to mobilize the international community – and step up our push for peace," Guterres told the UN General Assembly, speaking of his priorities for 2022. "In Ukraine, to reduce tensions, and urge that all issues be addressed exclusively through diplomacy," he said.

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Canada to Offer Loan of Up To \$96Mln to Ukraine – Trudeau

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"Canada will offer a loan of up to 120 million dollars to the government of Ukraine," Trudeau said. "This loan will help support Ukraine's economic resilience."

Ottawa is exploring additional options to provide financial and other support to Kiev, he added.

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US Imposes Global Terrorism Sanctions on 3 Individuals, 10 Entities in Lebanon - Treasury

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The sanctions also target companies in Lebanon, Zambia, and Germany for their alleged links to the sanctioned individuals, including Golden Group Sal Off Shore, Golden Group Trading SRL, Hamer and Nail Construction Limited, Hamidco Investment Limited and Top fashion Gmbh Konfektionsbugelei.

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US Public Approval of Democrat-Run Congress Drops to 18% - Gallup Poll

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Public approval of the US Congress, both chambers of which are currently controlled by President Joe Biden's Democratic Party, has collapsed to 18%, the lowest rating recorded since the president and the current House took office a year ago and it is continuing to fall, a new Gallup poll showed on Friday.

"Americans' approval rating of the job Congress is doing has fallen to 18%, the lowest point in more than a year, as congressional Democrats' efforts to pass spending and voting rights bills have stalled," Gallup announced in a news statement.

The approval rating has fallen by 5% just in the past month, and the additional dissatisfaction stems from Democrats' frustration with the parliament, the poll found.

"The latest five-percentage-point decline in congressional approval is largely attributed to a 10-point decline among Democrats whose frustration appears to be mounting with their party's senators and representatives who hold majorities in both houses of Congress," Gallup said. Approval of Congress among independent voters is also falling fast with another 5% decline in the past month while support among Republicans remains steady at previous rock low levels, Gallup added.

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UN Chief Warns World Must Go Into Emergency Mode, Next COVID-19 Strain May Be Worse

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on Friday the next COVID-19 variant may be worse than Omicron, and the global community must go into emergency mode to fight the pandemic.

"We must go into emergency mode in the COVID-19 battle," Guterres told the UN General Assembly, speaking of his priorities for 2022. "Omicron is yet another warning. The next variant may be worse."

Guterres added that stopping the spread of the virus everywhere in the world must be at the top of the agenda for this year.

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Pelosi Says US House to Introduce Competitiveness Bill to Bolster Investment in Chips

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Friday that the lower chamber of the Congress is going to introduce new legislation aimed at bolstering investment in research and manufacturing of semiconductors in the United States amid the global chip shortage.

"The House will soon introduce its competitiveness bill. The House legislation will supercharge our investment in chips, strengthen our supply chain and transform our research capacity, plus many other key provisions," Pelosi said in a letter to her Democratic colleagues.

Pelosi said she believes the bill will strengthen national and economic security and the financial security of families in the United States.

This bill is also referred to as a "China Competitiveness bill" as the Biden administration strives to catch up with the growing gap between the United States and its key Asian competitor in terms of electronic chip production and overall economic influence.

If passed, the new legislation is expected to secure billions of dollars in stimulating research and domestic chip production.