

**12/27/22 Tuesday**

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GOP Dissident Faction Member Gaetz Pushes Jim Jordan to Challenge McCarthy in House Speaker Race  
By - Fantine Gardinier

With just days left to secure a majority of votes, US Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) is rapidly running out of time to finalize his bid to become the next speaker of the US House of Representatives. A small group of GOP lawmakers has proven a potent obstacle, demanding concessions from McCarthy in exchange for their support.

Poking the hornet's nest yet another time, US Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) urged Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) to run against McCarthy in the race to become House speaker, the leader of the lower chamber of Congress and third in the line of presidential succession, after the vice president. "All I want for Christmas is @Jim\_Jordan to realize he should be Speaker of the House!" Gaetz tweeted on Saturday, which was Christmas Eve in Western Christianity.

Jordan is a co-founder and leader of the Freedom Caucus, a small-but-vocal ultra-conservative faction of House Republicans that grew out of the Tea Party movement and enthusiastically supported former US President Donald Trump. While its roster is not fully known, the Freedom Caucus is believed to comprise about 20% of the GOP's House membership.

The Freedom Caucus previously torpedoed the 2015 drive for the Speaker's seat by McCarthy, a longtime opponent of the group, eventually supporting winner Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) for the position.

Not all of the caucus has rebelled against McCarthy's push this time around, though. Rather, just five House Republicans have explicitly [said or strongly implied](#) they will not vote for McCarthy, with several others basing their support for him on extracting pledges to change certain rules or commit to certain policy priorities.

The GOP's majority is extremely slim, with 222 Republican seats; McCarthy (or Jordan) needs 218 to win if all members are present and vote, meaning just four dissidents is all it would take to foul his chances.

For a century, selection of the House speaker has been a foregone conclusion. [Only 14 times](#) since Congress was formed in 1789 has the speaker vote gone to a second ballot, with the most recent being Rep. Frederick Gillet (R-MA) in 1923, which took nine rounds of voting.

McCarthy is already being opposed by another Freedom Caucus member, Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ), who enjoys little support among Republicans. Biggs, Gaetz, and Reps. Ralph Norman (R-SC), Matt Rosendale (R-MT), and Bob Good (R-VA) are the five lawmakers explicitly against McCarthy as speaker.

Others, including Reps. Scott Perry (R-PA) and Lauren Boebert (R-CO), have said they would only support McCarthy if the ability of individual members to bring a "motion to vacate the chair" is restored. The rule was restricted in 2019 to being filed only by a majority vote of the caucus,

after the threat of such a motion led to the ouster of House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) in 2015.

Other demands include requiring a 72-hour window between the release of a bill's final text and a vote in the full chamber, and that the House should block bills by Republican senators who voted for the \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill [recently passed](#) by Congress. McCarthy railed against the bill last week, which was passed with a majority of House lawmakers voting by proxy - a practice he says he will end if elected as speaker.

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COVID-19, Mass Shootings & Mar-a-Lago Raid: What Were the Top US Headlines in 2022?  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The past year has witnessed a shift in American politics on several fronts, including the striking down of a long-held federal right of women to seek an abortion, a raid by federal police on the former president's estate, and the persistence of mass death by both illness and violence. As the year 2022 draws to a close, let's take a look back at some of its biggest stories in the United States.

**Biden Declares Pandemic 'Over' as Omicron Persists**

As the world ushered in the year 2022, it did so amid the worst-yet outbreak of COVID-19, driven by the Omicron variant of the virus, which was more capable than ever of dodging immune protections. January 4 saw more than 1 million new cases in the United States, and in May, the US officially passed 1 million COVID-19 deaths. The virus was clearly "here to stay," as pundits put it.

In March, Pfizer began selling a new antiviral therapy against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, called Paxlovid. However, hopes that it would help end the pandemic were again dashed after it was revealed to have limited effectiveness, including a troublesome "rebound" infection several weeks later for some people - as US President Joe Biden discovered when he contracted the virus in July.

Biden declared in a September interview that the pandemic was "over," although he acknowledged that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, was still "a problem." However, health officials didn't concur, especially the World Health Organization (WHO), which gave the official word about the outbreak becoming a pandemic. Biden's administration also scaled back most pandemic-era aid programs, including mass testing, but extended the moratorium on student loan payments.

In September, Pfizer and Moderna rolled out modified "bivalent" booster shots that inoculated recipients against both the original SARS-CoV-2 virus and specifically the Omicron variant. However, like the prior vaccines, these too had limited preventative ability, and were presented as mostly useful for weakening the effects of the virus instead of blocking infection entirely.

**Roe vs. Wade Overturned**

While the US Supreme Court ruling that formally overturned the 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision didn't come until late June, protests and outcry began in early May, thanks to an [unprecedented](#)

[leak](#) of the draft majority decision of the court. The leak was denounced as a “grave betrayal of trust” and an investigation was made to find the source.

Meanwhile, demonstrators rallied in huge numbers outside the high court on Capitol Hill, but also upped the ante by marching to the homes of some of the six conservative justices.

Called *Dobbs vs. Jackson*, the court’s June decision found that abortion access could not be guaranteed at the federal level by an action of the court, but only through legislation. As a result, numerous pre-Roe laws banning abortion immediately reactivated, and several states rushed to pass new restrictive bills. However, their efforts in several states failed, including Kansas, long seen as a conservative bastion, as well as in Kentucky and Michigan, among others.

However, the court’s decision also suggested that several other similar rulings could also be overturned in the future, including decisions that legalized interracial marriage, same-sex marriage, access to contraception, and the right to privacy. Democrats attempted to pass bills protecting these rights as well as abortion, but only succeeded at passing a truncated Respect for Marriage Act that protected aspects of same-gender and interracial marriages.

#### US Inflation/Recession Fears

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Reserve chose to tolerate rising inflation out of a fear that attempting to clamp down on it by raising interest rates would damage the country’s recovery from the dramatic crash of March 2020, when global society ground to a halt amid the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, by early 2022, inflation was reaching levels not seen in 40 years and the rising prices were beginning to have political consequences, so the central bank was obliged to take action.

Every month after March, the Fed raised interest rates, but inflation didn’t begin to slow its pace of increase until the late summer, and was still at elevated rates by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, fears the US economy would “burn out” by the summer continued, and the US technically entered a recession, although a bizarre economic situation meant that job numbers were still increasing and wages remained high, even as the dollar continued to lose its value and the nation’s Gross Domestic Product stagnated.

As the year ended, virtually all economic predictions saw storm clouds on the horizon, and investors were bracing for the coming recession.

#### Mass Shootings

When this article went to publication, an unofficial tally had recorded 723 mass shootings in the United States in 2022, defined as the shooting of at least four people in a single incident, not counting the shooter. While the violence was heartbreaking, two incidents shocked the nation above all: the May 14 shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, that killed 10 people, most of them Black shoppers, and the May 24 shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, that killed 22 people, most of them children.

The two incidents helped amplify calls for new gun control legislation, but also put the spotlight on the rising danger of white supremacist violence in Buffalo, and the hefty budgets given to police forces despite their refusal to take action. While some small measures were passed by lawmakers, a major gun control move eluded Democrats, as conservatives remained adamantly against further measures.

#### Elon Musk Buys Twitter

In April, billionaire industrialist Elon Musk reached a deal with Twitter’s board to buy the social media giant for \$44 billion, rescuing it from a yearslong financial nightmare. However, Musk’s

takeover was delayed until late October as he threatened to back out, accusing Twitter of withholding vital information from him about the platform.

After his takeover, Musk ushered in sweeping changes, not the least of which included firing or driving out roughly three-quarters of Twitter's staff. Although he pledged to protect free speech on the platform and rescinded lifetime bans on a number of right-wing figures, [Musk also drew criticism](#) for banning comedy impersonations on the site as well as a number of left-wing journalists and accounts that were critical of him or reported on his actions.

Then in December, Musk flipped the tables yet again by turning over information to a group of journalists about how prior to his takeover, Twitter had worked to silence certain accounts and news topics, including with FBI guidance. The "Twitter Files" were both panned for what was seen by some as catering to right-wing narratives, as well as praised for peeling back the veil of social media policing of so-called "disinformation" in the wake of the Russiagate affair.

However, by December, Musk had seemingly had enough, and after a poll on his account showed that users wanted him to resign, Musk said he would step aside as soon as a new CEO "foolish enough to take the job" could be found.

#### 'Red Wave' Fails to Materialize in Midterms

It's a long-observed trend that the president's party doesn't perform as well in the midterm elections, held at the 2-year mark between presidential elections, as they did in the previous election. With the Democrats in control of the House, the Senate, and the White House, it was already expected they would lose one or both houses of Congress in the 2022 elections. Add to that Biden's struggle for meaningful progress on his political agenda, and a growing economic crisis, and Republicans and Democrats alike predicted a "red wave" of conservative victories. However, that's not how things shaped up in the November vote.

While the Republicans did take back the US House of Representatives, they hold a narrow majority and are beset by internal disputes that threaten to block Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) from becoming House speaker.

In the Senate, Republicans failed to capture a majority, although because Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ) left the Democrats to become the upper chamber's third unaffiliated member, they technically have more seats than the Democrats do. However, all three Independents are far more likely to vote with the Democrats than the Republicans, giving liberals a de facto majority, if a razor-thin one.

Governors' races were also a middling success for Republicans, although the sweeping victory of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' reelection campaign helped boost his popularity among Republicans, who afterwards favored him over former US President Donald Trump as their 2024 contender.

#### FBI Raids Mar-a-Lago

When Trump left the White House in January 2021, he took with him box after box of documents, many of which were supposed to be turned over to the US National Archives and Records Administration. However, as NARA and later the FBI learned, many of the files, taken to Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate, were classified, with some rated as top secret.

After a January request failed to result in Trump returning all the documents to the Archives, the Department of Justice dispatched investigators, which culminated in an FBI raid in early August that resulted in the seizure of hundreds of files.

While no charges have been pressed against Trump, the search and seizure warrant cited the 1917 Espionage Act, as well as federal statutes against mishandling of documents and obstruction of justice, as concerns justifying the raid.

A protracted legal battle has since ensued, with Trump claiming the raid was a “witch hunt” by a Democrat-controlled FBI that had long been out to destroy his presidency, and later his attempts to return to office. The scandal is one among many for Trump, which has helped to lower his standing among Republicans, even after he formally declared his presidential campaign in November.

#### Ketanji Brown Jackson Appointed to Supreme Court

In January, Associate Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer announced his intent to retire from the high court at the age of 83, having spent 27 years on the court. His imminent departure created a crisis, but also an opportunity for Biden to nominate his first justice to the nine-member court, which rules on the constitutionality of laws in cases appealed before it as well as actions by the Executive Branch and certain federal entities, such as ambassadors. Breyer had been one of the court’s three remaining liberal justices, who became outnumbered by several conservative appointments under Trump, marking a sharp shift in the high court’s politics that led to the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, among other changes.

Biden nominated Ketanji Brown Jackson, a federal judge previously appointed to the position in 2012 by then-US President Barack Obama. A Black woman and former public defender, Jackson’s nomination earned the praise of civil rights groups, but she faced stiff opposition by conservatives in the US Senate, who grilled her on her supposed “radical left” politics, including her positions on abortion, gender identity, and the anti-racist school of historiography referred to by conservative politicians as “critical race theory.”

Despite the opposition, polls showed that 64% of Americans believed it was good for a Black woman to be appointed to the court, and several moderate Republican senators voted with their Democratic colleagues, approving her nomination. Jackson was sworn into office on June 30, 2022.

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#### Senior Chinese Legislative Body Agrees to Hong Kong’s Request to Interpret 2020 Security Law By - Fantine Gardinier

China’s 2020 National Security Law aroused fury across the West, where it was condemned as an “authoritarian” crackdown. However, those same nations have long supported anti-communist movements in Hong Kong and other parts of China as part of an effort to stop the rise of a socialist state with the potential to displace the US as a world leader.

On Tuesday, the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee heard a motion by Xia Baolong, director of the State Council’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, for the committee to interpret relevant parts of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law, according to a statement by the office of Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-Chiu.

The committee's decision to interpret the law will resolve months of political debate triggered by jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai Chee-ying attempting to hire a British lawyer to defend him against charges in a Hong Kong court that he [violated the security law](#) by colluding with foreign forces. Lai has been a UK national since 1996, and is one of the major bankrollers of the Hong Kong protest movement that is against integration with the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong's Department of Justice asked the courts to deny Lai's attempts to hire British King's Counsel Timothy Owen as his lawyer, raising objections that included the risk that a foreign national could learn state secrets during the trial, but the autonomy city's Supreme Court ruled in Lai's favor. Lee then appealed to the NPC Standing Committee, a legislative body that meets more regularly than the larger NPC, from whom its members are elected. The law was passed by the Standing Committee in June 2020 as a means of resolving a crisis that began the previous summer, when protests driven by Western-backed demonstrators took to the streets to challenge a proposed extradition treaty between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and the Chinese mainland. HKSAR has been a part of China since 1997, when it was returned following 150 years of British colonial rule, but it has retained parts of its liberal, capitalist system as part of a deal to ease its integration into the socialist PRC. Macau was returned to China from Portugal two years later under a similar agreement. The [2020 law extended the reach](#) of a previous National Security Law that had excluded HKSAR, banning four particular crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign organizations, to the SAR as well. Detractors claimed Beijing was stifling dissent, and the [US accused Beijing](#) of authoritarianism and of breaking the 50-year autonomy deal that underpinned the city's return to Chinese rule. In March, Xia said it was possible that the arrangement, called "One Country, Two Systems," could last far beyond its 2047 official expiration date. That is in keeping with comments by other Chinese figures, including Lee's predecessor, Carrie Lam, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, who has said he hopes for the "long-term successful practice" of "One Country, Two Systems."

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Tesla's Stock Plummets 10.6% on News Shanghai Gigafactory Will Scale Back Production Next Month

By - Fantine Gardinier

Electric car manufacturer Tesla has suffered an incredible loss of value in 2022, with its stock price plummeting by 72% since January 1. CEO Elon Musk has blamed the decline on rising interest rates, but critics say there are deeper structural issues at play. Another collapse in Tesla's stock has set the company up for its worst-ever month, quarter, and year, having lost 72.3% of its value since the start of the year. When the New York Stock Exchange closed on Tuesday, Tesla was valued at just \$109.52 per share. The latest loss was provoked by news on Tuesday of dramatic cuts to output next month at the Shanghai Gigafactory, the company's largest manufacturing plant. The plant is already under an

eight-day closure in response to rising COVID-19 cases in the city, with the plant expected to reopen on January 1.

However, a reduced production schedule will now begin on January 3 and run until January 19, followed by a total closure from January 20 until January 31. The Lunar New Year, the biggest holiday on the Chinese calendar, begins on January 22.

Ironically, some of Tesla's other troubles may help it to weather the storm. The company has a surplus of unsold cars, which it has tried to get rid of by [offering buyers a \\$7,500 discount](#) if they'll buy and take delivery of one of their most popular electric vehicles, the Model 3 sedan or Model Y sport utility vehicle.

CEO Elon Musk's fascination with his newest acquisition, social media giant Twitter, has continued to draw the ire of Tesla investors, who have blamed him for Tesla's struggles.

"Tesla stock price now reflects the value of having no CEO," Ross Gerber, head of Gerber Kawasaki Wealth and Investment Management, a Tesla shareholder, [fumed on Twitter](#) on December 20. "Great job Tesla BOD [Board of Directors] - Time for a shakeup," he added. Gerber then iterated a list of demands of Musk, including knowing when he'd return to Tesla from micromanaging Twitter, and communication about Musk's massive sales of Tesla stock. Year-to-date, the billionaire industrialist has liquidated about \$40 billion of his shares in the company.

The steady decline in Tesla's stock has made it a favorite target of short-sellers, who Musk [sought to court](#) last year amid the "Gamestonk" amateur trading craze. According to a report by S3 Partners last week, traders have made \$15 billion in profits betting against Musk and Tesla this year - a trend that went "into overdrive" after Musk's deal to buy Twitter for \$44 billion was announced in April.

Musk has argued the decline in Tesla's stock has been driven by [interest rate increases](#) by the US Federal Reserve, which hiked its Federal Funds Rate considerably since March in an effort to stop record-high inflation.

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Video: Thousands Stranded Across US Amid Bevy of Cancellations From Southwest Airlines  
By - Ian DeMartino

In a typical year, 1-3% of airline flights are canceled. Even before Winter Storm Elliott, 2022 was on pace to have the highest cancellation rate outside of the pandemic since 2014.

Southwest Airlines has canceled thousands of flights nationwide, stranding holiday travelers and frustrating customers as the company struggles to resume normal operations after a deadly winter storm.

As of 2:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Tuesday, 3,020 flights either originating in or arriving in the United States were canceled. The vast majority of those flights, 2,590, were from Southwest Airlines. The canceled flights represent 63% of Southwest's total flights in the country and another 16%, 655, have been delayed.

Things do not appear to be getting better anytime soon for Southwest customers. Roughly the same amount, 2,477 flights have already been canceled by Southwest for Wednesday, and 1,138 Thursday flights have also been axed.

Southwest Airlines CEO Bob Jordan said in an interview with the Wall Street Journal Monday evening that problems are expected to continue. "In all likelihood, we'll have another tough day tomorrow as we work our way out of this," he said.

One reason Southwest is having more difficulty recovering from the storm compared to other major airlines is that Southwest operates differently than most of its competitors.

Most major airlines utilize a "hub and spoke" system, which has crews and planes return to major hubs after each trip. This allows airlines to easily cut off areas affected by weather and resume service quickly.

Southwest instead manages its routes with a "point to point" system. When it is functioning properly, Southwest's system enables more direct flights but when things go wrong it can cause a cascading effect, leaving crew and planes scattered across the country and disrupting service. Southwest customers have flocked to social media, documenting their tribulations by posting videos of hundreds of pieces of luggage left on the airport floor and travelers stranded in the airport, sleeping in seats and on the ground.

The Transportation Workers Union (TWU) Local 556, which represents Southwest flight attendants, blamed Southwest's "antiquated" system, claiming workers have demanded modernization for years.

In a letter issued on Monday, TWU 556 president put the issue squarely in the hands of management. "The way Southwest Airlines has treated its flight crews can only be termed 'despicable,'" Montgomery said in the letter. "But at this point, the many years of failure by management, despite many unions' demands to modernize, has left flight attendants fatigued, stranded, hungry and cold – on Christmas! This impacts lives and threatens the safety for all."

The US Department of Transportation said it is looking into "Southwest's unacceptable rate of cancellations and delays & reports of lack of prompt customer service." Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg added he is monitoring the situation and will have more to say on Wednesday.

Winter Storm Elliott not only caused flight cancellations and delays nationwide; it was also the deadliest winter storm in the United States since 1993's "The Storm of the Century" killed 318 people.

Winter Storm Elliott was responsible for at least 64 deaths nationwide, including 30 in the Buffalo, New York, region where state and federal military police have been called in to enforce a driving ban. The storm also knocked out power for hundreds of thousands of residents in multiple states from Texas to Maine.

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Qatar Built State-of-Art Stadiums for 2022 World Cup in Football - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - The stadiums built in Qatar for the 2022 World

Cup in football were pioneered under sustainable energy requirements and some will be dismantled in order to be sent to developing countries that need them, Qatar Ambassador to the United Nations Sheikha Alya bint Ahmed Al Thani told Sputnik.

"The stadiums were state of the art in terms of design, construction and management; they met all the sustainability's requirements," Al Thani said. "Moreover, some of them will be disassembled and donated to some developing countries. And this is an excellent way of utilizing our resources and helping the developing countries and communities," Al Thani said. The ambassador said Stadium 974 was the first transportable football facility that was built by using 974 recycled shipping containers in what resembled Lego pieces. According to reports, the parts will be sent to Uruguay because the country is planning a bid to host the World Cup in 2030, together with Argentina, Chile and Paraguay.

The international governing body of association football, better known as FIFA, said the stadiums in Qatar were 30% more energy efficient and recycled water vapor from cooling systems was used to irrigate the surrounding stadium landscapes. In addition, FIFA said 90% of temporary diesel generators were replaced by electric substations, providing "greener" power and reducing air pollution, while all stadiums also had GSAS Seasonal Energy Efficiency certification.

Moreover, FIFA directed World Cup attendees to help it achieve its carbon neutral goal by suggesting that they solely use public transportation, drink water responsibly and use natural light instead of appliances.

Finally, FIFA recommended switching off the air-conditioning units in accommodations and setting the temperature above 23 degrees.

Qatar was the first country in the Arab world to host the World Cup in football. The tournament was held from November 20 to December 18.

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UN Negotiation Lounge Transformed Into 'Sports Diplomacy' During World Cup - Qatar Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - Some of the historic United Nations conference rooms become areas for diplomats to gather and watch the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and negotiate in what became to be known as "sports diplomacy," Qatari Ambassador to the world body Sheikha Alya bint Ahmed Al Thani told Sputnik.

The United Nations delegate lounge became a gathering point for diplomats to watch the World Cup football games on a giant screen provided by the Qatar mission to the world body. A second screen was placed in the Vienna Café, which serves as the cafeteria for diplomats and United Nations staff.

"In the middle of this historic diplomatic space that wintered many key negotiation processes, we witnessed for a full month the joy of watching football and creating the best space for sports diplomacy," Al Thani said.

The Delegates Lounge is where diplomats and often state leaders gather to negotiate on sensitive issues.

Al Thani said the World Cup is a transformative tool whereby the entire world comes together to enjoy the event just as diplomats in the United Nations did at the gathering points in the Delegates Lounge.

The Qatar ambassador pointed out that the World Cup strengthened social capital, built trust and enabled people to get to know each other on a different level.

During crucial matches, the Delegates Lounge was often occupied to capacity, and ambassadors could be seen chatting and cheering together. Yet, also present was a different level of sensitivity than that brought by conflicts.

Qatar was the first Arab country to host the FIFA World Cup. The tournament was held from November 20 to December 18 and reportedly cost the host country some \$200 billion to prepare the event.

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Qatar to Work on Reducing Politicization of Football After Holding World Cup - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - Qatar will devote its efforts to decrease the politicization and radicalization of football after having hosted the FIFA World Cup 2022, the country's Ambassador to the United Nations Sheikha Alya bint Ahmed Al Thani told Sputnik. "This event was an opportunity for learning and exploring the depth of plurality of our world, and we will continue to adhere to our national and Arab values, as well as international shared values and standards. We will be working together to reduce the politicization and racialization of football in general," Al Thani said.

The ambassador pointed out that Qatar respects other cultures, but expects the same in return. Prior to the start of the World Cup, Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy attempted to send a video greeting to the participants and viewers, but FIFA chief Gianni Infantino refused to grant permission, saying such a request was an attempt to politicize the event.

Also, the match between the United States and Iran drew comments from many political observers and generated a wave of geopolitical analysis. The UN crowd was also fully invested in the outcome of the game on this day - some strongly wishing the United States to win and others Iran.

The Qatar mission to the United Nations brought two big television screens to the world body headquarters so that diplomats and staff could watch the World Cup matches.

Qatar was the first Arab country to host the FIFA World Cup, which took place from November 20 - December 18.

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Blinken Vows to Press for Paul Whelan's Release on Fourth Anniversary of His Detention

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is renewing its call for the immediate release of Paul Whelan on the fourth anniversary of his detention in Russia, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today marks four years that Paul Whelan has spent wrongfully detained, away from his family, suffering through an unfathomable ordeal. Russian authorities subjected him to a secret trial and sentenced him to 16 years in a Russian penal colony based on secret evidence. His detention remains unacceptable, and we continue to press for his immediate release at every opportunity," Blinken said.

Blinken added that he is committed to freeing Whelan along with all other US "hostages and wrongful detainees" held around the world.

"As the President said directly to the Whelan family, our efforts to secure Paul's release will not cease until he is back home with his family where he belongs," Blinken said.

Paul Whelan, who was arrested in December 2018, is currently serving a 16-year prison sentence after being convicted on charges of espionage. The convict, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained he is innocent and insisted that he came to Russia for a friend's wedding.

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US Considering Restrictions on Travelers From China Amid COVID-19 Surge – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) – The United States is considering restrictions on travelers from China amid a massive surge in COVID-19 infections, CNBC reported, citing US officials.

On Tuesday, Japan announced it will require a negative coronavirus test for travelers from China. Taiwan also said those arriving from mainland China should undergo COVID-19 testing. "There are mounting concerns in the international community on the ongoing COVID-19 surges in China and the lack of transparent data, including viral genomic sequence data, being reported from the PRC," US officials said in a statement on Tuesday, as quoted by the broadcaster. The lack of this data makes it difficult for public health officials to identify new variants or control the spread of COVID-19 infections, the officials continued.

"The U.S. is following the science and advice of public health experts, consulting with partners, and considering taking similar steps we can take to protect the American people," they added. The Chinese government abruptly dropped three years of harsh COVID-19 controls earlier this month following mass protests, leading to a nationwide surge in infections.

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More Than 3,500 Flights Canceled, Delayed in US – Portal

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) – More than 3,500 flights were canceled or delayed in the United States as the country recovers from a severe winter storm, the FlightAware.com web portal said on Wednesday.

“Total cancellations within, into, or out of the United States today: 2,751,” FlightAware said, adding that another 788 flights were delayed.

Most of the cancellations, or 2,700 flights, came from Southwest Airlines, whose booking systems in recent days have suffered what Biden administration officials are calling a complete "meltdown."

Southwest Airlines canceled more than 60% of its flights on Wednesday, according to the portal. The latest cancellations come after airline called off thousands of flights on Monday and Tuesday, leaving holiday travelers stranded across the country.

President Joe Biden has said his administration is working to hold airlines accountable for the flight disruptions, and the Department of Transportation has said it is particularly concerned about Southwest's "unacceptable rate of cancellations and delays."

Southwest has blamed weather conditions for much of its woes, saying that it was especially hard hit by the winter storm, which pummeled its two largest hubs in Chicago and Denver.

The company has also said that its outdated crew-scheduling software exacerbated scheduling problems, and has promised to "double down" on its plans to upgrade its systems.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said "meltdown is the only word" to describe the situation with Southwest airlines and has vowed to secure refunds and expenses for affected passengers.

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US Erects Sprawling Tent Camp to House Anticipated Surge of Migrants on Southern Border

EL PASO, Texas, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is erecting a sprawling tent camp in El Paso, Texas, to house an anticipated surge of migrants on the US border with Mexico, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Sputnik correspondent reported that a large number of construction crews were active building a large tent camp in the middle of the desert on the outskirts of El Paso, where tens of thousands of migrants have arrived in recent weeks.

The tent camp is possibly being erected on property owned by the US Army, considering its location near the Fort Bliss Army base located in El Paso.

The large tents appear capable of housing tens of thousands of migrants and several large commercial trucks were also seen hauling supplies into the area where the facility is being built. US immigration facilities in El Paso have recently become overwhelmed and unable to hold the thousands of migrants arriving at the border, forcing them to release several hundred on the streets or into local shelters amid freezing temperatures over the weekend.

US Customs and Border Protection, the Homeland Security Department, the Fort Bliss Army Base and the Texas National Guard did not immediately respond to Sputnik's inquiry for comment.

Also on Tuesday, the US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration's request to end the COVID-era Title 42 expulsion policy. Several Republican states had urged the court to leave it in place in order to avert a worsening of the current border crisis.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the Biden administration will comply with the Supreme Court's order and in the meantime will continue to advance preparations to manage the migration on the US-Mexico border.

The United States has seen two consecutive record breaking years of illegal crossings into the United States since Biden assumed office in January 2021. Well over two million illegal crossings into the United States were recorded in fiscal year 2022, according to Customs and Border Protection data.

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Biden Says US Supreme Court Will Decide on Title 42 Border Expulsion Policy's Fate in June

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that the US Supreme Court will decide the fate of the COVID-era Title 42 border expulsion policy in June of 2023, according to the White House press pool.

"The Court will not decide the matter until June but it's overdue," Biden said on Tuesday, according to the press pool.

Biden added that in the meantime, Title 42 must be enforced.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration's request to end the COVID-era Title 42 expulsion policy after several Republican states urged the court to leave it in place in order to avert a worsening of the current border crisis.

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White House Says Will Comply With Court Order Leaving Title 42 Policy in Place

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will comply with the US Supreme Court order granting a request from several Republican states to leave the COVID-era Title 42 immigration policy in place, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

"The Supreme Court's order today keeps the current Title 42 policy in place while the Court reviews the matter in 2023. We will, of course, comply with the order and prepare for the Court's review," Jean-Pierre said in a press release on Tuesday. "Title 42 is a public health measure, not an immigration enforcement measure, and it should not be extended indefinitely."

Jean-Pierre also said that the Biden administration is advancing its preparations to manage migration on the US-Mexico border when Title 42 is eventually lifted.

A Sputnik correspondent reported that the US government is setting up a new tent facility camp in El Paso, Texas, which is near the US-Mexico border and is currently a hot spot where tens of thousands of asylum-seeking migrants have trekked over the border illegally in recent weeks. The United States has seen two consecutive record breaking years of illegal crossings into the United States since Biden assumed office in January 2021. Well over two million illegal crossings into the United States were recorded in fiscal year 2022, according to CBP data. Jean-Pierre said lawmakers in Congress must work together, especially with cooperation from Republicans, to pass comprehensive immigration reform in order to address the "broken immigration system."

The Biden administration last week filed an appeal to the US Supreme Court, requesting that it deny a bid from several Republican states to keep in place Title 42. The policy was due to expire on December 21, but the US Supreme Court decided to hear last-minute arguments by the Biden administration.

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US Supreme Court Blocks Biden From Rescinding Border Expulsion Policy - Filing

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2-4, 7, 8)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration from rescinding the COVID-era Title 42 expulsion policy on the US southern border, a court filing revealed.

"The States contend that they face an immigration crisis at the border and policymakers have failed to agree on adequate measures to address it. The only means left to mitigate the crisis, the States suggest, is an order from this Court directing the federal government to continue its COVID-era Title 42 policies as long as possible - at the very least during the pendency of our review. Today, the Court supplies just such an order," Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch said in the filing on Tuesday.

Gorsuch said even the US federal government has acknowledged that terminating Title 42 orders will likely have disruptive consequences on the US southern border. However, Gorsuch also said the current border crisis is not a COVID-related one.

"Courts should not be in the business of perpetuating administrative edicts designed for one emergency only because elected officials have failed to address a different emergency. We are a court of law, not policymakers of last resort," Gorsuch added.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich welcomed the ruling, saying his office had led the charge to prevent the Biden administration from overturning the policy.

"The safety of American families is not expendable to political expediency," Brnovich said via Twitter.

The Biden administration last week filed an appeal to the US Supreme Court, requesting that it deny a bid from several Republican states to keep in place Title 42. The policy was due to expire on December 21, but the US Supreme Court decided to hear last-minute arguments by the Biden administration.

A Sputnik correspondent reported that the US government is setting up a new tent facility camp in El Paso, Texas, which is near the US-Mexico border and currently a hot spot where tens of thousands of asylum-seeking migrants have trekked over the border illegally in recent weeks.

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US Begins Confiscating Chinese Merchandise Produced With Use of N. Korean Workers - CBP

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has begun confiscating certain Chinese merchandise at all ports of entry following an investigation indicating that at least three companies used North Korean labor in their supply chains, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said in a press release.

"US Customs and Border Protection began detaining merchandise produced or manufactured by Jingde Trading Ltd., Rixin Foods. Ltd. and Zhejiang Sunrise Garment Group Co. Ltd. at all US ports of entry on Dec. 5, 2022," the release said on Tuesday.

The enforcement action is the result of a CBP investigation indicating that the listed companies use North Korean labor in their supply chains in violation of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the release said.

The existing US sanctions on North Korea prohibit the entry of any goods that have been produced or manufactured entirely or in part by North Korean nationals unless there is clear and convincing evidence that forced labor was not present at any stage of the production process, the release added.

In June, the United States also started implementing regulations that ban imports of goods from China's Xinjiang province in response to an alleged genocide and crimes against the Uyghur minority.

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UN Security Council Calls on Taliban to Ensure Equal Participation of Women - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council issued a statement calling on the Taliban (under United Nations sanctions for terrorism) to reopen schools to women and girls in Afghanistan and allow their full their participation in society.

"The Security Council is deeply alarmed by reports that the Taliban have suspended access to universities for women and girls, and reiterated its deep concern of the suspension of schools beyond the sixth grade, and its call for the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in Afghanistan," the statement said on Tuesday. "[The Security Council] called on the Taliban to reopen schools and swiftly reverse these policies and practices, which represent increasing erosion for the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The Security Council said it is also alarmed by the Taliban's ban on female employees from working in non-governmental and international organizations.

On Monday, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan acting head Ramiz Alakbarov urged the Taliban to reverse its decision to prohibit Afghan women from working in non-governmental and international organizations.

On Saturday, Afghan media reported that the Taliban government ordered all local and international non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan to suspend the work of their female employees until further notice.

The Afghan Education Ministry said earlier on Tuesday that the Taliban also ordered the suspension of girls' education in the country's private and public higher education institutions.

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US Supreme Court Blocks Biden From Rescinding Border Expulsion Policy - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration from rescinding the COVID-era Title 42 expulsion policy on the US southern border, a court filing revealed.

"The application for stay pending certiorari presented to the Chief Justice and by him referred to the Court is granted ... the stay shall terminate upon the sending down of the judgment of this Court," the Supreme Court said in a filing on Tuesday.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich welcomed the ruling, saying his office had led the charge to prevent the Biden administration from overturning the policy.

"The safety of American families is NOT expendable to political expediency," Brnovich said via Twitter.

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US Navy Approves Full-Scale Production for CH-53K King Stallion Helicopters - Sikorsky

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has approved full rate production of the Sikorsky CH-53K King Stallion helicopter, raising its numbers produced to 200 per year, Sikorsky announced in a press release.

"The US Navy declared full rate production of the Sikorsky CH-53K helicopter, a decision that is expected to increase production to more than 20 helicopters annually in the coming years," the company, a division of Lockheed Martin, said in the release.

As a result of the decision, Sikorsky is now procuring long-lead items and critical materials to support building full rate production of the aircraft in its digital factory, the release said.

"This production authorization stabilizes Sikorsky's domestic supply chain and is a testament to our enduring partnership with the Marine Corps," Sikorsky CH-53K Program Director Bill Falk said in the release.

The helicopter is designed to conduct expeditionary assault transport of armored vehicles, equipment and personnel to support distributed operations deep inland from a sea-based center of operations, critical in the Indo-Pacific region, the release said.

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US House Committee to Release Trump's Tax Returns on Friday - Spokesperson to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The House Ways and Means Committee will release a redacted version of former US President Donald Trump's tax returns on Friday, a committee spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

The committee will release Trump's tax returns, which have been the subject of public interest for several years, after approving a motion to make them public earlier this month, the spokesperson confirmed.

Last month, the US Supreme Court rejected an effort by Trump to block the committee from obtaining his tax records for the last six years.

Ways and Means Committee Ranking Member Kevin Brady also warned last month that releasing the former president's tax records will "unleash a cycle of political retribution" in Congress.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) -

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday issued a decree banning the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap imposed by Western states.

\* Gas futures in Europe were decreasing by nearly 6.6% on Tuesday, falling below \$850 per thousand cubic meters for the first time since February 21, according to data from the London-based ICE exchange.

\* Russian oil transportation giant Transneft did not receive appeals from Kazakhstan for pumping oil through the Druzhba pipeline to Germany in January, such decisions are made by the Russian Energy Ministry, Transneft spokesman Igor Demin told Sputnik.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

\* The dynamics of Russia's GDP in 2023 will be "about zero," First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov said on Tuesday.

\* Inflation in Russia next year may be lower than the forecast of the Ministry of Economic Development, which expects inflation to reach 5.5%, Belousov said.

\* The Bank of Russia said it had little hope that Russian banks would ever get back the assets that had been frozen in foreign bank accounts since February.

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

\* More than 700 critical infrastructure facilities have been damaged in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian military operation, Ukrainian First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Yevhenii Yenin said on Tuesday.

\* Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko called for imposing sanctions on the Russian nuclear industry and abandoning its nuclear fuel, the Ukrainian Energy Ministry said.

\* Kiev will face emergency electricity outages throughout the winter while power line repairs are underway, the deputy head of the city administration, Petro Panteleiev, said.

#### WINTER STORMS IN US

\* The death toll from the Arctic front that brought severe blizzards to the United States has increased to 57, NBC News reported on Tuesday.

\* A driving ban remains in effect in Buffalo, New York, after the severe winter storm there, Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz said.

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#### US House Bans TikTok From Official Devices Following Measure Passed Due to Security Risk

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives informed members and their staff that TikTok is hereby banned from their official devices due to security concerns, following a measure passed in the omnibus spending bill that bans the app across the federal government.

"Beginning immediately: House staff are not allowed to download the TikTok app on any House mobile devices. TikTok is not allowed on House mobile devices. If you have the TikTok app on your House mobile device, you will be contacted to remove it," the House Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) said in an internal notice, shared by US media.

The CAO's Office of Cybersecurity deemed TikTok's mobile application a threat to users due to a number of security risks, the notice said.

The \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill passed by Congress earlier this month requires federal government agencies to remove TikTok from their network of official devices, although some agencies have already imposed their own bans.

TikTok has been the subject of US federal government scrutiny for alleged ties between their parent company, ByteDance, and the Chinese government.

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Over 6,000 Children Hurt or Killed by Gunfire in US in 2022 - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - More than 6,000 children in the United States have been injured or killed by gunfire this year, the non-profit organization Gun Violence Archive that tracks shooting incidents said on Tuesday.

The Gun Violence Archive found 6,023 children 17-years-old or younger were killed or injured by gunfire in 2022 - the highest number of such incidents ever recorded in the organization's nine-year history.

At least 306 children under the age of 12 have died in shootings this year and more than 1,300 children between the ages of 12 and 17 have died by gunfire.

The Gun Violence Archive said that 2022 saw the most child deaths or injuries by gunfire since the nonprofit started tracking gunfire-related information in 2014.

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Texas Sent Some 16,000 Migrants to 'Sanctuary Cities' Across US Since Spring - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The Texas authorities have sent nearly 16,000 asylum-seeking migrants, who were apprehended on the US border with Mexico, to so-called "sanctuary jurisdictions" throughout the United States, Governor Greg Abbott said on Tuesday. "Texas has bused over 15,900 migrants to sanctuary cities," Abbott said via Twitter.

The Texas governor said the decision to send the migrants was taken in order to provide relief to border communities that are overwhelmed by the surge of migrants. The surge has been blamed on the Biden administration's lax immigration policy that has effectively enabled millions of migrants to enter the country.

Abbott said the Texas government sent more than 8,900 migrants to Washington, nearly 5,000 migrants to New York City, more than 1,500 to Chicago and more than 630 to Philadelphia.

The United States is preparing for a record-breaking migration surge on its southern border as soon as the Title 42 immigration policy is likely lifted later on Tuesday. The Trump-era immigration policy allows the US border authorities to deny entry into the United States based on a migrant's health status.

The Biden administration last week filed an appeal to the US Supreme Court, requesting that it deny the Republicans' bid to keep in place Title 42. The policy was due to expire on December 21, but the US Supreme Court has decided to hear last-minute arguments by the Biden administration.

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US Looks Forward to Supporting Nepal Deepen Democratic Traditions Post Elections - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The United States looks forward to supporting Nepal as the country deepens its democratic traditions after holding elections, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"Nepal's commitment to democracy is an example to countries around the world," Blinken said in a statement. "We look forward to supporting Nepal as it continues to deepen its democratic traditions in accordance with the will of the Nepali people."

Blinken congratulated Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his coalition partners on forming a new government in Nepal.

"We are proud to have robust and longstanding ties with Nepal and will continue to stand with the government of Nepal to promote issues of mutual importance, including achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth, strengthening Nepal's climate resilience and upholding democracy and respect for human rights," Blinken said.

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Guterres Appoints Elizabeth Mrema as Deputy Executive Director of UN Environment Program

UNITED NATIONS, December 27 (Sputnik) - The UN secretary-general has appointed Elizabeth Maruma Mrema of Tanzania as deputy executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, the United Nations said in a statement on Tuesday.

"United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres today announced the appointment of Elizabeth Maruma Mrema of the United Republic of Tanzania as deputy executive director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)," the statement said.

Mrema has served as executive secretary of the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity based in Montreal, Canada, since 2020.

Before joining UNEP in 1994, Mrema worked for the foreign ministry of Tanzania

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Driving Ban Continues in Buffalo, New York After Severe Winter Storm - Official

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - A driving ban remains in effect in Buffalo, New York, after the severe winter storm there, Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz said on Tuesday.

"We are in an ongoing State of Emergency and a driving ban remains for the City of Buffalo. You can absolutely go out and walk to check on neighbors, go to open stores, etc. But do not drive," Poloncarz said via Twitter.

The Erie County Emergency Services is coordinating to ensure its crews have sufficient amounts of fuel, Poloncarz said.

Officials are also working to ensure grocery stores are stocked with products and there have not been reports of supply issues, Poloncarz added.

Much of the United States has been experiencing severe winter weather over the past several days, including sub-zero temperatures and significant snowfall. At least 57 people have died nationwide from the weather conditions, according to US media reports.

In Buffalo, a number of people were arrested for looting stores amid the winter storm. Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown called the alleged looters "the lowest of the low."

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Record Number of Americans Registered for Health Insurance Through Government Site - Biden

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - A record number of Americans have signed up for health insurance in recent weeks through the US government website HealthCare.gov, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"From November 1st to December 15th, nearly 11.5 million Americans signed up for insurance on HealthCare.gov - about 1.8 million more people, an 18% increase, over the same period last year. That's an all-time record, with enrollment still open and not counting people who have signed up for coverage through their state marketplaces," Biden said in a statement.

Biden characterized the increase as proof of his administration's effort to lower the cost of health insurance for families and ensure affordable access to health care.

Health insurance rates as low as \$10 per month or less have been provided by the Affordable Care Act, popularly referred to as Obamacare, which is set to expire at the end of 2022. US lawmakers, however, have extended the insurance rates through the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act.

Americans seeking health care can take advantage of lower rates through HealthCare.gov until January 15, the statement said.

Other cost-saving measures included in the Inflation Reduction Act, such as a price cap on insulin for seniors, will also take effect starting on January 1, the statement added.

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US House Prices Rose Nearly 10% Year-Over-Year in October - Federal Housing Finance Agency

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - House prices in the United States increased by nearly 10% year-over-year in October, the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) said on Tuesday.

"House prices rose 9.8% from October 2021 to October 2022," FHFA said in a statement.

However, house prices have seen two consecutive months of near-zero appreciation, FHFA Supervisory Economist Nataliya Polkovnichenko said in the statement. Higher mortgage rates continue to put downward pressure on demand, weakening house price growth, the statement said.

The 9.8% rise is the first 12-month growth rate below 10% after 24 consecutive months of double-digit appreciation rates, the statement added.

FHFA is set to release its next Housing Price Index report on January 31, 2023, including monthly data through November 2022.

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US Court Sentences Man to 16 Years for Plot to Kidnap Michigan Governor Whitmer

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - A US district court on Tuesday sentenced Adam Fox, one of 14 plotters who planned to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, to 16 years in prison, a case manager at the US District Court for the Western District of Michigan told Sputnik. Judge Robert Jonker also ordered Fox to pay \$200 of the special assessment and \$1250 for each of the two counts against him as well as imposed a five-years supervised release, the case manager said.

Fox and another man, Barry Croft, led the group in 2020 as they planned to target law enforcement officers, attack the Michigan State Capitol building and kidnap government officials, including Whitmer, according to media reports.

Prosecutors claimed at the trial that the men intended to kidnap Whitmer from her vacation home near Elk Rapids and blow-up bridges to slow down the police chasing them.

On December 15, 2022, three members of the group, Paul Bellar, Joseph Morrison, and Pete Musico were sentenced to seven, ten and 20 years in prison, respectively.

They were convicted in October of being members of a gang, providing material support for terrorist acts and carrying or possessing a firearm during the commission of a felony.

Two other members of the group were acquitted at trial, another two pleaded guilty and two more were found guilty in the conspiracy to commit kidnapping.

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Hackers Stole Data in October Ransomware Attack on US Electric Utilities - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Hackers reportedly stole data belonging to electric utilities from a major critical infrastructure contractor during an October ransomware attack, CNN reported on Tuesday.

The incident has been closely monitored by the authorities to detect any negative impact on the US power grid, the report said.

The hackers attacked the Chicago-based engineering firm Sargent & Lundy, which is responsible for designing more than 900 power stations and thousands of power-line miles, nationwide, the report said.

The company also works in the nuclear sector and closely cooperates its activities with the Defense Department, the report said.

In addition to the efforts by the authorities, private investigators have been searching on the dark web for any traces of the stolen data, the report said.

While the hackers stole data related to a utility project, there is no evidence the stolen files have been published on the dark web, the report also said.

Sargent & Lundy has "fully recovered" from the incident with a minimal impact on its normal business operations, the report added, citing a company spokesperson.

The Biden administration has urged targeted companies to share data of incidents in light of increasing attempts to hack into US critical infrastructure, according to the report.

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Latest 'Twitter File' Reveals Censorship of COVID-19 Info Inconvenient to US Government

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - Twitter censored information about COVID-19 that was inconvenient to the US government and elevated the positions of public health authorities regardless of veracity, author David Zweig revealed in the latest release of the so-called Twitter Files.

"The United States government pressured Twitter and other social media platforms to elevate certain content and suppress other content about COVID-19," Zweig said on Monday. "Whether by humans or algorithms, content that was contrarian but true was still subject to getting flagged or suppressed."

Internal Twitter information revealed that the administrations of former US President Donald Trump and current officeholder Joe Biden both directly pressed the social media platform to moderate pandemic-related content according to their views, Zweig said.

In some instances, Twitter suppressed users sharing the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's own data, Zweig added.

Twitter, based on the political leanings of senior staff and government pressure, deemed the guidance of US health authorities as definitive, Zweig said. Information that challenged the opinion of the government, including on the potential harms of vaccines or relative risk of the virus, were subject to suppression, Zweig said.

Zweig also noted the impact the suppression of open debate may have had on public response to the pandemic and its aftermath.

However, Twitter did not fully capitulate to the US government's requests, Zweig said. Twitter employees often debated moderation cases in great detail and with more care than the government toward free speech, Zweig said.

Nevertheless, Twitter's moderation process had three major problems, according to Zweig: much of the company's content moderation was conducted by bots; non-expert contractors in

foreign countries were tasked with assisting in moderation; and higher level employees introduced bias in how both the bots and contractors operated.

The bias bent "heavily toward establishment dogma," Zweig said. Zweig provided a number of examples of Twitter taking action against accounts for tweeting demonstrably true information. Previous installments of the Twitter Files, which are based on internal information and released in coordination with company chief Elon Musk, have detailed other instances of the platform's engagement with the US government and military. The files revealed coordination to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop story and boost military psychological operations accounts.

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#### Death Toll From US Blizzard Up to 57 - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – The death toll from the Arctic front that brought a severe blizzard to the United States has climbed to 57, NBC News reported on Tuesday. Almost half of the fatalities occurred in Erie County in New York state. That includes 18 deaths in the city of Buffalo, according to the report.

Local authorities expressed the hope that the situation will ease later in the day, it added.

However, the National Weather Service (NWS) issued an additional advisory for the region until Tuesday afternoon. "Additional snow accumulations of an inch or so in the most persistent lake snows," the advisory said.

Significant wind gusts could deteriorate visibility, it added.

NWS also forecast strong storms in the western part of the country. "Increasingly stormy weather to impact the West Coast through Tuesday before spreading across Rockies," it said in a separate advisory.

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#### Blinken Says Ukrainians to Face 'Tough Winter' Amid Collapsing Energy Infrastructure

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday predicted a "tough winter" for Ukrainians as the country grapples with the consequences of collapsing energy infrastructure amid Russia's special military operation.

"We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. A tough winter lies ahead for Ukrainians, and we will work tirelessly with the G7 and other partners to repair, replace, and defend Ukraine's energy infrastructure," Blinken said in a tweet.

In November, the United States announced a \$53 million package of assistance to help restore Ukrainian energy infrastructure, including distribution transformers, circuit breakers, surge arresters, disconnectors, and vehicles.

Russia began striking Ukrainian infrastructure on October 10, two days after the attack on the Crimean Bridge. The strikes have targeted Ukraine's power, defense industry, military command, and communications facilities. In mid-November, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that almost half of the country's energy grid had been out of service.