



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

March 13, 2023

Case No. FL-2022-00062

Mr. Gary Ruskin
U.S. Right to Know
4096 Piedmont Avenue, #963
Oakland, CA 94611

Dear Mr. Ruskin:

As we noted in our letter dated January 30, 2023, we are processing your request for material under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552. The Department of State has identified an additional 15 responsive records subject to the FOIA. We have determined six records may be released in full and nine records may be released in part.

An enclosure explains the FOIA exemptions and other grounds for withholding material. Where we have made redactions, the applicable FOIA exemptions are marked on each record. Where applicable, the Department has considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing these records and applying FOIA exemptions. All non-exempt material that is reasonably segregable from the exempt material has been released and is enclosed.

We will keep you informed as your case progresses. If you have any questions, your attorney may contact Assistant United States Attorney, Stephanie Johnson, at stephanie.johnson5@usdoj.gov or (202) 252-7874. Please refer to the case number, FL-2022-00062, and the civil action number, 22-cv-01130, in all correspondence about this case.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Diamonece Hickson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Diamonece Hickson
Chief, Litigation and Appeals Branch
Office of Information Programs and Services

Enclosures: As stated.

The Freedom of Information Act (5 USC 552)

FOIA Exemptions

- (b)(1) Information specifically authorized by an executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy. Executive Order 13526 includes the following classification categories:
- 1.4(a) Military plans, systems, or operations
 - 1.4(b) Foreign government information
 - 1.4(c) Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
 - 1.4(d) Foreign relations or foreign activities of the US, including confidential sources
 - 1.4(e) Scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(f) U.S. Government programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
 - 1.4(g) Vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to US national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(h) Weapons of mass destruction
- (b)(2) Related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency
- (b)(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute (other than 5 USC 552), for example:
- | | |
|----------------|---|
| ARMSEXP | Arms Export Control Act, 50a USC 2411(c) |
| CIA PERS/ORG | Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949, 50 USC 403(g) |
| EXPORT CONTROL | Export Administration Act of 1979, 50 USC App. Sec. 2411(c) |
| FS ACT | Foreign Service Act of 1980, 22 USC 4004 |
| INA | Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC 1202(f), Sec. 222(f) |
| IRAN | Iran Claims Settlement Act, Public Law 99-99, Sec. 505 |
- (b)(4) Trade secrets and confidential commercial or financial information
- (b)(5) Interagency or intra-agency communications forming part of the deliberative process, attorney-client privilege, or attorney work product
- (b)(6) Personal privacy information
- (b)(7) Law enforcement information whose disclosure would:
- (A) interfere with enforcement proceedings
 - (B) deprive a person of a fair trial
 - (C) constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
 - (D) disclose confidential sources
 - (E) disclose investigation techniques
 - (F) endanger life or physical safety of an individual
- (b)(8) Prepared by or for a government agency regulating or supervising financial institutions
- (b)(9) Geological and geophysical information and data, including maps, concerning wells

Other Grounds for Withholding

- NR Material not responsive to a FOIA request excised with the agreement of the requester

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Summary:

- Andersen et al.¹ hypothesized that if the CoV-2 interaction with the human ACE2 was apparently “not ideal,” it was evidence that CoV-2 arose by natural selection.
- The alternative hypothesis would be that a finding that CoV-2 was optimized for ACE2 binding and human infection from the initial infection would be evidence of laboratory creation.
- Andersen relied on a paper for the “not ideal” interaction that relied on a computer algorithm rather than laboratory data, was qualitative in nature, sampled only five amino acids or 0.45% of the interaction region, and was over-interpreted.
- The analysis of the Baric et al. paper cited by Andersen as evidence the interaction was not ideal was reexamined and it was concluded that Andersen had over-interpreted the paper. The paper was a computer simulation study of only 5 of 201 amino acids in the CoV-2-ACE2 interaction region. Only one of the five amino acids discussed was said to be inferior to the equivalent amino acid in SARS-CoV-1; the remainder were either positive or neutral with respect to binding.
- A comprehensive, laboratory-based, and quantitative paper by Starr et al. of all 201 amino acids, not just five, was conducted. Fully 99.6% of all of the possible 3819² amino acid substitutions were tested for their effect on CoV-2 binding to ACE2. Only 21 substitutions of the 3819 improved ACE2 binding. Therefore, CoV-2 is optimized for binding in 99.45% of the amino acids in its Spike Protein interaction region.
- To support this finding, Starr also made an examination of 31,570 CoV-2 sequences from human infections, looking for the 21 substitutions that had been shown to improve CoV-2 binding in the above in vitro laboratory experiments. Among the 31,570 CoV-2 cases, they failed to find even a single case in which there was an amino acid substitution that improved binding.
- Based on Andersen’s hypothesis and its alternative, SARS-CoV-2 is fully optimized for interaction with the human ACE2 receptor and was at the time of the first patient. There is no evidence of an evolving SP binding region, as was seen with SARS-CoV-

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9>

² There are 201 amino acids in the residue 331 to 531 interaction region and so 201 times the 19 possible alternative amino acids not found in CoV-2 equals 3819.

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1. This is consistent with a laboratory optimized coronavirus which entered the human population fully evolved.

Analysis

Quote from Andersen: ‘While the analyses above suggest that SARS-CoV-2 may bind human ACE2 with high affinity, computational analyses predict that the interaction is not ideal (reference 7) and that the RBD sequence is different from those shown in SARS-CoV to be optimal for receptor binding (references 7,11).

Thus, the high-affinity binding of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein to human ACE2 is most likely the result of natural selection on a human or human-like ACE2 that permits another optimal binding solution to arise. This is strong evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is not the product of purposeful manipulation.”

The apparent **hypothesis** for the above conclusion is:

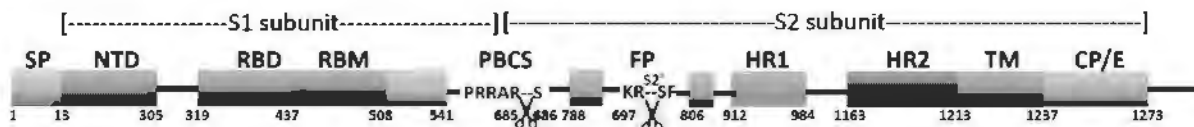
“If the SARS-CoV-2 (CoV-2) Spike Protein interaction with the ACE2 receptor is not maximized, then it is evidence that the interaction is the product of natural selection and not purposeful (laboratory) manipulation.”

This would lead to an **alternative hypothesis**:

“If the CoV-2 Spike Protein interaction with the ACE2 receptor is maximized, then it is evidence that the interaction was the product of purposeful (laboratory) manipulation.”

Background.

The Spike Protein (SP) structure and its functional domains are shown in this Figure. The S1 subunit is the initial host interaction portion while the S2 is the post-binding portion responsible for initiating host cell entry, with HR1, HR2, and TM being responsible for breaching the host cell membrane. Allowing viral RNA to enter the cell.



The interaction of the SP portions which interact with the ACE2 of the host cell, which begins the internalization, infectious process, are contained in the Receptor Binding Domain (RBD) and to a lesser extent the Receptor Binding Motif (RBM), specifically residues 331 to 531. Herein, residues 331 to 531 are called the “interaction region.”

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Evidence given by Andersen:

Reference 7 in the Andersen paper above is a Ralph Baric paper³ from early in the pandemic (submitted January 22, 2020) and examines five key residues in the receptor binding domain of the Spike Protein (SP) and whether they are "ideal" for interacting with the ACE2 of human cells. The entire paper is based on computer calculations or prior laboratory work but importantly does not do any new "wet" lab work with CoV-2.

Baric et al. had previously identified five amino acid residues that are important for SP-ACE2 interaction. Using the amino acid numbers of CoV-2 these amino acids are: 455, 486, 493, 494, and 501. Baric opines that the most critical residues are 493 and 501 and the next most important residues are 455, 486, and 494. The authors then discuss each amino acid in turn:

Residue 493: "Gln493 in 2019-nCoV RBD is compatible with hot spot 31, suggesting that 2019-nCoV is capable of recognizing human ACE2 and infecting human cells." In this analysis 4 of the 20 amino acids are probed.

Residue 501: "This analysis suggests that 2019-nCoV recognizes human ACE2 less efficiently than human SARS-CoV (year 2002) but more efficiently than human SARS-CoV (year 2003). Hence, at least when considering the ACE2-RBD interactions, 2019-nCoV has gained some capability to transmit from human to human."

Direct binding evidence has shown that this statement is wrong, and CoV-2 binds the ACE2 receptor about ten-times better than SARS-CoV (year 2002).⁴ In this analysis 3 of the 20 amino acids are probed.

Residues 455, 486, and 494: First, Baric et al. state: "Leu455 of 2019-nCoV RBD provides favorable interactions with hot spot 31, hence enhancing viral binding to human ACE2."

Next, they state: "Phe486 of 2019-nCoV RBD provides even more support for hot spot 31, hence also enhancing viral binding to human ACE2." Importantly, they also talk about their own laboratory work on an "optimized" receptor binding domain and state: "Leu472 of human and civet SARS-CoV RBDs provides favorable support for hot spot 31 on human ACE2 through hydrophobic interactions with ACE2 residue Met82 and several other hydrophobic residues (**this residue has been mutated to Phe472 in the optimized RBD**)."

Finally, they state: Ser494 in 2019-nCoV RBD still provides positive support for hot spot 353, but the support is not as favorable as that provided by Asp480. Overall, Leu455, Phe486, and Ser494 of 2019-nCoV RBD support the idea that 2019-nCoV recognizes human ACE2 and infects human cells."

³ <https://jvi.asm.org/content/94/7/e00127-20>

⁴ <https://www.cell.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0092-8674%2820%2931003-5> ;
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-2179-y> ;
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092867420302622> ;
<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/367/6483/1260>


SARS-CoV-2 Spike Protein is Highly Optimized for ACE2 Binding and Human Cell Infectivity, a Finding that is Inconsistent with Natural Selection but is Consistent with Laboratory Creation

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In this analysis they probe 3 of 20 amino acid residues for position 480, 4 of 20 for position 486, and 4 of 20 for position 442.

As shown in the Figure below from the Baric paper, the in vitro designed, optimized human SP (red arrow) had the amino acid residues F, F, N, D, and T at these five key residues. Since CoV-2 was identical in only one of these five it was not "optimal" and, according to Andersen, it therefore was not laboratory derived.



Virus	Year	442	472	479	480	487
SARS - human	2002	Y	L	N	D	T
SARS - civet	2002	Y	L	K	D	S
SARS - human/civet	2003	Y	P	N	G	S
SARS - civet	2005	Y	P	R	G	S
SARS - human	2008	F	F	N	D	S
Viral adaption to human ACE2		F > Y	F > L > P	N = R >>> K	D > G	T >>> S
Optimized - human	In vitro design	F	F	N	D	T
Viral adaptation to civet ACE2		Y > F	P = L > F	R > K = N	G > D	T > S
Optimized - civet	In vitro design	Y	P	R	G	T
SARS - bat	2013	S	F	N	D	N
2019-nCoV - human	2019	L (455)	F (486)	Q (493)	S (494)	N (501)

Conclusion from the above paper: by examining five amino acid residues of the 200 residues encompassing the interaction region, and calculating the expected interaction of a total of 18 of the 4000 possible residues or 0.45% of all possibilities, they conclude CoV-2 can infect human cells but is not optimized to do so. This data was twisted by Andersen to be 'strong evidence' of natural selection.

An alternative and comprehensive analysis in another paper:⁵

The receptor binding domain (RBD) of the CoV-2 SP is included in residues 331 to 531, a 201 amino acid sequence, of the SP. To examine the effect of each and every amino acid in each and every position, all 19 different amino acids were changed into all 201 positions of the RBD to the extent possible. Out of a total potential of 3819 different single amino acid variants, the scientists were able to create 3804 of the potential variants or 99.6% of the possible variants. It is probably that the variants with the 0.4% amino acid substitutions could not be made for one reason or another. These 3804 were then tested for binding to the human ACE2. Finally, the RBD from SARS-CoV-1 was also tested.

The Figure below is the result of the experiment. Starting with amino acid 331 and ending with amino acid 531, the amino acids that were changed are in vertical columns and are color coded.

⁵ <https://www.cell.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0092-8674%2820%2931003-5>

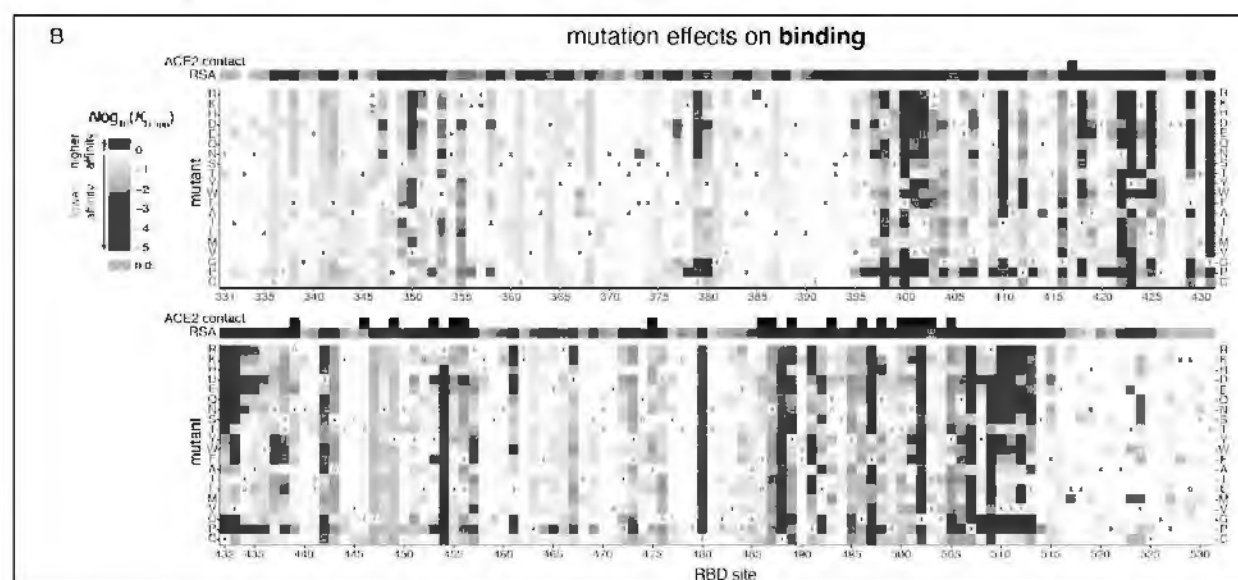
SARS-CoV-2 Spike Protein is Highly Optimized for ACE2 Binding and Human Cell Infectivity, a Finding that is Inconsistent with Natural Selection but is Consistent with Laboratory Creation

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Shades of brown are amino acid substitutions that reduce ACE2 binding affinity and blue are amino acid substitutions that improve binding, in all cases compared to the 'native' CoV-2 SP sequence. White is the color of a neutral substitution which neither enhances nor diminishes binding. Only the dark blue substitutions provide a strong improvement in ACE2 binding. There is a black square along the top row that denotes amino acids in the SP that interact with the ACE2 protein. Unlike in the Baric analysis above, in which only five amino acids were considered, this group of 19 amino acids provide a more complete interaction picture.

The first overarching observation is that most amino acid substitutions among the 201 amino acids are negative; while a large number are neutral. The fact that the vast majority of amino acid substitutions do not provide an improved ACE2 interaction is clear evidence that the CoV-2 SP interaction region is not newly evolved to the human ACE2.



There are three levels of improved binding as designated by dark blue, medium blue, and pale blue. Out of the 3804 variants tested, there are 4 dark blue substitutions or 0.11% and 17 medium blue or 0.45%. According to the paper, the binding effect of the light blue could not be measured as different from the native sequence.

The conclusion of this comprehensive work is the demonstration that for 99.45% of the amino acids in the 201 amino acid interaction region, the CoV-2 choice is optimized, where any substitution is either detrimental or, at best, neutral.

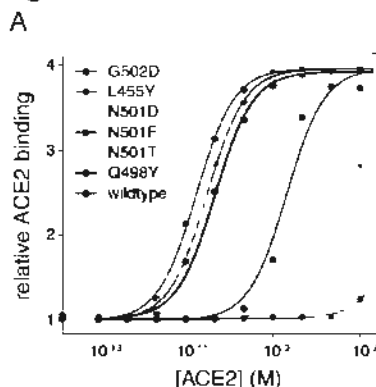
How much could CoV-2 binding be improved or made worse by substitutions during the human-to-human transmission of the pandemic?

The Figure 4 below, taken from the paper, shows that the three best amino acid substitutions have only a slight effect on the binding curve (Black is wildtype; curves to the left are better binding; curves to the right are worse binding). This is further evidence that CoV-2 is optimized as the original virus.

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Figure 4



The authors also concluded that Anderson et al was wrong: “An initially surprising feature of SARS-CoV-2 was that its RBD tightly binds ACE2 despite differing in sequence from SARS-CoV-1 at many residues that had been defined as important for ACE2 binding by that virus (Andersen et al., 2020; Wan et al., 2020).”

In fact, multiple studies have shown that CoV-2 binds ACE2 better than SARS-CoV-1, contradicting Andersen.

Is there evidence that CoV-2 in human circulation has mutations that enhance ACE2 binding?

No.

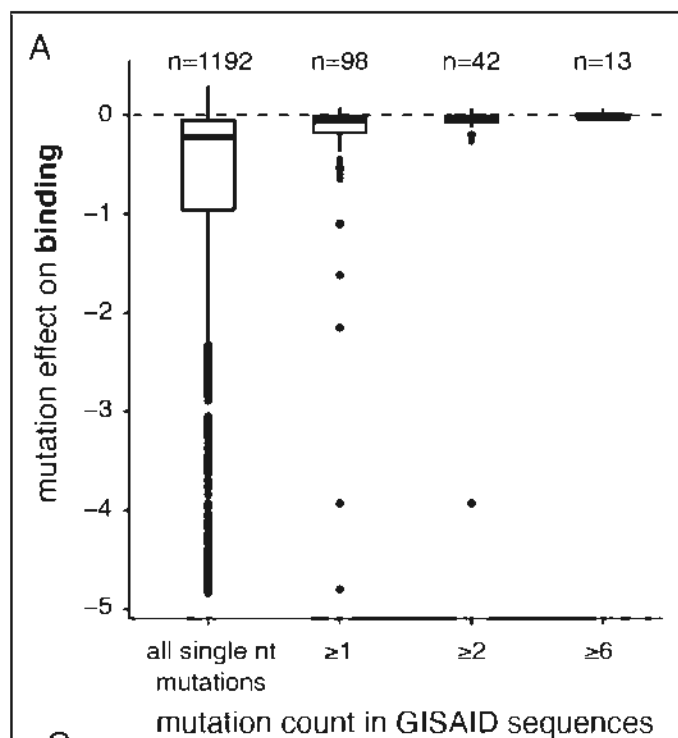
Another measure of whether CoV-2 is optimized for human infection is to see if Spike Protein mutations have arisen during the pandemic that improve binding of the virus to the ACE2 receptor or if the SP amino acids are ideal from the very first human patient.

The Starr paper addressed this issue as well. A total of 31,570 human sequences were analyzed to see if any of the 21 amino acid substitutions from the binding experiments (or any other fir that matter) were being selected for.

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Below is Figure 8 of the Starr paper. Of the 31,570 sequences, all mutations in the receptor interaction region were analyzed for their effect on ACE2 binding. The data below are for all examples of a single nt mutation (1192), two mutations (98), 3-5 mutations (42), and six or more (13) and the effect the mutation would have on ACE2 binding. The logarithmic scale has the wildtype CoV-2 as 0 and each negative integer is a 10-fold reduction in affinity. Shockingly, there is not a single mutation that is above the 0 line, which would be an improved affinity for the ACE2 receptor. All of the mutations lower the receptor affinity.



Here are the results, in the words of Starr:

“Our discovery of multiple strong affinity-enhancing mutations to the SARS-CoV-2 RBD raises the question of whether positive selection will favor such mutations, since the relationship between receptor affinity and fitness can be complex for viruses that are well-adapted to their hosts (Callaway et al., 2018; Hensley et al., 2009; Lang et al., 2020). Strong affinity-enhancing mutations are accessible via single-nucleotide mutation from SARS-CoV-2 (Figure S8C), but **none are observed among circulating viral sequences in GISAID (Figure 8A), and there is no significant trend for actual observed mutations to enhance ACE2 affinity more than randomly drawn samples of all single nucleotide mutations** (see permutation tests in Figure S8D). **Taken together, we see no clear evidence of selection for stronger ACE2 binding, consistent with SARS-CoV-2 already possessing adequate ACE2 affinity at the beginning of the pandemic.**” [emphasis added.]

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It is striking that the authors, in observing the complete absence of any evidence for stronger ACE2 binding in over thirty thousand cases, would describe this as evidence of “adequate ACE2 affinity” and not as an exceptional finding of “optimized ACE2 affinity.” Of course, calling the SP affinity exceptional from the beginning of the pandemic would beg the question of a laboratory derived virus.

Returning to the initial hypotheses, since the 3804 possible amino acids at the receptor interaction region of CoV-2 are 99.45% optimized for ACE2 binding and there is not a single example in 31,570 human CoV-2 genomes of a substitution that enhances ACE2 binding, the CoV-2 interaction with ACE-2 is maximized.

Therefore, the hypothesis, “If the SARS-CoV-2 (CoV-2) Spike Protein interaction with the ACE2 receptor is not maximized, then it is evidence that the interaction is the product of natural selection and not purposeful (laboratory) manipulation,” is **rejected**.

The alternative hypothesis, “If the CoV-2 Spike Protein interaction with the ACE2 receptor is maximized, then it is evidence that the interaction was the product of purposeful (laboratory) manipulation,” is thus **accepted**.

From: TechMIS - DOS Daily <dos@techmis.com>
To: <noreply@techmis.com>
Subject: State Department News Clips (1-7-21)
Date: Wed, 6 Jan 2021 23:40:09 -1000

STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
By TechMIS
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TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Thursday, January 7, 2021 5:00 AM ET

Secretary of State

Pompeo says U.S. considering sanctions on those involved in Hong Kong arrests (Reuters)

Hong Kong Activists Say Arrests Show Space for Democracy Is Rapidly Shrinking (Wall Street Journal)

US human rights lawyer arrested in Hong Kong granted bail (AP)

Department of State News

The storming of the U.S. Capitol echoes violent breaches elsewhere in the world (Washington Post)

World Leaders Are Shocked, Worried by Trump Supporters' Actions at U.S. Capitol (Wall Street Journal)

World Reacts With Alarm at Scenes of U.S. Capitol in Chaos (Bloomberg)

World leaders appalled by US rioting, urge peaceful transfer (AP)

World leaders express shock over US Capitol riots (Yahoo News/ANI)

Trudeau on riot at U.S. Capitol: 'We're following the situation minute by minute' (Politico)

Venezuela expresses concern over violence and instability in US amid Capitol riots (Yahoo! News/Independent)

Top White House Officials Weigh Exits After Trump Incites Mayhem (Bloomberg)

SolarWinds Hack Breached Justice Department System (Wall Street Journal)

U.S. Labels India, Italy, Turkey Digital Taxes Discriminatory (Bloomberg)

[China] NYSE Reverses Course Again, Will Delist Three Chinese Telecom Stocks (Wall Street Journal)

[China] NYSE to delist three Chinese telecoms in dizzying about-face (Reuters)

[China] U.S. to urge firms comply with China investment ban in new guidance, sources say (Reuters)

[China] Trump's Ban on Chinese Apps Falls to Biden to Execute—or Not (Wall Street Journal)

[China] U.S. Weighs Adding Alibaba, Tencent to China Stock Ban (Wall Street Journal)

Editorials and Op-eds

Pentagon must continue military support to CIA's counterterrorism operations (Washington Times)

Who's On the Hook If Vaccines Go Wrong? (Bloomberg)

[Hong Kong] Jimmy Lai's Message of Hope (Wall Street Journal)

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Nations Stretch Scarce Covid-19 Vaccines by Delaying a Second Shot (Wall Street Journal)

Why the search for the real origin of the coronavirus is a global concern (Washington Post)

China Health Expert Defends Delay in Confirming Covid's Threat (Bloomberg)

Near East & North Africa

[Morocco] Morocco approves AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine – Minister (Reuters)

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi Arabia's Extra Oil Cut to Last Two Months, Minister Says (Bloomberg)

[Syria] Syrian Air Defense responded to an Israeli attack over south Damascus: state TV (Reuters)

Europe and Eurasia

[Germany] Germanys confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 26,391 - RKI (Reuters)

[Germany] CureVac strikes COVID-19 vaccine alliance deal with Bayer -Bild (Reuters)

[Romania] Air Force establishes Reaper drone base in Romania (Washington Times)

[United Kingdom] After rumors flared that Trump may be heading to Scotland on Jan. 19, the country's leader says he will not be allowed in. (New York Times)

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australian exports feel China chill, while housing runs hot (Reuters)

[Australia] Australia urges China to give access to WHO coronavirus experts 'without delay' (Reuters)

[China] China reports most COVID cases in five months as Hebei infections rise (Reuters)

[China] Coronavirus Hasn't Killed Belt and Road (Foreign Policy Magazine)

[Indonesia] Indonesia to Release Bali Bombing Convict Amid Security Fears (Bloomberg)

[Indonesia] Indonesia Islamic council aims for halal ruling before mass vaccination (Reuters)

[Japan] Tokyo Faces Emergency; Allergic Reactions Rare: Virus Update (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Japan to Declare State of Emergency Over Virus Infections (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Tokyo's Second State of Emergency (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Plan for Tokyo state of emergency moves forward as COVID-19 cases ssurge (Reuters)

[North Korea] North Korea's economy struggles as sanctions, COVID-19 weigh (Reuters)

[North Korea] Kim vows to bolster North Korea's military at party meeting (AP)

[Philippines] Nearly Half in Philippines Don't Want Covid Vaccine, Survey Says (Bloomberg)

South and Central Asia

In Kashmir, empty grave for teenager killed by Indian forces (AP)

[India] Farmers block expressway near Delhi to protest Modi's new laws (Reuters)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

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[Canada] Canada to vaccinate federal inmates against COVID-19 starting Friday (Reuters)

[Canada] Quebec Imposes Curfew as ICU Cases for Covid-19 Near Peak Levels (Bloomberg)

[Mexico] Mexico's top diplomat discusses migration with US official (AP)

[Mexico] Mexico shares Biden focus on migration's root causes, ministry says (Reuters)

[Mexico] Mexican with allergic reaction after Pfizers COVID-19 vaccine still hospitalized (Reuters)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] Central African Republic: A disputed election and a strange rebel alliance (Yahoo News/BBC)

[Niger] Niger's leader: Fragility of nations must be top priority (AP)

[South Africa] South African Insurers to Pay for 14 Million Covid-19 Vaccines (Bloomberg)

Network TV News Coverage

Justice Department Says 3% of Emails Compromised in Breach of Government Systems (FOX News)

World Leaders React to Violence in DC (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

[Russia] Russia Sees US Chaos as Win to Years Long Effort to Sow Distrust, Misinformation (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

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The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

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CBS News

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Secretary of State

Pompeo says U.S. considering sanctions on those involved in Hong Kong arrests (Reuters)

Reuters [1/7/2021 2:15 AM, David Brunnstrom and Kanishka Singh, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington is considering sanctions and other restrictions on those involved in the arrest of over 50 people in Hong Kong and warned it could target the territory's economic and trade office in the United States. In a move likely to further rile Beijing, Pompeo announced in the same statement that U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft would visit Chinese-claimed Taiwan, which is not a UN member due to China's objections.

Pompeo also said he was "appalled" by the arrest of an American citizen as part of Wednesday's crackdown and added: "The United States will not tolerate the arbitrary detention or harassment of U.S. citizens."

Hong Kong police arrested 53 people in dawn raids on democracy activists on Wednesday in the biggest crackdown since China last year imposed a security law which opponents say is aimed at quashing dissent in the former British colony.

Among those detained was American lawyer John Clancey, a source at his firm said. Pompeo called the arrests an "outrage and a reminder of the Chinese Communist Party's contempt for its own people and the rule of law."

"The United States will consider sanctions and other restrictions on any and all individuals and entities involved in executing this assault on the Hong Kong people," Pompeo said.

He said it would also "explore restrictions against the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in the United States, and take additional immediate actions against officials who have undermined Hong Kong's democratic processes."

Pompeo's statement came after a day of turmoil in Washington that saw supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump storm the U.S. Capitol in a bid to overturn his November election defeat. Lawmakers on both sides denounced the action by Trump's supporters and called it an embarrassment to American democracy that would play into the hands of rivals like China.

"It kind of bolsters their claim that we're falling apart and they're the country of the future," Republican Senator Marco Rubio, a China hawk, told Tucker Carlson on the Fox News channel.

On Wednesday, the Chinese embassy in Washington issued an advisory on its website, warning Chinese citizens to strengthen safety precautions in light of the "large-scale demonstration" in Washington and the curfew announced by the local government.

Trump has pursued hardline policies towards China on issues ranging from trade to espionage and the coronavirus and his administration has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials for crushing Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and other alleged rights abuses.

Hong Kong Activists Say Arrests Show Space for Democracy Is Rapidly Shrinking (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 3:49 PM, Natasha Khan, Neutral]

Hong Kong activists say this week's mass roundup shows that Beijing's tolerance for democracy in the city is quickly narrowing, by branding dozens of opposition lawmakers who participated in political primaries as suspects in a plot to paralyze the city.

On Wednesday, about 1,000 police officers carried out predawn arrests of 53 people suspected of subversion for their involvement in political races held by opposition parties last summer to identify candidates for an election that had been scheduled for September. Six were arrested for organizing and planning the races and 47 for their participation.

"This is such a wide net authorities have cast on the pro-democracy camp. Everyone was involved in those primary elections," said Lee Cheuk-yan, vice chairman of the Labour Party, which had one candidate arrested, Carol Ng. "What road does this lead us down? Who will dare stand for elections again?"

The scale of the operation stunned a pro-democracy movement that was already demoralized and expecting further arrests. Officers fanned out across the city starting at around 6 a.m., knocking on doors, confiscating electronics and bringing people into police stations.

Among those arrested was an American lawyer in his 70s, John Clancey, who could be seen in a video posted on social media leaning on a cane as he was led to a police van. Others included veteran lawmakers and young political hopefuls who had been aiming to enter the legislature last year for the first time.

Police said they searched 72 locations and served four news outlets with court orders to provide information for their investigation. They said they had frozen 1.6 million Hong Kong dollars, or \$206,000, related to the campaign.

"Even for all of Beijing's crackdown over the past few months, Wednesday's raids were really still quite something," said Jeffrey Ngo, a Washington-based Hong Kong activist. "The police knocked on the doors of almost every prominent opposition figure in the city you can think of and arrested them all within the span of hours." The arrests were the latest blow to a pro-democracy movement that captured the world's attention for much of 2019, at times bringing more than a million people into the streets to demand greater democratic freedoms for Hong Kong. Those aspirations have been crippled by pandemic restrictions that have

kept them off the streets this year and a national security law imposed by Beijing that gave authorities broad new powers to prosecute people for subversion, secession and colluding with foreign entities.

The arrests drew international condemnation, including from the U.S. Antony Blinken, President-elect Joe Biden's pick for secretary of state, said on Twitter that the administration "will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy."

Peter Stano, the European Union's spokesman for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said the arrests sent a "signal that political pluralism is no longer tolerated in Hong Kong." Before Wednesday, a total of around 40 people had been arrested under the national security law for a range of suspected offenses, including collusion and secession. Prosecutors have so far brought charges under the security law against four of those arrested, including media mogul Jimmy Lai.

Under the national security law, those accused of subversion face up to life in prison for the most serious offenses. It couldn't be determined how many of those arrested Wednesday would be charged.

The primaries at the center of Wednesday's arrests were part of an opposition strategy that was first drafted by Benny Tai, a legal academic and an architect of the Occupy pro-democracy movement in 2014, in an effort to win a majority in Hong Kong's 70-seat Legislative Council. The plan was to hold unofficial democratic primaries to avoid fielding too many candidates and diluting support, he had said. The Legislative Council elections were ultimately postponed for a year, with authorities citing the coronavirus pandemic.

Hong Kong authorities say the effort organized by the politicians went beyond the scope of a typical political campaign, accusing the opposition figures of trying to stop Hong Kong's government from functioning. Secretary of Security John Lee on Wednesday pointed to a "10-step mutual destruction plan"—a reference to an article by Mr. Tai published on the Apple Daily news site in April 2020. In the article, Mr. Tai laid out a series of potential scenarios for the opposition, which started with taking control of the Legislative Council. Then, using a series of legal mechanisms under the city's mini constitution, known as the Basic Law, the opposition would trigger the dissolution of the legislature and eventually force the chief executive to resign and Beijing to declare a state of emergency in the city.

"By the tenth step, we will be holding China's Communist Party and jumping off the cliff together," he wrote.

Ronny Tong, a pro-establishment former lawmaker and member of the government's Executive Council, a group of policy advisers to the city's chief executive, said Wednesday that there was a clear difference between holding an event to select candidates to run for office and picking them with the express intent of overthrowing the government.

"It is alleged that the sole aim was to veto every budget until the government was paralyzed and impossible to govern. That's the difference," Mr. Tong said.

While even some in the opposition saw Mr. Tai's article as radical, activists and lawyers

said the individual actions laid out would have been legal. Under Hong Kong law, for example, the chief executive would be forced to resign if a budget proposal is rejected twice. Going after Mr. Tai and other politicians, they said, only further reduced the already limited space for any opposition figures to operate within the city's system of governance.

"This wave of arrests has introduced a new ballgame, beheading and delegitimizing the pan-democrats and compelling their parties to face a dilemma," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University. "Either accept the new rules of the game in terms of candidatures' registration or boycott the next LegCo election."

US human rights lawyer arrested in Hong Kong granted bail (AP)

AP [1/7/2021 12:28 AM, Zen Soo, 11261K, Negative]

An American human rights lawyer who was detained in Hong Kong with scores of democracy activists and supporters as part of a sweeping crackdown was granted bail, his associate said Thursday.

John Clancey, who works at law firm Ho Tse Wai & Partners, was one of 53 people arrested Wednesday under the national security law over their participation in an unofficial primary election last year that authorities say was part of a plan to paralyze the government and subvert state power.

The mass arrests were the largest move against Hong Kong's democracy movement since Beijing imposed the law last June to quell dissent in the semi-autonomous territory following months of anti-government protests in 2019.

The primaries were held by the pro-democracy camp to determine the best candidates to field as they sought to gain a majority in Hong Kong's legislature.

While most of those arrested were candidates in the primaries, Clancey was a treasurer for political organization Power for Democracy, which was involved in the event.

The legislative election that would have followed the unofficial primaries was postponed by a year by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who cited public health risks during the coronavirus pandemic.

The remaining activists will be granted bail without charge, although most had their passports confiscated as evidence, according to the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post, which cited unnamed sources.

The security law criminalizes acts of subversion, secession, terrorism and collusion with foreign powers to intervene in the city's affairs. Serious offenders could face up to a maximum punishment of life imprisonment.

Authorities pointed to a plan called "10 steps to mutual destruction" allegedly indicating that the primaries were part of a broader push to cause damage to both Hong Kong and mainland China.

That plan was published as an opinion piece in Apple Daily newspaper by former law

professor and pro-democracy activist Benny Tai, who was also arrested on Wednesday. He said that between 2020 and 2022, there would be 10 steps to "mutual destruction," including the pro-democracy bloc winning a majority in the legislature, intensifying protests, the forced resignation of Lam due to the budget bill being rejected twice, and international sanctions against the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

The arrests drew condemnation from the international community, including the U.S. and the European Union.

The U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva called Thursday for the immediate release of those detained.

"These latest arrests indicate that, as had been feared, the offence of subversion under the National Security Law is indeed being used to detain individuals for exercising legitimate rights to participate in political and public life," council spokesperson Liz Throssell said in a statement.

Kurt Tong, the former U.S. consul general in Hong Kong, viewed the arrests as part of a methodical and escalating campaign to eradicate viable opposition politics both among the protesters and elected parties.

"The national security law provides the legal foundation to do that," said Tong, now a partner at The Asia Group consultancy in Washington, D.C.

China wants to preserve Hong Kong's economic vibrancy and free market without what it views as political complications, he said. He doesn't predict a mass exodus by companies, saying the city retains its residual energy and dynamism, but warns there could be a measurable impact over time.

"China's taking a big gamble by picking away at parts of the Hong Kong system that it doesn't like," he said. "It really risks damaging parts that it values."

On Wednesday, Anthony Blinken, the U.S. secretary of state nominee for the upcoming Biden administration, called the arrests an "assault" on those advocating for universal rights. EU spokesman Peter Stano said that the security law was being used to "crush dissent and stifle the exercise of human rights and political freedoms."

Department of State News

The storming of the U.S. Capitol echoes violent breaches elsewhere in the world (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/6/2021 7:33 PM, Ruby Mellen, 13480K, Negative]

On Wednesday, rioters overran the U.S. Capitol, halting crucial election certification hearings, in scenes of chaos that stunned observers around the world. Members of the mob were seen breaking windows, looting the chambers and invading lawmakers' offices.

While unheard of for the U.S. Capitol, such scenes are not unfamiliar in the broad sweep of world affairs. Modern history is replete with cases of protesters, ranging from peaceful pro-

democracy movements demanding accountability to angry mobs looking to overthrow governments, breaching legislative buildings. Here are some examples of times when rioters or protesters overtook government buildings in other parts of the world.

Hong Kong

Pro-democracy protesters stormed Hong Kong's parliament in the summer of 2019. Wearing hard hats, masks and protective goggles, hundreds of demonstrators smashed windows and broke through barriers to flood into the government building, where they spray-painted the walls and defaced portraits of lawmakers. The vandalism was a relatively unusual show of force in what had been a largely peaceful protest and broad-based movement against a proposed law that would allow extraditions to mainland China. The bill signaled China's moves to tighten its grip on the island's semiautonomous rule.

Kyrgyzstan

Demonstrators in October occupied government buildings in Kyrgyzstan, protesting the legitimacy of recent parliamentary elections. Protesters descended on the Central Asian country's main political building, throwing documents and furniture into the streets and starting fires. Hours after the breach, Kyrgyzstan's election commission annulled the results.

Armenia

After six weeks of brutal fighting in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a cease-fire deal in November that granted Azerbaijan much of the territory it had regained in the clashes. The terms of the agreement prompted anger in Armenia's capital, Yerevan, where protesters stormed the country's parliament and other government buildings overnight. The demonstrators left broken glass and destroyed furniture in their wake and ransacked Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's office.

Indonesia

In 1998, protests and riots broke out across Indonesia as part of a student-led movement demanding the resignation of President Suharto, who had been in power since the 1960s. In May of that year, demonstrators, in part responding to the killings of students by security forces, occupied government buildings and continued to call for the Suharto's resignation. The civil unrest and demonstrations eventually led the dictator to step down and saw the rise of democracy in a country that now holds the world's largest democratic same-day elections.

Serbia

Serbia's government in July, faced with rising coronavirus cases, sought to impose a nationwide lockdown to stem the spread. Demonstrators crowded outside parliament in Belgrade, unmasked, to protest the new restrictions. They broke through a barrier set up by security officials and stormed the government building. Eventually police pushed them out, Reuters reported.

Burkina Faso

In October 2014, demonstrators in Burkina Faso, angered by President Blaise Compaore's push to extend his 27-year rule, set the country's parliament building on fire, also ransacking offices and setting fire to cars. Opposition to the president's bid to run for reelection saw protests across the country, with members of the military, including a former defense minister, joining in the demonstrations, according to the BBC.

World Leaders Are Shocked, Worried by Trump Supporters' Actions at U.S. Capitol (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/7/2021 12:31 AM, Valentina Pop and Ryan Dube, Neutral]

Leaders and citizens around the world reacted with alarm to images of a mob supporting President Trump forcing its way into the U.S. Capitol, calling it a shocking development in one of the world's most stable democracies.

From Europe to Latin America and Asia, politicians, citizens and dignitaries watched with dismay—and even disbelief—as pro-Trump protesters pushed their way past guards and into the building, halting debate over the certification of President-elect Joe Biden's Electoral College win.

In Europe, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was quick to condemn the actions of the mob, urging Mr. Trump and his allies, in a Twitter post, to "stop trampling democracy with their feet" and accept the result of the election.

Mr. Maas appeared to draw a parallel with Hitler's power grab: "Violent actions come from inflammatory words—on the steps of the Reichstag and now in the Capitol," he said, in reference to the burning of republican Germany's parliament building in 1933. "Disregarding democratic institutions has devastating consequences." British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a longtime Trump ally, tweeted: "Disgraceful scenes in U.S. Congress. The United States stands for democracy around the world and it is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power."

Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization and a former Norwegian prime minister, described the scenes as shocking. "The outcome of this democratic election must be respected," he said.

Closer to the U.S., Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on his official Twitter account that Canadians are "deeply disturbed and saddened by the attack on democracy" in Washington.

"Violence will never succeed in overruling the will of the people. Democracy in the US must be upheld—and it will be," Mr. Trudeau tweeted.

But in Toronto, some people came out to support Mr. Trump. Starting late Wednesday morning and into the afternoon, supporters created a motorcade about two blocks long that snaked through downtown and past the U.S. Consulate, according to local media reports. The supporters flew Trump banners and American flags, according to posts on social media. In Latin America—a region with a history of turbulent politics that is all too familiar with presidents who undercut democratic norms to maintain their grip on power—the

images of protesters forcing their way into the Capitol shocked politicians and residents who once looked to the U.S. as a model of stability and rule of law.

Mexico's former president, Felipe Calderon, said the U.S. was seeing "the fruits of populist discourse" from Mr. Trump, "which begins by withdrawing recognition of the truth, and manipulates people's political resentments, and goes on to delegitimize the rule of law."

"I am sure the U.S. will stop this craziness; I only hope it's not too late," he said.

Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga, a former president of Bolivia, where large, violent protests rocked that country in 2019 forcing then-President Evo Morales to resign and flee abroad, called Wednesday "a sad end for President Trump and a profound deterioration of the democratic image of the country."

In Brazil, members of Congress for the leftist Workers' Party took to Twitter on Wednesday, expressing their horror over the events unfolding in the U.S., while policy analysts raised fears that a copycat attack could happen next year in the Latin American country's presidential election. Political analysts in Latin America say the ordeal could make it harder for the U.S. to promote democracy in the region. That includes in Venezuela, where Mr. Trump's efforts to oust autocratic leader Nicolas Maduro have failed.

Indeed, leaders of countries that the U.S. has criticized for human-rights violations and failure to respect the rule of law didn't hesitate to point a finger back at the U.S. on Wednesday.

In Venezuela, where the government has jailed political opponents and used mobs of armed gangs called colectivos to attack critics, the leaders said they were concerned about political violence in Washington.

Diosdado Cabello, a powerful figure in the Maduro regime, wrote on Twitter, "I'll be brief: the U.S.A., what a disaster."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Maria Zakharova refrained from independently commenting about the events in Washington on her Facebook page, but shared a Facebook post from Jill Dougherty, a Russia expert at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

"The United States will never again be able to tell the world that we are the paragon of democracy," Ms. Dougherty wrote on Facebook. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the world's largest democracy, said he was distressed about the rioting.

"Orderly and peaceful transfer of power must continue," he said in a tweet Thursday morning. "The democratic process cannot be allowed to be subverted through unlawful protests."

In Japan, the chief government spokesman, Katsunobu Kato, said, "I hope that American democracy will overcome these difficult circumstances and restore social order and cooperation, and that a peaceful and democratic transition of power will proceed."

World Reacts With Alarm at Scenes of U.S. Capitol in Chaos (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 8:24 PM, Jason Scott, 6400K, Neutral]

World leaders voiced alarm over a pro-Trump mob's breach of the U.S. Capitol, with the U.K. and Australia calling for a peaceful transfer of power and allies in Europe calling the protesters' actions an attack on democracy.

"Disgraceful scenes in U.S. Congress," U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted after President Donald Trump's supporters stormed the building. Although well known for his admiration of the outgoing president, the British leader said "it is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power." Another leader who has previously voiced support of Trump, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, called the scenes "very distressing" and said he was looking forward to a peaceful transfer of power.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a radio interview that his government was "concerned." "We're following the situation minute by minute as it unfolds," he said.

Their comments came after President-elect Joe Biden used a Wednesday speech to urge Americans to "think what the rest of the world is looking at" when they viewed the chaotic scenes from Washington.

While some European lawmakers issued statements backing U.S. institutions and its democracy to overcome the turmoil, others were more condemning of the president and his supporters.

"The enemies of democracy will rejoice at these unbelievable images out of Washington," said German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. "Inflammatory words reap violent deeds." Scotland First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said "shame on those who have incited this attack on democracy."

Carl Bildt, co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said his "sincere hope is that the evil man who bears the responsibility ultimately will suffer the consequences."

Meanwhile, the Chinese embassy in Washington reminded its nationals living in the U.S. to step up their safety precautions. China's government in Beijing didn't immediately issue a direct response to the mob violence, but initial news reports on state media emphasized the chaos emanating from Washington.

World leaders appalled by US rioting, urge peaceful transfer (AP)

AP [1/6/2021 10:37 PM, Foster Klug and Christopher Torchia, 13480K, Neutral]

Teargas and bullets in the U.S. Capitol building. Outrage, confusion and condemnation from leaders across the world.

"What is happening is wrong," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said in a statement. "Democracy — the right of people to exercise a vote, have their voice heard and then have that decision upheld peacefully — should never be undone by a mob."

The chaotic scenes from the storming of the building at the center of American democracy by angry supporters of President Donald Trump are normally associated with countries

where popular uprisings topple a dictator. The Arab Spring, for instant, or the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

But this time it was an attempt by American citizens to stop a peaceful transition to power after a democratic election in a country that many around the world have looked at as a model for democratic governance.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "is saddened by the events at the U.S. Capitol," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "In such circumstances, it is important that political leaders impress on their followers the need to refrain from violence, as well as to respect democratic processes and the rule of law."

Several countries, both allies and antagonists of America, issued travel warnings to their citizens.

Australia warned its citizens to avoid protests following what Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison described as "rather disturbing scenes" in the United States.

"The riots and protests that we've seen in Washington, D.C., have been terribly distressing. They are very concerning," Morrison told reporters shortly after the U.S. Congress resumed proceedings late Wednesday Washington time.

"This is a difficult time for the United States, clearly. They're a great friend of Australia, and they're one of the world's greatest democracies. And so ... our thoughts are with them and we hope for the peaceful transition to take place," he said.

The Chinese Embassy in the United States also warned its citizens about the "grave" situation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic and the "large scale protest march" in Washington that prompted the city government to impose a curfew.

"The Chinese Embassy to the U.S. reminds Chinese citizens in the U.S. to closely follow their local virus and safety situations, raise their vigilance, be aware of their personal security and consider deeply before visiting public spaces," the Embassy said in a notice on its website.

Leaders around the world condemned the storming of the U.S. Capitol.

"Disgraceful scenes in US Congress," tweeted Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain, a staunch U.S. ally for generations. "The United States stands for democracy around the world and it is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power."

Other allies were similarly appalled at what they described as an attack on American democracy, though some said they believed U.S. democratic institutions would withstand the turmoil. Some leaders singled out Trump for harsh criticism.

"Trump and his supporters should finally accept the decision of the American voters and stop trampling on democracy," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas wrote on Twitter. "From inflammatory words come violent deeds." He added that "contempt for democratic institutions has disastrous effects."

"The beauty of democracy?" with a shrug emoji was the reaction tweeted by Bashir Ahmad, a personal assistant to the president of Nigeria, which has seen several coups since independence — including one led decades ago by President Muhammadu Buhari, who most recently entered the office via a vote.

Chilean President Sebastián Piñera and Colombian President Iván Duque were among those in Latin America who denounced the protesters, but both also said they were confident that American democracy and the rule of law would prevail.

"In this sad episode in the U.S., supporters of fascism showed their real face: anti-democratic and aggressive," tweeted Luis Roberto Barroso, Brazilian Supreme Court justice and the head of the country's electoral court. He said he hoped "American society and institutions react with vigor to this threat to democracy."

Venezuela, which is under U.S. sanctions, said the events in Washington show that the U.S. "is suffering what it has generated in other countries with its politics of aggression."

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has survived U.S.-backed opposition efforts to oust him despite accusations of human rights abuses, civil unrest and a humanitarian crisis that has forced millions to flee the oil-rich country.

In Puerto Rico, many people took to social media and joked that the U.S. territory no longer wanted statehood. Independence, they said, looked appealing for the first time in decades.

In fact, that pursuit of independence marked one of the last times the U.S. Congress was stormed violently. Four members of Puerto Rico's Nationalist Party opened fire on the House floor in March 1954, wounding five lawmakers.

Italians watched the events with shock, having always considered the U.S. to be the model of democracy and the country that rescued Italy after its fascist descent during World War II.

"This is the widely anticipated outcome of Trumpism," tweeted a retired Italian center-left politician, Pierluigi Castagnetti. "And unfortunately it won't end today. When politics is replaced by deception and fanaticism of the people the drift is inevitable."

European Parliament President David Sassoli, who leads one of the largest legislatures in the world, also denounced the scenes at the Capitol. The European Union has spent four cantankerous years dealing with the Trump administration, and its top officials have repeatedly said they are looking forward to a better relationship under President-elect Joe Biden.

"This is insurrection. Nothing less. In Washington," tweeted Carl Bildt, a former prime minister of Sweden.

Turkey, a NATO ally that has sometimes been at odds with Washington, expressed concern over the images of angry Trump supporters trying to thwart the certification of Biden as the new president.

A Turkish Foreign Ministry statement urged all parties in the United States to use "moderation and common sense."

"We believe that the United States will overcome this domestic political crisis with maturity," the ministry said.

The ministry statement also urged Turkish citizens in the United States to stay away from crowds and demonstrations.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country was "deeply disturbed" by the events in the U.S., Canada's closest ally and neighbor.

"Violence will never succeed in overruling the will of the people. Democracy in the US must be upheld — and it will be," Trudeau tweeted.

World leaders express shock over US Capitol riots (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/7/2021 12:30 AM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

World leaders and top diplomats condemned the US Capitol riots with some pressing President Donald Trump to call off the violence.

Earlier, Trump supporters on Wednesday (local time) breached the Capitol while a woman was shot dead when a protest spiraled out of control.

It interrupted Congress's count of electoral votes to certify President-elect Joe Biden's win. Biden is due to assume the presidency later this month on January 20.

The rioting took place after Trump told protestors to repeat his false claim that he won the US election in November.

Leaders around the world reacted with concern online, describing the chaotic scenes as 'shocking' and 'disgraceful', reported CNN.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a tweet, "Distressed to see news about rioting and violence in Washington DC. Orderly and peaceful transfer of power must continue. The democratic process cannot be allowed to be subverted through unlawful protests."

"Canadians are deeply disturbed and saddened by the attack on democracy in the United States, our closest ally and neighbour," tweeted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. "Violence will never succeed in overruling the will of the people. Democracy in the US must be upheld -- and it will be."

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison condemned the "very distressing" scenes of violence, and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern tweeted, "What is happening is wrong. Democracy -- the right of people to exercise a vote, have their voice heard and then have that decision upheld peacefully should never be undone by a mob."

Several leaders held the US President personally responsible for the upset and its resolution. "What we are now seeing from Washington is a completely unacceptable attack

on democracy in the United States. President Trump is responsible for stopping this. Scary pictures, and amazing that this is the United States," wrote Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg.

"President Trump and several members of Congress bear substantial responsibility for developments," tweeted Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven. "The democratic election process must be respected."

"The United States stands for democracy around the world," wrote UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Twitter. "The US Congress is a temple of democracy. To witness tonight's scenes in #WashingtonDC is a shock," said President of the European Council Charles Michel.

"Shocking & deeply sad scenes in Washington DC -- we must call this out for what it is: a deliberate assault on Democracy by a sitting President & his supporters, attempting to overturn a free & fair election! The world is watching! We hope for the restoration of calm," said Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney.

And Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte addressed Trump directly. "Horrible images from Washington DC Dear Donald Trump, recognise Joe Biden as the next president today."

Many, including top diplomats and leaders in Iceland, France, Austria, Poland, Ecuador, Colombia and Scotland among others, reminded the US of its role as a model of democracy in the world and expressed disbelief at the breach of the US Capitol -- the first time that the building had been overrun since a British attack during the War of 1812, according to Samuel Holliday, director of scholarship and operations with the US Capitol Historical Society, reported CNN.

"This is not America," wrote European Union High Representative Josep Borrell, who described the mob's actions as "an unseen assault on US democracy, its institutions and the rule of law."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg urged Americans to respect the outcome of the November election -- a call echoed by European Parliament President David Sassoli, who added, "We are certain the US will ensure that the rules of democracy are protected."

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, also wrote, "I believe in the strength of US institutions and democracy. A peaceful transition of power is at the core. Joe Biden won the election."

"I look forward to working with him as the next President of the USA," she added.

Trudeau on riot at U.S. Capitol: 'We're following the situation minute by minute' (Politico)

Politico [1/6/2021 6:51 PM, Laura Gardner, 2751K, Neutral]

The most senior leaders of the Canadian government expressed their distress Wednesday about rioters breaching the U.S. Capitol after President Donald Trump encouraged supporters to march to the building.

"Obviously we're concerned, and we're following the situation minute by minute as it unfolds," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during an interview with NEWS 1130 in Vancouver earlier in the day.

By the evening, the Liberal leader tweeted that Canadians were "deeply disturbed and saddened by the attack on democracy in the United States. Violence will never succeed in overruling the will of the people."

Trump supporters stormed the Capitol as lawmakers in the House and Senate began debating the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. A number of Republicans in both chambers were planning to challenge the outcomes in certain states.

"There is an important electoral process unfolding in the United States, and I think we all want it and need it to unfold properly and peacefully," Trudeau said. "We certainly hope things will calm down."

The prime minister said Canada will be watching carefully. "I think the American democratic institutions are strong and hopefully everything will return to normal shortly," he said when asked if he was confident President-elect Joe Biden would peacefully transition into power. "But we're going to continue to do what we need to do to make sure that Canadians are well-served in our relationship with the United States, regardless of how things unfold."

The Capitol complex went into lockdown for hours as pro-Trump rioters surged past Capitol Police and into a building normally protected by layers of security.

Canadian Ambassador to the U.S. Kirsten Hillman said the embassy is closely monitoring the situation, and that all staff members are safe. She tweeted an updated travel advisory to the U.S. that includes an alert about "demonstrations in Washington, D.C."

The scenes, which included security drawing guns in the House chamber, also drew statements of concern and condemnation from the leaders of Great Britain and NATO.

Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne said Canada "is deeply shocked" by the events. "The peaceful transition of power is fundamental to democracy — it must continue, and it will," he said on Twitter. "We are following developments closely and our thoughts are with the American people."

Conservative leader Erin O'Toole called the siege on the Capitol "an astonishing assault on freedom and democracy."

"I am deeply saddened to see chaos grip our greatest ally today," he said on Twitter.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh blamed Trump directly for the violence. Bloc Québécois chief Yves-François Blanchet said in French that the welcoming majority of Americans will soon see that they are not served by Trump and his ideology.

Venezuela expresses concern over violence and instability in US amid Capitol riots (Yahoo! News/Independent)

Yahoo News/Independent [1/6/2021 10:33 PM, Graig Graziosi, 11261K, Negative]

Officials in Venezuela issued a statement of concern over the stability of US democracy in the face of US Capitol riots carried out by Donald Trump supporters.

The statement mirrored similar statements that US officials have issued about authoritarianism in both countries, and comes a day after the country's socialist president retook official control of the government following an election last month.

In a communique issued from Caracas, the Venezuelan government said it "expresses its concern with the acts of violence that are taking [place] in the city of Washington, United States."

Mirroring the language used by US officials commenting on political movements in foreign countries, Venezuela condemned the violence in the Capitol.

"Venezuela condemns the political polarization and the spiral of violence that only reflects the deep crisis that the political and social system of the United States is currently going through," the message said.

The message went on to condemn the US for inciting the kind of violence and unrest seen at the US Capitol in other countries.

"With this unfortunate episode, the United States is suffering the same thing that it has generated in other countries with its policies of aggression. Venezuela hopes that soon the violence will cease and the American people can finally open a new path towards stability and social justice," the statement said.

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro accused the US of playing a part in a 2019 coup attempt by opposition government leader Juan Guaido.

The US and the European Union, among other foreign governments, recognised Mr Guaido as the legitimate leader of the country, but his attempt to oust Mr Maduro was unsuccessful.

The European Union stated on Tuesday it would no longer recognise Mr Guaido as the legitimate leader on Tuesday.

The US has a long history of supporting regime-change efforts - usually violent - in Latin American countries.

Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, the US attempted to fight the spread of revolutionary socialist governments in Latin America by supporting, training and supplying violent reactionary insurgents.

Arguably the most well known of these regime change efforts was the Contra War in Nicaragua in the early 1980's, in which the US Central Intelligence Agency trained guerilla fighters and "death squads" made up of reactionary Nicaraguan troops to oppose the Marxist Sandinista government that took power through a military junta.

The Contras assassinated civilian leaders, massacred religious workers, and incited mob violence against citizen cooperatives.

In 2020, an American right-wing mercenary Jordan Goudreau, attempted to lead a clandestine military operation into Venezuela to displace Mr Maduro.

"Operation Gideon," as Mr Goudreau called it, was reportedly advised against by Mr Guaido because it was amateurish and poorly-planned.

Mr Goudreau may have been motivated to carry out the mission in order to claim a multi-million dollar reward the US was offering for information leading to the arrest of Mr Maduro.

The American mercenary's men - approximately 60 poorly armed Venezuelans hiding out in Columbia and at least two former US soldiers - were arrested by Venezuelan security forces before they even reached the shore.

The soldiers have been sentenced to 20 years in prison for invading the country. Venezuela has also called for the extradition of Mr Goudreau - who did not personally accompany the ill-fated assault - so he can face trial.

Top White House Officials Weigh Exits After Trump Incites Mayhem (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/7/2021 1:14 AM, Jennifer Jacobs, Saleha Mohsin, and Jordan Fabian, Neutral]

Donald Trump's deputy national security advisor resigned and other White House officials are weighing departures after the president encouraged protests that led to his supporters storming the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, according to people familiar with the matter.

The deputy, Matt Pottinger, was dismayed by the attack on the Capitol and Trump's incitement of protesters, the people said. His boss, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, also considered leaving but was persuaded to stay on by allies on Wednesday, the people said. Also weighing a resignation is Chris Liddell, assistant to the president and deputy chief of staff for policy coordination. A handful of aides already quit following the mayhem Wednesday at the Capitol, including first lady Melania Trump's chief of staff.

Inside Trump's White House, there is anger and consternation over the unprecedented violence that unfolded as Congress began counting Electoral College votes to confirm President-elect Joe Biden's victory. Before Trump held a rally with thousands of supporters outside the White House in the morning, he spoke with Vice President Mike Pence by phone, urging him to reject some of Biden's votes while presiding over the count in a joint session of Congress. Trump told Pence that he could either be courageous or not, using a vulgarity, according to two people familiar with the matter.

During the rally, the president exhorted his supporters to march on the Capitol. Crowds swelled before protesters finally broke through police lines and entered the building just after the joint session got underway.

It took aides about 45 minutes to persuade Trump to issue a tweet urging protesters against violence after they entered the building, according to people familiar with the matter.

Those who tried to reason with the president included his chief of staff, Mark Meadows, and White House Counsel Pat Cipollone, the people said, asking not to be identified.

Meadows and the president's daughter and senior adviser, Ivanka Trump, later persuaded Trump to film a short video he posted on Twitter, in which he repeated his unfounded claims of election fraud and held the protesters blameless for the violence while urging them to go home.

Trump walked back and forth between the Oval Office and White House dining room watching the events at the Capitol and was initially pleased by the disturbance, the people said — a reaction that alarmed many of his aides.

The White House declined to comment.

Earlier Wednesday evening, first lady Melania Trump's chief of staff, Stephanie Grisham, resigned, as well as the White House social secretary, Anna Cristina "Rickie" Niceta Lloyd, according to people familiar with the matter. A deputy White House press secretary, Sarah Matthews, said she had resigned over Wednesday's violence at the Capitol, in which an unidentified woman shot and killed by a Capitol Police officer, according to the Washington, D.C. police department. Three other people died of medical emergencies as the Capitol was breached, the municipal police said.

"As someone who worked in the halls of Congress I was deeply disturbed by what I saw today," Matthews said in a statement. "I'll be stepping down from my role, effective immediately. Our nation needs a peaceful transfer of power." A State Department spokesman, Gabriel Noronha, criticized Trump in a tweet from his personal account late Wednesday, saying he "fomented an insurrectionist mob that attacked the Capitol" and "needs to go."

Noronha confirmed the authenticity of the tweet but declined further comment. Some of Trump's loyalists were angry that O'Brien signaled his displeasure with the president in several tweets on Wednesday, including one that openly praised Vice President Mike Pence after he defied Trump's demands that he unilaterally reject Electoral College votes for Biden.

The post was interpreted within the White House as criticism of Trump, according to people familiar with the matter. CNN reported earlier that O'Brien, Pottinger and Lidell are considering resigning. NBC News earlier reported Matthews's resignation.

Also Wednesday, the president told aides not to allow Vice President Mike Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, into the White House, the people said.

Trump acted out of anger toward Short for multiple reasons, according to people familiar with the matter, including a New York Times report that Pence had privately told him Tuesday he would not seek to halt the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory. Trump blamed Short for the story, one person said. Another person said Trump doesn't trust Short, and Short doesn't like Trump. Short was at the building on Wednesday anyway, according to one person familiar with the matter.

SolarWinds Hack Breached Justice Department System (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 5:00 PM, Dustin Volz and Robert McMillan, Neutral]

The U.S. Justice Department has become the latest federal agency to say it was breached by hackers in the Russia-linked cyberattack that has ripped through government agencies and an unknown number of corporate networks.

About 3% of the Justice Department's Microsoft Office email accounts were potentially accessed in the attack, the department said Wednesday.

The Justice Department's chief information officer learned of the previously unknown malicious activity on Dec. 24 and has "eliminated the identified method by which the actor was accessing" Microsoft Office email accounts, Marc Raimondi, a Justice Department spokesman, said in a written statement.

There is no indication classified systems were affected, Mr. Raimondi said, as the department classified the breach as a major incident requiring notification to other agencies and Congress.

Even unclassified email accounts, though, can contain sensitive information about investigations and potentially national security related issues, said Chris Painter, a former senior official at the Justice and State departments who worked on cybersecurity issues. "A lot of DOJ work happens on unclassified systems."

It couldn't be determined which Justice Department employees, or how many, potentially had their internal communications exposed in the operation. Some 115,000 employees work at the Justice Department, according to the department's 2020 fiscal year budget request, a figure that includes Federal Bureau of Investigation personnel and correctional officers at federal prisons. Mr. Raimondi said not all Justice Department employees use Microsoft Office, but didn't comment further on the size of the exposure. Investigators continue to try to understand the full extent of the hack, so far linked to using a malicious update to widely used software provided by a Texas-based network-management company called SolarWinds Corp. to compromise U.S. government agencies and scores of private businesses across the globe. Investigators are reviewing how it managed to go undetected for so long and whether there were avenues of attack.

Intelligence officials and cybersecurity analysts involved in the response are investigating whether a little-known software company called JetBrains s.r.o. might have played a role in the SolarWinds hack, according to people familiar with the matter. JetBrains makes tools for software developers, including a product called TeamCity that is used to help manage and speed up large software development projects.

Investigators believe that the SolarWinds hackers gained access to a TeamCity server used by SolarWinds to build its software products, but it is unclear how this system was accessed, according to people familiar with the matter.

"SolarWinds, like many companies, uses a product by JetBrains called TeamCity to assist with the development of its software. We are reviewing all internal and external tools as part of our investigations, which are still ongoing" a SolarWinds spokesman said. The company hasn't seen any evidence linking the security incident to a compromise of the TeamCity

product, he said.

"We're not aware of any breach," Maxim Shafirov, the chief executive of JetBrains, said in a text message. The company was founded in the Czech Republic in 2000. It boasts 79 of the Fortune 100 among its 300,000 clients.

"We have never been contact by any security firms or agencies on the matter," Mr. Shafirov said.

Interest in JetBrains among investigators was earlier reported by the New York Times.

The Justice Department is the latest of more than a half-dozen agencies to identify a compromise of its systems related to the massive hack, which has been under way for more than a year but was only discovered last month. Other federal agencies affected include the departments of State, Treasury, Commerce and Energy, according to officials and others familiar with the investigation.

On Tuesday, the Trump administration for the first time formally stated that Russia is likely behind what is known as the SolarWinds hack, a conclusion that senior officials had already reached and expressed both publicly and privately. Moscow has denied involvement in the cyberattack.

Current and former officials and cybersecurity experts have said the hack amounts to one of the worst intelligence failures on record. Hacks are often destructive in nature by disrupting operations. This one, officials believe, was different—a widely successful cyber espionage operation intended to purloin sensitive information from the U.S. government and quietly maintain persistent access within those networks.

Microsoft last week said the hackers accessed its systems and viewed internal source code used to create software products. The hackers also compromised at least one reseller of Microsoft's cloud-based computing services and tried to use that as a way of gaining access to emails belonging to the cybersecurity vendor CrowdStrike Inc. That attempt was unsuccessful, CrowdStrike has said.

Microsoft Corp. declined to comment on the breach of Justice Department email accounts.

U.S. Labels India, Italy, Turkey Digital Taxes Discriminatory (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 6:14 PM, Jenny Leonard, 6400K, Negative]

The U.S. said decisions by India, Italy and Turkey to tax local revenue of Internet giants such as Facebook Inc. discriminates against American companies, but won't be taking action against the countries for now.

The taxes are "inconsistent with prevailing principles of international taxation, and burden or restricts U.S. commerce," the office of the U.S. Trade Representative said in a statement Wednesday. While it won't retaliate now, the USTR will "continue to evaluate all available options," it said.

The countries are among several that have instituted so-called digital services taxes, or

levies on local sales of companies including Alphabet Inc.'s Google.

In June, the USTR started investigations into the moves of at least 10 countries, citing Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, which allows it to retaliate for trade practices it deems unfair. It's the same tool used to justify U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods for alleged theft of intellectual property.

Should the U.S. decide to impose duties on imports from these countries, it likely would be up to the incoming Biden administration to implement that decision -- as time is running out for the current USTR to prepare tariff lists and go through a public comment period before the duties take effect.

Plans for an international digital-tax agreement brokered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have been delayed until at least summer of this year after it became clear the initial deadline of reaching a deal in 2020 wouldn't be met. The goal had been to replace individual country's digital taxes with a global plan.

Without an OECD agreement, countries are going ahead with their own versions of the taxes, which could result in a world-wide retaliatory tax and tariff war between the U.S. and nations that want a share of the taxes from American tech giants' revenue. Belgium, Norway and Latvia are among countries who could introduce digital services taxes in 2021, while Spain and Czech Republic start collecting the tax this month.

French Retaliation

The U.S. was due to start charging a 25% levy on imports of French makeup, handbags and soap on Wednesday worth about \$1.3 billion annually in retaliation for the European country's tax on the revenue of American tech companies. The original annual value of goods to be targeted was \$2.4 billion.

The U.S. Trade Representative didn't respond requests for confirmation that the tariffs went into force. Officials from the French finance ministry and the European Commission hadn't received notices from the U.S. by the close of business Wednesday.

France implemented its tax on digital revenue in 2019 to put pressure on the talks to advance, but the U.S. said the unilateral move unfairly targeted American companies.

In January 2020, President Emmanuel Macron and U.S. counterpart Donald Trump agreed a truce in their dispute to give time for the international negotiations to reach a global deal, but the talks stumbled in October and France resumed collecting the tax in mid-December.

[China] NYSE Reverses Course Again, Will Delist Three Chinese Telecom Stocks (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 5:05 PM, By Alexander Osipovich, Neutral]

The New York Stock Exchange will move forward with delisting three Chinese telecommunications companies targeted by an executive order from President Trump, reversing course yet again after the NYSE said earlier this week that it wouldn't delist them.

The NYSE said Wednesday that trading of the U.S.-listed shares of China Mobile Ltd. CHL -

5.45% , China Telecom Corp. CHA 3.74% and China Unicom (Hong Kong) Ltd. would be suspended at 4 a.m. ET on Monday. Mr. Trump's order seeks to ban trading in securities of companies that the administration says have links to the Chinese military.

The NYSE said its latest action came after it received "new specific guidance" from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control on Tuesday, which listed the three companies' American depositary receipts as being covered by Mr. Trump's order. Wednesday's reversal is likely to raise further questions about the exchange's handling of the three Chinese stocks. Last week, the NYSE said it would delist the three companies to comply with Mr. Trump's order, only to reverse course on Monday and say that it wasn't delisting them. A person familiar with the matter said the NYSE backtracked Monday due to ambiguity in whether the three companies were covered by the order, but the new guidance, which Treasury shared with the exchange late Tuesday, made it clear that the companies must be delisted. The Treasury posted that guidance online Wednesday morning.

The NYSE's backpedaling drew criticism from the Trump administration and supporters of a hard line against Beijing. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin called NYSE President Stacey Cunningham to object to the NYSE's flip-flop.

The Treasury Dept.'s handling of the order has also come under fire. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) on Wednesday blamed the department for issuing erroneous guidance that led the NYSE to temporarily walk back its delisting. "It is outrageous that those in the U.S. Treasury Department attempted to undermine the President's Executive Order in a blatant attempt to serve the interests of Wall Street and the Chinese Communist Party at the expense of the United States," Mr. Rubio said in a statement.

The senator added that he was pleased the NYSE was moving ahead with the delisting. A Treasury spokesman declined to comment.

Critics on all sides hammered the NYSE, owned by Intercontinental Exchange Inc., for its flip-flop on the delistings, even as it remained unclear whether the exchange or the Treasury was at fault for the confusing series of reversals.

In China, officials have criticized the delisting of the telecom companies, saying it would harm the standing of the U.S. in global capital markets. "I'm sure all countries, not just China, are watching what the United States plans to do, which will determine whether it can be seen as a reliable or trustworthy partner for cooperation," a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said at a briefing Wednesday.

Meanwhile, U.S. critics of Beijing have accused the NYSE of trying to curry favor with Chinese authorities before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who may take a softer line on trade with China than Mr. Trump.

"The NYSE is trying to judge how the political winds are blowing, and it's a pretty confusing situation right now," said Dan David, founder of Wolfpack Research, an investment-research firm that specializes in shorting, or betting against, companies that it suspects to be engaged in fraud, including Chinese companies.

The NYSE's intent has always been to comply with the executive order, the person familiar with the matter said.

Investors have also been whipsawed as the on-again, off-again delisting announcements have sent the affected Chinese stocks on a wild ride. NYSE-listed shares of China Mobile fell 5.5% on Wednesday, while China Telecom gained 3.7% in the final minutes of trading after being down as much as 7% earlier, and China Unicom closed the day flat.

That came after the three stocks sold off Monday, only to rebound Tuesday when it appeared that the NYSE would be allowing the stocks to remain listed after all.

China Mobile and China Unicom didn't respond to requests for comment sent after business hours in Asia. A U.S.-based spokesman for China Telecom referred questions to the company's Hong Kong office, which didn't respond to requests for comment.

Derrick Early, an aerospace engineer in Maryland, said he sold China Mobile shares on Monday at a loss when it appeared that they would be delisted. That meant he missed out when the stock jumped more than 9% the next day.

"I'm so cross with President Trump on the ban, and I'm cross with NYSE on whipsawing their delisting policy," he said.

Mr. Trump's order doesn't formally require investors who own shares of the affected Chinese companies to sell them until November. Still, brokerages used by many individual investors have been warning customers that they may have trouble liquidating the shares unless they cash out several days before the ban takes effect early next week.

Last week, for instance, the popular investing app Robinhood told its customers that they had until Monday, Jan. 5, to sell the affected Chinese securities, and afterward "liquidation may not be available."

[China] NYSE to delist three Chinese telecoms in dizzying about-face (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 10:34 PM, John McCrank, Anirban Sen, Kanishka Singh, Bhargav Acharya, 5304K, Neutral]

The New York Stock Exchange said on Wednesday it will delist three Chinese telecom companies, confirming its latest U-turn on the matter a day after U.S. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin told the NYSE chief he disagreed with an earlier decision to reverse the delistings.

The latest move, which is effective Jan. 11, marks the third time in less than a week the Big Board has ruled on the issue.

The flip-flopping highlights the confusion over which firms were included in an executive order issued by President Donald Trump in November barring U.S. persons from investing in publicly traded companies Washington deems to be tied to the Chinese military.

It also comes amid escalating tensions within Washington on China policy in the final days of the Trump administration.

"There is a unique situation where there is an outgoing administration that is disengaged and (there are) orders sitting out there, so something has to be done, but no one wants to take on responsibility," said Leland Miller, the CEO of the U.S.-based consultancy China Beige Book.

"I think in future that anyone getting these orders will say: 'Tell us exactly what you want us to do,' and force administrations to be more focused."

The NYSE originally on Thursday announced plans to delist China Mobile Ltd, China Telecom Corp Ltd and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd. On Monday, it did a U-turn after consulting with regulators in connection with the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control and decided to keep them listed. Wednesday's decision marks a return to the original plan.

The decision to keep the companies listed had prompted criticism that Treasury was being dovish on China.

Mnuchin has long been seen as seeking to thwart attempts by hardliners in the administration - many led by the State department - to crack down on Chinese companies.

But sources who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the matter said Mnuchin had called NYSE President Stacey Cunningham on Tuesday to express his concerns over the decision to relist the companies, as the exchange sought further confirmation on the matter.

"The Treasury secretary was on the phone with the NYSE (president) now and was told that NYSE would reverse their decision," a U.S. official told Reuters on Tuesday.

On Wednesday the exchange operator said in a statement its latest decision, to move forward with the delistings, was based on "new specific guidance received on January 5, 2021, that the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control provided to the NYSE".

Trading in the securities will be suspended at 4 a.m. ET (0900 GMT) on Jan. 11, the NYSE said.

A spokeswoman for the exchange operator declined to comment further.

The flip-flopping caused investors to sell positions in the securities, the prices of which dropped on the initial announcement, then rose on the next, and tumbled again on Wednesday.

Republican Senator Ben Sasse, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said the decision was the "right call".

"Chinese firms that reject fundamental transparency requirements and have ties to the Chinese military shouldn't benefit from American investment," Sasse said.

Trump's executive order technically takes effect on Jan. 11 but does not ban purchases by U.S. investors until November.

While the directive stops short of forcing a delisting, a separate bill signed into law by Trump in November will kick Chinese companies off U.S. bourses if they do not fully comply with the country's auditing rules in three years.

The U.S. State Department plans to release as soon as Wednesday a fact sheet urging U.S. investors to comply with the executive order, according to three people familiar with the matter and a copy of the document seen by Reuters.

The Treasury said on Wednesday that market intermediaries could help investors divest securities of the blacklisted companies.

S&P Dow Jones Indices, which has also made U-turns in decisions, said late on Wednesday it will remove the three telecom firms' ADRs from its benchmarks before Jan. 11.

Other index makers including FTSE Russell and MSCI Inc have cut a dozen Chinese companies on the list from their benchmarks, but have not removed the three telecom firms, all of which have major passive U.S. funds amongst their top shareholders.

[China] U.S. to urge firms comply with China investment ban in new guidance, sources say (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 3:54 PM, Humeysra Pamuk and Alexandra Alper, Neutral]

The U.S. State Department plans to release as soon as Wednesday a fact sheet urging U.S. investors to comply with an executive order banning investments in alleged Chinese military companies, according to three people familiar with the matter and a copy of the document seen by Reuters.

The executive order, released by the Trump administration in November, bars Americans from buying securities of 35 Chinese companies that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has deemed to be owned or controlled by the Chinese military, starting in November 2021.

Confusion over what the order requires prompted the New York Stock Exchange last Thursday to announce plans to delist three Chinese telecom companies that the Pentagon added to the blacklist. On Monday the NYSE scrapped the move and then in a surprise twist the exchange reversed course a second time on Wednesday and vowed to continue with its bid to delist the firms.

The State Department guidance sheds little new light on the order but explicitly exhorts Americans to comply.

"Ample warning has been given to the compliance officers and risk managers to understand and disclose to their constituents the material risk associated with the Executive Order," a draft of the State Department release states.

"CEOs and their boards now have a legal duty to implement and be in full compliance with

the Executive Order," it adds.

Three people, who declined to be named since the matter was not yet public, confirmed plans to release the document and two of them confirmed the contents.

A spokesperson for the State Department declined to confirm the fact sheet but said, "We continue to work with Treasury, DoD, and others to implement the President's Executive Order to address the threat from securities investments that finance Communist Chinese military companies."

The November executive order is part of a bid by U.S. President Donald Trump to cement his tough-on-China legacy in the waning days of his administration. It also gives teeth to a 1999 law that required the DoD to compile a list of Chinese firms backed by the Chinese military.

The catalog now includes China's top chipmaker SMIC and oil giant CNOOC. Index providers like MSCI have begun shedding the blacklisted Chinese firms from their indexes in the wake of the November directive.

The confusion comes against a backdrop of tension among U.S. agencies about how stringently to construe the November executive order. Reuters and other news outlets reported that the State Department and DoD had pushed back against draft guidance that the Treasury Department was planning to issue that was seen as watering down the order.

Both U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin later wrote in tweets that there was no disagreement over the executive order.

[China] Trump's Ban on Chinese Apps Falls to Biden to Execute—or Not (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 5:12 PM, John D. McKinnon, Neutral]

President Trump's latest executive order targeting Chinese tech platforms will fall to President-elect Joe Biden to enforce, or not, giving Mr. Biden a difficult political calculation to make in his first weeks in office.

The executive order issued late Tuesday bans U.S. transactions with eight Chinese-connected apps, including the Alipay mobile payment platform owned by Chinese billionaire Jack Ma's Ant Group Co., and the WeChat TCEHY -3.97% Pay app owned by China's Tencent Holdings Ltd.

But the order won't take effect until next month—after Mr. Trump leaves office—meaning Mr. Biden has ample opportunity to modify or suspend it.

Already, the Biden transition team has announced that the incoming president will suspend and review late-stage executive actions by Mr. Trump that wouldn't kick in until after he has left office.

The Biden transition team declined to comment Wednesday about whether the new executive order concerning Chinese apps would be among the Trump initiatives likely to be

sidelined. Rolling back the order may not be a given, however, considering bipartisan concerns over China's use of technology for political repression. At the same time, U.S. businesses worry about the potential for retaliation by China if major new restrictions on its tech giants are enacted.

One purpose of the new order appears to have been to "make it as difficult as possible for a Biden administration to change direction," said Scott Kennedy, an expert on Chinese business at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. He predicted more such actions by Mr. Trump in his final two weeks in office. Already on Wednesday, U.S. business representatives were laying plans to push the incoming administration to delay implementation of the order through a review process, to ensure "sufficient commercial input on the measures before any action is taken," one person familiar with the matter said.

"I'm sure it will be paused and reviewed," this person said. "If anything is implemented it will be much further down the road."

Representatives of Ant and Tencent had no comment on the executive order Wednesday.

Beyond those companies, the executive order's language could raise new concerns among businesses about the potential for restricting some transactions in China, a hot market for many U.S. multinationals, according to a former U.S. trade official.

The U.S. China Business Council in a statement Wednesday expressed support for the order's aims. It added, however, that "it is vital that this executive order be scoped and enforced in such a way that protects U.S. citizens' legitimate interests, but does not unnecessarily harm U.S. company competitiveness in international markets, particularly a market as strategically important to many companies as China."

In fact, some parts of the order are broadly worded. The prohibition on transactions, for example, applies to "any person or...property, subject to the jurisdiction of the United States." Another part of the order prohibiting attempts at evasion applies to "any transaction by a United States person or within the United States."

In the executive order, Mr. Trump directed Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to work out the implementation details—although like the president, Mr. Ross will be departing after Mr. Biden's inauguration.

[China] U.S. Weighs Adding Alibaba, Tencent to China Stock Ban (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 7:38 PM, Dawn Lim, Jing Yang, Gordon Lubold and Alexander Osipovich
, Neutral]

U.S. officials are considering prohibiting Americans from investing in Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. and Tencent Holdings Ltd., a potential escalation of the outgoing Trump administration's efforts to unwind U.S. investors' holdings in major Chinese companies.

State and Defense Department officials in recent weeks have discussed expanding a

blacklist of companies prohibited to U.S. investments over alleged ties to China's military and security services, according to people familiar with the matter. The U.S. government announced its original blacklist in November with 31 companies.

Tencent and Alibaba are China's two most valuable publicly listed companies, with a combined market capitalization of over \$1.3 trillion and scores of American mutual funds and other investors holding their shares. Alibaba's New York-listed American depositary receipts fell more than 5% on Wednesday, while Tencent ADRs tumbled by about 4% in the U.S. over-the-counter market. The blacklist is one of several Trump administration efforts related to investing in Chinese firms. Also on Wednesday, the New York Stock Exchange said it would delist three major Chinese telecommunication carriers targeted by a Trump executive order, after earlier scrapping the plan following "new specific guidance" from the Treasury Department. The investment decisions aren't the only steps the Trump administration has taken.

After decades of policy broadly aimed at cultivating closer ties, the U.S. has taken a harder line against China in business, politics, trade and markets that have rippled through the global economy.

U.S. companies have also shifted, with some moving production out of China and others more closely examining the security of their trade secrets there. Wall Street, which has long pursued greater connection between the countries' financial markets, is now navigating growing risks to tying investors' money to China.

The State and Defense Departments have debated with the Treasury whether adding Alibaba and Tencent to the U.S. blacklist would have wide capital-markets ramifications, people familiar with the matter said. The plan remains under discussion and might not proceed, the people added.

Alibaba and Tencent are tracked by major indexes including those created by MSCI Inc. and FTSE Russell. Alibaba, listed in both New York and Hong Kong, and Hong Kong-listed Tencent are heavyweights in widely followed global stock indexes. Like most foreign companies, the stocks aren't included on the Nasdaq Composite, S&P 500 or Dow Jones Industrial Average. In the final weeks of the Trump presidency, U.S. authorities have clashed over the scope of the list of companies barred to American investors. Pentagon and State officials have pursued a broader list including high-profile firms and many subsidiaries of already-named companies in China. The agencies have urged a tougher line to curb China's military and security services' access to data troves, advanced technologies and expertise. The Treasury, worried that forced selling could shake financial markets, wants a narrower list.

The Pentagon, the lead agency managing the list, had no immediate comment. The State Department and Treasury Department had no immediate comment.

A spokeswoman at Alibaba didn't respond to requests for comment. A spokesman at Tencent declined to comment.

China's Ministry of Commerce didn't respond to a request for comment sent outside business hours, and the Chinese embassy in the U.S. referred to a December comment by

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that said, "China firmly opposes the wanton suppression of Chinese companies by the United States," and "the Chinese government will continue to safeguard Chinese companies' legitimate and lawful rights and interests."

While Alibaba and Tencent aren't controlled by the Chinese government, the State Department and Pentagon have long voiced concerns that the companies could be coerced to share data on U.S. citizens and businesses, potentially serving as a conduit for the Beijing to extend its influence.

In a separate action earlier this week, President Trump signed an order prohibiting U.S. individuals and companies from transacting with eight Chinese software apps including Alibaba affiliate Ant Group Co.'s Alipay and Tencent's WeChat Pay. The order takes effect in 45 days, after President-elect Joe Biden is inaugurated on Jan. 20.

Then on Wednesday, the NYSE said the trading of the U.S.-listed shares of China Mobile Ltd., China Telecom Corp. and China Unicom (Hong Kong) Ltd. would be suspended at 4 a.m. ET on Monday.

The exchange's reversal is likely to raise further questions about its handling of the three Chinese stocks. The NYSE said last week that it would delist the three companies to comply with Mr. Trump's order, only to change course on Monday and say that it wasn't delisting them.

A person familiar with the matter attributed NYSE's backtracking Monday to ambiguity over whether the three companies were covered by the order. But the new guidance, which the Treasury shared with the exchange late Tuesday, made it clear that the companies must be delisted. The Treasury posted that guidance online Wednesday morning.

The Trump administration and supporters of a hard line against Beijing criticized the exchange's reversal. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin called NYSE President Stacey Cunningham to voice objections.

The past year has seen several moves that could cut off a recurring investment pipeline between U.S. investors and Chinese firms.

In recent years, scores of Chinese tech companies have raised tens of billions of dollars from U.S. and international investors, allowing foreign investors to capitalize on China's fast-growing economy. As of Dec. 31, Alibaba and Tencent were among top constituents in the MSCI Emerging Markets Index, accounting for a combined 11% weighting. Similarly, the two together claimed a 12% weighting in the FTSE Emerging Index as of Dec. 31.

After releasing its November blacklist, the Pentagon expanded it in December to include companies such as top Chinese chip maker Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp. and oil giant China National Offshore Oil Corp.

The State Department in August said the U.S. needs to address threats posed by cloud-based systems run by Alibaba, Tencent and Baidu Inc. U.S. officials have become increasingly concerned in recent weeks as the increased scrutiny Alibaba and Ant have faced in China, putting the further at the mercy of Beijing, have raised U.S. officials'

concerns in recent weeks, according to one of the people familiar with the matter.

The Chinese government has tightened control over domestic tech champions recently, unveiling a sweeping antitrust regulation aimed at the country's biggest internet platforms, launching an investigation into Alibaba and scuttling Ant's blockbuster initial public offering. Regulators are trying to get Ant to share the troves of consumer-credit data it has amassed with the Chinese central bank's credit-reporting system, The Wall Street Journal reported.

Tencent operates the hugely popular WeChat app, which has become one of Beijing's most powerful surveillance tools. Tencent also owns stakes in several U.S. videogame companies.

Major U.S. asset managers including T. Rowe Price Group Inc., BlackRock Inc. and Vanguard Group are among the top public shareholders of Alibaba and Tencent through funds, according to FactSet data.

Asset managers are lobbying to prevent companies like Alibaba from becoming blacklisted, said a person familiar with large financial firms' conversations with U.S. regulators.

The Treasury said last week that investors would be barred from investing in both blacklisted companies and subsidiaries owned 50% or more by a company named on the list. Derivatives, bonds and depositary receipts—as well as exchange-traded funds, index funds and mutual funds holding securities issued by these entities in any jurisdiction—will also be restricted to U.S. investors.

Editorials and Op-eds

Pentagon must continue military support to CIA's counterterrorism operations (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/6/2021 3:59 PM, Abraham Wagner, 459K, Neutral]

A key element of the ongoing war on terror has been the collaborative efforts by CIA and the U.S. military working on what are termed "covert" or "clandestine" operations against terrorists around the world.

Often the CIA's Special Activities Center carries out such covert operations with its own paramilitary force, acting independently, but relying on the Defense Department's military assets for transportation and logistical support. In the field, they also rely on special forces for assistance in various counterterrorism operations.

According to a recent report, the Pentagon informed the CIA that it would be ending the majority of the military support it provides to the agency's counterterrorism missions. Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller is reported to have sent a letter to CIA Director Gina Haspel outlining the decision, which is both surprising and unprecedented.

Such a decision would certainly impact the CIA's worldwide counterterrorism missions that frequently rely on the military where military personnel are detailed to support the CIA's operations. Over the last two decades such joint and cooperative operations have been a successful and high point in overall U.S. counterterrorism activities. As terrorist activities

around the globe have escalated, U.S. presidents have all supported such operations as an essential element of U.S. policy.

A CIA spokesperson has stated that "there is no stronger relationship nor better partnership than that between CIA and DOD," and "that partnership has led to accomplishments that significantly advanced U.S. national security, and we are confident that DOD and CIA will continue this close collaboration for years to come."

At the Defense Department, their spokesperson indicated that the possible shift away from supporting the CIA's counterterrorism missions was in line with the National Defense Strategy that pushes the military's focus away from the regional wars in the Middle East toward near-peer competitors like Russia and China. Here the intent behind the move is to see if DOD personnel "detailed" to the CIA should be diverted from counterterrorism missions and toward missions related to competition with Russia and China. Such a concept would "better align its allocation of resources with the 2018 National Defense Strategy's shift to great power competition."

In reality, however, the types of DOD personnel detailed to support CIA counterterrorism operations have little to do with competition with Russia and China. Nothing in fact. A careful reading of the 2018 National Security Strategy shows this approach to be largely nonsense. It is simply a political stunt being undertaken for some largely unknown reason. These highly trained and specialized forces are not needed for other missions and removing them from support to counterterrorism operations only serves to harm U.S. interests.

Taking such actions by DOD would be a serious setback to a very strong and effective relationship between the DOD and CIA, that has resulted in numerous successes over the past two decades in the area of counterterrorism, including the operations against Osama bin Laden and al-Baghdadi, as well as many others that will never be disclosed.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently disclosed that a CIA paramilitary officer was killed in Somalia and had previously served in the military as a Navy SEAL. Removing DOD support to critical counterterrorism operations could increase the risk to CIA officers and may need to be addressed by the incoming administration. If it is not reversed, the CIA needs increased personnel and funding to make up for the difference to continue their critical missions.

On a related note, the DOD announced that President Trump had ordered the withdrawal of most of the 700 U.S. military personnel in Somalia, though the department stated that it would continue to carry out counterterrorism missions against al-Shabab, the al Qaeda affiliate. Presumably, the removal of most of those troops from Somalia would already have had an impact on the CIA's counterterrorism operations in that country.

One of the great success stories of the DOD over the past several decades has been the area of "special forces" where organization, training and equipment have all contributed to what are now outstanding capabilities. Here these forces have repeatedly served on missions which are within the DOD mission areas as well as joint operations with their CIA counterparts.

The relationship between the DOD and CIA has grown exponentially over the last two

decades not only in high-profile missions, but daily operations that most often go unnoticed. Those familiar with these activities note that the relationships on the ground and within the ranks are on solid ground, and that any effort to remove this support would be "akin to cutting off your nose to spite your face." At least one former high-ranking CIA official described the DOD plans as "highly irregular" given that the CIA's counter-terrorism missions can no longer be executed by the CIA without U.S. military support.

Exactly how or why this state of affairs came about so quickly at the end of the Trump administration remains a mystery. It should be a high priority for the incoming Biden administration to review what has taken place and ensure that policy going forward supports the decades of highly successful joint operations between the DOD and CIA in the counterterrorism area. This has never been a partisan issue, and administrations from both parties have all worked to create a capability that serves the nation in a most critical area. Maintaining this capability rather than wrecking it is essential for the country.

Who's On the Hook If Vaccines Go Wrong? (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 5:30 PM, Anjani Trivedi and Andy Mukherjee, 6400K, Neutral]

The Covid-19 vaccines are here and distribution has begun. But what if something goes wrong?

Whether it's a loss of income, hefty medical bills or other serious adverse effects from getting a shot, someone has to pick up the tab, be it vaccine manufacturers or governments. In the past, so-called liability shields have given companies cover to produce effective treatments quickly without legal exposure. But it's a risky endeavor for countries to absorb full responsibility for highly novel products, developed and licensed at lightning speed. Especially when every man, woman and, eventually, child will need to be injected.

Adar Poonawalla, the chief executive of Serum Institute of India Ltd., the world's largest vaccine maker by volume, wants indemnity. Competitors tripping up one another by instigating frivolous civil suits isn't a trivial risk for the likes of Poonawalla, who's manufacturing the jab developed by AstraZeneca Plc and Oxford University. It could get messier still because some healthcare systems may experiment with dosage quantities and intervals to deal with mutations. Who will be responsible if there are serious adverse side events then? No insurer will underwrite the risk; the burden of compensation will fall on states or, in the case of poor countries, on Covax, a global initiative to ensure equitable distribution.

On current estimates, Covax can meet only a fifth of global demand by the end of the year. So countries that are striking direct agreements with producers will still have to worry about potential tort claims, which seek civil remedies — and not just for the next year or two. The virus may stick around even after universal immunization, with mutant strains creating an enduring market for jabs long after Covid has ceased to be a public health emergency.

Manufacturers, distributors and other entities in the United States "are very likely to find their Covid-19 products and services moving across borders," according to RAND Corporation researchers. Their legal exposure in foreign courts is thus uncertain, especially given the rapid pace of vaccine development and limited data about side effects and long-term consequences.

Going by past pandemics, this data won't start showing up for a while. When it does, it will likely vary by country, which affects how liability is handled. In 2013, four years after swine flu hit the globe, the U.K. government reversed its stand on the safety of the Pandemrix jab made by GlaxoSmithKline Plc, after a major study showed that it was associated with narcolepsy. Affected individuals could apply for compensation. At the time, the health department noted that "the decision to recommend that children got this vaccine during the flu pandemic was based on evidence available at the time, along with the advice from the European Medicines Agency which approved its use." It then said that the department keeps "all emerging evidence under review," which is why usage stopped in 2011 for those under 20. The data evolves, muddying potential liability issues.

It gets more complicated. Rich countries are buying up large doses of viable vaccines from Pfizer Inc.-BioNTech SE and Moderna Inc. Many are now weighing turning over a portion they have secured to low- and middle-income nations facing delays as Covax hasn't worked out as planned. The European Union, for instance, is considering donating 5% of its inoculations, Reuters reported. With altruistic gifts, it's even harder to assign responsibility.

During the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, the World Health Organization came up with a multi-country liability shield, as RAND researchers describe it, or a global legal framework. Recipient countries had to sign a letter of agreement that basically allowed donors to wash their hands of liability, or indemnify donors, as long as they followed WHO standards. The issues were knotty and some countries didn't have the resources to interpret them. Eventually, of the 94 countries that were interested in donations, 87 signed the agreement and only 78 completed the preconditions in the agreement for vaccine supply.

The complexity of the current situation and the sheer scale of production mean a new agreement will be required. National governments will need to negotiate, consider and approve various requirements – all long processes. If disparities between countries crop up, manufacturers will face barriers to production and distribution. The alternative is national compensation funds, which honor claims for those who have suffered adverse effects from the vaccines. Many countries simply can't afford these, further reinforcing the resource and investment imbalance.

Previous widespread illnesses like small pox and other influenzas show that liability issues can hinder progress of new vaccines, even domestically. In 1976, as the Ford administration took on an ambitious program to vaccinate millions against an anticipated outbreak of swine flu, insurers and manufacturers balked. Their concerns around legal exposure prompted Congress to pass a law waiving liability. Through legislation, the U.S. was substituted as the defendant in lawsuits against any vaccine manufacturer, distributor or American entity providing free inoculation. Although that flu scare didn't evolve into a full-blown pandemic, firms in the U.S. are now effectively protected. Such a legal setup isn't standard in most other places.

An additional challenge this time around is the space race-type international competition in vaccine development. China and Russia are promoting inoculations with little or no data validating their effectiveness in large studies. India has licensed an indigenous product developed by local firm Bharat Biotech International Ltd. "in clinical trial mode" — those receiving the shots will be tracked and that will supposedly prove its efficacy. That's

because phase three experimental data, which do exactly that, aren't yet available.

All this is too breathtaking a pace for scientists. Policy makers in developing nations may not have a choice but to take what they can get — easily, cheaply and quickly. But in so doing, they might just be storing up legal troubles for later.

[Hong Kong] Jimmy Lai's Message of Hope (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 6:33 PM, Brad Lips, Neutral]

Jimmy Lai began 2021 in jail. The detention last month of the prominent Hong Kong businessman and democracy activist suggested that the Chinese Communist Party was looking to crack down on dissent. The hammer dropped Tuesday morning, with the mass arrest of 53 other democracy proponents in Hong Kong.

The jailings may lead to an early test for the Biden administration. While Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were celebrated as Time magazine's "Persons of the Year" for winning an election, it is not clear if they will stand with those fighting for the right to have elections at all.

From a global perspective, the big story of 2020 was China's government: its duplicity around Covid, the continuing expansion of its surveillance state, and its mass forced incarceration and indoctrination of Uighurs in 380 detention centers across the Xianjing region. China is flexing its muscles in Hong Kong unchecked. It is time the rest of the world stood up for the norms of free societies, including free speech and the rule of law.

Mr. Lai's case should draw world-wide attention to what is being lost in Hong Kong. At 12, he smuggled himself out of mainland China by boat, reaching Hong Kong penniless but ambitious. Sixty years later, his success embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of a free Hong Kong; from nothing he built a clothing store empire, then a newspaper and media conglomerate. His newspaper, Apple Daily, is the second-most read paper in Hong Kong. Those accomplishments are impressive, but what he is most passionate about, and what keeps him up at night, is Hong Kong's democracy movement. When I interviewed him in early November, he said "I really appreciate the freedom in Hong Kong. This freedom has given us all that we have. Hope. Inspiration. This is so precious. With my gratitude to this place, it is my duty to do whatever I can to fight for freedom and the rule of law here."

He remained steadfast when I asked about his coming trial: "My life is about something more than myself. . . . Once I started to fight for freedom my life changed. I feel there is a purpose and meaning in my life. Even if I have to go to jail, which is very likely, I don't regret it. I consider it a redemption of the life that I have had. I am prepared for anything."

Many in the West—whether in academia, business or the media—prefer to cover their eyes and pretend that totalitarianism isn't spreading. Will the new Biden administration also accommodate China and its human-rights violations? One doesn't have to believe Donald Trump was 100% correct on China to recognize that his administration was right to challenge Beijing's alarming hostility toward Hong Kong's freedoms.

My New Year's wish is that in 2021 the Biden administration will win honors for providing the world an example of freedom, tolerance and the rule of law. The president-elect could

begin by calling out the illiberalism of the Chinese government. Then he could follow the lead of the U.K. by offering asylum to Hong Kong's people, including those arrested under the national-security law—especially democracy's hero, Jimmy Lai.

Coronavirus News

Nations Stretch Scarce Covid-19 Vaccines by Delaying a Second Shot (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/6/2021 2:21 PM, Jenny Strasburg and Joanna Sugden, Neutral]
Governments engaged in a desperate race to roll out vaccines to beat back a winter surge of the coronavirus have turned to a new tactic: freeing up scarce vaccine supplies so they can inoculate more vulnerable people faster with a single shot by delaying the second dose.

The first to act was the U.K., which is dealing with new Covid-19 infections propelled by a fast-spreading variant of the virus. Its plan to expand vaccine supplies by delaying the second dose has been followed elsewhere in Europe and part of Canada. The U.K.'s state-run National Health Service will wait up to three months to deliver the second shot instead of the three to four weeks recommended based on drug-company trials.

The moves come as many countries are struggling to ramp up vaccination programs. France has inoculated only a few thousand people, while Belgium began its mass-vaccination program on Tuesday and the Netherlands on Wednesday. Even in places like the U.K., Germany and the U.S. where more people have been vaccinated, vaccination efforts are falling behind a winter wave of infections that threatens to overwhelm some hospitals.

The approach has prompted pushback by some medical authorities, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which this week called delaying the second dose potentially detrimental to public health. However, other U.S. health officials have said they are looking into options such as tinkering with dosage sizes and other ways to stretch the reach of available vaccines. Elsewhere in Europe, some authorities are leaning toward the British approach.

Denmark on Monday approved a delay of up to six weeks between doses while Germany is also considering stretching out the interval. Belgium has also shifted gears, using all available vaccine for first doses, hoping to administer second doses in three to six weeks. In Canada, Quebec said in late December that it would delay second doses of the vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech SE to immunize more people with one dose. But Canada's national public-health agency has resisted requests to consider turning an existing two-dose vaccine by Moderna Inc. into a single-dose shot. Canadian officials said data are too limited.

British medical authorities calculated that giving more at-risk people some immunity with one vaccine dose would save more lives than conferring more complete immunity to half the number with a double dose.

With a new variant spreading rapidly, the government estimates one in 50 people have the virus in England, and one in 30 in London. This has forced trade-offs scientists say are

crucial to prevent deaths.

"Clearly, if we had infinite vaccine, we might have taken different approaches, but we don't," Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, told reporters Tuesday.

In the first month of the vaccine rollout, roughly 1.3 million people in the U.K. had received a first shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, or one by AstraZeneca PLC and the University of Oxford. Millions more vaccinations are planned this month.

The U.K. has ordered 100 million doses of AstraZeneca's shot, but faces bottlenecks waiting for bulk vaccine to be packaged into vials and tested for consistency. It has ordered 40 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech version.

The World Health Organization on Tuesday said a second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine could be delayed until six weeks—rather than just three weeks—after the first dose in "exceptional circumstances."

The FDA on Monday said that altering dose schedules is a bad idea that lacks scientific backing. The FDA said doing so "may ultimately be counterproductive to public health," such as potentially making people feel more protected than they are, leading to riskier behavior. But the U.S. National Institutes of Health said this week the agency is studying whether halving Moderna vaccine doses could effectively protect more people faster.

One concern scientists have is that delaying doses could help a mutating virus build resistance, or foster more mutations in people already vulnerable to disease. Viruses routinely mutate, but new variants of the coronavirus rooted in the U.K. and South Africa have become a leading concern as they spread globally.

Scientists say the new coronavirus variant spreading across the U.K.—and already reported in dozens of other countries including the U.S—is up to 70% more transmissible than earlier versions.

"We are in possibly the worst situation in the world," said Stephen Evans, professor of pharmacoepidemiology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. "We live on a knife edge with our hospital capacity in the U.K."

The U.K.'s medicines regulator said its advice to prolong the dosing interval for both of the U.K.'s authorized vaccines followed a thorough review of data that also drew on broader science beyond the vaccine trials. It concluded that vaccine efficacy would be maintained.

A spokeswoman for the U.K. agency said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine showed to be 90.5% effective 12 days after the first dose, with no evidence that protection declines after 21 days.

June Raine, chief executive of the medicines regulator, said that approval of the Oxford-AstraZeneca shot and a more flexible dosing schedule would mean more people could be protected. The agency and advisers said last week they found robust reasoning for the delay of second doses.

Critics have said clinical trials of existing vaccines were largely designed to test two shots

spaced three to four weeks apart, and didn't provide enough evidence of strength or duration of immunity after one shot.

An AstraZeneca spokesman said the U.K. regulator's dosing advice was "supported by strong evidence," including elimination of Covid-19 hospitalizations by one dose. The vaccine was about 70% effective at three weeks after the first dose and stretching to the time of the second dose, the regulator said. Pfizer said its vaccine hadn't been evaluated for delayed-dosing schedules. Trials showed partial protection from the vaccine appears to begin as early as 12 days after the first dose, but that the 95% maximum protection only kicks in after two doses.

"There are no data to demonstrate that protection after the first dose is sustained after 21 days," the company said. BioNTech has said data are lacking to back up delaying the vaccine's second dose.

Moderna said its trials and emergency authorization for use in the U.S. were linked to two shots of its vaccine one month apart. A company spokeswoman said it couldn't comment on regulatory discussions involving other dosing options.

Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious-diseases official, said last week it was possible to make the case for a longer interval between doses, but he wouldn't be in favor of doing so. However, Moncef Slaoui, chief adviser to the Operation Warp Speed vaccine program, said Sunday that federal officials were considering halving doses of Moderna's vaccine to speed up the vaccination of the public. He said the FDA would need to decide.

The European Union's medicines regulator on Wednesday cleared Moderna's shot for use across the bloc, stipulating it should be administered in two doses 28 days apart.

It said earlier that delaying second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine without more clinical data would be "off-label use," which the agency would need more data to recommend. A spokeswoman for the regulator said trials on which the regulator based its decision involved doses 19 to 42 days apart. "Individuals may not be fully protected until seven days after their second dose of vaccine," she said.

Why the search for the real origin of the coronavirus is a global concern (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/7/2021 12:00 AM, Adam Taylor, 13480K, Neutral]

Amid untold suffering, the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed at least 1.8 million people over the past year, has been an era of remarkable scientific breakthroughs, including record-breaking vaccine development programs.

But the answer to one of the fundamental questions about the virus remains shrouded in mystery: How did a pathogen found in bats make the jump to humans, presumably in or near the Chinese city of Wuhan, where it was first detected in late 2019?

An upcoming World Health Organization mission to China intends to investigate the matter.

That is, if it ever actually sets foot in China. WHO officials have been negotiating with

Beijing to allow a team of international experts to investigate the virus's origin for almost a year, but Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said this week that China was still holding up the process.

In the void of information about the virus's origin, speculation has grown. Chinese officials have suggested that the virus might not have originated in their country, while U.S. officials have said repeatedly that the virus could have leaked from a lab in Wuhan.

In such a politicized and conspiratorial atmosphere, some virologists and public health experts now have doubts that a clear picture of the virus's origins can ever be discovered. But there are still reasons to hope that the WHO mission can proceed and succeed.

In interviews, the WHO team has emphasized that it does not intend to go into the mission with preconceived notions.

"Everything is on the table," Peter Ben Embarek, a Danish food safety expert and head of the mission, told my colleague Emily Rauhala during an interview last week. The team would begin with a "basic study that will give us clues, and those clues will then help us test different hypotheses."

Ben Embarek did say that one scenario would be the "least surprising" — that the virus now known as SARS-CoV-2, or the novel coronavirus, had spread from bats to an unidentified second animal before infecting humans through zoonotic spillover.

Among scientists, this is the apparent consensus. "The virus is just like a virus we would expect to see in wild bat populations, similar viruses have jumped from non-human animals to animals in the past, so I see no reason to speculate about this any further," Andrew Rambaut, a microbiologist at the University of Edinburgh, told Today's WorldView last year.

If it could be proved, this jump from a bat to another animal before humans could explain how the virus made it from the Chinese province of Yunnan, where scientists found its closest relative some time ago (a virus known as SARS-CoV RaTG13), to Wuhan, in Hubei province, more than 1,000 miles away.

But a key question remains: What, and where, was the intermediary animal? Without knowing the answer, scientists have fewer tools to prevent the same thing from happening again.

Around the world, experts have already seen that the virus can spread to and from animals including minks, prompting costly mass cullings.

The WHO team is expected to focus much of its investigation on the Huanan Seafood Market in central Wuhan, to which many early coronavirus cases were linked.

The delay in finding the animal in question is not without precedent. Ben Embarek noted that it took roughly a year to link Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, to dromedary camels.

While most virologists favor the theory of zoonotic spillover, other, more controversial

theories abound.

In recent weeks, for example, Chinese officials have pushed the idea that the virus came from outside the country.

High-level experts such as Wu Guizhen, biosafety expert at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, have said that focusing on wildlife may be the wrong approach. "When we were investigating the origins of the virus, we kept looking for the intermediary host," Wu said in June. "Now, we may need to reexamine whether the virus really did come from wild animals."

Meanwhile, a rival theory suggests that the virus could have escaped from the Wuhan branch of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which did conduct research on bat coronaviruses.

That idea became popular among hawkish Republican lawmakers such as Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) last year, but it never really went away: As recently as last week, deputy national security adviser Matthew Pottinger was reported to have told British lawmakers that there was "a growing body of evidence" that this was a "credible possibility."

The idea also gained mainstream prevalence with a recent New York Magazine story, which detailed the hypothesis that the virus had unintentionally leaked from the laboratory during controversial "gain of function" experiments, wherein viruses are manipulated to see how they can become more virulent and transmissible.

Virologists tend to be skeptical of both of these theories, noting that they come with political notions attached and that direct evidence for either is lacking.

The WHO team has pledged to consider them, but Ben Embarek said he had his doubts about both. The idea that the virus could have been imported to China a year ago was "not impossible but difficult," he said, while the leak theory was undermined by the fact that the virus was not among those in the lab's records.

In an ideal world, global powers would come together to uncover the origins of the virus.

The other theories need to be considered, cautiously, too. Even if the virus was not spread as a result of a "gain of function" experiment, its rapid spread raises questions about the risks involved in such experiments.

That's an issue that wouldn't just affect China: The United States previously blocked funding to similar experiments amid safety concerns, but resumed it in 2017.

But global efforts to understand the virus have not managed to transcend geopolitics. China has obfuscated international understanding of the virus's origins. The Associated Press reported last week that although hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants had been given out to those studying the origin of the virus, the publication of any of the findings was being tightly controlled by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

But the Trump administration has not made a cooperative effort on the issue either. Rather

than support the effort for an international response to the pandemic, it pulled out of the WHO and escalated tensions with China.

By placing political rivalry above scientific discovery, both China and the United States have undermined research. Some experts think it is now unlikely that the WHO team will have the support to complete a credible investigation.

That would be a massive missed opportunity. As the WHO's own emergencies chief Mike Ryan said last week, the coronavirus is not the only pandemic humanity will face. "This is not necessarily the big one," he said.

China Health Expert Defends Delay in Confirming Covid's Threat (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 4:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

One of China's top scientists defended the country's delays in raising a global alarm in the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, saying officials were initially unsure whether the pathogen was infectious among humans because close contacts of the first patients didn't appear to fall sick.

In the first days of 2020, after the mysterious pneumonia cluster emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, Chinese experts quarantined 700 close contacts of the first patients – including 400 medical workers that tended to them – but none showed signs of illness.

This led experts to hold off on concluding the coronavirus was transmissible among humans, said Liang Wannian, a senior official at the National Health Commission who oversaw China's virus response until September.

"At the beginning of January, none of the two dozen cases – and later increased to four dozens – fit those criteria," said Liang in an exclusive interview Tuesday with Bloomberg News in Beijing. "Our call at the time was that there was no clear evidence for human-to-human transmission."

It wasn't until Jan. 20 that China confirmed the virus can be passed on among humans, after some of the medical staff became infected. By then, the situation had spiraled out of control: days later, Wuhan and the broader Hubei Province were forced into a draconian lockdown as infections surged and hospitals became overwhelmed.

China has faced heavy criticism for those lost days. The initial downplaying of the severity of the pathogen's threat allowed Covid-19 to rapidly leap across borders to become a pandemic that has infected more than 86 million people and killed over 1.8 million.

It's now understood that many Covid-19 patients are asymptomatic, which may have accounted for why quarantined close contacts of those first patients did not seem to fall ill.

Liang's comments are the most detailed public statements yet from top Chinese officials at the time describing circumstances at the start of the crisis.

Some governments, however, acted much faster than China. Taiwan dodged a major outbreak by imposing border controls and other strict curbs in January.

Taiwanese health officials visited Wuhan early on and noticed that some among the first patients had no relation to the wet market suspected as the place where people were getting infected. This led them to conclude human-to-human transmission was occurring.

Faced with global acrimony, China has sought to shift the narrative over the virus's origins, with state media and government officials pushing the possibility that the pathogen didn't emerge solely in the Asian country.

Liang, a public health veteran who also oversaw Beijing's response to the SARS outbreak in 2003, echoed the theory.

He said that while much speculation focused on wild animals at the market serving as an intermediary host to the virus that was then passed to humans, most of the earliest patients were merchants selling seafood there.

"Our hypothesis was that they were mostly selling animals or meats, but that wasn't the case," Liang said. "We need to study where the virus at the Huanan Seafood Market came from: Is it from animals or from other goods transported through cold chain or carried in by people? The market is probably not at the beginning of the chain."

The lack of any definitive solutions to the mystery has fed into the political divisions created by the pandemic, particularly between China and the U.S. The Trump administration has claimed that the virus was leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where many coronaviruses have been studied – a scenario Liang said has "zero percent" chance of being true.

China's actions haven't helped dispel the mistrust. Representatives and scientists from the World Health Organization visited Wuhan in January and February, but were barred from entering the Wuhan market to conduct investigations.

The difficulties have continued, with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus saying Tuesday that China has delayed the travel of experts sent to the Asian country to investigate the virus's origins. Chinese officials haven't yet finalized permission to allow the WHO team to enter the country, despite months of negotiation and planning.

Liang said during the interview that the WHO's investigation would "begin very soon" in China. Among the work that will be done will be analyzing the data and samples taken from the market in Wuhan in early 2020, before it was thoroughly disinfected.

Liang, who left his job at China's National Health Commission in September and joined the newly founded Vanke School of Public Health at Tsinghua University in Beijing, rejected assertions that the country has not been forthcoming enough.

Yet he acknowledged that a lack of international exposure among many of China's public health and clinical physicians can get in the way of effective communication.

"We should step up efforts to cultivate talents and capabilities to familiarize them with international rules and enable them to communicate" and be better understood, Liang said.

Near East & North Africa

[Morocco] Morocco approves AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine – Minister (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 4:54 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Morocco's health ministry on Wednesday approved the COVID-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University for emergency use, Health Minister Khalid Ait Taleb said.

Morocco had announced it plans to launch a free vaccination campaign targeting 25 million people, or 80% of its population.

The country has ordered 66 million doses from AstraZeneca and China's Sinopharm but has not yet received any, Ait Taleb told state 2M TV channel.

The deal with Sinopharm includes technology transfer and the setting up of a production plant in Morocco, he said.

The vaccination campaign would last three months at least in order to achieve population immunity, Ait Taleb said.

On Dec. 23, Morocco imposed a nationwide three-week curfew from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am and ordered restaurants to shutdown in the hard-hit cities of Agadir, Casablanca, Marrakech and Tangier in an effort to control the latest outbreak.

On Wednesday, the country said it has recorded a total of 447,081 coronavirus infections including 7,000 deaths and 20,719 active cases.

The Moroccan economy is expected to have contracted by 7.2% in 2020 according to the International Monetary Fund, while the government said its 2020 fiscal deficit would surge to 7.5% due to the virus.

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi Arabia's Extra Oil Cut to Last Two Months, Minister Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 12:49 PM, Annmarie Hordern and Grant Smith, 6400K, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's additional million-barrel-a-day oil production cut will last two months, and then the supplies will be returned to the market, the kingdom said.

The extra cutback in February and March -- which comes on top of curbs Riyadh is already making with OPEC+ -- will end in the same fashion as the supplementary reduction made last summer, Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said in a Bloomberg television interview on Wednesday.

"We gave the oil industry a wonderful present and a wonderful surprise," he said. "We're extending support and help to the industry."

OPEC+, a 23-nation alliance that spans the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries plus non-members including Russia, is already idling just over 7 million barrels a day of

supply to prop up a global market ravaged by the pandemic.

Saudi Arabia was completely alone in making the decision to deepen its cut, and didn't consult with any of its fellow OPEC+ members, according to Prince Abdulaziz.

It would have been "excruciating" for many of them -- who have often struggled to implement their agreed reductions -- to make a further sacrifice, he said.

The reduction will apply to the producer's international exports, as well as its domestic sales.

The extra Saudi cut announced on Tuesday came a day after the kingdom and three other Arab states restored ties with Qatar, ending a three-year rift.

RBC Capital Markets LLC suggested the new oil policy could have been "intended as an olive branch to Washington" before the arrival of a new president who has threatened a tougher line with Riyadh.

"I fail to see any correlation between the two events," Prince Abdulaziz said. "We have always been cordial and congenial with any U.S. administration -- past, present and the future."

[Syria] Syrian Air Defense responded to an Israeli attack over south Damascus: state TV (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 4:48 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The Syrian Air Defense responded to an Israeli attack over the southern of the capital Damascus on Wednesday, state TV reported.

There was no immediate information of any damages or casualties.

Europe and Eurasia

[Germany] Germanys confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 26,391 - RKI (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 11:20 PM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany increased by 26,391 to 1,835,038, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for infectious diseases showed on Thursday.

The reported death toll rose by 1,070 to 37,607, the tally showed.

[Germany] CureVac strikes COVID-19 vaccine alliance deal with Bayer -Bild (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 6:09 PM, Ludwig Burger, 5304K, Neutral]

German biotech firm CureVac has agreed to an alliance with drugmaker Bayer to get global support in seeking approval for its experimental COVID-19 vaccine and for distribution, the daily Bild reported.

Under the deal, Germany's Bayer will provide access to international pharmaceutical markets, as well as its global supply chain and distribution network, the tabloid newspaper reported in an excerpt made available to Reuters ahead of publication.

The report did not specify its sources and did not disclose financial terms.

Bayer and CureVac were not immediately available for comment outside regular business hours.

CureVac, which has said it was looking for a larger partner, last month started a late-stage clinical trial of its COVID-19 vaccine candidate, banking on the same technology that has allowed rivals BioNTech and Moderna to lead the development race.

The Nasdaq-listed biotech firm, which is backed by investors Dietmar Hopp, the Gates Foundation, GlaxoSmithKline and the German government, has said it aimed to produce up to 300 million doses of the vaccine in 2021 and up to 600 million in 2022.

In March last year, CureVac was at the centre of a row over alleged attempts by U.S. President Donald Trump to gain access to the vaccine but the company denied at the time having received any U.S. offers for the company or its assets.

Ahead of any regulatory approval, the European Union has secured up to 405 million doses of the immunisation, among a slew of supply deals agreed between the bloc and other vaccine developers.

Bayer's pharma unit, which is trying to build a new cell and gene therapy business, has expertise in cancer, haemophilia, multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular diseases and women's health but not in vaccines.

The group's stock has been battered by billions of euros in writedowns at its agriculture division, litigation woes and a bleaker profit outlook, in large part related to the \$63 billion takeover of seed maker Monsanto.

[Romania] Air Force establishes Reaper drone base in Romania (Washington Times)
Washington Times [1/6/2021 5:45 PM, Mike Glenn, 459K, Neutral]

The U.S. Air Force has set up a base in Romania to locate a squadron of MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct intelligence and reconnaissance missions in support of NATO operations.

The Reapers and about 90 Air Force personnel will be located at Campia Turzii, a Romanian air base located about 400 miles northwest of Bucharest, the country's capital. Until the squadron is fully operational, the Reapers will fall under the command of the Air Force's 31st Expeditionary Operations Group, officials said.

"The forward and ready positioning of our MQ-9s at this key strategic location reassures our allies and partners, while also sending a message to our adversaries that we can quickly respond to any emergent threat," said Gen. Jeff Harrigan, commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Africa.

In January 2000, the Air Force deployed a detachment of Reapers to Romania from Poland, where they had been operating since May 2018.

"It is designed to promote stability and security within the region and to strengthen relationships with NATO allies and other countries," Air Force officials said in a statement.

With the Reaper unit being located there, Campia Turzii could become a hub for U.S. Air Force operations in southeastern Europe. The National Defense Authorization Act for 2021 included more than \$130 million to renovate the base, a former Soviet-era military installation.

"The United States and Romania enjoy a close military-to-military relationship as NATO allies and cooperate on numerous regional security officials," Air Force officials said.

In addition to their intelligence and reconnaissance missions in the region, the Reaper units also will fly "freedom of maneuver" operations and work with joint forces in the region, Air Force officials said.

[United Kingdom] After rumors flared that Trump may be heading to Scotland on Jan. 19, the country's leader says he will not be allowed in. (New York Times)

New York Times [1/6/2021 7:05 AM, Mark Landler and Maggie Haberman, 28290K, Neutral] President Trump has not said where he plans to go after leaving the White House on Jan. 20. But the leader of Scotland made clear on Tuesday that Mr. Trump is not welcome in her country.

Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, said that under newly imposed virus restrictions, which prohibit all but essential travel, a visit by the president to one of his Scottish golf resorts, Trump Turnberry, would not be acceptable.

Rumors that Mr. Trump would head for Scotland flared after a Scottish paper reported that an American military version of a Boeing 757 — sometimes used by Mr. Trump — was scheduled to land at a nearby airport on Jan. 19, the day before Joseph R. Biden Jr. is to be sworn in as president.

"We are not allowing people to come into Scotland," Ms. Sturgeon told reporters in Edinburgh, "and that would apply to him just as it applies to anybody else — and coming in to play golf is not what I would consider to be an essential purpose."

A plain-spoken politician, Ms. Sturgeon said she did not know what Mr. Trump's travel plans were, but that she hoped his immediate plan was to exit the White House. On Monday, she imposed a lockdown on Scotland, which, like England, is battling a surge in coronavirus cases because of a rapidly spreading new variant.

Under the new rules, people are required to stay at home and to work from there, where possible. Places of worship have been closed, and schools will operate by remote learning. Scotland has frequently moved faster and further than England to impose restrictions during the pandemic.

The White House initially declined to comment on the report, first published in Scotland's Sunday Post paper, but later denied it.

"This is not accurate," the press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, said on Tuesday. "President Trump has no plans to travel to Scotland."

Two White House officials said that while there's been almost no concrete discussion of what Mr. Trump will do on Jan. 20 because he is so focused on trying to overturn the election results, they do not believe he is considering Scotland.

Mr. Trump has owned the Trump Turnberry resort since 2014 and has long thought of it as an escape. In November 2016, according to Anthony Scaramucci, the former White House communications director, he had planned on flying to the resort if, as he then expected, he lost the presidential race to Hillary Clinton.

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australian exports feel China chill, while housing runs hot (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 9:02 PM, Wayne Cole, 5304K, Neutral]

Australia's trade surplus narrowed in November as China curbs on coal and farm goods took some steam out of exports, while a rebound in the domestic economy sucked in record goods imports.

Other data out on Thursday showed Australia's property market roaring back to life with approvals to build new houses hitting the highest in two decades.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed the country's trade surplus contracted to A\$5 billion (\$3.90 billion) in November, from A\$6.6 billion the month before.

Overall exports rose 3% in the month, mainly due to a sharp jump in gold shipments, but goods exports just to China dropped almost 10% to a four-month low.

Diplomatic tensions with Beijing have seen the Asian giant clamp down on imports of Australian coal, barley and wine. China takes fully a third of Australia's exports, with a particular hunger for the iron ore that feeds its steel and construction industries.

While earnings from the ore dipped slightly in November, they were still the second highest on record with a 12-month running total of A\$140 billion.

Strength in demand domestically saw total imports into Australia jump 10% in November, led by telecoms, cars and aircraft. Imports of goods hit a record, having more than recovered from a lockdown-driven dive in mid-2020.

Housing has been a key driver of activity as low mortgage rates helped lift prices out of a pandemic slump.

Approvals to build new dwellings rose 2.6% in November, to the highest since mid-2018, while approvals for houses alone were up by a third on a year earlier.

Analysts see the latter as a near-term positive for the economy as houses take far less time

to start and construct than apartment blocks. The sector employs a multitude of small builders and tradespeople, which has a big multiplier effect on activity.

[Australia] Australia urges China to give access to WHO coronavirus experts 'without delay' (Reuters)

Reuters [1/7/2021 12:06 AM, Colin Packham, 5304K, Neutral]

China should give access to World Health Organization (WHO) officials investigating the origins of COVID-19 "without delay", Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne said on Thursday.

Earlier this week, the head of the WHO said he was "very disappointed" that China had still not authorised the entry of a team of international coronavirus experts.

"We hope that the necessary permissions for the WHO team's travel to China can be issued without delay," Payne said.

She reiterated the importance of the WHO-convened scientific study and said: "We look forward to the findings from the international field mission to China".

The novel coronavirus is believed to have first emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019. It has since spread globally, infecting more than 86 million people and killing over 1.8 million, Reuters calculations show.

Australia has been a leading voice in calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and, partly because of this, has seen its relations with China sour.

China, Australia's top trade partner, has since limited beef imports, imposed tariffs on Australian wine and told its millers to stop buying Australian cotton.

[China] China reports most COVID cases in five months as Hebei infections rise (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 10:21 PM, Jing Wang and Josh Horwitz, 5304K, Neutral]

Authorities in the capital of China's Hebei province strengthened travel restriction on Thursday to curb the spread of the coronavirus as the country reported the biggest rise in daily COVID-19 cases in more than five months.

Hebei, which entered a "wartime mode" on Tuesday, accounted for 51 of the 52 local cases reported by the National Health Commission on Thursday. This compared with 20 cases reported in the province, which surrounds Beijing, a day earlier.

Authorities in Shijiazhuang, Hebei's capital, have launched mass testing drives and banned gatherings to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

Chinese state television reported that the city has now banned passengers from entering its main railway station. The city previously required travellers to present a negative nucleic acid COVID-19 test result taken within 72 hours before boarding a train or an airplane in the province.

Total new COVID-19 cases for all of mainland China stood at 63, compared with 32 reported a day earlier, marking the biggest rise in daily cases since 127 cases were reported on July 30.

The number of asymptomatic patients, who have been infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the disease but have yet to develop any symptoms, also rose to 79 from 64 a day earlier.

The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in mainland China since the outbreak first started in the city of Wuhan in late 2019 now stands at 87,278 cases, while the death toll remained unchanged at 4,634.

In the city of Dalian in Liaoning province, which has reported local infections in recent days, residents in medium or high-risk areas have been barred from leaving the city. Residents in other areas were told to refrain from unnecessary trips out of Dalian.

Authorities in Guangdong province late on Wednesday reported a patient infected with a more transmissible variant of the coronavirus discovered in South Africa.

Some scientists worry that COVID-19 vaccines currently being rolled out may not be able to protect against this variant because of certain mutations that have been observed.

[China] Coronavirus Hasn't Killed Belt and Road (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [1/6/2021 4:43 PM, Alice Han and Eyck Freymann, Neutral]

The past two years have not been kind to the Belt and Road Initiative, the signature infrastructure project of Chinese President Xi Jinping. First, the United States labeled the initiative a "debt trap"—a loan-shark scheme for luring poor countries into economic vassalage—and began to pressure its allies and partners to stay away. Then came COVID-19. Last summer, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that as much as 60 percent of Belt and Road projects have been impacted to some degree by the pandemic. That figure is surely higher now. New Chinese overseas lending has fallen precipitously. This year, as low-income countries face a debt crunch, Chinese lenders could take enormous losses.

But the Belt and Road Initiative hasn't died of COVID-19. On the contrary, Xi and other senior Chinese officials continue to trumpet the initiative. Their messaging is highly consistent: In 2021, China will start to wind down its new investment into traditional capital-intensive infrastructure, both at home and abroad. In that way, the pandemic provides an excuse to cut losses on unviable projects. Instead, the initiative will refocus on public health (especially vaccines), green technology, and digital services. This fresh-faced Belt and Road—higher-tech and more geared toward trade than investment—will fit neatly into China's new "dual circulation" economic concept, which emphasizes Chinese domestic consumption. It will also be more attractive to partner countries than its previous incarnation.

China's plans were made clear in remarks this past November by Meng Wei, a spokesperson for the National Development and Reform Commission, which oversees Belt and Road projects. Even as she insisted that the program "has shown full resilience ... in the face of the pandemic," she mostly focused her talk on "new breakthroughs on the Health

Silk Road." More and more countries, she said, "have seen the cooperation opportunities of the Health Silk Road, the Digital Silk Road, and the Green Silk Road." Ning Jizhe, the commission's vice chairman, elaborated on her comments in a follow-up speech in Hong Kong.

The "Health Silk Road"—the COVID-19 vaccine race—is Beijing's top priority. China wants to be seen as a responsible high-tech superpower that will help the world conquer the pandemic, not as a shady authoritarian regime that unleashed it. And China has a first-mover advantage in distributing its vaccines in non-Western countries. Vaccine makers Sinopharm and Sinovac are already delivering millions of doses everywhere from Indonesia to the United Arab Emirates. Throughout the pandemic, Xi positioned the Chinese vaccine as a "global public good." This implies that China will heavily subsidize foreign buyers and favor China's long-standing Belt and Road partners.

The "Green Silk Road" is another way China can burnish its international image while peddling its high-tech products abroad. China's recent pledge to become carbon neutral by 2060 doubles as an industrial policy: It plans deepen its dominance in the fast-growing overseas market for wind turbines, photovoltaics, electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries, and smart grid technologies. In 2019, over 70 percent of solar photovoltaics manufactured worldwide were made in China. China also controls up three-quarters of global manufacturing capacity for lithium-ion battery cells. These are some of the world's fast-growing manufacturing industries: 72 percent of net new electricity generating capacity installed worldwide in 2019 was renewable.

Finally, a renewed push for the "Digital Silk Road," launched in 2016, will support the international expansion of private Chinese tech companies under close supervision by the Communist Party. China now accounts for 23 percent of global cross-border data flows—mostly thanks to use of Chinese apps and services in Japan and Southeast Asia. This is almost double the U.S. share. China is also rolling out a world-leading digital renminbi with the goal of collecting more data and weakening the dominance of the U.S. dollar. Some Chinese tech companies are exporting "smart city technologies." Others are offering integrated city or "country-as-a-platform" solutions, which could be a euphemism for exporting China's techno-authoritarian toolkit.

By refocusing on these three priorities, the new Belt and Road Initiative will fit cleanly into China's domestic post-pandemic macroeconomic strategy, known as "dual circulation." Under the leadership of economic czar Liu He, China is finally reconsidering the debt-fueled growth model that has driven its development for over a decade. As Liu argued in the People's Daily, in 2021 China should instead focus on stimulating household consumption, including of low-value imported goods, while boosting exports of higher-tech products. Such reforms, Liu has long argued, will "de-risk" China's financial system; as Beijing's overseas debtors clamor for loan forgiveness, it makes less and less sense for China to lend indiscriminately to high-risk countries like Pakistan and Venezuela.

Most of China's trading partners find this new Belt and Road compelling—it's a formula for rapid post-pandemic economic normalization. And they are already benefiting. Chinese imports reached a historic high in 2020, thanks to a stronger renminbi. From a Chinese perspective, meanwhile, this higher-tech Belt and Road, more focused on trade than on

investment, is more sustainable than the chaotic, high-risk, debt-dependent model that preceded it.

[Indonesia] Indonesia to Release Bali Bombing Convict Amid Security Fears (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 11:11 PM, Rieka Rahadiana, 6400K, Negative]

Indonesia is set to release the alleged mastermind of the deadly Bali bombings after his 15-year prison term ends Friday, raising concerns over possible security threats.

Abu Bakar Bashir was found guilty of funding an Islamic militant training camp and of links to the 2002 bombings that killed more than 200 people in Bali as well as the attack against the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in 2003.

The government must monitor the 82-year-old cleric who is notorious for his jihadist ideology, according to Stanislaus Riyanta, a Jakarta-based intelligence and terrorism analyst. However, "the security threat posed by Bashir won't be as big as predicted because of his old age," he added.

President Joko Widodo has pledged to intensify the fight against all acts that threaten the country's sovereignty and security as he seeks to improve the investment climate. In 2018, the parliament approved a revision to the anti-terrorism law to let the police take preemptive action and detain people suspected of planning an attack.

At least three people linked to Bali bombings have been executed despite calls to stop the death penalty on concern the men would be painted as martyrs. Bashir, who was also convicted of treason for seeking to overthrow the government and set up an Islamic state, rejected a clemency offer from Jokowi in 2019 as it would require him to pledge loyalty to the state.

The police will undertake efforts to prevent security breaches linked to Bashir's release, spokesman Rusdi Hartono said in a briefing this week, without giving detail on the plan.

[Indonesia] Indonesia Islamic council aims for halal ruling before mass vaccination (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 11:06 PM, Agustinus Beo Da Costa, Stanley Widiyanto, 5304K, Neutral]

Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical council aims to issue a ruling on whether a COVID-19 vaccine is halal, or permissible under Islam, before the country is due to start a mass inoculation programme using a Chinese vaccine next week.

The world's largest Muslim-majority country plans to launch vaccinations on Jan. 13 after obtaining 3 million doses from China's Sinovac Biotech.

Controversy over whether vaccines adhere to Islamic principles has stymied public health responses before, including in 2018, when the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa declaring that a measles vaccine was forbidden under Islam.

"Our target is before first injections start, the fatwa has to come out then," said Muti Arintawati, an official at MUI in charge of analysing food and drugs to assess whether they

are halal.

Indonesia is struggling with the worst COVID-19 outbreak in Southeast Asia and authorities are relying on a vaccine to help alleviate dual health and economic crises ravaging the country.

Asked about the risk of public resistance, a health ministry official said the government would wait for MUI's decision.

In a bid to boost acceptance, President Joko Widodo has said he will be the first to receive a vaccine shot next week.

Dicky Budiman, a researcher at Australia's Griffith University, said authorities needed to be transparent on the halal certification to reassure the public.

The New York Times reported that Sinovac told Indonesia's state-owned drugmaker Bio Farma that the vaccines were "manufactured free of porcine materials."

Bambang Heriyanto, Bio Farma's corporate secretary, confirmed receiving the statement, but said the halal status was decided by MUI. Sinovac did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Ahmad Ishomuddin, an official at Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's biggest mainstream Muslim organisation, said emergency vaccines that were not halal could be used if there were no other options.

This opinion was supported by some Muslim residents in Depok, south of Jakarta.

"If indeed the vaccine contains non-halal ingredients and during the emergency period there are no other ingredients for the medicine, yes, it is permissible according to my religion," said 19-year-old student Muhammad Farrel.

Indonesia's food and drug agency (BPOM) needs to issue emergency use approval for vaccinations to start.

In neighbouring Malaysia, religious authorities have declared COVID-19 vaccines were permissible for Muslims, and mandatory for those the government has identified to receive them.

Malaysia does not require vaccines to be certified halal, though authorities are planning to introduce a certification framework this year to allay concerns among some Muslims.

[Japan] Tokyo Faces Emergency; Allergic Reactions Rare: Virus Update (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/6/2021 7:50 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is set to declare a state of emergency for Tokyo and surrounding prefectures from Friday, domestic media reported.

A top Chinese scientist defended delays in raising the alarm in the early days of the

outbreak, saying officials were initially unsure whether the coronavirus was transmissible among humans. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said he was concerned by China's lack of cooperation with the World Health Organization, while the U.K. urged Beijing to let WHO officials into the country.

Just 1 in 100,000 people have had a severe allergic reaction to the first Covid-19 vaccine, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Moderna Inc.'s vaccine won European Union approval.

China Reports More Cases in Hebei (8:48 a.m. HK)

China reported 52 new confirmed local Covid-19 cases, 51 of which were in the province of Hebei near Beijing. The other was in the northeastern province of Liaoning.

Suga Set to Declare Emergency (8:35 a.m. HK)

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is due to declare a state of emergency for Tokyo and adjacent areas, seeking to stem infections that are at record highs.

The declaration will cover the capital and the surrounding prefectures of Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba, and is likely to be imposed from Friday until Feb. 7, public broadcaster NHK and other domestic media reported.

Suga is set to hold a news conference on the matter at 6 p.m. local time.

National Express UK to Suspend Services (7:50 a.m. HK)

National Express UK Coach said it will fully suspend its network of scheduled coach services from Jan. 11 amid tighter restrictions and falling passenger numbers. The company set a provisional restart date of March 1.

Japan to Fine Violators of Shutdown Law (7:27 a.m. HK)

Japan will revise legislation to allow imposing fines on business operators that don't obey government shutdown orders, the Mainichi reported, citing a draft of the law. Violators will face fines of up to 500,000 yen (\$4,855), the newspaper said.

Vaccine for Police Sparks New York Dispute (6 a.m. HK)

In the latest disagreement with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Governor Andrew Cuomo said police officers and firefighters are not yet eligible to get the Covid-19 vaccine.

De Blasio said Wednesday that police and firefighters can begin getting vaccinated this week. In response, Cuomo said that only police and firefighters who are also emergency-care providers are eligible. The rest will be able to get vaccinated when the state starts with its next tier.

California Has Second-Highest Death Tally (3:38 a.m. HK)

California reported 459 daily virus deaths, the second-highest tally since the pandemic began, as the most-populous U.S. state continues to battle a surge of cases that has strained health-care facilities.

Virus hospitalizations climbed 1.5% from the prior day to a record 22,820 patients, according to state health-department data Wednesday. Intensive-care units in Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley are at a surge capacity, while the San Francisco Bay area has less than 8% of its ICU beds available.

States Urged to Widen Vaccination Pool (3:15 a.m. HK)

U.S. health officials encouraged states to start vaccinating people more widely, acknowledging that the immunization rollout has been slower than anticipated and opening the spigot for a broader range of Americans to begin getting shots.

About 5.2 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines from Pfizer Inc.-BioNTech SE and Moderna Inc. have been administered in the U.S. since mid-December, according to data compiled by Bloomberg News. That represents a fraction of the number of doses distributed so far.

Colorado Vaccinating People Over 70 (3 a.m. HK)

Colorado has begun administering vaccines to residents ages 70 and older following last week's decision to expedite shots to seniors, who account for 78% of the state's Covid-19 deaths, Colorado Governor Jared Polis said during an online briefing.

Health officials also reported that the total number of confirmed cases of the mutation first detected in England stands at two. Colorado was the first state to report the faster-spreading mutation last week. Colorado has recorded 3,986 Covid-19 deaths since the pandemic swept into the U.S., Polis said.

CDC Calls Severe Allergic Reactions Rare (2:10 a.m. HK)

Roughly 1 in 100,000 people have had a severe allergic reaction to the first Covid-19 vaccine, a rate that's higher than the flu vaccine but still quite rare, U.S. health officials said.

A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released Wednesday outlined 21 cases of anaphylaxis among the first 1.9 million recipients of Pfizer Inc.'s vaccine, a rate of 11.1 per million doses administered. No anaphylaxis deaths have been reported, the CDC said.

Warp Speed's Slaoui to Be Biden Consultant (2:05 a.m. HK)

Moncef Slaoui, chief scientific adviser to the U.S. Operation Warp Speed effort to develop Covid-19 vaccines, said he will stay on as a consultant to the incoming Biden administration.

Slaoui, a longtime pharmaceutical executive, had previously said he would consider returning to the private sector after two vaccines and two therapies were available. Operation Warp Speed has achieved that goal with vaccines from Pfizer Inc. and Moderna

Inc. authorized for emergency use, along with antibody therapies available to treat Covid-19 cases.

N.Y. Triples Medical-Worker Vaccination Rate (1:15 a.m. HK)

New York's vaccination rate of medical workers has tripled so far this week, but supply is still an issue, Governor Andrew Cuomo said. The state has administered more than 31,000 doses a day for the past two days, compared with a daily rate of 10,809 over the past three weeks, Cuomo said.

New York is getting about 300,000 doses a week from the federal government. To date it has received 950,000 doses for 2.1 million health-care and nursing home staff and residents, Cuomo said.

Ireland Adds Extra Restrictions (12:45 a.m. HK)

Ireland tightened restrictions in a bid to contain its worst virus outbreak yet, adding extra curbs to what's already one of Western Europe's strictest lockdowns.

The government will keep most students out of schools until at least the end of the month, Prime Minister Micheal Martin said. Most construction will also halt, and click-and-collect services from non-essential stores will end. From Jan. 9, all passengers arriving at Irish airports and ports whose trip started in Great Britain or South Africa will need evidence of a recent negative virus test result.

U.K. Tallies Most Deaths Since April (12:30 a.m. HK)

The U.K. reported 1,041 new coronavirus deaths within 28 days of a positive test on Wednesday, the highest daily increase since late April.

A further 62,322 positive coronavirus cases were also reported on the government's dashboard, higher than a seven-day average of 55,945.

Moderna Shot Gains EU Approval (11:45 p.m. HK)

Moderna Inc.'s Covid-19 vaccine won European Union approval, opening the way for a second weapon in the bloc's battle against a resurgent virus.

EU leaders are facing growing pressure to speed up clearance and deployment of vaccines to tame a surge of cases across the continent. The 27-nation bloc began immunizations last week with the vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE, but the pace of the rollout has been uneven, prompting unfavorable comparisons with the U.K. and U.S.

U.K. Cancels School Exams (9:45 p.m. HK)

The U.K. government confirmed that GCSE and A-level exams will be canceled this year due to the pandemic, with pupils instead being graded using teacher assessments.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson told members of Parliament it is right to "put our trust

in teachers rather than algorithms" for generating grades. Earlier, Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised that England's schools will be the first things to reopen after the national lockdown but warned that restrictions could last months.

Germany Urges Patience on Vaccine Rollout (8:25 p.m. HK)

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government pleaded for patience as it pushed back against criticism that Germany bungled the rollout of a vaccine. A shortage of doses at the start of the campaign was expected and stems from production bottlenecks, Health Minister Jens Spahn said Wednesday in Berlin.

Germany's daily Covid-19 deaths exceeded 1,000 for only the second time since the start of the pandemic, with 1,009 fatalities in the 24 hours through Wednesday morning, bringing the total to 36,757.

[Japan] Japan to Declare State of Emergency Over Virus Infections (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 9:37 PM, Staff, 6400K, Negative]

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga will be speaking in Japan later and is expected to declare a state of emergency for Tokyo and adjacent areas as coronavirus infections continue to hit record highs. Critics are calling the strategy too narrow and see restrictions lasting for months. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Japan] Tokyo's Second State of Emergency (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/7/2021 12:20 AM, Staff, 6400K, Negative]

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is considering a state of emergency in Tokyo and surrounding areas, with coronavirus cases at record highs and Japan's vaccine rollout still more than a month away. Bloomberg's Kurumi Mori reports from Tokyo. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Japan] Plan for Tokyo state of emergency moves forward as COVID-19 cases surge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 8:19 PM, Chang-Ran Kim, 5304K, Neutral]

An advisory panel approved on Thursday the Japanese government's plan for a one-month state of emergency, beginning Friday, for Tokyo and three neighbouring prefectures in a bid to contain a surge in new coronavirus cases, now running at record levels.

The proposal for an emergency declaration running from Jan. 8 to Feb. 7 was approved at a morning meeting, Economy Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura said. Its restrictions centre on measures to combat transmission at bars and restaurants, cited by the government as key risk areas.

Though still less seriously affected by the pandemic than many countries around the world, Japan saw new daily infections top 6,000 for the first time on Wednesday, according to public broadcaster NHK, led by 1,591 positive tests in the capital, Tokyo.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga will hold a news conference at 6 p.m. (0900 GMT) to formally announce the decision and curbs to be imposed in Tokyo and the neighbouring Saitama, Kanagawa and Chiba prefectures. But medical experts have said they fear the

government's plans might be inadequate, with new cases hitting highs around the country.

Government officials have been in talks with experts this week to assess steps to try to bring the surge under control with as little damage as possible to the economy.

With an eye on the looming Tokyo Olympics and the fragile state of the world's third-biggest economy, Suga has favoured limited restrictions.

Economy Minister Nishimura said on Thursday that measures to be included in the state of emergency from Friday mean asking restaurants and bars to close by 8 p.m., requesting that residents refrain from non-urgent outings, and limiting attendance at sporting and other big events to 5,000 people. The four prefectures are home to about 150,000 restaurants and bars.

Prime Minister Suga has said shorter operating hours for such businesses had helped bring cases down in regions such as Osaka and Hokkaido.

But in a worrying sign, Osaka on Wednesday reported new cases easily topped their previous record, with 560 infections, while Hokkaido saw cases surpass 100 for the first time in a week.

"Depending on the way infections spread from here on, we may need to think about a state of emergency nationwide," Toshio Nakagawa, president of the Japan Medical Association, told a news conference on Wednesday.

MORE PAIN FOR RESTAURANTS, BARS

According to simulations by Kyoto University scientist Hiroshi Nishiura, daily infections in Tokyo could reach 3,500 per day by February and hit 7,000 by March without new measures. An emergency declaration would need to last at least two months to bring infections to manageable levels, he said.

Already, eating and drinking establishments are suffering.

Tokyo-based Teikoku Databank said this week bankruptcies in the sector hit an all-time high of 780 in 2020, up from the previous year's record of 732. Local media said the government would raise the maximum compensation for the restaurant business to 60,000 yen (\$582) a day from 40,000 yen.

Analysts now say the new state of emergency would probably trigger an economic contraction in the first quarter - a reversal from a 2.1% annualised expansion forecast in a Reuters poll last month.

[North Korea] North Korea's economy struggles as sanctions, COVID-19 weigh (Reuters)

Reuters [1/7/2021 2:00 AM, Hyonhee Shin, Neutral]

Already suffering under stringent U.S. and U.N. sanctions, North Korea's economy faced a double whammy of severe floods and the coronavirus pandemic this year, which prompted

Pyongyang to shut its border with China and ditch outside aid.

Kicking off a rare congress on Tuesday, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said his ambitious five-year economic plan unveiled in 2016 had "tremendously fell short of goals on almost every sector".

How bad is North Korea's economy? Here is what we know. After shrinking 4.1% in 2018 - its sharpest contraction in 21 years - North Korea's economy grew 0.4% in 2019, thanks to improved weather and crop yields, according to South Korea's central bank.

But the isolated economy may have contracted by 8.5% last year, Fitch Solutions said, while South Korea's Hana Institute of Finance estimated a decline of up to 10%. The biggest blow came from a drop in trade with China, its top ally which is responsible for some 90% of North Korea trade. Two-way trade plunged nearly 80% to \$534.1 million last year as of November from the same period of 2019, Chinese customs data showed.

Still, U.S. and United Nations officials have accused North Korea of clandestinely exporting coal, seafood and other commodities - mostly to China - in violation of international sanctions.

The pandemic likely had a greater impact than international sanctions, severing nearly all sources of foreign currency, including tourism, labour exports and overseas restaurants, experts say. Reduced trade also led to a lack of fertiliser and farming tools, and North Korea's chronic food shortages were exacerbated by severe floods.

There was more rain last summer than 2007 when North Korea suffered devastating floods, according to Seoul's Unification Ministry. North Korean state media reported tens of thousands of homes and vast swaths of farming areas were damaged, mostly in the breadbasket province of Hwanghae. The U.N.'s World Food Programme said in July, just before the monsoon season, that more than 10 million people, or 40% of the population, were already facing food shortages.

"A crisis could come in the spring due to a fall in outside aid and fertiliser imports as well as flood damage, which came together to inevitably cut crop harvest," said Jang Hye-won, an analyst at the Hana Institute of Finance, in a Dec. 18 North Korean economy outlook. Economic concerns triggered volatility in fuel and food prices and exchange rates in unofficial markets, where most ordinary North Koreans buy their food.

In the capital Pyongyang, the value of the North Korean won rose about 17.5% and 15.2% against the dollar and Chinese yuan between September and November, according to data compiled by Daily NK, a Seoul-based website that gathers news and information from sources inside North Korea.

Rice and gasoline prices, which are sold in local currency, plummeted more than 10% during that period in line with the appreciation of the won.

"The exchange rates likely increased because there were less foreign currencies available after trade and smuggling with China was cut and North Korea sealed off some areas where

any suspected COVID-19 cases came out," said Kang Mi-jin, a defector and economist who analyses market data at Daily NK.

[North Korea] Kim vows to bolster North Korea's military at party meeting (AP)

AP [1/6/2021 9:17 PM, Hyung-Jin Kim, 2164K, Neutral]

North Korea leader Kim Jong Un vowed to strengthen the country's military defenses in a speech at a major ruling party meeting that provides insights into his priorities amid growing economic challenges and a U.S. presidential transition.

Kim made clear his "will to reliably protect the security of the country and people and the peaceful environment of the socialist construction by placing the state defense capabilities on a much higher level, and put forth goals for realizing it," the Korean Central News Agency said.

The state media report Thursday on Kim's speech to the Workers' Party congress the previous day didn't elaborate. North Korea has previously underscored its need for nuclear weapons and missiles as a deterrent and a pre-emptive strike capability to cope with what it describes as American hostility.

Cheong Seong-Chang, a fellow at the Wilson Center's Asia Program, said Kim's speech likely contained "sensitive contents" that can provoke the United States and South Korea.

Kim halted his country's nuclear and long-range missile tests before engaging in high-stakes summitry with President Donald Trump in 2018. But with his advancing arsenal on the negotiating table, their diplomacy fell apart due to wrangling over the weapons and U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea.

Kim since then has openly pledged to expand his nuclear capability that he says already put the American mainland within its striking range. However, he has not resumed high-profile weapons tests, which some analysts say could completely derail diplomacy with the United States and further diminish prospects for winning sanctions relief.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers in late November that Kim was worried about President-elect Joe Biden's expected new approach on North Korea. Biden has called Kim a "thug" and criticized his summit diplomacy with Trump.

This year's congress — the first in five years — comes as Kim faces what appears to be the toughest moment since taking power in late 2011, due to what he calls "multiple crises" caused by an economy battered by pandemic-related border closings, a series of natural disasters and the sanctions.

On the first day of the congress Tuesday, Kim admitted his previous economic development plans failed, saying that "almost all sectors fell a long way short of the set objectives." He said the congress would work out a new five-year development plan.

Kim on Wednesday presented goals for developing the North's transport, construction, commerce and other industries and proposed ways to expand production in agriculture, light industry and fishing to improve public livelihoods, KCNA said.

State media didn't provide much details on Kim's economic review. Cheong said North Korea likely didn't want foreign experts to learn its poor economic performance too easily.

[Philippines] Nearly Half in Philippines Don't Want Covid Vaccine, Survey Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/7/2021 12:21 AM, Andreo Calonzo, 6400K, Neutral]

Almost half of Philippine citizens are not inclined to get a Covid-19 vaccine mainly due to safety concerns, according to a survey by pollster Pulse Asia.

Only nearly a third of 2,400 Filipino adults polled said they are willing to be vaccinated, while 21% couldn't say yet if they want to be inoculated. Of those who don't want to get the vaccine, 84% said they are "not sure of its safety."

The level of confidence on the Covid-19 shots poses a challenge to the Southeast Asian nation's vaccine rollout, which underpins government's economic recovery outlook. The Philippines, which has the region's second-worst outbreak, is targeting to inoculate more than half of its population this year, using 148 million doses from at least seven vaccine makers.

South and Central Asia

In Kashmir, empty grave for teenager killed by Indian forces (AP)

AP [1/7/2021 12:29 AM, Shah Abbas, Sheikh Saaliq, Aljaz Hussain, 29K, Negative]

On a recent chilly winter day in Indian-controlled Kashmir, Mushtaq Ahmed shoveled the earth, laboriously digging a grave for his teenage son. There was, however, no body to be lowered inside.

Stunned, a group of onlookers watched in silence. But Ahmed kept digging, now knee-deep inside the half-dug grave.

Then he rose, straightening his back, and faced the crowd, enraged.

"I want my son's body," he howled. "I ask India to return my son's dead body to me."

Police said government forces fatally shot Ahmed's 16-year-old son, Athar Mushtaq, and two other young men when the men refused to surrender on the outskirts of Srinagar city on Dec. 30. They described the men as "hardcore associates of terrorists" opposed to Indian rule.

The men's families insist they were not militants and were killed in cold blood. There was no way to independently confirm either claim.

"It was a fake encounter," a grieving Ahmed cried, as the crowd that gathered around him in the graveyard in southern Bellow village shouted slogans demanding justice.

Authorities buried them at a remote graveyard 115 kilometers (70 miles) from their ancestral villages.

Under a policy started in 2020, Indian authorities have buried scores of Kashmiri rebels in unmarked graves, denying their families proper funerals. The policy has added to widespread anti-India anger in the disputed region.

India has long relied on military force to retain control over the portion of Kashmir it administers. It has fought two wars over the region with Pakistan, which also claims the mountainous territory. An armed uprising since 1989 against Indian control and subsequent Indian crackdown have killed tens of thousands of civilians, rebels and government forces.

In August 2019, India revoked Kashmir's semiautonomous status, clamped curfews and communication blackouts and arrested thousands, sparking an outrage and economic ruin. Since then, authorities have brought in a slew of laws and implemented policies that locals and critics view as part of India's settler colonialism project in the volatile region.

Kashmiris for years have accused Indian troops of targeting civilians and abuse of power with sweeping impunity. Troops have been accused of staging gunfights and then saying the victims were militants to claim rewards and promotions.

Athar's killing came months after a rare admission of wrongdoing by the Indian military, which conceded that soldiers exceeded their legal powers in the deaths of three local men it initially described as Pakistani terrorists. Police concluded that an Indian army officer and two civilian "army sources" killed the three laborers "after stripping them of their identities and tagging them as hardcore terrorists." The officer has been charged with murder.

Kashmiris' fears and rage over such incidents have been exacerbated by the new policy of not identifying those killed or their associates and refusing to return their bodies to their families.

Authorities say the policy is aimed at stopping the spread of the coronavirus, but rights activists and residents say it is an attempt by the government to avoid large funerals that fuel more resentment against India.

The inspector-general of police, Vijay Kumar, said in a recent interview with The Hindu newspaper that the policy "not only stopped the spread of COVID infections but also stopped the glamorizing of terrorists and avoided potential law and order problems."

Authorities, however, have not stopped state-sponsored funerals for government forces killed in combat with the rebels.

"Not returning the bodies of the slain is a humiliation to humanity," said Zareef Ahmed Zareef, a civil rights campaigner and prominent Kashmiri poet.

Distraught families of militants and civilians killed by government forces have repeatedly demanded that Hindu authorities allow final rituals and proper burials at ancestral villages under the Muslim faith. The pleas have been repeatedly denied. Families have sometimes discreetly visited the remote graveyards and marked the graves of their kin with stones and scribbled their names with paintbrushes.

Until last April, Indian forces had handed the bodies of rebels to their relatives for burial. Since then, according to police, 158 militants have been buried at isolated locations.

Athar's body was the last one denied to relatives last year. On Dec. 30, when Ahmed received news of his son's killing, he rushed to a police facility in Srinagar where Athar's body was being kept. When police later transported the body, along with those of the two other men, to a remote mountain for burial, Ahmed followed.

Along the way, he was stopped multiple times but begged Indian forces to let him see his son's face one last time, he said. When he finally reached the burial site, he was shattered.

Ahmed said the graves had been dug by an earthmover, contrary to traditional practice in which they are dug by shovels and generally marked with marble gravestones.

"They were not graves but hurriedly dug pits," he said. "I myself lowered my son into that pit."

Experts and rights activists say the refusal to return bodies to families is a crime.

"It is an outright violation of international law and against the Geneva Conventions," said Parvez Imroz, a prominent human rights lawyer. "This is even against local laws."

Athar's killing and remote burial drew public mourning, with thousands demanding "return the bodies" on social media.

At his family's simple house in Bellow, mourners surrounded Athar's grieving mother. His sister cried, "Mother, have patience. He will return. He has promised me he will."

At the graveyard, the grave Ahmed dug for his son remained empty.

[India] Farmers block expressway near Delhi to protest Modi's new laws (Reuters)
Reuters [1/7/2021 2:30 AM, Devjyot Ghoshal, Neutral]

Tens of thousands of farmers on tractors occupied a stretch of an expressway on the periphery of the Indian capital New Delhi on Thursday in one of the biggest shows of strength since they began a sit-in against deregulation of farm markets more than a month ago.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has held several rounds of talks with the farmers to placate them, offering concessions on the three laws it passed last year to bring private investment into the country's antiquated agriculture markets.

But the farmers have resisted the overtures and been camped at an interstate border near the village of Kundli outside Delhi for more than 40 days demanding the government withdraw the laws.

On Thursday, the protesters mostly from the Sikh-dominated northern state of Punjab, which is one of the country's leading producers of wheat and rice, took to the highway.

Turbaned young men and elderly farmers with flowing beards rode a convoy of tractors numbering in the thousands, some with loud music blaring.

There was no sign of any police presence.

"We want Modi to repeal the three laws," said Rajvinder Singh, 35, a farmer from Punjab's Gurdaspur district.

He said the rally was a way to build pressure on the government in the lead-up to India's Republic Day on Jan. 26 when the farm unions have threatened to march on to the centre of the capital if the laws are not revoked by then. Farmers fear that the deregulation under which food processors and big retailers can directly buy produce from them will eventually replace government-regulated wholesale markets where they are guaranteed a minimum price for their produce.

The government says the state-regulated market yards will continue alongside the new ones and has offered to give written assurances to the farmers they will continue to get a minimum price.

On Friday, the two sides will sit down for another round of talks.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil ready to begin COVID-19 vaccinations in Jan, health minister says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 7:27 PM, Gabriel Stargardter, 5304K, Neutral]

Brazil is ready to the country's begin vaccinating its population against COVID-19 this month, Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello said on Wednesday, adding the country has assured a total of 354 million vaccine doses for 2021.

Pazuello, who is under pressure for a slow rollout, added that President Jair Bolsonaro had on Wednesday signed a series of executive orders to streamline vaccine operations. He also said the government was in talks with Pfizer to overcome issues over purchasing its vaccine.

[Canada] Canada to vaccinate federal inmates against COVID-19 starting Friday (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 7:08 PM, Anna Mehler Paperny, David Ljunggren, 11261K, Neutral]

Canada will start inoculating its federal prison inmates against COVID-19 starting Friday, protecting a vulnerable population that many jurisdictions have struggled to keep safe during the pandemic, a government statement said on Wednesday.

Correctional Service Canada said in the statement it would start with 600 elderly and medically vulnerable inmates, followed by more when additional vaccine becomes available.

Three inmates have died due to COVID-19 as of Jan. 5 and there are 144 active cases, out of about 12,500 federal inmates in the country, according to government data.

Inmates are vulnerable not only because they live in high-risk settings in what are often older and poorly ventilated buildings but also because they often have comorbidities that worsen prognosis should they fall ill, public health experts say.

Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said the government was following the advice of an advisory committee which said people congregated together in places such as prisons were at higher risk.

But the move came under fire from the federal opposition Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole, who posted on Twitter that, "Not one criminal should be vaccinated ahead of any vulnerable Canadian or front line health worker."

The president of the union representing Canadian correctional officers said he supported prioritizing inmates but wanted vaccines now for his members, as well. The Corrections Canada statement said prison staff would get inoculated through their province or territory and that the agency is working closely with these governments to ensure health workers in prisons are vaccinated in the first phase.

Many jurisdictions have struggled to keep people behind bars safe during the pandemic. According to an October report from the National Academies Press, COVID-19 infection rates among the incarcerated population were nearly five times higher than that of the general U.S. population.

Vaccination is "a really important initiative to address the higher risk of transmission in prisons and the fact that there are multiple active outbreaks in prisons," Dr. Farah Mawani, a social and psychiatric epidemiologist with Unity Health Toronto.

[Canada] Quebec Imposes Curfew as ICU Cases for Covid-19 Near Peak Levels (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 6:13 PM, Sandrine Rastello, 6400K, Neutral]

Quebec is implementing a curfew, Canada's first of the Covid-19 pandemic, and adding new restrictions on business as it battles a rise in virus-related hospitalizations.

The nightly curfew across starts Jan. 9 and will last nearly a month, Premier Francois Legault said at a news conference Wednesday. His government also asked manufacturers and builders to curb activity by delaying the production of non-essential goods. Restaurants, retailers and many other industries are already closed or operating under tight limits.

The announcement brings Canada's second-largest province closer to the measures it took in March, which shut down about 40% of the economy for eight weeks, according to government estimates.

"The situation in our hospitals is critical, especially in Montreal. There are still too many visits in homes," Legault said. Only sparsely-populated areas of the province's north are exempt from the curfew.

Quebec has been the worst-hit Canadian province in the pandemic. With 8.5 million people, it accounts for 23% of the country's population but more than half of its virus deaths. The

province had 202 virus patients in intensive care units as of Tuesday, more than double the number on Dec. 1 and close to peak levels of the spring.

After loosening restrictions in May, the government imposed new ones in October to quell a second wave of infections. Last month Legault tightened them further, extending school closures and limits on retailers. It hasn't worked the way the government hoped.

The steady rise in hospital cases has been upsetting to Legault, who was forced to abandon plans to allow limited Christmas gatherings. The decision to impose a daily curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. marks a shift to a more coercive approach after months of exhorting people to stay home.

"The next month will be critical. We are in a race against the clock," Legault said. "We lost that race a bit in the past weeks but we are capable of winning it. That's why we're announcing a shock therapy."

It's not just Quebec. Except for the more isolated Atlantic provinces, Canada has struggled to get a grip on the virus in recent months. The country has suffered 44 deaths per 100,000 people, on par with Germany, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The ratio is 2 for South Korea, one of the most successful countries at handling the pandemic, and 109 for the U.S.

[Mexico] Mexico's top diplomat discusses migration with US official (AP)

AP [1/6/2021 10:04 PM, Staff, 29K, Positive]

Mexico's top diplomat said Wednesday he discussed immigration policy with U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's pick for national security adviser, Jake Sullivan.

Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said the two spoke via internet.

Ebrard's office said that the talk focused on "a shared vision on the issue of migration" and that the two discussed ways to make migration "safe, orderly and regular."

"Attending to the structural causes of migration is a priority shared" by the two administrations, Ebrard said.

He said he and Sullivan agreed to work on "a regional answer centered on economic development" in areas that migrants come from.

[Mexico] Mexico shares Biden focus on migration's root causes, ministry says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 11:07 PM, Trevor Hunnicutt, Dave Graham and Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Neutral]

Mexico's foreign ministry said on Wednesday that U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's team shares its vision of international aid and economic development for Central America to achieve orderly and safe migration.

Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard and Jake Sullivan, Biden's pick for national security adviser, agreed during a video meeting that both governments will prioritize the structural

causes of migration, the Mexican statement said.

Sullivan discussed border issues with Ebrard, a Biden aide said. Democrat Biden, who takes office on Jan. 20, has promised voters a more humane and multilateral approach to immigration policy than Republican President Donald Trump, who took a harder line than previous administrations.

"Attention to the structural causes of migration is a priority shared by the government of Mexico and by the next administration ..." the ministry said in the statement.

"The vision focuses on the protection of the human rights of migrants and refugees, as well as on a regional response focused on economic development."

On Dec. 19, Biden's team said that he and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador vowed in a phone call to hone a "new approach" to migration issues that "offers alternatives to undertaking the dangerous journey to the United States."

Border arrests reached the highest level in nearly two years in December, driven by coronavirus lockdowns and devastating hurricanes in Central America.

Mexican officials have signaled they will not relax tough enforcement measures aimed at stopping caravans of migrants making their way to the U.S. border. One such caravan is planned to leave Honduras next week.

The latest call was designed to start efforts to build a joint migration policy soon after inauguration day, according to two Biden aides.

The U.S.-Mexico relationship frayed during the last four years over Trump's demands that the Mexican government do more to reduce the flow of U.S.-bound migrants.

[Mexico] Mexican with allergic reaction after Pfizers COVID-19 vaccine still hospitalized (Reuters)

Reuters [1/6/2021 8:30 PM, Adriana Barrera, 5304K, Neutral]

A Mexican doctor who had a serious allergic reaction after receiving Pfizer Inc and BioNTech's vaccine against COVID-19 remains hospitalized and has not fully recovered muscle strength, health authorities said on Wednesday.

The 32-year-old internist, who got the vaccine on Dec. 30, had several seizures in the following days and is being treated in a specialized hospital that is part of Mexico's social security institute IMSS.

The health ministry's initial diagnosis after the reaction was encephalomyelitis. Encephalomyelitis is an inflammation of the brain and spinal cord. The ministry has said the doctor has a history of allergic reactions.

Victor Hugo Borja, an IMSS director, said the doctor has so far responded favorably to treatment, has had no new seizures, and recovered some of the muscle strength lost.

"Today, she's been able to sit up and it's possible she'll be discharged in the following days," said Borja at a news conference.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Wednesday it was carefully monitoring allergic reactions to the coronavirus vaccines from Pfizer Inc and Moderna Inc and urged individuals who had a serious reaction not to get the second dose.

A study published on Wednesday in the CDC's weekly report on death and disease looking at cases between Dec. 14 and Dec. 23 identified 21 cases of anaphylaxis after the administration of 1,893,360 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

Doctors are still studying whether the doctor's seizures and decreased muscle strength are related to the vaccine against COVID-19 or previous conditions. The ministry has said there is no evidence from clinical trials that anyone has developed an inflammation of the brain after the vaccine's application.

Pfizer said it is aware that the health ministry is studying the case and vowed to continue to collaborate "with any information that is requested from us."

Mexico started its COVID-19 vaccination plan before Christmas, giving frontline workers priority.

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] Central African Republic: A disputed election and a strange rebel alliance (Yahoo News/BBC)

Yahoo News/BBC [1/6/2021 9:34 PM, Jack Losh, 11261K, Negative]

After an election marred by violence, the president of the Central African Republic (CAR) has won five more years in power. But his victory is contested and the fate of the country balances on a knife edge.

A disparate jumble of armed groups formed an alliance last month and launched an offensive in a bid to disrupt this crucial vote.

Since the election, fighting has continued in towns nationwide, with the rebels threatening to march on the capital, Bangui. So far, they have been kept away by United Nations peacekeepers, CAR's armed forces and hundreds of reinforcements from Russia and Rwanda.

The political opposition has said Faustin-Archange Touadéra's victory lacks legitimacy and are demanding a re-run.

While voters turned out in force in Bangui and some other towns, militants launched a violent and disruptive campaign of intimidation elsewhere - burning ballot boxes, ransacking polling stations and preventing the vote in over 40% of electoral districts in this chronically unstable country.

The rebel alliance calls itself the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC). This formation is

new but the armed groups within it have been around for many years.

With origins stretching back to the insurgencies of the 2000s, many of them were involved in the civil war that erupted in 2013 albeit in a different guise. That year, mainly Muslim rebel groups from the lawless north banded together into the so-called Seleka coalition and ousted then-President Francois Bozizé.

The Seleka's brutal rule prompted the creation of another group of militants known as the Anti-Balaka, drawn mainly from Christian and animist communities. These militias fought back against the rebels and carried out reprisals against CAR's minority Muslim population, pushing the country deeper into bloodshed.

The Seleka coalition eventually splintered into various rebel factions, often drawn along ethnic lines and known by a bewildering array of acronyms - the FPRC, the MPC, the UPC, 3R and so on. Along with Anti-Balaka militias, these armed groups have terrorised civilians for years, clashing over the control of mineral resources, such as diamonds and gold, and cattle migration routes, and occupying some two-thirds of the country.

Despite sporadic violence, a peace deal signed between CAR's government and 14 rebel groups in 2019 raised hopes of stability. But last month, these armed groups - despite supposedly being sworn enemies - said they were uniting "into a single entity" and launched a new uprising.

It is not clear exactly why these rival armed groups have banded together, except that rebellions in CAR have a history of being used as a tool to extract concessions from the government and to secure lucrative official positions.

A key figure amid this mayhem is Francois Bozizé - a former general who seized power in a 2003 coup before being toppled by Seleka rebels a decade later. He fled the country, allegedly supporting the Anti-Balaka's rampage from afar, which resulted in UN sanctions against him, although he has denied controlling the group.

Despite an international warrant for his arrest, the 74-year-old Mr Bozizé slipped back into CAR in late 2019 after years in exile and announced his presidential candidacy last July. The country's top court barred him in December from running, saying he did not satisfy the "good morality" requirement for candidates.

Soon afterwards, shortly before the election, the new insurrection erupted. CAR's government and the UN accuse Mr Bozizé - whose location is unknown - of colluding with armed groups to seize power. He denies the accusation. But if true, his alleged alliance with the same rebels that deposed him years earlier would mark an extraordinary twist in this long-running, unpredictable drama.

A former maths lecturer and vice-chancellor at the University of Bangui, Mr Touadéra, 63, served as prime minister under Mr Bozizé between 2008 and 2013. He came to power as president in 2016, running on a ticket to unite CAR and disarm the rebels, but has struggled to wrest control of vast swathes of the country from them, despite enjoying the backing of a UN peacekeeping mission and Russian weapons and personnel.

The signing of the 2019 peace deal was regarded as a positive step by his administration, although the agreement was criticised for its ambiguity over securing post-conflict justice.

A subsequent presidential decree sparked controversy by naming three of the country's most powerful rebel commanders as "special military advisers" within the government. These were essentially token positions, but still carried significance. Human rights groups condemned the decision to bestow official positions on these warlords, whose groups have committed widespread atrocities, and warned against handing them any amnesties.

Russia says it is responding to a legitimate request for security assistance from the CAR government.

Besides gaining access to CAR's mineral riches, Russia's aim of forging new partnerships and rekindling Cold War-era alliances across Africa is seen as a bid to project a great power image and implant itself into areas of Western interest. Its involvement in CAR is a threat to France's influence in CAR, its former colony.

With Russia's economy in long-term decline, Moscow is seeking political influence and new markets in several African countries through arms, construction and energy deals, analysts say.

Violence is likely to continue but observers don't expect a repeat of 2013's total collapse into anarchy.

Security has been strengthened by a 14,000-strong UN peacekeeping mission and an army bolstered by Russian arms and training, as well as private military contractors sent by Moscow - none of which were present seven years ago.

Nor does the new alliance appear to have the popular support or uniting agenda to help this mishmash of former rivals overthrow the government.

But it is hard to see these armed groups laying down their arms yet. Incentives to continue the unrest include seizing new areas to extort funds and controlling the main route into neighbouring Cameroon, thus securing leverage in future peace negotiations.

Mr Touadéra faces serious challenges but is unlikely to be ousted. "Touadéra's vote was the expression of people fed up with armed groups who want to impose a setback for democracy," said Fridolin Ngoulou, a Central African journalist. "Touadéra will retain power as the entire international community supports these elections."

Yet the incumbent's authority is certainly dented, not only by reduced voter turnout but also by the embarrassment of staking his first term on making peace with rebel warlords - sometimes through controversial deals - only for them to turn on him.

Mr Bozizé's shadowy influence is another threat, although his next move is hard to predict. "It is a very risky game of balance that the president needs to play," said Tity Agbahey, of Amnesty International's West and Central Africa office.

The latest flare-up is also a disappointment for the UN peacekeeping mission which has

invested huge sums towards re-establishing state control over the country.

"The slow process by which the UN has been helping the central government extend some sort of authority has been set back quite badly," said Paul Melly, a consulting fellow at the Chatham House think-tank. "In a negative scenario, instability would splutter on and not get any better."

CAR is a diverse country, populated by a multitude of different communities, from Bayaka "pygmies" in the Congo Basin to ethnic Peul (Fulani) nomads in northern arid areas. Before the war, the Christian majority and Muslim minority had coexisted in relative peace in this large but sparsely populated country of 4.7 million people.

Daily life, though, is tough for many. Ranked among the world's least developed countries, CAR is not just enmeshed in a security crisis; it faces a grave humanitarian emergency.

Protracted conflict has left more than 1.2 million people - a quarter of the population - displaced and impedes the work of aid organisations. Malnutrition rates have continued to rise, with 1.9 million people enduring crisis levels of food insecurity. Many face poor access to education, healthcare, hygiene and other basic services.

CAR's civilian population has faced decades of war crimes and human rights abuses. Thousands died in the recent civil war which pushed the country to brink of genocide, while the accompanying humanitarian crisis has stretched resilience to breaking point in the hardest-hit areas. The country cannot afford the devastation of another full-blown conflict.

While CAR occupies a marginal position on the world stage, that is precisely why it is so crucial to help the country through this latest crisis, analysts say. Such support would be powerful proof of the international community's commitment to nudging even the most geo-strategically peripheral countries towards stability.

Allowing the resurgent armed groups to block the election process would undermine the African Union principle that "you can't take power permanently by the gun," said Melly. "The consequences for the whole policy approach would be catastrophic."

Ending impunity for abuses is regarded as key to CAR's sustainable peace. As part of efforts to bring war criminals to justice, a new tribunal in Bangui - known as the Special Criminal Court - promises to break new ground as the first UN-backed court founded in a country where fighting continues. Trials are yet to commence but, if successful, this institution could offer a new model of justice to other hotspots.

"The country is really at some kind of crossroads," said Agbahey. "Everything is there for the change to happen. There is a judicial momentum. For once, there is a feeling that people could have accountability. But it is still so fragile."

[Niger] Niger's leader: Fragility of nations must be top priority (AP)

AP [1/6/2021 9:33 PM, Edith M. Lederer, 11261K, Neutral]

Days after attacks on two villages killed more than 100 civilians in his African nation, Niger's president said Wednesday that tackling the growing fragility of nations must be a top priority

of the 21st century.

President Mahamadou Issoufou urged international help so countries in Africa's Sahel and Lake Chad Basin can build stronger democratic institutions and strengthen their security and defense capabilities.

He said the massacre near Niger's border with Mali is a stark reminder that "what is happening in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin ... strikes the entire international community."

Speaking at a virtual high-level meeting of the U.N. Security Council, Issoufou said that "fragile conflicts are increasingly the battleground for political rivalries." He said terrorism, pandemics, forced displacements, disasters and famine "often take root in fragility."

Niger and neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali are battling the spread of deadly extremist violence, including from the Islamic State group and al-Qaida, which has killed thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands despite the presence of thousands of regional and international troops. Niger must also deal with instability spilling over from Nigeria, exacerbated by local tensions.

The deadly attacks on the western villages of Tchombangou and Zaroumdareye took place Saturday, the same day that Niger announced its presidential election will go to a second round on Feb. 21. Issoufou is stepping down after two terms and the West African nation, which has seen four coups, could see its first democratic transition of power since independence from France in 1960.

The next president will have to deal with major problems including extremism, poverty, displacement and corruption. Issoufou told the council: "We need as broad involvement as possible of the international community to the international coalition to counter terrorism in the Sahel."

Moussa Faki Mahamat, chair of the African Union Commission, said that "it is in Africa that the issue of state fragility and peacekeeping issues are most acute," pointing especially to the spate of attacks in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, including the weekend attacks in Niger.

Tunisian President Kais Saied, whose country holds the Security Council presidency this month and organized the meeting, said that "peacebuilding efforts need to focus on stability and progressively addressing fragility so development and prosperity can be achieved."

He stressed the importance of promoting human rights, democracy, good governance and inclusive participation in fragile nations.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "Conflict continues to breed poverty and foster institutional fragility, which in turn decreases the resilience of these societies and the prospects for peace."

"By 2030, the World Bank estimates that two thirds of the world's extreme poor will live in fragile or conflict-affected countries," he said.

The U.N. chief quoted the World Bank's Fragility and Conflict Report, which said one in five people in the Middle East and North Africa "lives in close proximity to a major conflict." This has led humanitarian needs to multiply, "reaching the highest levels since the Second World War," Guterres said.

The number of people at risk of starvation has doubled, international methods to manage conflicts "have been stretched to the breaking point" resulting in a number of countries being caught in a vicious cycle, he said.

Guterres said the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends, with extreme poverty rising for the first time in 22 years in 2020, and the contraction of economic activity in fragile and conflict-affected settings "expected to push an additional 18 million to 27 million people into extreme poverty."

Former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, told the council, "You have the power in your hands to help to end the vicious cycle of conflict, displacement and despair so many have faced for so many years."

She urged the U.N.'s most powerful body to look beyond its narrow interests -- which have blocked action on Syria and other conflicts -- "and recognize that peaceful, just and inclusive societies have benefits far beyond their own borders."

She warned that "unattended issues in society fester and deepen fragility." She strongly backed early interventions to prevent conflicts and U.N. peacekeeping operations that are flexible enough to change with challenging circumstances to help restore stability in conflict countries.

Many peacekeeping operations cost hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and some more than a billion dollars, and Sirleaf asked the 15 council members to consider a new idea for spending some of that money.

"What would result if some 25% of financing for peacekeeping were allocated to a technical training contingent of peacekeepers dedicated to training young, unemployed potential militants?" Sirleaf asked.

[South Africa] South African Insurers to Pay for 14 Million Covid-19 Vaccines (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/6/2021 2:11 PM, Antony Sguazzin, Roxanne Henderson, 6400K, Positive] South African medical insurers will pay for a Covid-19 vaccine for as many people who don't have coverage as they have members and expect the program to cost as much as 7 billion rand (\$464 million).

The subsidy will mean that including medical aid members the companies will finance vaccines for 14 million adults in the country of 60 million people, Ryan Noach, the chief executive officer of Discovery Health Ltd., said in an interview on Wednesday. Discovery has already set aside the money, he said.

"The ultimate effect is the one-to-one cross subsidy," he said.

The plan is being led by Adrian Gore, the CEO and co-founder of Discovery Ltd., the parent of Discovery Health and Africa's biggest health insurer, after he was approached by South African Health Minister Zweli Mkhize.

South Africa's government is facing increasing criticism from labor unions, health officials and opposition parties for its failure to procure vaccines even as at least 37 nations begin inoculating their populations.

The country has yet to conclude any direct supply agreements with pharmaceutical companies. It expects to begin receiving shots in the second quarter to cover a 10th of its citizens through the Covax initiative, which is trying to ensure equitable access to vaccines.

With more than 1.1 million confirmed infections and over 30,000 deaths, South Africa is Africa's worst-hit nation. The economy is estimated by the government to have contracted by the most in nine decades last year as a result of a lockdown related to the outbreak. Some of those measures are still in place.

"There is no more important health care requirement than the vaccination of all South Africans," Noach said. "It has economic benefits to the country in restoring some normality to business and trade. It's far cheaper than a lockdown to pay for the vaccines."

Pharmaceutical companies will only negotiate directly with governments. Still, the procurement may ultimately be handled on behalf of the government by the Solidarity Fund, a charity that collected money from some of the country's richest people and biggest companies, he said.

"We will take whatever reliable vaccine we can get and whatever comes along first," Noach said.

Network TV News Coverage

Justice Department Says 3% of Emails Compromised in Breach of Government Systems (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/6/2021 10:04 PM, Staff]

The Justice Department says about 3% of its emails could be compromised as part of a massive breach of federal government agencies that US officials have linked to Russia. No classified systems are believed to have been affected.

World Leaders React to Violence in DC (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/6/2021 6:50 PM, Staff]

World leaders are calling on President Trump to condemn the violence in DC. There were dozens of reactions from world leaders, expressing shock and horror. They are all saying that this was an attack on Democracy. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, "It is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power." Germany's Foreign Ministry said, "The enemies of Democracy will be pleased at these unbearable images." The Secretary General of NATO said, "Shocking scenes in Washington, DC. The outcome of

this democratic election must be respected." Leaders were placing blame directly on President Trump. The Prime Minister of Sweden tweeted that President Trump and many members of Congress have a great responsibility for what is happenign now. A spokesman for the President of South Africa said simply, "Pray for America."

[Russia] Russia Sees US Chaos as Win to Years Long Effort to Sow Distrust, Misinformation (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/6/2021 8:43 PM, Staff]

Intelligence agencies report that the goal of Vladimir Putin starting more than five years ago, even more than helping elect Donald Trump president, was sowing chaos and division across America. Today has been a great victory for him. Putin saw a vulnerability to misinformation, which as a former KGB agent he was an expert at, and he has pursued this for years. Putin has said that he hates what the United States stands for.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Congress closes in on affirming Biden win following riot at U.S. Capitol

Kid glove treatment of pro-Trump mob contrasts with strong-arm police tactics against Black Lives Matter, activists say

Capitol breach prompts urgent questions about security failures

CDC foresees spread in U.S. of highly contagious coronavirus variant

Justice Department also hacked by Russians in the ongoing cyberespionage campaign, officials say

The New York Times

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

A Mob and the Breach of Democracy: The Violent End of the Trump Era

House Debates Pennsylvania Electors, Further Delaying Certification

U.S. Is Blind to Contagious New Virus Variant, Scientists Warn

As the D.C. police clears the Capitol grounds, the mayor extends a public emergency.

The Wall Street Journal

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Congress Resumes Debate After Rioters Storm Capitol

'The Protesters Are in the Building.' Inside the Capitol Stormed by a Pro-Trump Mob

A Single Day Shakes Two Presidencies, Two Parties and One Nation to the Core

SolarWinds Hack Breached Justice Department System

ABC News

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Members of Trump Cabinet discussing invoking 25th Amendment: Sources

Some GOP senators reverse objections to Electoral College certification after protesters storm Capitol

US holds first oil lease sale for Alaska's Arctic refuge

CBS News

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Trump Cabinet members discuss possibility of invoking 25th Amendment

Key Republican senators withdraw objections to Electoral College count after Capitol siege

4 dead after Trump supporters storm U.S. Capitol

CNN

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Congress reconvenes to certify Biden's win after rioters breach Capitol

US Capitol secured, 4 dead after rioters stormed the halls of Congress to block Biden's win

Rioters breached US Capitol security on Wednesday. This was the police response when it was Black protesters on DC streets last year

Fox News

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Congress reconvenes following chaos at US Capitol

White House sees resignations over Capitol building riots

Democratic Rep. Cori Bush calls for expulsion of GOP lawmakers who 'incited this domestic terror attack'

NBC News

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

Senate rejects first GOP attempt to block Joe Biden's electors after day of chaos

4 dead, Congress evacuated, National Guard activated after pro-Trump rioters storm Capitol

World leaders express 'shock' after pro-Trump rioters storm Capitol

Washington Schedule**President**

The White House

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

The President has no public events scheduled today.

Vice President

The White House

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

There are no public events scheduled today.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(1/7/2021 6:00 AM)

There are no public events scheduled today.

{End of Report}

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From: (b)(6) @state.gov>
To: Legal-L-Attorneys-DL <Legal-L-Attorneys-DL@state.gov>
Subject: State Department News Clips (1-27-21)
Date: Wed, 27 Jan 2021 12:05:15 +0000

**STATE DEPARTMENT
NEWS CLIPS**

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
By TechMIS
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TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Wednesday, January 27, 2021 5:00 AM ET

Secretary of State

U.S. Senate confirms Biden nominee Blinken as secretary of state (Reuters)

Department of State News

Biden's UN ambassador: U.S. will support two-state solution in Middle East (Washington Examiner)

Kerry aims to talk US back into a lead role in climate fight (AP)

Israel's top general says its military is refreshing operational plans against Iran (Reuters)

Head of Israeli military cautions against US return to the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Examiner)

China: Military flights warn against interference in Taiwan (AP)

Defense Secretary Austin to Review Trump's Last-Minute Withdrawal of Troops From Afghanistan, Iraq (Wall Street Journal)

Google says North Korea-backed hackers sought cyber research (AP)

[Yemen] In a first, Yemenis seek redress for U.S. drone strikes at Inter-American rights body (Washington Post)

[Yemen] Aid boost in Yemen after U.S. allows Houthi deals (Reuters)

[Russia] In first call with Putin, Biden marks a return to skepticism from the top (Washington Post)

[\[Russia\] Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Russia\] First Biden-Putin call shows both cautious on big concerns \(AP\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia, U.S. extend arms pact, Kremlin says, as Biden, Putin talk \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[China\] Declassified U.S. intelligence bolsters Wuhan lab theory in coronavirus outbreak \(Washington Times\)](#)

[\[Ethiopia\] US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately \(AP\)](#)

Editorials and Op-eds

[Biden's uphill battle to save the Iran nuclear deal \(Washington Post\)](#)

[Hong Kong's Candles in the Wind \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[America Can Defend Taiwan \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[Scrapping DHS's travel vetting regime is the wrong approach \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[Russia\] In Less Than a Minute, Biden Changes U.S.-Russian Dynamics \(Yahoo News/Time\)](#)

[\[China\] The US has accused China of carrying out genocide. Will it now boycott the 2022 Beijing Olympics? \(CNN\)](#)

Coronavirus News

[European Economy Lags China and U.S. on Pandemic Recovery \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

Congressional Activity

[Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

[\[Iraq\] Iraq signs pact with Total for 'large projects' \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] Amid crisis, Hezbollah 'bank' a lifeline for some Lebanese \(AP\)](#)

[\[Tunisia\] Tunisia's parliament approves Cabinet reshuffle amid protests \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[United Arab Emirates\] UAE Central Bank slaps monetary sanction on Bank of Baroda \(Yahoo News/Capital Market\)](#)

Europe and Eurasia

[Netherlands] Calm returns to Dutch cities after riots, with police out in force (Reuters)

[Portugal] Portugal urged to seek international help as COVID-19 deaths hit record (Reuters)

[Serbia] Serbia to spend 2.5 billion euros to aid recovery from coronavirus crisis - president (Reuters)

[United Kingdom] Britain Faces Up to Painful Lessons After 100,000 Covid Deaths (Bloomberg)

[United Kingdom] AstraZeneca Faces EU Grilling Over Delays to Vaccine Delivery (Bloomberg)

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia set for 10th day of no local COVID-19 cases (Reuters)

[Australia] Australia's Inflation Exceeds Estimates as Recovery Builds (Bloomberg)

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Appoints Local Lawyer to Prosecute Jimmy Lai (Bloomberg)

[Indonesia] Indonesian volcano unleashes river of lava in new eruption (AP)

[Japan] Japan's COVID crisis reawakens deflation fears as cash hoarding returns (Reuters)

[Japan] Newly found Fukushima plant contamination may delay cleanup (AP)

[Japan] Olympics: IOC's Pound wants to examine reasons for Japan public's concerns (Reuters)

[Japan] Japan PM apologizes after lawmakers' night club outings (Reuters)

[Singapore] Singapore faces talent crunch as tech giants scale up (Reuters)

[South Korea] South Korea Now Seeks Ways to Live With Low Birth Rate (Bloomberg)

[South Korea] South Korea reports big jump in COVID-19 cases on outbreaks in Christian schools (Reuters)

[Taiwan] Taiwanese man fined \$35K for breaking home quarantine 7 times (CNN)

[Thailand] Thailand reports 819 new virus cases, 1 additional death (Reuters)

[Vietnam] Vietnam's Communist Party chief nominated for re-election: state media (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Taliban backs vaccine drive as Afghan government receives \$112 million funding pledge (Reuters)

[India] Farmers back at protest camp after deep challenge to PM Modi (AP)

[India] Protesters supporting Indian farmers demonstrate in NYC (AP)

[India] Security tight at Red Fort after clashes with farmers (Reuters)

[India] India Has Plenty of Coronavirus Vaccines But Few Takers (Bloomberg)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Biden DOJ rescinds Trump 'zero tolerance' policy that resulted in family separations at border (Washington Examiner)

[Brazil] Brazil approaches 9 million COVID-19 cases, death toll at 218,878 (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil's Health Minister under investigation over health crisis in Amazonas (CNN)

[Cuba] Cuba's coronavirus cases, death toll surge (Reuters)

[Cuba] Cuba detects presence of South African variant of the coronavirus (Miami Herald)

[Mexico] Mexico near approving Russian vaccine, with little data (AP)

[Mexico] Mexico may approve Russian COVID-19 vaccine within days, health official says (Reuters)

[Peru] Peru volunteer in Sinopharm vaccine trial dies of COVID-19 pneumonia, university says (Reuters)

[Venezuela] Maduro's 'miracle' treatment for COVID-19 draws skeptics (AP)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Mali] Mali says joint military operation with France kills 100 jihadists (Reuters)

Network TV News Coverage

Antony Blinken Confirmed by Senate as Secretary of State (FOX News)

Anger Rises in Europe as Governments Impose New Restrictions, Vaccines in Short Supply (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

Experts Warn US Must Do More to Help Vaccinate the World's Poorest Countries (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

[Russia] Biden Holds First Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Raises Many Concerns (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

[Russia] Biden Speaks to Putin in First Phone Call Since Becoming President, Raises Several Concerns (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

Headlines

The Washington Post

The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

ABC News

CBS News

CNN

Fox News

NBC News

Washington Schedule

President

Vice President

Senate

House of Representatives

Secretary of State

U.S. Senate confirms Biden nominee Blinken as secretary of state (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 8:22 PM, Patricia Zengerle, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. Senate on Tuesday confirmed President Joe Biden's nominee, veteran diplomat Antony Blinken, to serve as secretary of state.

The 100-member Senate backed Blinken 78-22, meaning he could be sworn in as the nation's top diplomat later in the day. A simple majority was needed in the Democratic-controlled chamber for his confirmation.

Blinken is a longtime Biden confidant who has been confirmed by the U.S. Senate before, most recently to serve as No. 2 at the State Department during former Democratic President Barack Obama's administration, when Biden was vice president.

At his confirmation before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Blinken pledged to work more closely with allies after former President Donald Trump's "America First" approach to foreign affairs. Blinken said he would work to revitalize damaged

American diplomacy and build a united front to counter the challenges posed by Russia, China and Iran.

The 100-member Senate is divided 50-50 but controlled by Biden's fellow Democrats because Vice President Kamala Harris can break any tie.

All of the votes against Blinken's confirmation came from Republicans.

Blinken's confirmation hearing went smoothly, with both Democrats and Republicans offering praise. Blinken was a committee staff director - when Biden, who spent decades in the Senate, was chairman - before he joined the Obama administration.

Department of State News

Biden's UN ambassador: U.S. will support two-state solution in Middle East (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 4:10 PM, Mica Soellner, Neutral]

President Biden is so far making good on his promise to reverse the Trump administration's Israel policy, with a top official vowing the Democrat will support a two-state solution in the Middle East.

Richard Mills, acting U.S. envoy to the United Nations, told the Security Council on Tuesday that the United States encourages Israel and Palestinians "to avoid unilateral steps that make a two-state solution more difficult, such as annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolition, incitement to violence and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated the administration's intentions in the Arab world, according to a report by Al Jazeera.

"The president's view continues to be that a two-state solution is the only path forward," Psaki said.

In addition to taking steps to create an environment where a two-state solution may be possible, Mills said the Biden administration aims to restore Palestinian aid and reopen the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington, according to a report by Reuters.

Under Trump, the U.S. cut around \$360 million in annual funding for the U.N. agency supporting Palestinian refugees.

On the campaign trail, Biden warned peace would be impossible in the Middle East if Israel didn't stop its threats of annexation. He said last May that he was committed to Israel and hoped to help the nation maintain its "qualitative military edge" while taking steps toward peace.

Despite reversing Trump administration policies, the Biden administration will aim to continue Trump's trajectory of normalizing international ties with Israel. Under the former president, the U.S. secured agreements with four Arab states, which include the United

Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, to begin normalizing relations with Israel.

Mills added, however, that normalizing ties is "not substitute for Israeli-Palestinian peace."

Trump also moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that was viewed as solidifying the latter as the nation's true capital. The Biden administration plans to keep the embassy in Jerusalem.

Kerry aims to talk US back into a lead role in climate fight (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:06 AM, Ellen Knickmeyer, 381K, Neutral]

From a wood-paneled library in his Boston mansion, new climate envoy John Kerry is talking the U.S. back into a leading role in global climate action, making clear the nation isn't just revving up its own efforts to reduce oil, gas and coal pollution but that it intends to push everyone in the world to do more, too.

Kerry's diplomatic efforts match the fast pace of domestic climate directives by the week-old Biden administration, which created the job Kerry now holds. Those directives include a Biden order expected Wednesday spelling out how U.S. intelligence, defense and homeland security agencies should address the security threats posed by worsening droughts, floods and other natural disasters under global warming.

At 77, Kerry is working to make a success out of the global climate accord that he helped negotiate in Paris as President Barack Obama's secretary of state — and that he then saw rejected by President Donald Trump, who also spurned all other Obama-era legacy efforts to wean the U.S. and global economies off climate-damaging fossil fuels.

Success for Kerry is hardly assured. At home, he faces pushback from the oil and gas industry and hears concerns that jobs will be lost. Internationally, there's uncertainty about whether Biden's climate commitments can survive the United States' intensely divided politics, let alone the next presidential transition.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are pushing him to be aggressive — even demonstrating outside his house on his first full day on the job.

Underscoring the urgency, Kerry -- working from his home on Boston's patrician Beacon Hill during the COVID-19 pandemic -- sat before a computer screen and started talking before sunup last Thursday, his first full day in his new job, to a global business forum in Europe.

Since then, he has spoken virtually with U.S. mayors, foreign presidents and premiers, government ministers and others, until the light from the setting sun slides down the gilt spines of the shelves of leather-bound books in his library.

Kerry exhorts: Put your big one-off COVID-19 economic recovery funding into projects that boost cleaner energy. Get green projects going fast in Republican-leaning U.S. states to prove renewable energy can mean jobs and build needed political support. Get everyone to talk to China about things like stopping the building of dirty-burning coal-fired power plants.

If China and the U.S., as the world's No. 1 and 2 top carbon emitters, don't spell out exactly

how they will curb climate-damaging emissions more quickly, "we're all going to lose credibility," Kerry told an online gathering of American mayors last weekend.

The U.S. has to have the "credibility to go to the table, show people what we're doing and push them to do more," Kerry said then. "So everybody can understand it's not fake, it's not a phony, empty promise — it really is getting real."

Kerry is a full-time principal member for climate on the White House's National Security Council. The role acknowledges what climate and military experts say will be growing conflicts around the world as climate change increases competition for natural resources. It takes into account a lack of U.S. readiness to protect military installations and overall infrastructure from worsening flooding and other natural disasters as temperatures rise.

By giving someone of Kerry's stature a job with equally high prominence, Biden aims to "bring the climate issue into the conversation" on national security matters routinely, said John Podesta, a climate counselor for Obama and a White House chief of staff for President Bill Clinton.

Kerry is expected to have desks at both the White House and the State Department.

In the meantime, the home library where Kerry now holds most of his big online meetings earned him a 10 out of 10 from the popular "Room Rater" Twitter account that judges the backdrop décor in people's Zoom calls and TV appearances. That's despite expressing doubt about whether it was a room or a set.

Kerry and other Biden administration climate leaders will be working to set a tougher goal for the U.S. for cutting emissions, as well as making good on pledges to increase climate funding for poorer countries.

On Thursday, the progressive Sunrise Movement's Boston branch had demonstrators outside his Boston house holding signs saying "Kerry be brave." The move shows the left keeping up pressure for what could be a politically tricky level of aggressiveness on cutting fossil fuels.

"Our role is ... now to hold them accountable," Sunrise Movement spokesperson Ellen Sciales said Tuesday, and keep them "pushing us forward to meet the scale and the urgency of the climate crisis."

On the right, some Republican lawmakers and the politically influential oil and gas industry have been subdued in the first week of the Biden administration, saying they hope to work with Kerry and others on climate efforts.

Kerry told the mayors he talked with Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia at Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration. Kerry said he and Manchin, who has fought climate regulation he sees threatening his coal state's economy, agreed: Winning the U.S. fight on climate change will depend on getting renewable-energy jobs into places like West Virginia and Tennessee as soon as possible.

Then, "boom, you will begin to have believers," Kerry declared from his library. "They're not going to believe it when we just say it. We have to do it."

Israel's top general says its military is refreshing operational plans against Iran (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 3:15 PM, Jeffrey Heller, Neutral]

Israel's top general said on Tuesday that its military was refreshing its operational plans against Iran and that any U.S. return to a 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran would be "wrong."

The remarks are an apparent signal to U.S. President Joe Biden to tread cautiously in any diplomatic engagement with Iran. Such comments by Israel's military chief of staff on U.S. policymaking are rare and likely would have been pre-approved by the Israeli government.

"A return to the 2015 nuclear agreement, or even if it is a similar accord with several improvements, is bad and wrong from an operational and strategic point of view," Lieutenant-General Aviv Kohavi said in an address to Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, abandoned the nuclear agreement in 2018, a move that was welcomed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who criticised the sanctions relief it offered and warned of the likelihood of Iranian nuclear arms development after its expiration.

Antony Blinken, confirmed on Tuesday as Biden's secretary of state, said last week the United States was "a long way" from deciding whether to rejoin the deal and it would need to see what Iran actually did to resume complying with the pact.

Since Washington pulled out of the deal, Iran has gradually breached its key limits, building up its stockpile of low enriched uranium, enriching uranium to higher levels of purity, and installing centrifuges in ways barred by the accord.

Kohavi said those actions by Iran, which denies it is seeking atomic arms, showed it could ultimately decide to push forward rapidly towards building a nuclear weapon.

"In light of this fundamental analysis, I have instructed the Israel Defense Forces to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to those already in place," Kohavi said.

"It will be up to the political leadership, of course, to decide on implementation, but these plans need to be on the table."

Netanyahu had threatened possible Israeli strikes against Iran in the run-up to the accord. But a senior Israeli officer, who spoke to reporters in 2015 on condition of anonymity, underscored differences in Israel over the issue by saying a deal had potential security benefits.

Head of Israeli military cautions against US return to the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Zachary Halaschak, 394K, Neutral]
Israel Defense Forces Chief of General Staff Aviv Kochavi, in a rare public statement about U.S. foreign policy, urged the Biden administration not to attempt to kick-start the Iran nuclear deal.

Kochavi, speaking virtually at the Institute for National Security Studies think tank's annual conference on Tuesday, said that even if a potential deal could improve on the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it would not be the right move for regional security.

"With the changing of the administration in the United States, the Iranians have said they want to return to the previous agreement," the military commander said, according to the Times of Israel. "I want to state my position, the position that I give to all my colleagues when I meet them around the world: Returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement or even to an agreement that is similar but with a few improvements is a bad thing, and it is not the right thing to do."

The United States withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 and embarked on a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at squeezing Iran into submission. Since the U.S. departure, Iran has continued to breach all aspects of the treaty. Earlier this month, its regime announced that it was rolling out 1,000 additional centrifuges and would begin enriching uranium to levels far in excess of the JCPOA.

"As of today, Iran has increased the amount of enriched material beyond what was permitted. It enriched it to levels beyond what was permitted. It developed and manufactured centrifuges that will allow it to rush ahead and produce a weapon at a much faster rate, within months, maybe even weeks," Kochavi warned.

Kochavi also said he has directed the IDF to refresh the country's operational plans regarding what to do if it needs to strike Iran because of its nuclear program.

"Iran can decide that it wants to advance to a bomb, either covertly or in a provocative way. In light of this basic analysis, I have ordered the IDF to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to the existing ones. We are studying these plans, and we will develop them over the next year," he said.

"The government will, of course, be the one to decide if they should be used. But these plans must be on the table, in existence, and trained for," he added.

In January, the Iranian regime notified the International Atomic Energy Agency in a weekend letter that it is planning to enrich uranium to 20%. The nuclear deal dictated that Iran cannot enrich uranium by more than 3.67%, although the regime has previously broken the pact by upping enrichment to 4.5% purity.

The comments from Kochavi come a day after the Iranian regime reportedly executed 30-year-old wrestler Mehdi Ali Hosseini. Hosseini's death was preceded by 27-year-old champion wrestler Navid Afkari, who was killed in September despite pleas from several human rights groups and prominent international figures.

China: Military flights warn against interference in Taiwan (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:17 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The Chinese government said Wednesday that actions like its warplanes flying near Taiwan last weekend are a warning against both foreign interference in Taiwan and any independence moves by the island.

Asked about the flights, Zhu Fenglian, a spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, said China's military drills are to show the nation's resolution to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"They are a stern warning against external interference and provocation from separatist forces advocating for Taiwan independence," she said at a regular briefing, giving the Chinese government's first official comment on the recent flights. China sent eight bombers and four fighter jets into Taiwan's air defense identification zone on Saturday, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. Taiwan scrambled fighters to monitor the activity.

The U.S. State Department later issued a statement urging China "to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan" following China's sizeable show of force.

China then sent 16 military aircraft into the same area on Sunday, Taiwan said.

Taiwan is a self-governing island about 160 kilometers (100 miles) off China's east coast. The Chinese government regards it as a renegade province that should be united with mainland China.

Zhu said that China would not renounce the use of force to guard against separatist moves and foreign interference.

"We ... reserve the option to use all necessary measures," she said. "Our position has been consistent and will not change."

Defense Secretary Austin to Review Trump's Last-Minute Withdrawal of Troops From Afghanistan, Iraq (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 4:37 PM, Gordon Lubold and Nancy A. Youssef, Neutral]

The Pentagon's new chief is expected to review troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq in an effort to examine American strategy in two conflicts, following former President Donald Trump's drawdown of forces there, according to defense officials.

President Biden's defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, is facing a slew of issues in the U.S. and around the world, but Mr. Trump's decision to quickly withdraw more than 3,000 troops from the two conflicts before he left office this month forces the White House to confront how it will manage the long-running wars.

In his confirmation hearing last week, Mr. Austin indicated he would review the strategies and resources in those conflicts, but left vague his view on the threats either conflict poses and how they are matched by troop levels and other military capabilities.

Mr. Austin's spokesman, John Kirby, said officials hadn't yet made a formal decision to review troop levels in either country.

"It stands to reason that the incoming administration will want to better understand the status of operations in both places and the resources being applied to those missions," he said. "Nothing has changed about our desire to defend the American people from the threat of terrorism, while also making sure we are appropriately resourcing our strategy."

Mr. Kirby said any decisions on troop levels would be taken in consultation with the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan. He didn't say who would be conducting the review nor when it could be completed.

Mr. Trump, who had railed against what he called "endless foreign wars," drew American forces down in Iraq and Afghanistan to 2,500 personnel in each country this month, in an effort to bring the longstanding military engagements to a close.

The decision to pull troops out from Afghanistan was more contentious than the decision to remove troops from Iraq. Top military officials and some lawmakers believed pulling troops from Afghanistan should be based on conditions on the ground, including levels of violence, not on a political timetable. Top military officials have said in recent months that the remaining force may be too small to conduct counterterrorism operations, and train and advise local fighters, while also providing enough security for the American contingent on the ground.

Mr. Biden has few good options, analysts have said. Sending more troops back into either war theater is politically perilous, while reducing them further too quickly could accelerate violence and reverse whatever gains military officials have achieved there.

Helping to facilitate Mr. Biden's decision is Mr. Austin, a retired four-star Army general who is intimately familiar with the issues after having led Central Command, which oversees the wars, before his retirement in 2016.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, declined in an interview to speculate on a review or any potential changes to troop levels. Gen. McKenzie noted that the size of the force in Afghanistan contributed by Washington's North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies exceeds the size of the U.S. contribution for the first time ever.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are pressing security challenges.

Within days of its tenure, the Biden administration said it told its Afghan counterparts that it would review the continuing peace talks with the Taliban, according to a White House statement.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan told Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib that the review would assess "whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders," the White House statement said.

He didn't identify troop levels in a public readout of the conversation.

Under a 2020 agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban, all U.S. troops would withdraw by May and the Taliban would make security guarantees. But since that agreement, violence has surged.

In Iraq, one day after Mr. Biden's inauguration, a double suicide bombing in a crowded market killed at least 32 people, marking one of the deadliest attacks there since the collapse of Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

Google says North Korea-backed hackers sought cyber research (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:15 AM, Kim Tong-Hyung, Neutral]

Google says it believes hackers backed by the North Korean government have been posing as computer security bloggers and using fake accounts on social media while attempting to steal information from researchers in the field.

Google didn't specify how successful the hackers were or what kind of information could have been compromised. Experts say the attacks reflect North Korean efforts to improve its cyber skills and be able to breach widely used computer products, such as Google's Chrome internet browser and Microsoft's Windows 10 operating system.

While the country has denied involvement, North Korea has been linked to major cyberattacks, including a 2013 campaign that paralyzed the servers of South Korean financial institutions, the 2014 hacking of Sony Pictures, and the WannaCry malware attack of 2017. The U.N. Security Council in 2019 estimated North Korea earned as much as \$2 billion over several years through illicit cyber operations targeting cryptocurrency exchanges and other financial transactions, generating income that is harder to trace and offsets capital lost to U.S.-led economic sanctions over its nuclear weapons program.

Adam Weidemann, a researcher from Google's Threat Analysis Group, said in the online report published late Monday that hackers supposedly backed by North Korea created a fake research blog and multiple Twitter profiles to build credibility and interact with the security researchers they targeted.

After connecting with researchers, the hackers would ask them if they wanted to collaborate on cyber-vulnerability research and share a tool that contained a code designed to install malicious software on the targets' computers, which would then allow the hackers to control the device and steal information from it.

Several targeted researchers were compromised after following a Twitter link to a blog set up by the hackers, Weidemann said.

"At the time of these visits, the victim systems were running fully patched and up-to-date Windows 10 and Chrome browser versions," Weidemann wrote. "At this time we're unable to confirm the mechanism of compromise, but we welcome any information others might have."

Google published a list of social media accounts and websites it said were controlled by the

hackers, including 10 Twitter profiles and five LinkedIn profiles.

Simon Choi, a senior analyst at NSHC, a South Korean computer security firm, said cyberattacks linked to North Korea over the past few years have demonstrated an improving ability in identifying and exploiting vulnerabilities in computer security systems. Before 2016, the North Koreans had mainly relied on methods used by Chinese or Russian hackers, he said. "It's notable that the computer security experts on Twitter who said they were approached by the hackers had been engaged in vulnerability research for Chrome and Windows 10," Choi said.

"It's that not easy to successfully penetrate these systems that are built with the latest security technologies. For the North Koreans, it makes more sense to steal the vulnerabilities already discovered by the researchers because developing their own ways to exploit these systems is harder."

In 2018, U.S. federal prosecutors charged a computer programmer working for the North Korean government for his alleged involvement in the cyberattacks that hacked Sony Pictures and unleashed the WannaCry ransomware virus. Park Jin Hyok, who is believed to be in North Korea, conspired to conduct attacks that also stole \$81 million from Bangladesh's central bank, according to the charges.

The 2014 Sony hack led to the release of tens of thousands of confidential Sony emails and business files. The WannaCry cyberattack in 2017 scrambled data on hundreds of thousands of computers at government agencies, banks and other businesses across the globe and crippled parts of the British health care system.

[Yemen] In a first, Yemenis seek redress for U.S. drone strikes at Inter-American rights body (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:15 PM, Missy Ryan, Souad Mekhennet, 13480K, Neutral] Relatives of at least 34 Yemenis alleged to have been killed in American military actions have asked an international human rights body to determine whether the deaths were unlawful, in a case that could draw attention to the human cost of overseas counterterrorism campaigns.

The petition, the first of its kind to be submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, asserts that six drone strikes and one Special Operations raid targeting Yemen's al-Bayda governorate during the Obama and Trump administrations inflicted catastrophic damage on two families. Among the dead, the survivors say, were nine children and several members of Yemen's military.

The filing provides new visibility into a counterterrorism campaign that has mostly been shrouded in secrecy, as American military and intelligence officials conduct an extended effort against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other militant threats. Since 2015, a parallel conflict between Yemen's Houthi rebels and forces backed by Saudi Arabia has made communication and media access more difficult, further thrusting the war against extremists into the shadows.

The petition, submitted on behalf of a group of Yemenis by the London-based human rights

group Reprieve, which has documented the aftermath of U.S. counterterrorism operations, argues that the repeated targeting of the two families, in addition to lives lost, has taken a psychological toll on survivors.

"Having already suffered enormous loss, the families live in constant fear that the drones flying overhead will strike again, killing more members of their family or their extended tribe or community," Jennifer Gibson, a lawyer with Reprieve, said in one of the petition documents.

A determination in favor of the Yemeni petitioners by the commission, an independent body affiliated with the Organization of American States, would not necessarily force changes in U.S. military operations or policy. But it could have symbolic importance in highlighting the unintended outcome of counterterrorism operations.

"A decision from the [commission] concluding that the U.S. is responsible for a particular human rights violation carries legal and moral weight internationally. It is also an important tool in creating pressure and opportunities to engage the government on reforms," said Lisa Reinsberg, the executive director of the International Justice Resource Center.

"On the flip side, a lot depends on political will at the national level," she said.

Last year, the Inter-American Commission declared that the United States was responsible for torture in the case of a former inmate at the Guantanamo Bay prison.

Lt. Col. Anton Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, declined to comment on the petition but said the U.S. military sought to minimize civilian harm when planning and conducting operations.

"Consistent with our mission, our authorities, and our obligations under the law of war, [U.S. Central Command] will continue to conduct military actions in Yemen when required to protect the nation and our allies and partners from al-Qaeda and [Islamic State] terror cells," he said in a statement.

The filings contain new details on how rural life and counterterrorism concerns have collided in Bayda, an area of central Yemen that officials have also described as a hotbed of AQAP activity. The group was long known as one of the most virulent branches of al-Qaeda, responsible for repeated plots against the United States, including an attempted airliner bombing in 2009.

In the petition, a Yemeni man named Aziz al-Ameri, speaking on behalf of his family and the closely linked al-Taisy family, denies links to militants, saying those killed were mostly shepherds, farmers and their families.

The military actions cited in the petition date to the Obama administration, when a U.S. drone struck a wedding convoy in December 2013 and, according to the filing, killed several members of the Ameri family and five of the Taisy family.

The Yemeni government paid more than \$1 million in compensation to the families of those killed and injured, money that Reprieve has suggested may have come from the United

States.

The other six actions occurred during the Trump administration, when the pace of counterterrorism operations accelerated in Yemen as the new president loosened operational rules and new intelligence fueled additional operations. From 2017 to 2019, the military reported more than 160 strikes, the majority of which Reprieve said were carried out in Bayda.

One occurred days after Trump took office, when a raid on the village of Yaklaa resulted in a major firefight, killing a Navy SEAL and multiple civilians.

After an inquiry, military leaders said that as many as 12 civilians had died. But according to the petition, the toll was far higher, with 26 people killed, including at least 10 children, including a full-term baby who was injured by a bullet in the womb and died after being delivered by Caesarean section.

Abdullah al-Taisy, a Yemeni soldier who lives in Yaklaa and witnessed the raid, said none of those killed were militants.

"Our houses and farmers are clear. No one is a member of any terrorist groups," he said in a phone interview from Yemen. Like the Ameri family, Taisy called for greater accountability and fair compensation.

The raid, which U.S. officials said yielded significant intelligence about AQAP, produced a string of follow-on strikes in the same area. According to the petition, a September 2018 strike killed two men serving as soldiers for Yemen's internationally recognized government, which works closely with U.S. allies to battle the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

"How come they can target official military personnel who were on a military mission?" asked Ahmed al-Helou, another Yemeni colonel who worked with Abdullah al-Taisy. "They seem not to understand the difference between the local community and the militants."

The Yemenis asked the commission to urge the United States to take immediate steps to prevent further loss of life while commissioners consider the petition, a process that could take years.

[Yemen] Aid boost in Yemen after U.S. allows Houthi deals (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:12 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The U.S. on Monday approved all transactions involving Yemen's Houthi movement for the next month as Washington reviews a Trump administration designation of the Iran-aligned group as a foreign terrorist organization. Colette Luke has more. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Russia] In first call with Putin, Biden marks a return to skepticism from the top (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:44 PM, Anne Gearan, Karen DeYoung, 13480K, Neutral]

President Biden laid out a bill of complaint against Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, airing allegations of human rights abuses, cyberspying and more while making a

hard pivot away from the deference that former president Donald Trump often displayed toward Russia.

The phone call less than a week into Biden's term was his first known contact with an adversarial foreign leader. It came as the United States has joined European nations and others in condemning the detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and after a crackdown on street protests.

Biden's agenda for the call included protest of "ongoing Russian aggression" against Ukraine, and he confronted Putin over the "Solar Winds" espionage case, alleged interference in U.S. elections and the alleged offer to pay bounties for the deaths of U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday.

"His intention was also to make clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of our national interests in response to malign actions by Russia," Psaki said.

Throughout his presidency, Trump refused to pin blame on Russia for actions ranging from 2016 election interference to the attempted assassination of a British former spy, the poisoning of Navalny last year, the alleged bounties and the extensive cyberhack that affected U.S. federal agencies and corporations. In each of those cases, other elements of the U.S. government blamed Russia.

Alongside the return to official skepticism from the top about Russian actions and motives, Biden made an expected offer to Putin to extend a key arms control agreement.

The pact, known as New START, is the last remaining nuclear arms treaty between the former Cold War enemies, and the timing of Biden's call was partly driven by the clock. The pact would expire next week unless extended by both nations, something the United States can do without congressional approval.

Russia and the United States traded documents Tuesday to extend the pact for five years.

The Kremlin also released a readout of the call between the two leaders. It did not mention the issues Psaki listed and took an optimistic tone about cooperation under Biden's presidency.

"The presidents expressed their satisfaction with today's exchange of the diplomatic notes of having reached an agreement to extend the New START," the statement said. "Over the next few days the two sides will finalize all procedures necessary for further functioning of this important mechanism of international law on the mutual limitation of nuclear missile arsenals."

Biden also spoke Tuesday with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and "conveyed his intention to consult and work with allies on the full range of shared security concerns" and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to "strengthening transatlantic security."

A written summary of the Putin call provided by the White House later Tuesday emphasized extending the arms control treaty. The statement raised the possibility of further talks on other arms control and security issues before listing the allegations and complaints Biden

had laid out to Putin.

"The two presidents agreed to maintain transparent and consistent communication going forward," the White House statement said.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the former National Security Council aide fired by Trump after testifying during Trump's 2019 impeachment trial, tweeted Tuesday in support of the shift that the conversation represented.

"An enormous departure from the last four years," he wrote.

Trump repeatedly declined to challenge Putin in public or in private. He took Putin's word over that of U.S. intelligence services that Russia was not involved in undermining the 2016 presidential election and equivocated about Russian culpability in numerous other areas. The reasons are not clear, although former aides said Trump was extremely sensitive about any suggestion that Russia had helped him win in 2016.

"He was the lap dog for Russia rather than the watchdog for America," Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) said in an interview on MSNBC, as he called the Biden phone call a "refreshing" return to the premise that the U.S. president should hold Putin to account.

Trump had 18 one-on-one calls with Putin over four years, according to Kremlin readouts. On a number of occasions, the White House did not even acknowledge the calls until after an announcement by Moscow, and some reported by Moscow do not appear in archived public White House records.

Both sides generally provided anodyne statements acknowledging joint global concerns, along with promises to work together. One of Trump's early calls to Putin, in December 2017, was described by the White House as simply a thank you to the Russian leader for "acknowledging America's strong economic performance in his annual press conference."

In March 2018, according to White House records, Trump called Putin to congratulate him on his reelection. News reports about the call later revealed that Trump had been given briefing notes ahead of the conversation that warned "DO NOT CONGRATULATE."

On the same call, despite international skepticism about the fairness of the race, Trump proposed meeting Putin at the White House, in what would have been the Russian leader's first visit since 2005. No Putin visit ever occurred during the Trump administration.

After Trump's controversial 2019 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky leaked, and its contents led to Trump's first impeachment, the White House ordered new restrictions on those allowed to view internal transcripts of his communications with world leaders.

Trump's last reported calls with Putin took place over a several-week period last year. On June 1 — after Trump had suggested to reporters that he wanted to invite Putin to that year's U.S.-hosted Group of Seven conference — he said that they had discussed "progress toward convening the meeting."

The idea was dropped after other members of the group complained that Russia continued

to occupy parts of Ukraine — the reason it was kicked out of the G-7 in 2014 — and planned to boycott.

On Tuesday, the United States joined the other G-7 nations in condemning what a statement called “the politically motivated arrest and detention” of Navalny, who was taken into custody earlier this month upon his return to Russia from Germany, where he had recuperated after a poisoning attempt blamed on the Russian state.

The last reported call between Trump and Putin was July 23, following news reports that Russian intelligence had offered the Taliban bounties to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Asked in an interview with Axios whether he had raised the subject with Putin, Trump said it was “a phone call to discuss other things. And frankly, that’s an issue that many people said was fake news.”

He then complained that “nobody ever brings up China. They always bring up Russia, Russia, Russia.”

[Russia] Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:05 PM, Ken Thomas, Neutral]

The White House said Tuesday that President Biden held his first call as president with Russian President Vladimir Putin and raised concerns about issues including the detaining of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the massive SolarWinds hack and reports of Russia offering bounties on U.S. troops.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Mr. Biden reaffirmed America’s “strong support” for Ukraine’s sovereignty and addressed concerns about Russian interference in the 2020 election. The call also focused on plans to extend a U.S.-Russia nuclear arms treaty for five years.

Mr. Biden voiced criticism of Mr. Putin throughout his presidential campaign, and the call represented his first opportunity as president to seek to establish a break from the frequently warm rapport between former President Donald Trump and the Russian leader. Mr. Biden, who as vice president held a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Putin in 2011, has warned Moscow that it could face additional sanctions for election interference if it is confirmed by U.S. intelligence officials.

During Mr. Trump’s presidency, some Democratic lawmakers accused the administration of pulling its punches against Moscow, as Mr. Trump rejected intelligence findings of Kremlin election interference. But Mr. Trump countered that his administration had levied more sanctions against Russia than previous administrations.

In the days before Mr. Biden’s inauguration, the Trump administration sanctioned seven men, including several former Ukrainian officials, for allegedly interfering in U.S. elections as agents of Russia’s government by promoting theories about Mr. Biden’s son, Hunter. The U.S. and Russia have been at odds in recent years over issues including its seizure of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014, accusations that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Russia’s involvement in the war in Syria.

The White House said in a statement following Tuesday's call that Mr. Biden "made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies."

The Kremlin said in a statement that Mr. Putin told Mr. Biden that "normalization in ties between Russia and the U.S. would serve the interests of both countries, underscoring their special responsibility to maintain security and stability in the world, and the whole world."

The Kremlin statement said the conversation was open and businesslike, and both sides agreed to maintain contact.

The Kremlin statement said the two leaders discussed the New START Treaty, Iran's nuclear program and Ukraine but didn't mention Mr. Navalny or the hacking attacks. Ms. Psaki said Mr. Biden had planned to raise the treatment of "peaceful protesters by Russian security forces."

Russian police detained thousands of people during wide-scale protests in support of Mr. Navalny across the country last weekend.

Mr. Navalny, an ardent critic of Mr. Putin, was arrested earlier this month after returning to Russia from Germany, where he had been recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he has accused the Kremlin of perpetrating. Russian officials have denied any role in the poisoning.

Despite the tensions, the Biden administration has sought to find common ground with Russia on the nuclear weapons pact. Mr. Biden's administration said last week that it would seek to maintain the New START treaty as the arms control framework that has constrained U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear arsenals since it took effect in 2011.

The accord is scheduled to lapse on Feb. 5, but Washington and Moscow have sought to extend the agreement despite friction between the two countries.

The Kremlin said the two sides would finish in the coming days final steps needed to ensure the treaty stayed in force. The White House said teams from both countries would "work urgently" to complete the extension by the February deadline.

The White House also said the two leaders agreed to "explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

Some analysts said the readouts showed that the Biden administration would avoid a reset with Russia but instead pursue stability in the relationship.

"By calling for transparency and consistency, those are the two elements that give you that stability," said Jim Townsend, a former deputy assistant secretary of Defense in the Obama administration and an adjunct senior fellow with the Center for New American Security.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow during the Obama administration, said Mr. Navalny's inclusion in the readout by the new administration was significant. "That

says to me they're going to talk a lot more about issues of democracy and human rights with respect to Russia in a way that President Trump never did and even his team rarely did," Mr. McFaul said. But James Carafano, a national security and foreign policy analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation, said Mr. Biden lost leverage by simply seeking to extend the arms treaty and raising concerns without threatening tougher action such as new sanctions.

"Action gets the Russians' attention. Words, Putin could care less about," Mr. Carafano said.

Since Mr. Biden's inauguration, he has asked the intelligence community to assess the recent Russian hacking, interference in the 2020 election, use of chemical weapons against Mr. Navalny and the alleged bounty program against U.S. soldiers.

The outgoing Trump administration formally stated that Russia was likely behind the massive cyberattack, a conclusion that senior officials had expressed publicly and privately. Moscow denied involvement in the SolarWinds hack.

Cybersecurity experts have said the hack amounts to one of the worst intelligence failures on record.

Mr. Biden also spoke to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during the day, discussing challenges such as "dealing with a more assertive Russia," NATO said in a statement.

[Russia] First Biden-Putin call shows both cautious on big concerns (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:12 PM, Matthew Lee and Jonathan Lemire, 13480K, Neutral]

U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin held their first conversation as counterparts Tuesday in a phone call that underscored troubled relations and the delicate balance between the former Cold War foes.

According to the White House, Biden raised concerns about the arrest of opposition figure Alexei Navalny, Russia's alleged involvement in a massive cyber espionage campaign and reports of Russian bounties on American troops in Afghanistan. The Kremlin, meanwhile, focused on Putin's response to Biden's proposal to extend the last remaining U.S.-Russia arms control treaty.

While the readouts from the two capitals emphasized different elements, they both suggested that U.S.-Russia relations will be guided, at least at the beginning of the Biden administration, by a desire to do no harm but also no urgency to repair existing damage.

The two presidents agreed to have their teams work urgently to complete a five-year extension of the New START nuclear weapons treaty that expires next month. Former President Donald Trump's administration had withdrawn from two arms control treaties with Russia and had been prepared to let New START lapse.

Unlike his immediate predecessors — including Trump, who was enamored of Putin and frequently undercut his own administration's tough stance on Russia — Biden has not held

out hope for a “reset” in relations. Instead he has indicated he wants to manage differences without necessarily resolving them or improving ties.

And with a heavy domestic agenda and looming decisions needed on Iran and China, a direct confrontation with Russia is not likely something Biden seeks.

Although the leaders agreed to work together to extend New START before it expires Feb. 5 and to look at other areas of potential strategic cooperation, the White House said Biden was firm on U.S. support for Ukraine’s sovereignty, while Russia is supporting separatists in the country’s east.

Biden also raised the SolarWinds cyberhack, which has been attributed to Russia, reports of Russian bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan, interference in the 2020 U.S. election, the poisoning of Navalny and the weekend crackdown on Navalny’s supporters.

“President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies,” the White House said. Biden told Putin in the phone call, first reported by The Associated Press, that the U.S. would defend itself and take action, which could include further sanctions, to ensure Moscow does not act with impunity, officials said.

Moscow had reached out last week to request the call, according to U.S. officials familiar with the matter but not authorized to discuss it publicly. Biden agreed, but he wanted first to prepare with his staff and speak with European allies, including the leaders of Britain, France and Germany, which he did.

Before he spoke to Putin, Biden also called NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg to pledge U.S. commitment to the decades-old alliance founded as a bulwark against Russian aggression.

The Kremlin’s readout of the call did not address the most contentious issues between the countries, though it said the leaders also discussed other “acute issues on the bilateral and international agenda.”

It described the talk as “frank and businesslike” — often a diplomatic way of referring to tense discussions. It also said Putin congratulated Biden on becoming president and “noted that normalization of ties between Russia and the United States would serve the interests of both countries.”

Among the issues the Kremlin said were discussed were the coronavirus pandemic, the Iran nuclear agreement, Ukraine and issues related to trade and the economy.

The call came as Putin considers the aftermath of pro-Navalny protests that took place in more than 100 Russian cities over the weekend. Biden’s team has already reacted strongly to the crackdown on the protests, in which more than 3,700 people were arrested across Russia, including more than 1,400 in Moscow. More protests are planned for the coming weekend.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and Putin’s best-known critic, was arrested Jan. 17 as he returned to Russia from Germany, where he had spent nearly five months recovering

from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Biden has previously condemned the use of chemical weapons.

Russian authorities deny the accusations.

Just from the public accounts, Biden's discussion with Putin appeared diametrically opposed to Trump's relationship with the Russian president.

Trump had seemed to seek Putin's approval, frequently casting doubt on Russian interference in the 2016 elections, including when he stood next to Putin at their 2018 summit in Helsinki. He also downplayed Russia's involvement in the hack of federal government agencies last year and the allegations that Russia offered the Taliban bounties.

Still, despite that conciliatory approach, Trump's administration toed a tough line against Moscow, imposing sanctions on the country, Russian companies and business leaders for issues including Ukraine, energy supplies and attacks on dissidents.

Biden, in his call with Putin, broke sharply with Trump by declaring that he knew that Russia attempted to interfere with both the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections.

[Russia] Russia, U.S. extend arms pact, Kremlin says, as Biden, Putin talk (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 6:08 PM, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, Trevor Hunnicutt, 5304K, Neutral]
Russia and the United States have struck a deal to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty, the Kremlin said on Tuesday, a move that preserves the last major pact of its kind between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

The White House did not immediately confirm the Kremlin's announcement but said President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin had discussed the issue by telephone and agreed that their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5, when the treaty expires.

Signed in 2010, the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) is a cornerstone of global arms control.

It limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads deployed by the United States and Russia to 1,550 each as well as the number of land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them.

The Kremlin declared the breakthrough, which was widely anticipated, in a statement announcing that Putin and Biden had spoken for the first time since Biden took office on Jan. 20.

Moscow and Washington had failed to agree an extension under former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose administration had wanted to attach conditions to a renewal that Moscow rejected.

The Kremlin said Putin and Biden "expressed satisfaction" that diplomatic notes between the two nations had been exchanged earlier on Tuesday confirming the pact would be

extended and that procedures required for the pact to come into force before it expires would be completed in the coming days.

The White House, in its description of the call, did not say that an agreement had been reached or that diplomatic notes had been exchanged, though its tone was upbeat.

"They discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years, agreeing to have their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5," the White House said. "They also agreed to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the plan was for the exchange of notes to occur on Tuesday.

Asked why Washington had not explicitly said an agreement had been reached, a second U.S. official, also on condition of anonymity, said some steps were needed, including approval by the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. The treaty itself does not require legislative approval for an extension.

The White House said last week Biden would seek a five-year extension.

In its statement, the Kremlin said that Putin had told Biden a normalisation of relations between Moscow and Washington would be in both countries' interest.

It said the two leaders had also discussed the U.S. decision during Trump's administration to exit the Open Skies treaty. Putin and Biden also talked about Iran's nuclear programme and the conflict in Ukraine.

The White House stressed that it will raise matters where it disagrees with Russia, and said Biden had reaffirmed the United States' "firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty".

Biden had raised "other matters of concern" including the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, the cyber hack blamed on Russia that used U.S. tech company SolarWinds Corp as a springboard to penetrate federal government networks, and reports that Russia offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants to kill coalition forces in Afghanistan.

"President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," the White House statement said.

[China] Declassified U.S. intelligence bolsters Wuhan lab theory in coronavirus outbreak (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/26/2021 2:23 PM, Bill Gertz, 459K, Neutral]

U.S. intelligence findings recently declassified by the State Department provide fresh evidence for the theory that the COVID-19 pandemic likely began at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China's sole high-security laboratory that has links to the country's military.

The department, in a report made public this month by the outgoing Trump administration,

disclosed for the first time that several workers at the Wuhan institute, where research on deadly viruses is conducted, were sickened in the autumn of 2019 with COVID-19-like symptoms.

The report also made public U.S. intelligence that the People's Liberation Army conducted secret research on covert biological warfare at the institute. Chinese leaders have consistently denied any link between the lab and the outbreak of COVID-19 and have even promoted speculation that the United States or some other foreign source brought the virus to China.

The lab illnesses were detected prior to the first publicized case of COVID-19 in Wuhan in early December 2019, but China has refused to disclose what happened to the workers.

"Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one," the report states.

"This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

"Based on my experience and understanding of the science, it's hard to believe this is a naturally occurring phenomenon," said Robert G. Darling, a medical doctor and expert on biological weapons formerly with the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

"I think somebody [in Wuhan] caught their experiment," said Dr. Darling, now chief medical officer for Patronus Medical.

William Lang, a former associate chief medical officer at the Homeland Security Department, noted that the State Department report does not accuse China's communist leadership of releasing the virus intentionally.

"But the circumstantial — and more than circumstantial — evidence of some relation to WIV is very strong," said Dr. Lang, now with the health service WorldClinic.

Ms. Shi, the WIV scientist dubbed the "bat woman of China" for her work on bat coronaviruses similar to the one that causes COVID-19, co-authored a scientific study in 2015 that mentions the laboratory manipulation of bat viruses as part of studying how they infect humans.

The U.S. intelligence reports said Chinese authorities for more than a year have systematically prevented a thorough investigation into the origins of the pandemic and instead devoted "enormous resources to deceit and disinformation."

A World Health Organization delegation to China was blocked from entering the country first in the spring of 2020 and again this month. Beijing then relented and permitted a team to visit. The investigators currently are in China.

Likely origins

The State Department report acknowledges that the U.S. government has been unable to determine "exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus — known as SARS-CoV-2 — was transmitted initially to humans."

The two most likely sources are contact with infected animals or "an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China."

China initially said the virus began at a wild animal "wet market" in Wuhan, but Beijing authorities have been unable to identify an animal host that transmitted the pathogen to humans.

The failure to find the host has led many virus experts and intelligence analysts to examine more closely the idea that the virus leaked from the Wuhan laboratory. Skeptics of China's official version say Beijing authorities have actively tried to keep the world from knowing what happened.

"The Chinese government has destroyed all the evidence from the outbreak because they want to avoid saying it began from a laboratory leak," said a U.S. official familiar with intelligence reports. "China is trying to sell a story to the world that it began as a naturally occurring event from a wet market in Wuhan."

Chinese authorities have tried to get WHO investigators to identify a credible animal source during their inquiry.

"Instead of focusing on an animal host that probably doesn't exist, the WHO team should be focusing on the labs and biosafety," the official said.

The official said, "It is very likely this was PLA secret work that went awry."

U.S. intelligence analysts noted that China's military is engaged in covert development of biological weapons and initial research on such arms would include developing vaccines. At least 2,016 Wuhan lab researchers experimented with a virus called RaTG13, a bat coronavirus similar to the SARS-CoV-2, the report said.

"The WIV has a published record of conducting 'gain-of-function' research to engineer chimeric viruses," the report said, using the term for synthetic viruses.

"But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including RaTG13, which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness."

According to the report, a laboratory accident could appear as a natural outbreak if those initially exposed were limited to a few people and spread more easily by those with a lack of initial symptoms.

"Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure," the report said.

The report also revealed that the Wuhan Institute of Virology has links to the People's Liberation Army, China's military, and has conducted secret lab research at the institute since 2017.

American virus experts who have conducted research at the institute denied those claims as a conspiracy theory. Many private virus experts originally dismissed reports that the institute was linked to China's covert biological weapons program.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," the report said. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

The report said the U.S. government "for many years" has publicly voiced concerns about China's biological weapons work that Beijing has failed to fully document and has not shown that it had eliminated, despite the requirement to do so under the Biological Weapons Convention.

The report said the intelligence disclosures about the WIV "scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19's origin in China."

"Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records," the report said, as well as interviews with Wuhan researchers and access to worker health records.

China's government blocked all efforts to interview researchers at the WIV, including those who became ill in the fall of 2019.

The detailed State Department report concluded that excessive Chinese government secrecy prevented international investigators from determining the origin of the pandemic.

Rising skepticism

Outside experts critical of China say the Trump administration findings only increase the skepticism of Beijing's denials that the virus leaked from the laboratory through an infection of a worker or through a research animal that was sold illicitly to a wild animal market.

"That was a lie. And the Chinese government knew very early on that that was a lie," said Jamie Metzl, a WHO adviser and a former Senate aide to President Biden.

"And so in the face of overwhelming evidence in May of last year, the Chinese government shifted its position," he told the Toronto Sun last week.

China's government instead sought to promote conspiracy theories. Beijing officials even floated the idea that the virus was first introduced to China by the U.S. Army. The U.S. government vehemently denied that charge.

The Chinese government later cited what it said were reports of an outbreak in southern Europe before it appeared in Wuhan at the end of 2019.

A more recent theory pushed by Chinese officials is that the virus was introduced into the country on frozen food packaging. Virus experts have dismissed that theory as highly unlikely.

Mr. Metzl, the WHO adviser, said in an email that U.S. intelligence reports "suggest the Chinese People's Liberation Army was conducting secret animal research with highly contagious viruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, without notifying the World Health Organization even after the pandemic began."

He said WHO investigators must be given full access to the workers and labs at WIV, including notes, a list of all viruses studied both past and present, and all records.

"If the Chinese government fails to immediately change course, however, the Biden administration should bring allies and partners around the world together to demand an impartial and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of COVID-19, with full access to all necessary records, databases, biological samples and key personnel," he said.

Yan Li-meng, an exiled Chinese virology expert who believes the coronavirus was an engineered bioweapon, said the State Department report shows the WIV has been "lying from the beginning" about the virus origin.

She said the report bolsters her contention that the "backbone" virus behind SARS-CoV-2 was discovered by China's military in the 2015 to 2017 time frame and that "its gain-of-function process involved humanized animal experiments."

"Intelligence here shows researchers in WIV were sick last fall, while WIV has denied it in public," she said. "Then it is important to investigate whether the patients were infected with the same original strain of SARS-CoV-2 or similar strains from the lab," Ms. Yan said.

WorldClinic's Dr. Lang said the goal of the international community, including China, "should be to get to the root cause" of the pandemic.

"If it turns out that the root cause does lead to WIV, that means that the international community and [China] need to know that and then work collaboratively to make sure that nothing like this, which has had mortality and economic impact of a scale unseen outside of wartime, ever happens again."

[Ethiopia] US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:10 AM, Cara Anna, Neutral]

The United States said all soldiers from Eritrea should leave Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region "immediately."

A State Department spokesperson in an email to The Associated Press cited "credible reports of looting, sexual violence, assaults in refugee camps and other human rights

abuses."

"There is also evidence of Eritrean soldiers forcibly returning Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea," the spokesperson said.

The statement reflects new pressure by the Biden administration on the government of Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country and the anchor of the Horn of Africa, and other combatants as the deadly fighting in Tigray nears the three-month mark. The AP this week cited witnesses who fled the Tigray region as saying Eritrean soldiers were looting, going house-to-house killing young men and even acting as local authorities. The Eritreans have been fighting on the side of Ethiopian forces as they pursue the fugitive leaders of the Tigray region, though Ethiopia's government has denied their presence.

The U.S. stance has shifted dramatically from the early days of the conflict when the Trump administration praised Eritrea for its "restraint."

The new U.S. statement calls for an independent and transparent investigation into alleged abuses. "It remains unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, or precisely where," it says.

It was not immediately clear whether the U.S. has addressed its demand directly to Eritrean officials.

Witnesses have estimated that the Eritrean soldiers number in the thousands. Eritrean officials have not responded to questions. The information minister for Eritrea, one of the world's most secretive countries, this week tweeted that "the rabid defamation campaign against Eritrea is on the rise again."

The U.S. also seeks an immediate stop to the fighting in Tigray and "full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access" to the region, which remains largely cut off from the outside world, with Ethiopian forces often accompanying aid.

"We are gravely concerned by credible reports that hundreds of thousands of people may starve to death if urgent humanitarian assistance is not mobilized immediately," the statement says.

The U.S. adds that "dialogue is essential between the government and Tigrayans." Ethiopia's government has rejected dialogue with the former Tigray leaders, seeing them as illegitimate, and has appointed an interim administration.

The former Tigray leaders, in turn, objected to Ethiopia delaying a national election last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and considered Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's mandate over.

Editorials and Op-eds

Biden's uphill battle to save the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Ishaan Tharoor, 13480K, Neutral]

There's probably no country in the world outside the United States that was more affected by the November election than Iran. President Biden's victory and entry into the White House was expected to mark a major shift in U.S. strategy toward the regime in Tehran. After weathering the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and rounds of asphyxiating sanctions, Iranian officials hoped for a change in the geopolitical winds and some economic relief.

Biden and his allies say they want to undo the diplomatic harm caused by former president Donald Trump's unilateral reimposition of sanctions on Iran, which happened over the objections of European partners. Along with rejoining the Paris climate accords, salvaging the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that Trump abrogated would demonstrate the Biden administration's commitment to multilateral diplomacy with long-standing allies. The Biden camp also believes that Trump's hardline tactics failed to achieve their stated goal of curbing Iran's malign activities abroad, driving it closer to amassing a sufficient stockpile of enriched uranium that could be used for a nuclear weapon than it was before Trump took office.

But a return to the status quo that existed before the Trump presidency looks tricky. While Biden is committed to re-engagement with Iran, his aides have yet to indicate clearly when and how, suggesting that the ball is in Iran's court. At his confirmation hearing last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would wait until it was convinced that Tehran was scaling back its revived enrichment operations and returning once more to compliance with the pact.

"We are a long way from there," said Blinken. "We would then have to evaluate whether they were actually making good if they say they are coming back into compliance with their obligations, and then we would take it from there."

The Iranians want to see the Americans take the first major step. "The administration should begin by unconditionally removing, with full effect, all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or relabeled since Trump took office," wrote Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif in a Foreign Affairs op-ed last week. "In turn, Iran would reverse all the remedial measures it has taken in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal."

Zarif added that a "return to the table will be jeopardized" if Washington and its European partners insist on linking a portfolio of other concerns — including Iran's ballistic missile program and ongoing support for proxy militias elsewhere in the Middle East — to the resumption of talks around the nuclear deal.

As the Trump administration fired off a final salvo of punitive actions against Tehran, the regime responded by stepping up enrichment of uranium at five times the rate permitted under the nuclear deal. In November, Iranian parliament passed a law that would restrict U.N. inspectors' access to key nuclear facilities in the absence of sanctions relief; it may get implemented as early next month.

"It is clear that we don't have many months ahead of us," Rafael Gross, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, told Reuters earlier this month, warning that time was running out for diplomacy to get back on course. "We have

weeks."

This standoff between Biden and Zarif's boss, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, is made more fraught by domestic pressures within both countries. Republicans and supporters of the Trump administration's approach appear to be waiting to make political hay of any perceived concession to Iran and have already started smearing Biden appointees as soft on the regime. They are joined by officials from Iran's regional adversaries — Israel and the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — who say that Biden should build off the perceived leverage achieved by Trump.

Some analysts of Iranian politics argue that that leverage is not what it's cracked up to be and that the regime has proved remarkably resilient despite the squeeze of sanctions. With Iranian presidential elections slated for this summer, a camp of hard-liners opposed to rapprochement with the United States already looks ascendant.

"The Iranian president has very difficult months ahead of him before he leaves office," wrote Saeid Jafari for the Atlantic Council's Iran Source blog. "Rouhani's influential political rivals will do their best to deprive him of reviving the [nuclear deal] before the end of his government."

But Iran watchers in Washington caution against worrying too much about internal political fissures within the Islamic Republic. "I would not hold the Iranian presidential election as a serious reason for urgency on our side," said Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution during a webinar last week where she argued Tehran's strategy at present was aimed at goading Biden quickly back into the deal. "The Biden administration should resist the temptation to be drawn into crisis diplomacy with the Iranians."

What Maloney and other experts in Washington advocate is a more measured approach that cools tensions without immediately lifting all of Trump's sanctions. But a risky game of brinkmanship may now unfold, which will test cooperation between the new U.S. administration and its European partners.

"Tehran would be wrong to assume that [the Biden] administration would hesitate to maintain or even intensify pressure on the Islamic Republic — this time in coordination with European allies — if it were to issue excessive demands," noted a report from the International Crisis Group.

Even if the regime is intact, Iranian society is paying a price. "The cost of US sanctions have so far been felt most by ordinary Iranians, who have been hit with high inflation," wrote Iran scholars Ellie Geranmayeh and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj in an op-ed for CNN. "The worsening economic situation did not lead to regime collapse or capitulation as the Trump administration had bet on, but instead contributed ... protests that were met with brutal force by the security apparatus."

My colleague Jason Rezaian argued that Biden ought to make the "concerns and aspirations of ordinary Iranians central to his policy." But after the difficulties of the Trump years, many Iranians are pessimistic about the way ahead.

"I do not think Biden's presidency is going to make any important change in our lives," said

Shabnam, 41, a teacher in Tehran who spoke to my colleagues on the condition that only her first name be used for security reasons. "To be honest with you, the degree and depth of hopelessness and despair in Iran is so high that I am not optimistic about any action by any Iranian or American politician."

Hong Kong's Candles in the Wind (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 6:30 PM, Matthew Brooker, 6400K, Neutral]

Beijing chose President Biden's inauguration day to announce sanctions on outgoing members of the Trump administration for, among other things, penalizing Chinese officials blamed for eroding Hong Kong's autonomy. In a familiar refrain, the foreign ministry chastened the U.S. for interfering in China's internal affairs.

Hong Kong is Chinese territory; that isn't in dispute. Yet to assert that what happens in the city is purely a domestic issue is to ignore the crucial role that the former British colony has played as a bridge between the Communist system and the democratic world, a legacy that has enduring relevance for the prospects of future cooperation between the two spheres.

Deng Xiaoping's "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement, the basis of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration that governed Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, was a visionary formula whose significance reverberated far beyond the shores of the territory. Then in the early stages of its economic reform and opening to the world, China needed Western markets and capital to drive its development.

Deng, in accepting a capitalist enclave with civil liberties on China's doorstep, was embracing more than a willingness to ease the passage of Hong Kong's people back to the motherland. One Country, Two Systems signaled to the U.S. and its allies that Beijing's rulers had decided it was possible for the Communist and democratic worlds to coexist in an atmosphere of mutual benefit – a radical step for a party that came to power through a civil war and was dedicated to the ultimate demise of global capitalism.

The crackdown on Hong Kong since the passage of a national security law enacted by China's National People's Congress last June has essentially repudiated Deng's notion. The actions of authorities go far beyond what was necessary to restore order to the city after the sometimes-violent protests of 2019, the proximate cause for Beijing's decision to impose the new law. These include the disqualification of moderate pro-democracy lawmakers, the arrest of a newspaper publisher and, most recently, the rounding-up of more than 50 people for their involvement in organizing or participating in an unofficial primary election last year — including an American lawyer.

Having blamed "external forces" for fomenting the Hong Kong unrest — another familiar refrain, and one that ignores the role of Beijing's policies in the city's deepening social discontent — China's leaders appear to have decided that the values of an open, pluralist society are incompatible with the Communist state after all. A more cynical interpretation might be that One Country, Two Systems was only ever a tactical arrangement, concluded at a time when China still needed the West and was too weak to stand on its own. Deng, let's not forget, is also known for the dictum: "Hide your strength, bide your time." Under Xi Jinping, the party has decided that the time for biding its time is over.

There are anomalies within the assault on Hong Kong's freedoms. In particular, authorities have yet to target the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, organizer of the annual Tiananmen vigil held in the city's Victoria Park.

The alliance was formed to support the protesting Beijing students before June 4, 1989 and, since the massacre, has been a thorn in Beijing's side. Before 1997, there was speculation that the annual vigil would be banned; Hong Kong's first post-handover chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, urged people to "put the baggage of June 4" behind them. Yet the gatherings went on. Police banned last year's vigil, though they cited health risks from the pandemic. There has been no attempt to shut down the event's organizer.

For a group that openly wishes for an end to Communist rule in China to survive unmolested in the post-national security law environment — when as little as a Facebook post or a tweet, or just going to the polls, could be enough to get an offender into trouble — is striking. It may just be a matter of time. Just perhaps, though, Beijing is genuinely hesitant about the way such a move would be perceived.

The Tiananmen vigil is the most potent symbol of how Hong Kong differs from mainland China. The city is the only place in the People's Republic where public commemoration of June 4 is permitted. So the gathering's persistent appearance year after year served a purpose in showing to the world that One Country, Two Systems was a reality — even if it irritated the territory's Beijing-backed leaders. Take that away, and the repeated insistence by every official from Xi on down that China is "upholding" One Country, Two Systems becomes harder to sustain.

The foreign ministry announced the sanctions on the departing Trump administration officials during Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20 in what looked like a defiant gesture that China would stand its ground. In reality, Beijing may care more about international public opinion than it would care to admit.

America Can Defend Taiwan (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 1:00 PM, Elbridge Colby, Neutral]

The Biden administration faces a stark reality: Over the next four years it's possible that China will try to take Taiwan. For the first time since 1950, Beijing may reasonably think it has a viable military option to force what it regards as a renegade province to heel. President Xi Jinping has said Taiwan must be part of China—and has signaled he intends to do something about it.

The stakes for America are immense. Keeping Taiwan out of Beijing's grip is crucial for denying China's goal of attaining regional hegemony and eventually global pre-eminence. The island occupies a pivotal geographic position. If Taiwan falls, China would have the ability to project military power throughout Asia. Japan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands would all be more vulnerable to China's military.

The U.S. has long opposed China's belligerence toward Taiwan, and states in the region would read the U.S. response to an attack as a bellwether of American reliability. Forgoing Taiwan's defense would seriously undermine America's credibility among already nervous Asian allies and partners. For these reasons, the recently declassified 2018 Indo-Pacific

strategy specifically ordered the Pentagon to implement a defense strategy that will make the U.S. capable of defending Taiwan.

But can America even defend Taiwan from a China that has become so powerful? The People's Liberation Army is growing stronger at an astonishingly fast rate. The PLA Navy already has more ships than the U.S. Navy, its air forces are the largest in the region, and Beijing also boasts the world's largest missile force. Beijing seeks to reach technical parity with America's armed forces by the 2020s, and surpass us by 2030. Despite all this, the answer is yes. Defeating a PLA attack would be far from easy or cheap, and being ready to do so will involve wrenching changes in the U.S. and Taiwanese defense establishments. But it is doable. It would be harder than often appreciated for China to bring Taiwan to its knees. It is true that Taiwan is less than 100 miles off the Chinese coast. But to subordinate Taiwan, China would either have to invade and occupy the island or blockade or bombard it into submission. Any of these courses would be very difficult if China faced a sophisticated and prepared defense, especially combined with Taiwan's resolute population that has watched Beijing bludgeon Hong Kong's freedoms.

Invasion is Beijing's cleanest option, especially a fait accompli that takes the island before the U.S. can mobilize a sufficient response. In such circumstances, Beijing might gamble that Americans would judge the costs and risks of ejecting an entrenched PLA as too great. But to pull this off, China would have to ferry and sustain by sea and air an army large enough to seize and hold an island with 24 million people. This might be feasible if the PLA attacks a Taiwan standing alone. But taking a Taiwan backed up by a well-prepared U.S. military is a far different proposition. Amphibious invasions against a capable, prepared defense are very hard.

To put it simply, defeating a Chinese invasion would require the U.S., Taiwan and any other engaged parties to cripple or destroy enough Chinese amphibious ships and transport aircraft to prevent the PLA from holding the island. For a country spending more than \$700 billion a year on defense, this is a tractable problem, if America focuses on it.

But the U.S. must do four things, urgently. First, deploy an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance system to monitor Chinese airfields and ports of embarkation, and to target Chinese invasion forces should conflict erupt. Second, buy more long-range munitions, especially antiship weapons, and position them in the region at sea and in places like Guam, Japan and the Philippines. This would help make the U.S. ready to blunt the initial waves of the Chinese amphibious fleet and air-assault elements. Third, have powerful forces further back in the Pacific and beyond ready to reinforce those blunting forces. Fourth, routinely exercise these three components together to demonstrate to Chinese military planners that launching an attack would be unlikely to succeed.

The U.S. can likewise handle a Chinese attempt to blockade or bombard Taiwan into submission. Especially with American support, the Taiwanese would be unlikely to buckle under such pressure, even if brutal, since the alternative is to be swallowed up by Xi Jinping's China. This is especially true if Taiwan had stockpiled enough food, energy supplies and other essentials. A well-prepared U.S. could also conduct a "Taipei sealift" to deliver the supplies needed to prevent China's from strangling the island's populace.

Firm and resolute U.S. action is necessary to prevent Asia from falling under Beijing's

hegemony. Cutting Taiwan loose would undercut Washington's precious credibility in the region while uncorking Chinese power projection.

Ensuring that the U.S. can defend the island will take focus and heavy investment from both America and Taiwan. But it can be done. And that will be a small price to pay to make sure China doesn't get the wrong idea—with catastrophic results.

Scrapping DHS's travel vetting regime is the wrong approach (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Chad Wolf, 394K, Neutral]

On his first day in office, President Biden revoked the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's travel vetting infrastructure, undoing four years of arduous, and successful, work to protect the public. In his proclamation, he claimed that national security will be enhanced. Unfortunately, the facts don't support that statement.

One of the primary responsibilities of DHS is to keep us safe by ensuring that those who wish to enter our country are properly screened and vetted. It is undisputed after all that there are evil people out there who seek to travel to the United States with ill intent.

In early 2017, former President Donald Trump and DHS first implemented travel restrictions on seven countries. Admittedly, the rollout was less than ideal. The policy was poorly communicated to the public. But let's be clear — no "Muslim Ban" ever existed. Still, the notion did quickly gain momentum as a talking point for the establishment media as well as elected officials of a particular leaning.

Unfortunately, it was this experience four years ago, not the policy itself or even its outcomes, that likely influenced Biden's decision to revoke what was an essential counterterrorism tool.

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has been building, and continues to refine, its vetting infrastructure that detects terrorists trying to enter the country. This capability relies upon documentation provided by prospective travelers as well as information provided by their governments.

For this reason, DHS carefully and methodically developed a complex set of quantifiable criteria by which countries were to be assessed and ranked. Those criteria included the issuance of modern, electronic passports; the ability to report the loss or theft of passports to Interpol; the ability to share information on known or suspected terrorists; and the level of risk posed by a country due to terrorist travel, crime, or illegal migration.

Every country in the world has been aware of these basic standards for years. Those that failed to meet them were identified for tailored travel restrictions in order to incentivize compliance and minimize risk. Again, countries that were deficient, such as Iran, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, had consciously chosen not to take the necessary actions to become compliant.

Importantly, DHS's approach was quantitatively driven, intended to minimize the risk associated with identity management or information-sharing deficiencies of a particular country. And neither religion nor geography ever had anything to do with the vetting. In fact,

several countries, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Burma, and Tanzania, were subject to restrictions and are not Muslim-majority countries.

The process DHS employed was not static. Rather, it was constantly evolving. DHS systematically reviewed all countries against the established criteria on five separate occasions since 2017, and the latest review provided the most detailed picture yet of the degree of compliance.

To evaluate a country's performance against the criteria, DHS established a consistent process in coordination with the U.S. departments of State, Justice, and Defense — as well as with the intelligence community. DHS would spend months collecting data from U.S. embassies abroad and uploading it into an assessment tool that ranked each country.

How do we know it was working? The simple answer: the facts. The process yielded major improvements in foreign government identity management and information sharing. We saw an increase in the number of countries reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol, and more countries were sharing their travel documents and actionable intelligence.

In fact, in 2018, the Republic of Chad had its travel restrictions removed after improving its performance across all of the vetting criteria, proving that countries are both becoming safer and sharing more information with the U.S. government. And in June 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the vetting infrastructure put in place by DHS was valid and within the constitutional authority of the president.

Trump's and DHS's travel restrictions were yielding significant results, making everyone safer and more secure. Our world is complex and dangerous, so now is not the time to fulfill a campaign promise by decommissioning a proven tool in our counterterrorism arsenal.

At the beginning of this administration, I was hopeful Biden would appreciate the effectiveness of the measures implemented over the past four years. Regrettably, with his revocation of commonsense travel vetting, America is now less safe. This is the real peril of political posturing.

[Russia] In Less Than a Minute, Biden Changes U.S.-Russian Dynamics (Yahoo News/Time)

Yahoo News/Time [1/26/2021 1:43 PM, Philip Elliott, 11261K, Neutral]

It's been a busy week in Washington. President Joe Biden yesterday reversed his predecessor's ban on transgender individuals from serving in uniform, boosted a Buy American program for manufacturing and set a new, ambitious goal of 1.5 million vaccinations a day. The House of Representatives sent its second impeachment of former President Donald Trump to the Senate, which got started on its history-making path. Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio announced that he is heading toward retirement and Janet Yellen is starting as the first female to lead the Treasury Department. Today, Biden is signing orders aimed squarely at racism. Oh, and Major and Champ moved into the White House with their humans over the weekend.

Perhaps lost in all that was a seismic development in Washington's posture toward Moscow. The entire pivot took just 58 seconds, but reset four years of Trump-era

ambivalence.

Biden, answering questions on Monday from reporters in a formal setting for the first time during his presidency, was asked directly about possible sanctions against Russia for the attempted poisoning and subsequent detention of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, or whether those were being delayed as his government tries to renew an expiring nuclear treaty with Russia called New START.

Biden, who spent years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as its top Democrats and was a leading voice on international affairs inside Barack Obama's White House, knew precisely what needed to be said. He expanded the scope of the question to include not just the treaty, but reports that the Russians put bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan, a massive hacking operation known as SolarWinds, and the sweeping intelligence review he just ordered on what the U.S. knows about Russia's ongoing troublemaking. The ongoing protests across Russia have raised public awareness of it all, and Biden stepped in to lump it all together for a domestic and international audience.

"I find that we can both operate in the mutual self-interest of our countries as a New START agreement, and make it clear to Russia that we are very concerned about their behavior, whether it's Navalny, whether it's the SolarWinds or whether it's the reports of bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan," Biden said. "I will not hesitate to raise those issues with the Russians."

In less than a minute, Biden put the United States on new footing and Vladimir Putin on notice. So when Biden and Putin spoke today for the first time under the new U.S. administration, Putin knew what to expect. According to U.S. officials, Biden did exactly as he promised yesterday and pressed Putin without holding out grand hopes for a reset or even improved relations.

Biden's aides at the White House, State Department and throughout government had been offering a stiffened spine toward Russia. But as much as reporters in Washington respect new White House press secretary Jen Psaki and top State Department spokesman Ned Price, their words don't carry as much weight as the President's. After all, the Trump era often featured a split screen of foreign-policy hands being tough on Russia while the then-President seemed indifferent to Russia's belligerence. It doesn't really matter what the apparatchiks say if the top boss has other plans.

Biden yesterday demonstrated none of Trump's deference to Putin, a relationship that puzzled Washington even before the 2016 election. Nor did he echo Obama's effort to reboot Washington's relationship with Moscow, which started in 2009 with a botched "reset" stunt that had then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton handing her counterpart a plastic toy with the word peregruzka on it. The U.S. side thought it was Russian for 'reset' but it actually said 'overload.' The day left Foggy Bottom red-faced and Clinton with a deep distrust of the Russian openness.

More recently, Biden's stance wasn't George W. Bush's look into Putin's soul, or Bill Clinton's post-Cold War navigation of a totally new dynamic. In all reality, Biden probably retreated to something closer to Ronald Reagan's position: compromise on treaties when it makes sense without forgetting that he's dealing with the vestiges of what Reagan famously

called "the Evil Empire."

Biden ran as a sensible candidate, a transitional figure for his party and his country. So far, he has pushed an agenda through executive orders that is far more progressive than Democratic skeptics expected and far more radical than Republicans believed he would dare. So it's a curious comparison between Cold War Reagan and Post-Trump Biden, but it might be an accurate reminder that Presidents often can chase competing ideologies at home and abroad. (Just look at the second President Bush's education reform agenda and his response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.)

Biden's foreign policy circle has its share of Russian hawks. His nominee to lead the CIA is a career diplomat who spent time as the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. No one would mistake William Burns as a Russophile. Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, is as clear-eyed as they come when it comes to Russia's aggression, especially regarding the invasion of Ukraine and meddling in elections. Biden's pick for the State Department's No. 3 post, Victoria Nuland, is a veteran diplomat who served in administrations of both parties; she was a top adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney and an Obama Administration's point-person on pushing back on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan — a top hand during Clinton's days at the State Department and one of Biden's top foreign policy hands as VP — has been working the phones looking to extend the treaty and knows these issues inside and out.

But it's also not a single-note chorus surrounding Biden. Most notably, his nominee for the State Department's deputy secretary, Wendy Sherman, is an experienced and tough-as-nails negotiator who has sat across the table from America's most bellicose foes and extracted diplomatic agreements with the likes of Iran and North Korea. She's talked the U.S. out of some of the thorniest moments in recent diplomatic history. Where some around Biden are expected to urge hawkish stances, those like Sherman — who spent months on tough deals with nebulous details — are more prone to slow trust-building. The same is true of the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, who is heading up Biden's development agenda. She used to court diplomats personally, and counted her Russian counterpart as a friend.

For months, Biden has been signaling to all who would listen that this was where he was heading. The Monday declaration at the former War Department headquarters next to the White House made it official, though. That's not to say Biden is going to be shouting "tear down this wall" any time soon. But he's also not relying on tchotchkes to solve one of the first major foreign policy tests of his presidency.

[China] The US has accused China of carrying out genocide. Will it now boycott the 2022 Beijing Olympics? (CNN)

CNN [1/26/2021 8:24 PM, Ben Westcott, 7975K, Neutral]

The United States' determination that China is committing genocide in Xinjiang presents a rare moral predicament for athletes and countries preparing to compete in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made the announcement on the last day of the Trump administration, drawing attention to the systematic abuse of the minority Uyghur

population in China's far west.

The designation is the first by the US State Department since 2016, when then Secretary of State John Kerry determined that the atrocities committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria amounted to genocide, and only among a handful of times a US administration has applied the term to an ongoing crisis.

Genocide is defined by the United Nations as "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," and although the US determination won't trigger any immediate penalties, it will put pressure on anyone who does business with China -- and that includes the 90 or so nations that are due to send athletes to the Winter Games in February next year.

"Right now there is a lot of pressure on any kind of major engagements with the Chinese government that involves lending (them) legitimacy," said Maya Wang, senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The prospect of US athletes competing in the capital of a country accused of carrying out an ongoing genocide, will at the very least send mixed messages about Washington's commitment to human rights.

Beijing has long denied claims of genocide, claiming its policies in Xinjiang are part of a program of mass deradicalization and poverty alleviation. Last week a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused Pompeo of spreading "venomous" lies, inviting people to visit Xinjiang to "see with your own eyes."

Politicians in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the US have publicly raised the prospect of not sending athletes to Beijing in 2022. While in March last year, 12 US senators led by Republican Rick Scott submitted a bipartisan resolution requesting that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) remove the 2022 Games from China and reopen the bidding process. But to date no government or national sports authority has officially announced it will be pulling out.

CNN has reached out to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) for comment.

In a statement to CNN, the IOC said that it had received "assurances" from Chinese authorities that the principles of the Olympic Charter will be respected at the Beijing 2022 Games.

"Awarding the Olympic Games to a National Olympic Committee (NOC) does not mean that the IOC agrees with the political structure, social circumstances or human rights standards in its country," the statement said.

Activists and experts said that US' accusations will undoubtedly fuel calls for at least a partial boycott of the Games. In September 2020, more than 160 human rights groups around the world wrote to the IOC to reverse its decision to hold the 2022 Games in Beijing. Mandie McKeown, executive director of the International Tibet Network, who coordinated the letter, said that if they were to put together another group letter now, the number of

organizations would "undoubtedly" be higher.

She said if the Games couldn't be canceled, then her organization was advocating for a diplomatic boycott of the event, which would allow teams to attend while world leaders stayed away.

"The push for diplomatic boycott is definitely growing and noises (from governments) are positive," McKeown said.

Politicizing the Games

Over the years there have been many calls for Olympic boycotts, either over alleged human rights abuses or for political purposes.

In 1936, shortly before the beginning of World War II, pressure was placed on countries to boycott the Summer Olympics in Munich, which was presided over by then-Chancellor Adolf Hitler.

In 1976, more than 20 African nations boycotted the Montreal Summer Games over the participation of New Zealand athletes, after the country's rugby team defied the United Nations to go on a controversial tour of apartheid South Africa.

During the Cold War, the US and its allies boycotted the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow after which the Soviet Union then boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

But Susan Brownell, an Olympics expert and professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri-St Louis, said that from the Winter Olympics in Albertville in 1992 onwards there had been no national boycotts.

"A broad consensus opposing boycotts emerged among national governments worldwide because of the feeling that they accomplish nothing and only harm the athletes," she said.

There was a push by human rights organizations and NGOs for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics over the Chinese government's restrictions on civil liberties, especially in regards to Tibetan minority groups, but in the end the Olympics went ahead as planned. "No-one with the power to withdraw from the Games was seriously considering it," Brownell said.

But since then, allegations against Beijing in relation to mass detention camps in Xinjiang have mounted. Beijing claims it's offering Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs, an education in Chinese language and values as part of its anti-terrorism program.

"Languages, traditional cultures and customs of all ethnic minorities in Xinjiang have been well protected and inherited. All residents fully enjoy their rights, including the right to subsistence and development," said Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying on January 20.

However, Uyghurs in exile say their families are being imprisoned for arbitrary offenses and subjected to forced labor and abuse.

Even without formal boycotts, the 2022 event is likely to attract protests, though mass demonstrations won't be possible in a country that prides itself on maintaining order.

McKeown, from the International Tibet Network, said her organization and other groups working with it would be undertaking a program of action, including protests around the world, in the lead up to the 2022 Beijing Games to draw attention to the Chinese government's human rights abuses.

She said for now they were advocating for a political boycott, rather than a total boycott, for the sake of the athletes.

"Athletes have worked incredibly hard to get where they are. It's not necessarily their concern that the IOC made such a terrible mistake in giving the Games to Beijing," she said.

Individual athletes could still boycott the 2022 Games, although this would mean compromising years of training and lucrative sponsorships. Under Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, any political protests by individual competitors at the Games are banned.

'The power of sport'

An Olympics can still be heavily political even if there's no boycotts, and the 2022 Beijing Games are likely to be no exception.

In 2018, at the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, North and South Korea marched in the Opening Ceremony under a United Korea banner, a powerful symbol of unity between the two divided nations.

But the 2018 Games came at the same time as rising tensions between the US and North Korea. At the Opening Ceremony, then-US Vice President Mike Pence appeared to act coldly towards North Korean representatives, including the sister of leader Kim Jong Un.

A boycott by Western political leaders of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2022 Games is possible, said Olympic expert Brownell, but she added that given Winter Olympics rarely attracted the attention of the Summer Games, many leaders were unlikely to go in the first place.

Brownell said that she believed the worst damage to the Olympics' reputation didn't come from an association with China or human rights issues. "The damage seems to have come from the perception of excess cost to the taxpayer and corruption in the IOC," she said.

Despite the genocide ruling by the US, no countries have publicly moved to downsize relations with the Chinese government. And signs point to stronger ties, not weaker. In late December, for example, the European Union struck a wide-reaching investment agreement with Beijing despite the concerns of human rights organizations.

Human rights activists said it was too early to say whether or not a boycott of the 2022 Games, political or otherwise, was likely to go ahead.

And that's assuming the Games even go ahead as planned. Events in Beijing are scheduled to begin on Friday, February 4, 2022 -- just over 12 months away. But as the postponement of last year's Summer Games in Tokyo has shown, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown doubt on countries' ability to host large sporting events.

With numerous potential problems ahead, Wang, of Human Rights Watch, said the Chinese government needed to be given a chance to respond to international concerns over their actions in Xinjiang and the crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong.

But Wang said that she found it hard to see that happening and without demonstrable changes in Beijing's behavior, there could be a "change of perception among other governments."

"They are going to have to make a decision," Wang said. Human Rights Watch is currently not calling for any boycott of the 2022 Games.

In response to a question about a potential boycott in 2022 on January 20, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that "preparations are being smoothly carried out." "We have confidence that it will be an extraordinary gathering," she said.

In 2017, the IOC announced that it would add human rights, anti-corruption and sustainable development clauses to Olympic Host City contracts in the future. However, the new rules will only come into place after the 2022 Winter Olympics, beginning with the 2024 Summer Games. It is unclear how the clauses will be policed or what will happen if a host city breaks them.

In its statement to CNN, the IOC said that it recognizes and upholds human rights but at the same time, couldn't change laws or the political system in a sovereign country. "This must rightfully remain the legitimate role of governments and respective intergovernmental organizations," the statement said.

The IOC said that the Olympic Games had a unique role in bringing the world together.

"In our fragile world, the power of sport to bring the whole world together, despite all the existing differences, gives us all hope for a better future," the statement said.

Coronavirus News

European Economy Lags China and U.S. on Pandemic Recovery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Craig Stirling, 6400K, Negative]

Europe's economy is starting to follow the familiar script of lagging its international peers when recovering from a crisis.

That was the upshot of the International Monetary Fund's forecasts on Tuesday, which downgraded the growth outlook for 2021 across Europe and underscored a generally poorer performance compared with China and the U.S.

Such diverging fortunes reflect the stringency of lockdowns across the euro zone to contain the coronavirus, as well as a late and stumbling vaccination campaign -- headwinds that threaten to deepen what already looks likely to be a double-dip recession. Political unease over the future leadership of Germany and a crisis in Italy are compounding the gloom.

By contrast, China is fulfilling a V-shaped recovery, and the U.S. is strutting more confidently with a new president overseeing an extra stimulus injection and a more aggressive vaccine effort.

"We've started the year on a softer footing, particularly in Europe, because much of Europe seems to have gone back into recession," Janet Henry, chief global economist at HSBC Holdings Plc in London, told Bloomberg Television. "China is already back above pre-pandemic levels and, on our projections, the U.S. will be by the end of 2021. For the euro zone, it'll be the end of 2022."

That divergence was emphasized in the IMF's forecasts, which showed euro-area gross domestic product rising only 4.2% this year, after falling 7.2% in 2020. The U.S. economy is seen expanding 5.1%, more than recouping last year's 3.4% contraction.

The most immediate cause of Europe's relative weakness is the need for stricter and longer lockdowns to combat a resurgent coronavirus outbreak, and to contain nastier strains of the disease.

As European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde put it last week, a contraction in the fourth quarter will now "travel" into the first three months of the year.

"The short-term risk is tilted to the downside," she added somberly. "Uncertainty is in the air."

Sluggish immunization programs also threaten to widen the disparity between Europe and the rest. The European Union's best performers in that regard, tiny Malta and Denmark, have administered only around 4 shots per 100 people. The U.S. has managed 7 and the U.K. is above 10. The currency bloc is now in a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc over delayed vaccine deliveries.

With such shortcomings likely to cement lockdowns even further, the contrast in economic destinies is looking stark, with banks including Barclays Plc pointing to an "Atlantic divide."

"The U.S. outlook is improving, Europe's is deteriorating" BofA Global Research's economics team wrote in a report. "Don't think of both economies' recovery prospects as equal."

Such a trajectory evokes the frequent impression that Europe has become a natural economic laggard to the rest. That sense has persisted for much of the current century, not least after the region's sovereign-debt crisis impaired its recovery from the global financial crash a decade ago, while the U.S. and China powered ahead, at least in relative terms.

Newfound political disarray is only serving to highlight Europe's listlessness. Post-Brexit trade curbs with the U.K. are already an irksome reminder of the recent trauma of divorce

disfiguring the region.

Meanwhile, the succession to Germany's Angela Merkel is still unresolved, keeping open the question of how the bloc will galvanize itself into fighting crises in the era after she leaves. Even after a candidate to replace her as chancellor is settled, an election in September -- no doubt followed by coalition talks -- will prolong the drift.

The sudden resignation of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, against a backdrop of burgeoning debt obligations, also shows how turmoil is never far from erupting somewhere in the region. The country has been the focus of the EU's efforts to forge a joint recovery fund to shore up the integrity of its common currency.

For all their potential despair, European policy makers can still cling to hopes that their economies remain sound beneath the surface.

Government support programs in the region have tended to be highly targeted toward keeping companies and jobs afloat even when output is shut down, possibly avoiding unnecessary destruction to growth potential.

"Economies are being held in an imperfect state of suspended animation, and by and large it keeps underlying economies healthy," said Kallum Pickering, an economist at Berenberg. "My hunch actually is that there's a bit less scarring than most people think."

In any case, Europe's finance chiefs are now resigning themselves to being patient for when vaccination setbacks can be cleared, and the pandemic tamed, so that their economies can finally be unleashed -- even if that happens far later than global rivals.

"We have to divide the year 2021 in two parts," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said in a Bloomberg Television interview. "We have everything that is required to have a very strong, very quick rebound as soon as the pandemic is over."

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 6:28 PM, Stephanie Armour, Sabrina Siddiqui and Andrew Restuccia, Neutral]

The Biden administration on Tuesday said it would boost the supply of coronavirus vaccines sent to states by about 16% for the next three weeks and will purchase enough additional doses to vaccinate most of the U.S. population with a two-dose regimen by the end of the summer.

Senior administration officials said the federal government is working to purchase an additional 100 million doses each of the Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. vaccines, increasing the total U.S. vaccine order by 50% to 600 million from 400 million. Officials said they expect the additional doses to be delivered over the summer.

The purchases will provide enough supply to vaccinate 300 million Americans in a two-dose regimen over the summer. The vaccine is not approved for people under 16 years old.

"We now have a national strategy to beat Covid-19," President Biden said Tuesday. "It's comprehensive. It's based on science, not politics. It's based on truth, not denial. And it is detailed."

He nonetheless urged the public to remain vigilant, referring to the fight against the pandemic as "a wartime undertaking." "The brutal truth is, it's going to take months before we get the majority of Americans vaccinated," Mr. Biden said.

Even with the increase in doses to states starting next week, supplies aren't yet sufficient for what is needed now, a senior administration official said.

The administration will also start providing states with three weeks' advance notice of their estimated vaccine allocations, updated on a running basis, to help with their planning. Governors had said allocations fluctuated under the Trump administration, complicating efforts to staff vaccination sites and manage appointments.

"We've been going week to week, and you really can't plan and schedule," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said on MSNBC. "It will bring some efficiency to the program that we haven't been able to implement."

Members of the Biden administration, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky and White House coronavirus coordinator Jeffrey Zients, briefed governors on the changes on a call Tuesday afternoon, people familiar with the discussion said. The Department of Health and Human Services will boost allocations to states next week to a minimum of 10 million doses a week, up from 8.6 million doses a week, for the next three weeks, a senior administration official said.

Biden administration officials told governors that 5.7 million doses will be Moderna's vaccine and 4.3 million will be Pfizer's vaccine, the people familiar with the call said.

The officials also told governors that the sixth dose that Pfizer recently discovered could be extracted from its five-dose vials won't count toward the allocation of the company's doses to states, the people with knowledge of the call said. Special syringes are required to extract the additional dose and some pharmacies have struggled to extract it properly.

The vaccine rollout has been hindered by long waits for shots, crashing websites and early evidence that lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color are falling behind more affluent, white areas when it comes to getting vaccinated. Mr. Biden had said he wanted to see 1 million vaccinations administered a day in his first 100 days, and on Monday he said the administration could reach 1.5 million vaccinations a day. Public-health analysts had said that administering 1 million doses a day, an amount almost reached under the Trump administration, would put the U.S. on track to reach herd immunity to the virus in 2022.

Mr. Biden said Monday he was optimistic that any American who wants a coronavirus vaccine should be able to get one by the spring. The president said delivering on that promise will require boosting vaccine supply and the capacity of facilities where people can receive the vaccine. To date, about 44.4 million doses of both vaccines have been distributed in the U.S., of which 23.5 million have been administered, according to the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of the doses administered, 13 million were Pfizer vaccines and 10.4 million were from Moderna. Johnson & Johnson has said it expects to report results of a large clinical trial of its Covid-19 vaccine by early next week and to deliver 100 million doses for use in the U.S. by the end of June if the results are positive and the vaccine is authorized. Mr. Biden's plan would establish 100 federally supported vaccination centers and dispatch mobile units to rural and underserved areas across the country. The CDC will make vaccines available in local pharmacies beginning next month. The Biden administration also plans to launch a national public awareness campaign to promote the importance of the vaccine.

He has invoked the Defense Production Act to take certain steps to expand vaccine manufacturing, such as producing more equipment and materials used to make shots. He also will use the act to boost supplies such as "low dead space" syringes, which can be used to squeeze more doses out of vaccine vials.

Vaccines were initially allocated to states in December based on the size of their population. In December, CDC advisers recommended that initial supplies go to high-risk populations such as front-line health workers and nursing-home residents. The advisory panel said adults 65 years and older should begin vaccinations only after doses were given to essential workers and adults 75 years and older who wanted them.

The Trump administration on Jan. 12 said it was changing the distribution system, providing allocations to states based on the size of state populations over age 65 and how effective states have been in getting the shots administered.

It also called on states to open up vaccinations to adults 65 years and older, but governors said there wasn't enough supply from the reserve to keep up with the surge in demand that followed. Mr. Cuomo said Tuesday that New York was "functionally out" of vaccines but expected new shipments in the next several days. Health officials in New York's Erie County, which includes Buffalo, said Tuesday they were canceling planned vaccination clinics on Friday and Saturday due to a lack of vaccine availability.

As of Tuesday, New York had received 1.3 million first vaccine doses and distributed 1.2 million, the state health department said. According to the CDC, New York had distributed 1.45 million of the 2.4 million doses it was allocated as of Tuesday morning; the federal figures include all doses, including those used in a federal program to vaccinate nursing-home residents.

On a conference call with California officials, Yolanda Richardson, secretary of the Government Operations Agency in Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration, said that the state didn't yet know what its new vaccine allocation would be.

As of Tuesday, about 4.7 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine had been shipped to California and about 2.6 million of those had been administered, according to state data.

California Health and Human Services Secretary Mark Ghaly said Tuesday the state is currently vaccinating 125,000 people each weekday.

"We look forward to increasing the cadence to make sure the needs of Californians are

heard loud and clear and we're able to fill the pressing demands on vaccines as quickly as possible," he said.

Moderna said it has supplied 30.4 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccine to the U.S. government for distribution to date and remains on track to meet its targets for providing many more in the coming months. Including what it has supplied so far, the Cambridge, Mass., company said Tuesday it plans to deliver 100 million doses for the U.S. by the end of March, followed by an additional 100 million by the end of June, for a total of 200 million by midyear. U.S. regulators authorized use of the two-dose vaccine in December.

Pfizer and partner BioNTech SE have been providing another Covid-19 vaccine for use in the U.S., which is also given in two doses.

Pfizer said it would do its part to "make more shots-in-arms a reality," a company spokeswoman said. Under the company's agreement, the U.S. government has an option to purchase an additional 400 million doses.

Mr. Biden received his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine in December and a second dose earlier this month. Vice President Kamala Harris got her second dose of the Moderna vaccine on Tuesday.

The U.S. has seen 25.2 million confirmed Covid-19 infections and about 420,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Congressional Activity

Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:13 PM, Siobhan Hughes and Lindsay Wise, Neutral]

Most Republican senators questioned the Senate's authority to hold an impeachment trial for a former president, dealing a blow to Democrats' chances of convicting Donald Trump of inciting an attack on the Capitol.

Forty-five Republicans, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), sided with Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) on his point of order arguing that the planned trial of a now-private citizen violates the Constitution. Some cautioned, however, that their vote Tuesday didn't necessarily dictate how they would vote at the end of trial.

The proposal was tabled, or killed, in a 55-45 vote that clears the way for the trial to move forward in two weeks. All 50 lawmakers in the Democratic caucus joined GOP Sens. Mitt Romney of Utah, Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.

Seventeen Republicans would have to join the Democrats to reach the two-thirds supermajority required to convict Mr. Trump.

The Republican former president was impeached by the House on allegations of inciting the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, as Congress was holding a joint session to certify

the election victory of President Biden, a Democrat. A conviction would allow for a subsequent, simple majority vote to bar Mr. Trump from holding office again. Mr. Paul said the roll call showed that there aren't enough Republican senators willing to convict Mr. Trump. "Forty-five votes means the impeachment trial is dead on arrival," he said.

Democrats countered that the trial is proper and that Republicans are focusing on the constitutional question to avoid having to weigh in on the merits of the case itself—and whether Mr. Trump's actions rise to the level of encouraging an insurrection against the U.S. government.

"The theory that the Senate can't try former officials would amount to a constitutional get-out-of-jail-free card for any president who commits an impeachable offense," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D, N.Y.).

This will be the fourth presidential impeachment trial, and Mr. Trump's second, but the first for a president who has left office. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service, the public-policy research arm of Congress, concludes that while the matter is open to debate, the weight of scholarly authority agrees that the impeachment process, including the trial, can be applied to officials who are no longer in office.

One precedent is the 1876 impeachment and trial of Secretary of War William Belknap, who resigned after the House obtained evidence that he had taken kickbacks from an associate appointed to run a frontier trading post. He was tried by the Senate and acquitted. Mr. Biden supports the Senate Democrats' decision to move ahead with a trial, even if it interferes with his legislative agenda and cabinet confirmations, but predicted in an interview with CNN on Monday there wouldn't be 17 GOP votes to convict Mr. Trump.

"He's going to allow them to move forward at the pace and the manner that the leaders in the Senate determined, and I can promise you that we will leave the vote counting to leaders in the Senate from now on," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday.

Mr. Trump's staff declined to comment.

House managers walked the article of impeachment to the Senate on Monday night, and senators were sworn in as jurors on Tuesday, with Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), the president pro tempore, sworn in as the presiding officer.

Mr. Leahy, 80 years old, was taken to a local hospital for evaluation after feeling unwell on Tuesday evening, an aide said. Mr. Leahy is the longest-serving Senate Democrat and third in line for the presidency after Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) The trial will begin in earnest the week of Feb. 8, about a month after the Capitol riot that left five people dead, including a U.S. Capitol Police officer. Senators on Tuesday agreed to that timeline in a pretrial organizing resolution.

The House impeachment article, which passed on Jan. 13 by 232-197, drew the support of 10 Republicans.

Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Senate Republican, cautioned that Tuesday's

vote shouldn't be interpreted as a guarantee of how GOP senators would vote at the conclusion of the trial.

"I just think that it was a question on the constitutionality of it. I don't think it binds anybody once the trial starts," Mr. Thune said. But he said most Republican senators believe that from a constitutional standpoint, the trial is "on really shaky ground."

Sen. Rob Portman (R., Ohio), who announced Monday he won't run for re-election, said his vote against tabling Mr. Paul's motion was motivated by a desire to allow debate on the trial's constitutionality, but he hasn't decided whether he would convict or acquit Mr. Trump. He said he would wait to hear the evidence. Although Republican senators have criticized the former president for his actions on Jan. 6, many have signaled opposition to voting to convict him. Ahead of the vote Tuesday, a Wall Street Journal survey found that at least 32 senators have said they are opposed to a trial or leaning against convicting Mr. Trump.

Mr. McConnell has been sharply critical of Mr. Trump, saying he provoked the mob that attacked the Capitol earlier this month. At his weekly press conference Tuesday, Mr. McConnell wouldn't answer a reporter's question about whether he believes Trump's actions were impeachable.

Mr. Romney, one of the five Republicans who voted with Democrats on Tuesday, was the only GOP senator to vote to convict Mr. Trump in his impeachment trial last year over his efforts to press Ukraine's president to announce an investigation of Mr. Biden.

Ahead of the vote, Republicans met Tuesday with law professor Jonathan Turley of the George Washington University Law School, who has argued that impeachment proceedings against a former president are at odds with the Constitution. The decision to invite Mr. Turley to the Tuesday Republican lunch was Mr. McConnell's, according to Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee.

Mr. Turley, who testified in favor of Mr. Trump during his first impeachment, argued that Mr. Trump's unfounded assertions to supporters that he was the election's rightful winner, which preceded their rioting, were protected speech, that it is unconstitutional to try a former president, and that Mr. Trump might be best served by simply not participating in the trial.

With the Senate moving ahead with its trial, Mr. Trump could try to appeal to federal courts, but legal experts say it is unlikely they would intervene either to block a trial or to reverse a potential conviction.

Near East & North Africa

[Iraq] Iraq signs pact with Total for 'large projects' (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 2:00 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, Neutral]

Iraq has signed a memorandum of understanding with Total to execute "large and promising projects" in the Middle Eastern country, particularly regarding use of natural gas and clean energy, its oil ministry said on Wednesday.

The agreement was signed during a visit by Total's Chief Executive Patrick Pouyanne, the ministry said in a statement.

[Lebanon] Amid crisis, Hezbollah 'bank' a lifeline for some Lebanese (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:10 AM, Bassem Mroue, 13480K, Neutral]

When Lebanon's financial meltdown began in late 2019, Hassan Shoumar was locked out of his dollar savings like everyone else in the country as banks clamped down with capital controls.

But the young engineer had an alternative. He could still pull out the dollars in his account at the al-Qard al-Hasan Association, the financial arm of the militant Hezbollah group.

Shoumar had kept an account at the association for years, ever since he had taken a loan from it to pay university fees. Unlike Lebanon's commercial banks, the accounts at the association didn't earn interest. But the 28-year-old Shoumar didn't care about that.

"What I care about is that when I want my money, I can get it," he said by telephone from south Lebanon.

Stepping in where the state and financial institutions have failed, Hezbollah is providing a vital lifeline for some Lebanese. In the country's wrecked economy, everyone is desperate for hard currency and liquidity as the local currency plummets in value. At commercial banks, depositors stand in line for hours and fight with managers in vain to access their dollar savings. Most banks have stopped giving loans.

But at Hezbollah's al-Qard al-Hasan people can take out small, interest-free loans in dollars, enabling them to pay school fees, get married, buy a used car or open a small business. They can also open saving accounts there.

The association, officially a non-profit charity, is one of the tools by which Hezbollah entrenches its support among the country's Shiite population, even as the group has come under enormous criticism over the past year among Lebanese furious at the political elite.

With poverty rising across Lebanon, Hezbollah provides its community with low-cost schools and hospitals and distributes heating fuel to the poor. Hezbollah continues to pay its fighters and employees in its institutions in U.S. dollars, while everyone else gets their salaries in Lebanese pounds, which lost about 80% of their value in the crisis.

Over the past year, the al-Qard al-Hasan association has seen a significant increase in clients, despite it being under U.S. Treasury sanctions since 2007.

"People's lack of confidence in the banking sector forced them to find other places," said Batoul Tahini, a spokeswoman for the association.

She said the number of deposits was much higher than 2019 and previous years, though loans did not increase very much. She declined to give exact figures.

In a recent speech, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said around 300,000

people currently are dealing with the association on loans. The association says its clients are from Lebanon's various sects. But the vast majority are believed to be Shiite Muslims.

Roy Badaro, a Lebanese economist, said the association is part of Hezbollah's state-within-a-state and a "disguised way to complement their activity through microfinance, similar to Hezbollah-run schools, hospitals, etc."

"The aim is to absorb the economic crisis among poor Shiites," he said.

Al-Qard al-Hasan, whose name in Arabic means "the benevolent loan," offers interest-free loans up to \$5,000 and, importantly these days, it gives them in dollars. Active for more than three decades, it is considered Lebanon's largest non-banking financial institution giving microloans.

Clients must put up gold as collateral or bring a guarantor. They then pay back the loan in monthly installments for up to 30 months, after which the collateral is returned. Clients can also set up accounts to deposit money, which is then used to finance the loans. The association operates under Islamic rules forbidding interest.

Lebanon's economic and financial crisis is the country's worst in modern history, with the economy contracting 19% in 2020. Tens of thousands around the country have lost their jobs, and nearly half the population of more than 6 million is in poverty.

The crisis shattered people's confidence in Lebanon's banking system, once among the most respected in the region. As banks took a hit, many people decided to keep their money at home, amounting to up to \$10 billion, according to central bank governor Riad Salameh.

That has proven a boon for the al-Qard al-Hasan association, as some turned to it as an alternative to store their cash.

The risk for Hezbollah is that as poverty rises and the economic crisis worsens, many people might default on their loans, the economist Badaro said. If that happens, Hezbollah might have to use its own funds to cover deposits, he said.

The association's prominence has also made it a target.

A hacking group calling itself "Spiderz" claimed that it broke into the association's system and posted the identities of some clients and security camera footage from some of its branches. It warned clients to withdraw their money or else they might come under American sanctions.

Al-Qard al-Hasan confirmed there was a cyberattack in late December that it called "partial and limited." It told clients not to worry about their identities being revealed. Tahini said the issue is under investigation.

The sight of the association's clients getting their dollars without problems has also bred resentments over Hezbollah's power in Lebanon.

"This shows that Hezbollah is safe and relaxed, while we are in a dilemma," Walid Joumblatt, political leader of Lebanon's Druze community and a Hezbollah critic, said in an interview with Sky News Arabia. He joked that he was growing his beard like conservative Muslims to get a loan from al-Qard al-Hasan.

In a speech days later, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah shot back, saying all anyone had to do was fill out an application and put up the gold collateral.

He also depicted the association as rock solid, providing \$3.7 billion in loans to some 1.8 million people since it was founded. He boasted that U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah officials only strengthened al-Qard al-Hasan, since some of them moved their accounts from banks to the association.

He revealed for the first time that during the 2006 war with Israel, Israeli warplanes struck a site where money and gold were stored. Despite that, he boasted, every client got their money.

"No one ever lost a cent," he said.

[Tunisia] Tunisia's parliament approves Cabinet reshuffle amid protests (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:13 PM, Tarek Amara, Angus McDowall, 5304K, Neutral]

Tunisia's parliament on Tuesday approved a Cabinet reshuffle that deepened the conflict between the prime minister and the president, as hundreds protested outside the heavily barricaded parliament over social inequality and police abuses.

Riot police turned water cannon on protesters outside the parliament earlier on Tuesday, trying to quell the largest rally since demonstrations began this month.

Hundreds of protesters had marched from the Ettadhamen district of the capital, Tunis, where young people have clashed with police several nights this month, and were joined by hundreds more near the parliament.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi named 11 new ministers and said he hoped it would inject new blood into his government.

"Young people protesting outside parliament reminds us of our priorities. Their protests are legitimate and the government will listen to the angry youth," he said.

But President Kais Saied indicated on Monday he would reject the Cabinet reshuffle, condemned the absence of women among the new ministers and said some likely new Cabinet members may have conflicts of interest.

Saied, who appointed Mechichi last year but has taken issue with some of his moves, said he would not swear in any ministers suspected of corruption.

Police blocked the march with barricades to prevent protesters approaching the parliament building where lawmakers were debating the government reshuffle.

"The government that only uses police to protect itself from the people - it has no more legitimacy," said one protester, Salem Ben Saleh, who is unemployed.

Later, police also blocked Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the broad tree-lined boulevard that is home to the Interior Ministry and where major protests have traditionally taken place, as demonstrators tried to gather there.

ARAB SPRING ANNIVERSARY

Protests flared earlier this month on the 10th anniversary of Tunisia's 2011 revolution that inspired that Arab Spring and introduced democracy in the North African country.

Political paralysis and economic decline have soured many Tunisians on the fruits of the uprising.

The political deadlock in Tunisia since elections in 2019 has stymied efforts to address festering economic problems, with both foreign lenders and the main labour union demanding reforms.

Last year, as the global coronavirus pandemic struck, Tunisia's economy shrank by more than 8%. The fiscal deficit rose above 12% of gross domestic product, ballooning public debt to more than 90% of GDP.

The nightly clashes between young people and police have been matched by growing daytime protests at which demonstrators have chanted slogans including: "The people want the fall of the regime" - echoing Arab Spring uprisings.

On Tuesday, with anger high over the death on Monday of a young man whose family said had been hit by a tear gas canister, protesters chanted against the security forces.

In Sbeitla, the hometown of Haykel Rachdi, who was buried on Tuesday, mourners later clashed with police, witnesses said.

As parliamentary debate on the reshuffle paused, some opposition lawmakers left parliament to join the protest outside.

"Mechichi has transformed this into a police state. ... No work, no development, no investment... just police against the people," said Imed, another protester who did not want to give his family name.

[United Arab Emirates] UAE Central Bank slaps monetary sanction on Bank of Baroda (Yahoo News/Capital Market)

Yahoo News/Capital Market [1/26/2021 10:54 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates has imposed a financial sanction on Bank of Baroda, GCC Operations, Dubai for deficiencies in compliance of Federal Decree Law of 2018 on Anti Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism and Financing of Illegal Organisations.

Bank of Baroda said has been taking steps to ensure compliance with the Federal Decree Law no (20) of 2018 and has been communicating with the Central Bank. Additionally, it has been undertaking measures to improve compliance, the bank said. Under these circumstances, it is informed to the public that the bank has engaged with the relevant stakeholders and is exploring all necessary options available with the bank, including the option to file an appeal against the financial sanctions that have been imposed, it added.

The announcement was made after market hours on Monday, 25 January 2021. Shares of Bank of Baroda rose 0.68% to settle at Rs 73.80 on Monday, 25 January 2021.

Bank of Baroda is a public sector bank. The Government of India held 71.60% stake in the bank as on 30 September 2020.

Europe and Eurasia

[Netherlands] Calm returns to Dutch cities after riots, with police out in force (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 AM, Toby Sterling, Neutral]

With shops boarded up and riot police out in force, it was relatively calm in Dutch cities on Tuesday night after three days of violence during which nearly 500 people were detained.

In several cities, including the capital Amsterdam, some businesses closed early and emergency ordinances were in place to give law enforcement greater powers to respond to the rioting, which was prompted by a nighttime curfew to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

On Tuesday when the 9 p.m. curfew went into effect, rowdy crowds of youths gathered in Amsterdam and Hilversum, but were broken up without incident. In Rotterdam, 17 people were detained for violating social distancing regulations.

That was in stark contrast to Monday night, when rioting rocked cities across the country and more than 180 people were arrested for burning vehicles, stone throwing and widespread looting.

"This was truly a different picture to yesterday," National Police chief Willem Woelders told Dutch public television. "We did not need to use the riot police or other forces."

But he cautioned that one night of quiet did not mean they could let down their guard. "We have to remain alert," Woelders said.

The Netherlands' first curfew since World War Two was imposed on Saturday despite weeks of falling infections, after the National Institute for Health (RIVM) said a faster-spreading variant first found in England was causing a third of cases.

A hospital in Rotterdam had warned visitors of patients to stay away, after rioters tried to attack hospitals in various cities.

A nationwide appeal issued by law enforcement on Tuesday evening called on parents to keep teenagers indoors, warning they could end up with a criminal record and forced to pay

for damage to cars, shops or property.

In Amsterdam on Monday, groups of youths threw fireworks, broke store windows and attacked a police truck, but were broken up by a massive police presence.

Ten police officers were injured in Rotterdam, where 60 rioters were detained overnight after widespread looting and destruction in the city centre, a police spokeswoman said. Supermarkets in the port city were emptied, while bins and vehicles were set ablaze.

Two photographers were hurt after being targeted by rock-throwing gangs, one in Amsterdam and another in the nearby town of Haarlem, police said.

Coronavirus infections have been falling in recent weeks, with the number of new cases down by 8% over the past week. A little under 4,000 new infections were reported on Tuesday, the smallest daily increase since Nov. 24.

But the RIVM said the situation in the Netherlands was still very serious as a result of the more contagious variant that has caused a massive surge in cases in Britain.

Schools and non-essential shops across the Netherlands have been shut since mid-December. Bars and restaurants were closed two months earlier. The country's death toll stands at 13,664, with 956,867 infections to date.

[Portugal] Portugal urged to seek international help as COVID-19 deaths hit record (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:09 PM Victoria Waldersee, Catarina Demony, Miguel Pereira and Pedro Nunes, 5304K, Neutral]

Portugal's government was urged to transfer COVID-19 patients abroad on Tuesday as deaths hit a record high and the oxygen supply system of a large hospital near Lisbon partly failed from overuse.

COVID-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours reached a record 291, bringing the total to 653,878 cases and 11,012 deaths. It now has world's the highest seven-day average of cases and deaths per million people, according to ourworldindata.org.

A hospital in the Amadora municipality had to transfer 48 of its patients to other health units in the capital late on Tuesday as oxygen pressure was not enough for the large number of patients, it said in a statement.

"There was a need to relieve oxygen consumption so patients were transferred," said the hospital, which has nearly no empty beds left. "They were never in danger."

News reports showed ambulances rushing through the hospital's main gates to get the patients, while some left escorted by police.

Twenty patients were transferred to Lisbon's largest hospital, Santa Maria, which on Tuesday installed two fridges outside its morgue with the capacity for 30 bodies, its spokesman said.

Across Portugal's health service, 830 intensive care beds have been allocated to COVID-19 patients out of a total of 1,200, the health ministry said. Currently 765 COVID-19 patients are in intensive care units.

As public hospitals struggle to cope, large military health units in Lisbon and Porto stepped in to help. The one in the capital doubled its capacity to tackle the surge. Two cafeterias have been turned into wards.

The local council in Torres Vedras, a municipality near Lisbon which is facing major coronavirus outbreaks in several care homes, urged the foreign ministry to seek international help.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa told a news conference there was no need to create "alarm" about the idea of international aid but added: "We know there is the availability of friendly countries to help."

Health Minister Marta Temido told broadcaster RTP on Monday: "The Portuguese government is triggering all mechanisms available, including in the international framework, to ensure it provides the best assistance to patients."

But Temido noted that patient transfers were constrained by Portugal's location on the westernmost edge of Europe, especially as other EU nations are also under pressure.

[Serbia] Serbia to spend 2.5 billion euros to aid recovery from coronavirus crisis - president (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 4:47 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Serbia plans to spend about 2.5 billion euros (\$3.04 billion) in loans and subsidies to businesses and payments to pensioners and other citizens to help them cope with the economic impact of the coronavirus, President Aleksandar Vucic said on Tuesday.

The package envisions an array of measures including payments amounting to 50% of the minimum wage to employees of micro and small enterprises and state guarantees for borrowing in commercial banks.

"We want to tremendously ... bolster the private sector," Vucic told state-run RTS TV.

The state also plans to distribute 30 euros to every adult Serbian citizen or about 5 million people in May and November, and an additional 50 euros to every pensioner, Vucic said.

"There will be three (such) gifts for pensioners, and two for all adult citizens," Vucic said.

Vucic said the total public debt this year would not exceed 61% of gross domestic product (GDP).

Serbia's 2021 budget sees economic growth at 6%, following an estimated contraction of around 1% in 2020. It also sets the 2021 deficit at 3%. The International Monetary Fund sees Serbia's economy growing by 5% in 2021, after a forecast 1.5% contraction last year.

Last March, Serbia allocated 5.5 billion euros to help businesses and citizen cope with the crisis. Additional expenditures increased the deficit in 2020 to around 8.9%, up from the previously planned 0.3%.

In Serbia, which has a population of 7 million, 3,924 people have died from COVID-19 and 387,206 fell ill with it. The country, which has started a nationwide inoculation programme, registered a new strain of the coronavirus last week.

[United Kingdom] Britain Faces Up to Painful Lessons After 100,000 Covid Deaths (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 5:31 PM, Tim Ross and Emily Ashton, Neutral]

It's almost exactly a year since coronavirus made its first impression on the U.K., when a government-chartered plane flew 83 British passengers home from Wuhan to a wind-swept military airfield west of London.

Now in the midst of its third national lockdown, the U.K. has hit the devastating milestone of 100,000 deaths from Covid-19.

For Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the country he leads, it's a sobering moment. Fatalities are now already five times the 20,000 figure Johnson's chief scientist once said would represent a "good outcome" for Britain.

"It's hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," Johnson said in a televised press conference on Tuesday evening. "I am deeply sorry for every life that has been lost."

While Johnson vowed to learn lessons once the virus is beaten, he offered few answers to the question of what went so wrong over the past year. How did the U.K. end up with the fifth highest death toll in the world, despite its state-run health service, renowned scientists, and the natural advantages of an island for managing the flow of people?

More pressingly, the prime minister faces questions over the future. The government will need to make the most of the head start it has gained over other European nations in vaccinating its people.

The political stakes are high: Johnson will be put to the test in local and mayoral elections later this year. He also faces a showdown with Scottish nationalists, and with his own increasingly jumpy Conservative colleagues over the restrictions.

The choices confronting Johnson on when to turn off state support for businesses, and how to pay the bill, will determine what kind of an economy is left to revive once the lockdown wreckage has been cleared away.

Much of it will come back to the premier's character. In private his colleagues remark how he makes fewer jokes nowadays, and has struck a more serious tone since the start of the year. Stung by criticism that he has over-promised on when the crisis will be over, he's now more cautious about a timetable for easing the lockdown.

Last March, Johnson breezily brushed aside the threat, openly joking about shaking hands with staff in a hospital treating Covid patients. In April, he was admitted into intensive care with the virus.

Major events such as soccer matches and the Cheltenham horse races went ahead, and the premier – a libertarian and a crowd pleaser by nature – was reluctant to curtail individual freedoms.

Officials argued that locking down the country too soon would be a mistake – people would get tired of the restrictions and start to break the rules, they said. Yet at the same time, countries such as Australia and New Zealand – which are now almost Covid-free with comparatively low fatalities – quarantined all passengers on arrival.

"We just dithered too much and didn't take it seriously enough at the beginning," Professor Lawrence Young, a virologist at Warwick Medical School, said in an interview. Other countries "went in hard, they went in fast, they didn't prevaricate."

One of the biggest problems was the U.K.'s inability to run an effective test and trace operation to keep track of infections and ensure patients didn't spread the disease.

In the early months of the pandemic, the U.K. had to give up trying to test people because its maximum testing capacity of just 2,000 a day was nowhere near enough as the virus spread exponentially.

A 22 billion-pound (\$30.2 billion) mission eventually ramped up the testing and tracing capacity to rates that are among the highest in the world. Earlier this month, 665,000 Covid tests were carried out in one day in the U.K. But the essential follow-up process of tracing contacts didn't reach enough people to be effective, although it has improved.

British officials insist they simply did not know how helpful mask-wearing would be – even though other countries adopted the policy far earlier. Nor was it clear to the government how easily coronavirus spread among people without symptoms.

Even as the death toll passed 100,000, a policy to isolate arriving passengers in hotels was still being debated.

Almost 3.7 million people in the U.K. have tested positive – the fifth largest caseload worldwide and about half a million more than France. The U.K. has suffered almost twice the number of deaths as Spain and Germany. According to analysis from Johns Hopkins University, the U.K. ranks fourth in deaths per 100,000 people in the population of any country.

In the early days, Britain won praise from economists for its comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting the economy.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak rolled out about 300 billion pounds of measures to support companies and prop up workers' wages, while the Bank of England slashed interest rates to a record low 0.1% and doubled its bond-buying program.

None of this stopped the U.K. suffering its deepest recession since the Great Frost of 1709. Recent figures show the British economy is the worst performing among the Group of Seven nations, with output still about 9% below its pre-Covid level. Most economists and the Bank of England expect the economy to contract again.

Now Johnson is pinning his hopes on an ambitious vaccination program. A successful rollout would give the government a shot at political redemption, too, and so far the progress has been rapid.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines," Jonathan Ball, professor of molecular virology at Nottingham University, told Bloomberg. With a comprehensive test-and-trace program, and assuming the vaccines are as effective as they seem, "you would hope we would be in a much better position next winter."

The U.K. has administered 6.85 million first doses of the AstraZeneca Plc and Pfizer Inc. vaccine. That puts it largely on target to offer the shot to 15 million of the most vulnerable people by mid-February, and far ahead of the U.S. and Europe. Only Israel and the United Arab Emirates have deployed more vaccines per capita.

But there's another cloud hanging over Britain's battle with the pandemic: Its own mutant strain of the virus.

The recent wave of hospitalizations has been linked to the new variant B.1.1.7 of coronavirus that appears to spread more quickly and officials now believe may be more than 30% deadlier than the original strain. On Tuesday, the government's medical experts warned the death toll will continue to mount and will only start to fall slowly.

Johnson, when pressed on the government's missteps at Tuesday's press conference, said: "We truly did everything we could, and continue to do everything we can, to minimize loss of life and to minimize suffering."

Chaand Nagpaul, from the British Medical Association, said the U.K. "must not and will not forget this day" and needs to understand what went wrong. "As the first nation in Europe to have reached this dark death toll, we must learn the lessons of this tragedy."

[United Kingdom] AstraZeneca Faces EU Grilling Over Delays to Vaccine Delivery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:00 PM, Nikos Chrysoloras, Jonathan Stearns, 6400K, Neutral]
The European Union will seek on Wednesday to resolve a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc that threatens to keep its vaccination program in the slow lane, trigger a global spat over coronavirus shots, and prolong damaging lockdowns.

Officials representing national governments and the European Commission will demand the company meets its vaccine commitment. They will also seek "fundamental" information from executives about delivery plans for the first half of the year, according to an official with knowledge of the situation. The call is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Brussels time.

The Anglo-Swedish drugmaker warned late last week of delays at a manufacturing plant in

Belgium, which would deal a further blow to the continent's already-sluggish vaccination campaign. The EU responded with fury, vowing to monitor exports of shots, with Germany even signaling support for imposing limits on sales outside the EU.

The risk is that protectionist measures could spark retaliation by other countries, disrupting the flow of life-saving shots just as billions of people wait to be inoculated against a virus that's wreaked havoc on the global economy. Getting people vaccinated is the main hurdle to efforts by European governments to restore normality after 2020's record recession.

Astra Chief Executive Pascal Soriot pushed back against the EU in a newspaper interview published late Tuesday, saying the company signed a so-called best-effort agreement that doesn't specify a quantity. That's because EU insisted on receiving the vaccine about the same time as the U.K. despite putting in its order three months later.

But Soriot added that once Astra gets regulatory approval in Europe -- expected within days -- it will ship at least 3 million doses immediately, with a target of 17 million by February.

"Would I like to do better? Of course," he said in comments published in La Repubblica and other newspapers. "But, you know, if we deliver in February what we are planning to deliver, it's not a small volume. We are planning to deliver millions."

With so much riding on vaccinations, the bloc's executive arm is due to present its export monitoring proposal by the end of this week. An Astra spokesperson said the company hasn't diverted any products from the Europe supply chain.

Shots by Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. are already authorized for use, though the EU lags way behind the U.S. and the U.K. in terms of the share of its population inoculated, according to Bloomberg's global vaccine tracker.

Governments across the bloc are eager to dodge the blame for the underwhelming performance, which could force them to prolong lockdowns. The measures have crippled industries from aviation to hospitality, and are causing growing discontent.

The Netherlands is facing its worst civil unrest in four decades because of its curfew, Belgium has banned everyone from entering or leaving the country without compelling reason as of Wednesday, while Ireland's strict lockdown is set to be extended until at least March 5.

European Medicines Agency Executive Director Emer Cooke said the organization is working with manufacturers to address vaccine delays and expressed hope the shortfalls will be "short-lived." Speaking to a European Parliament committee on Tuesday, Cooke also repeated the EMA's goal to decide this week on approval for Astra's vaccine.

While the details of the EU's plans to monitor exports have yet to be revealed, the World Trade Organization would not hinder the bloc from implementing temporary vaccine export restrictions or even an outright ban.

The WTO rulebook contains a specific exemption that allows nations to temporarily impose such measures to prevent or relieve critical shortages of essential products. There's also a

broad exemption if the actions are deemed necessary to protect human life and health.

Protectionist measures could add another layer of complexity for pharmaceutical companies struggling to satisfy an unprecedented demand for vaccines.

But EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis dismissed the idea that a notification system for vaccine exports would limit them in any way.

"We're not planning to impose an export ban or export restrictions," Dombrovskis told reporters on Tuesday in Brussels. "Primarily it's a matter of transparency on the deliveries."

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia set for 10th day of no local COVID-19 cases (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 7:46 PM, Swati Pandey, 5304K, Neutral]

Australia is on track for a 10th day of no new local COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, allowing its most populous state of New South Wales (NSW) to relax coronavirus restrictions after controlling a fast-spreading cluster.

NSW has recorded no local cases for 10 days after low single digit numbers earlier in January. Victoria state, which is hosting the Australia Open tennis tournament, has gone three weeks without a local case.

Other states and territories which have mostly been COVID-free, some for months, will report daily case numbers later on Wednesday, but are expected to report zero local infections.

Australia's success in curbing small outbreaks, with a total 22,000 local cases since March 2020 and 909 deaths, comes at a time when global coronavirus cases are edging towards 100 million with the death toll surpassing 2 million.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklien announced coronavirus restrictions would be eased from Friday, including rules around mask wearing and allowing more people in house parties, weddings, funerals and places of worship.

The restrictions had kicked in late last year to successfully curb virus clusters in Sydney's northern beaches and western suburbs. The outbreaks saw other states and territories close borders or restrict travel from NSW.

Berejiklien hinted that restrictions would be eased further in two weeks if there were no further cases, adding she was "striking the right balance" between economic growth and virus control.

"They both go hand in hand, you can't have an open economy unless you make sure you get the health settings right," she said, while urging Sydneysiders to come out and get tested for COVID-19 even for the "mildest of symptoms".

Despite its relative success in handling the pandemic, Australia's international borders will

likely remain shut to non-citizens this year although there may be exclusive travel arrangements called "bubbles" with its South Pacific neighbours.

Australia had a one-way "travel bubble" with New Zealand where those arriving from the latter didn't have to quarantine, but that arrangement was suspended for 72 hours on Monday after a highly infectious coronavirus strain was found in New Zealand.

New Zealand reported a third day of zero cases on Wednesday, allaying fears of a fresh outbreak.

[Australia] Australia's Inflation Exceeds Estimates as Recovery Builds (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/26/2021 9:03 PM, Michael Heath, 6400K, Neutral]

Australia's consumer prices rose faster than forecast in the final three months of last year as the government amended funding to various stimulus programs amid an economy regaining momentum.

The consumer price index advanced 0.9% from the third quarter, underpinned by increases in tobacco excise, compared with economists' estimates of a 0.7% gain, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed Wednesday. Annual CPI also beat forecasts, similarly rising by 0.9% versus an estimated 0.7%.

"Since the June quarter fall of 0.3%, the increase in annual inflation largely reflects the unwinding of free child care and higher petrol prices," said Michelle Marquardt, head of Prices Statistics at the ABS. "The rise in demand for new dwellings is reflected in higher building approvals for houses and a record value for housing loan commitments."

Australian prices have been hit by cross-currents caused by fallout from Covid-19 and governments ending some support programs in favor of stimulus for areas like housing. The Reserve Bank of Australia has adjusted its inflation framework to allow the economy to run a little hotter. It doesn't intend to tighten borrowing costs until inflation is sustainably within the 2-3% target.

Achieving that will require strong wage growth stemming from a tighter labor market, outcomes unlikely to be in the offing any time soon with the jobless rate at 6.6%.

Today's report showed the quarterly trimmed-mean gauge of inflation matched estimates, rising 0.4%, and slightly exceeded them on an annual basis, advancing 1.2% versus a forecast 1.1%

The weighted-median gauge, another core measure, advanced 0.5% from the third quarter for an annual increase of 1.4%, compared with forecast increases of 0.4% and 1.2%, respectively.

Separate data released at the same time as inflation, showed business conditions -- measuring hiring, sales and profits -- surged in December to the highest level since 2018. The employment index surged, reflecting Australia's strengthening labor market that has seen unemployment fall to 6.6% in December from a high of 7.5% in July. The economy entered the pandemic with a jobless rate of 5.1% in February 2020.

"The rise in the employment index is very encouraging," said Alan Oster, chief economist at National Australia Bank Ltd. that runs the monthly business sentiment survey. "The gains have been seen across all states and notably, Victoria appears to have caught up with New South Wales and Queensland -- great news for the state that has suffered an extended lockdown."

Yet, business confidence slid in the period amid a flareup in Covid outbreaks in Sydney and elsewhere.

Today's inflation report showed tradables prices, which are typically impacted by the currency and global factors, fell 0.4% in the fourth quarter from the previous three months. Non-tradables, which are largely affected by domestic variables like utilities and rents, advanced 1.5% due to the scheduled hike in the tobacco excise.

Other details in the report include:

There was a rise of 6.3% in domestic holiday travel and accommodation following the re-opening of state and territory borders and the peak summer holiday period. International holiday travel and accommodation was again imputed

The most significant price fall was in electricity, down 7.5% after Western Australia provided a one-time credit to households

The Reserve Bank of Australia meets for the first time this year on Tuesday and is expected to keep its cash rate and yield target to 0.10%. It is also set to maintain its A\$100 billion (\$77.4 billion) quantitative easing program.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Appoints Local Lawyer to Prosecute Jimmy Lai (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:56 AM, Chloe Lo, 6400K, Neutral]

Hong Kong's Department of Justice hired Senior Counsel Benjamin Yu to replace British lawyer David Perry in prosecuting media tycoon and activist Jimmy Lai, local media including Apple Daily and Now TV reported, citing unnamed sources.

[Indonesia] Indonesian volcano unleashes river of lava in new eruption (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:08 AM, Slamet Riyadi, 13480K, Neutral]

Indonesia's most active volcano erupted Wednesday with a river of lava and searing gas clouds flowing 1,500 meters (4,900 feet) down its slopes.

It was the Mount Merapi's longest lava flow since authorities raised the volatile volcano's danger level in November, said Hanik Humaida, the head of Yogyakarta's Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Center.

The alert level was being maintained for now at the second-highest level, she said, and people should stay out of the existing 5-kilometer (3-mile) danger zone around the crater as the local administrations in Central Java and Yogyakarta provinces closely monitor the situation.

The 2,968-meter (9,737-foot) volcano is on the densely populated island of Java and near the ancient city of Yogyakarta. It is the most active of dozens of Indonesian volcanoes and has repeatedly erupted with lava and gas clouds recently.

Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed 347 people.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of seismic fault lines around the ocean.

[Japan] Japan's COVID crisis reawakens deflation fears as cash hoarding returns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:00 AM, Leika Kihara, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

A spike in coronavirus infections in Japan is driving local households to do what they have always done in times of crisis: spend less and save more, stoking fears of a deeper retail recession and grinding deflation.

Fifty-year-old Hiromi Suzuki is doing just that having quit her job at a Tokyo novelty store in December after the pandemic hit sales.

"I try not to spend money," she said, walking her dog in the city. "Since I don't go out much, I don't buy cosmetics or clothes any more."

Suzuki's case exemplifies the trouble Japan faces as COVID state of emergency measures were reinstated in January, hitting spending on services, which makes up one-third of total consumption.

High-frequency data shows consumption began to falter even before January's state of emergency, catching policymakers off guard and forcing both the government and central bank to cut their assessments on private spending.

"Service spending is slumping sharply," Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda said last week. "We don't expect Japan to return to deflation. But we need to keep vigilant on price moves given very high uncertainty over the outlook."

While demand for some goods is holding up, analysts warn it won't be strong enough to offset deflationary pressures caused by weak service spending.

"The economy will be in bad shape in the first quarter, which would push prices down," said Hiroshi Ugai, chief Japan economist at JPMorgan Securities. "Prices will essentially remain weak this year."

Despite a rebound after initial lockdown measures were lifted in May, consumption later lost momentum, falling more than 4% in November from January's pre-pandemic levels, according to a BOJ gauge of spending.

That was mostly due to a 10% slump in services spending, which contrasted with an 8% gain in durable goods consumption.

The pain continued in December with consumption falling 11.5% from a year ago, mainly due to a 20% drop in services spending, according to research firm Nowcast and credit card company JCB.

Spending on eat-outs fell 36% and while dining at "izakaya" bars slumped 47%, both marking the biggest declines since May.

A government request for restaurants to close early means retailers are now feeling the pinch.

Monterozza, which runs several popular pub chains, said it was closing 61 of its 337 locations in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, beverage giant Suntory Holdings CEO Takeshi Niinami predicts that 30% of all bars and restaurants might fail in the coming months.

The average number of customers per restaurant fell 60% in January from a year ago, data by booking site TableCheck showed, faster than a 23% slide in November and a 40% drop in December.

And Japanese households aren't spending much on other items either. A BOJ survey showed more than 70% of households don't plan to change the amount spent to enjoy time at home.

Instead, they are hoarding cash in banks, as they have done through every crisis including the two decades of debilitating deflation that haunted Japan until 2013.

Bank deposits surged 9.3% in December from a year earlier to a record 803 trillion yen (\$7.74 trillion).

Households are expected to have saved 45.8 trillion yen, or 8.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), last year, up from 14.5 trillion in 2019, estimates by HSBC showed.

"Unless fears over the pandemic are wiped out, the money piling up in bank accounts won't be spent," said Toshihiro Nagahama, chief economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute.

The BOJ has downplayed concerns about a return to deflation, arguing that companies aren't cutting prices across the board as doing so would eat already thin margins.

Nonetheless, core consumer prices fell 1.0% in December from a year earlier, marking the biggest drop in a decade, a sign weak demand is heightening deflationary pressures.

Even fashion group Fast Retailing Co Ltd, seen as resilient due to brisk demand for its casual at-home attire, plans to lower prices of discount brand GU's spring and summer collections.

While Fast Retailing is wary of cutting prices at its main Uniqlo brand, discounts are planned in coming months to reduce inventory, CFO Takeshi Okazaki said earlier this month.

The hope is that more households will act like Noriko Indo, an 81-year-old pensioner who keeps a tight rein on spending but occasionally indulges in luxuries like tuna sashimi, her favourite food.

"Once the pandemic is over, I'd like to splurge on travel and shop like crazy at a department store," she said.

[Japan] Newly found Fukushima plant contamination may delay cleanup (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:33 AM, Mari Yamaguchi, 2164K, Negative]

A draft investigation report into the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, adopted by Japanese nuclear regulators Wednesday, says it has detected dangerously high levels of radioactive contamination at two of the three reactors, adding to concerns about decommissioning challenges.

The interim report said data collected by investigators showed that the sealing plugs sitting atop the No. 2 and 3 reactor containment vessels were as fatally contaminated as nuclear fuel debris that had melted and fell to the bottom of the reactors following the March 2011 tsunami and earthquake.

The experts said the bottom of the sealed plug, a triple-layered concrete disc-shaped lid 12 meters (39 feet) in diameter sitting atop the primary containment vessel, is coated with high levels of radioactive Cesium 137.

The No. 1 reactor lid was less contaminated, presumably because the plug was slightly knocked out of place and disfigured due to the impact of the hydrogen explosion, the report said.

The experts measured radiation levels at multiple locations inside the three reactor buildings, and examined how radioactive materials moved and safety equipment functioned during the accident. They also said venting attempt at Unit 2 to prevent reactor damage never worked, and that safety measures and equipment designs still need to be examined.

The lid contamination does not affect the environment as the containment vessels are enclosed inside the reactor buildings. The report did not give further details about if or how the lid contamination would affect the decommissioning progress.

Nuclear Regulation Commission Chairman Toyoshi Fuketa called the findings "extremely serious" and said they would make melted fuel removal "more difficult." He said figuring out how to remove the lids would be a major challenge.

Removing an estimated 900 tons of melted fuel debris from three reactors is a daunting task expected to take decades, and officials have not been able to describe exactly when or how it may end.

The Fukushima plant was to start removing melted fuel debris from Unit 2, the first of three reactors, later this year ahead of the 10th anniversary of the accident. But in December, plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the government announced a delay until 2022.

They said the development of a robotic arm for the debris removal — a joint project with Britain — has been delayed due to the pandemic.

Under the current plan, a remote-controlled robotic arm will be inserted from the side of the reactor to reach the molten fuel mixed with melted parts and concrete floor of the reactor. Eventually the lids also would have to be removed, but their contamination is a major setback.

The team of experts entered areas inside the three reactors that were previously highly contaminated and inaccessible after radiation levels came down significantly. They're seeking data and evidence before they get lost in the cleanup.

Massive radiation from the reactors has caused some 160,000 people to evacuate from around the plant. Tens of thousands are still unable to return home.

[Japan] Olympics: IOC's Pound wants to examine reasons for Japan public's concerns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:50 PM, Chris Gallagher, 5304K, Negative]

Senior International Olympic Committee member Dick Pound says he wants to examine the reasons behind the Japanese public's concerns about hosting the Games this summer after recent polls showed around 80% were opposed to the event going ahead in July.

While much of Japan is under a state of emergency due to a third wave of COVID-19 infections, organisers and the government have vowed to forge ahead with preparations for the postponed Games, which are due to run from July 23 to Aug. 8.

"I know there are those in Japan who question holding the event," Pound told the Asahi newspaper in comments published Wednesday in Japanese.

"Together I would like to scrutinise the reasons and respond. Are they are worried about a large number athletes and others from overseas spreading the coronavirus, are they against the cost, or maybe there are people who just don't like the Olympics."

Pound also appealed for people to take the feelings of athletes into consideration, noting that they had put in many years of work in order to step onto sport's biggest stage.

He said the decision on whether the Games go ahead this summer must be made by May at the latest and stressed that another delay was not possible.

"Personally, I think it's possible to hold the Games this summer," Pound said. "Several vaccines have been developed and people in the world are being vaccinated. The risk of coronavirus infection can be reduced."

[Japan] Japan PM apologizes after lawmakers' night club outings (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:52 PM, Yoshifumi Takemoto, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga apologised on Wednesday after lawmakers from his ruling coalition visited night clubs despite his government's call for people to avoid unnecessary outings to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The news is another headache for Suga whose approval rating has tumbled due to dissatisfaction with his handling of the pandemic, which critics have called too slow and inconsistent.

"I'm terribly sorry that this happened when we are asking people not to eat out after 8 p.m. and to avoid non-essential, non-urgent outings," Suga told parliament.

"Each lawmaker should behave to gain the public's understanding."

Japan this month issued a state of emergency in Tokyo and other areas to tame a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases. The measure includes a request for restaurants and bars to close by 8 p.m. although there are currently no penalties for non-compliance.

"My behaviour was careless at a time when we are asking people to be patient," Jun Matsumoto, a senior lawmaker from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters.

Matsumoto was speaking following a Daily Shincho magazine report that he had visited two night clubs in Tokyo's posh Ginza district after dining at an Italian restaurant last Monday.

Kiyohiko Toyama, a lawmaker from the coalition's junior partner Komeito, also apologised after tabloid Shukan Bunshun reported he had visited a high-end night club in Ginza until late last Friday.

Twitter users voiced their frustration.

"It is just a matter of time before public anger explodes. I don't want a blanket cash-payout of 100,000 yen (\$965), I want them to quit!" wrote one user.

"They are really stupid. Don't they think about what they are doing and how the public sees them? If they don't, they are unqualified to represent the public," said another.

[Singapore] Singapore faces talent crunch as tech giants scale up (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 12:48 AM, Chen Lin, Aradhana Aravindan, 11261K, Neutral]

At least three recruiters approach Singapore-based software engineer Xiao Yuguang every day with job offers.

Demand for Xiao's skills has soared since he graduated in 2014 with a computer engineering degree but now he just ignores the offers, having recently joined TikTok owner Bytedance after several years with Southeast Asia's Grab.

"It's not like I want to change jobs frequently," said Xiao.

Singapore is aiming to become a regional tech hub but faces a severe talent crunch as more firms move in, interviews with more than a dozen recruiters, companies and workers show.

China's Tencent, Bytedance, U.S.-based Zoom Video Communications and unicorn Grab

and Sea Ltd are among companies expanding in Singapore, fueling a war for tech talent in the city-state, where the jobless rate had reached a 16-year high due to a coronavirus-induced recession.

"Certain member companies have been expanding their operations ... and looking to hire more data scientists, more coders," said Lei Hsien-Hsien, chief executive officer at the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

"So the demand is very strong but the supply is relatively weak, which then slows down some of the expansion plans."

Up to 500 new tech vacancies are posted each week on job sites, according to NodeFlair, which is helping hire for Bytedance and Sea's e-commerce business Shopee.

The information communications sector would need another 60,000 professionals over the next three years, cabinet minister Vivian Balakrishnan said in June.

In response to a Reuters query on the figure, the communications ministry said in mid-September there were nearly 10,000 tech-related job postings on a government-run careers portal and another 6,800 jobs and traineeships would be created by June 2021 through industry partnerships.

Border curbs due to the coronavirus and tighter foreign worker policies are delaying overseas hiring, exacerbating the shortage, some headhunters said. Some tech professionals can command pay increases of up to 30% when they switch jobs.

"It's not sustainable," said Daljit Sall at recruitment firm Randstad, who expects salaries to even out once borders reopen and as the talent pool develops.

The government has been re-training thousands of people with tech skills while the intake for IT courses at Singapore colleges has risen 17% over the past three years to about 7,600 for the 2020 academic year.

Singapore, an Asian base for many multinationals and banks, has for years had a tight labour market and the country of 5.7 million people does not yet have the capacity to quickly match the tech skills and experience the industry needs.

"There are a lot of tech companies coming in and it's a small island," said Raagulan Pathy, head of enterprise Asia Pacific at Zoom, which plans to hire hundreds of engineers.

"The simple maths of it means that at a certain point you are going to run out of talent," said Pathy, adding that Singapore's programme for allocating visas for foreign workers was pragmatic.

For now, the labour crunch does not seem to be putting anyone off. The Economic Development Board (EDB) is getting healthy interest from global tech companies keen to expand operations, it said.

"We constantly seek to ensure companies who set up here have access to a strong

Singaporean workforce complemented by a diverse foreign workforce," said Managing Director Chng Kai Fong.

The EDB has various programmes to bridge the skills shortage including one that helps tech companies bring in talent from overseas and a new work visa for top-tier tech executives.

The work visa, launched this month, has prompted many enquiries, recruiters said. But it is limited to 500 participants and has strict criteria.

Companies are finding ways to cope. Shopping rewards platform ShopBack resorts to reallocating workload to its existing engineers to meet new demands.

Fintech firm Nium's 250-strong engineering team is in India. Its 13-strong team of product managers is being doubled in Singapore, CEO Prajit Nanu said.

Singapore's open economy was hit hard by the pandemic, airlines and tourism in particular, and former Singapore Airlines flight attendant Alloysius Lee is thankful he decided to study data analytics.

"I feel lucky ... I spent the past few years learning and picking up a new skill," said Lee, 32.

[South Korea] South Korea Now Seeks Ways to Live With Low Birth Rate (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:41 PM, Jiyeun Lee, 6400K, Neutral]

After years of failed efforts to boost the birth rate, South Korea's government now says it will focus some of its energy on learning to live with population decline, rather than simply trying to halt it.

The government has "found it will be difficult to reverse the low birth rate trend in the near future" and so will be adopting a "two track" approach of encouraging births, while finding ways to adjust the economy to a shrinking and aging population, according to a joint statement from 11 ministries on Wednesday.

South Korea's fertility rate of 0.92 was the world's lowest in 2019, and likely fell further last year as the uncertainty of the pandemic discouraged young people from marrying and having children. The population fell for the first time ever last year, while more people opting to live alone pushed the number of households to a record.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the negative shock from declining population by causing career breaks for women facing increased childcare burdens and disrupting the inflow of foreign workers," the statement said.

The statement announced the launch of a third government task force on population policy since President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, and outlined its goals.

To minimize the economic hit from a declining population, the government plans to encourage more women and seniors to stay in the labor force, while also seeking ways to

accept more foreign workers.

The government will develop a new visa to attract researchers and other professionals from overseas, while also providing ways to help retired people open their own businesses.

Korea will also strengthen "legal and institutional support" for non-traditional types of families such as those based on common-law marriage or non-married couples with babies. Various residential and safety measures for single households will be considered.

The government plans to release detailed measures from May.

[South Korea] South Korea reports big jump in COVID-19 cases on outbreaks in Christian schools (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 10:00 PM, Sangmi Cha, 5304K, Negative]

South Korean authorities were scrambling on Wednesday to contain coronavirus outbreaks centred around Christian schools as the country reported a jump in infections, dampening hopes of a speedy exit from a third wave of the pandemic.

A total of 297 COVID-19 cases had been traced to six churches and mission schools run by a Christian organisation, senior health official Yoon Tae-ho told a briefing.

More than 100 cases were confirmed overnight among people linked to a church and its mission school in Gwangju, about 270 kms (168 miles) south of Seoul, officials said. Another 171 cases had been linked to an affiliated school in the city of Daejeon since Jan. 17.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) said the Daejeon mission school outbreak appeared to have been spreading for some time before it was detected.

The Christian organisation responsible for the facilities, International Mission, was ordered to test everyone linked to 32 of its 40 schools and churches around the country.

The group apologised for not taking early measures to prevent the outbreak. It said that while some infected students may have been asymptomatic it had also failed to require students with cold-like symptoms to get tested.

"We deeply apologise for not responding earlier and for thinking the students could have had a cold when a student first developed fever," it said in a statement.

The organisation said it would submit a full list of students and staff in its schools nationwide.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun called on people affiliated with the affected facilities to get tested.

"The key is speed. I call on the authorities and local governments to make all-out efforts to identify related facilities and prevent further transmission," Chung told a government briefing.

The KDCA reported 559 new cases as of midnight on Tuesday, up from 354 a day before, bringing the national tally to 76,429 infections with 1,378 deaths.

South Korea had managed to keep the virus under control thanks to aggressive testing and contact-tracing, but a third wave that broke out late last year has proven more difficult to contain.

The KDCA has said 45.4% of infections in the country over the past year were caused by cluster infections emerging from specific close-knit groups. Religious facilities were the main source of such clusters.

[Taiwan] Taiwanese man fined \$35K for breaking home quarantine 7 times (CNN)
CNN [1/27/2021 12:13 AM, Lilit Marcus, 7975K, Negative]

A Taiwanese man has been fined \$1 million New Taiwan Dollars (\$35,000) for repeatedly breaking his home quarantine.

The unnamed man, who lives in Taichung in central Taiwan, was doing a home quarantine in his apartment building after returning from a business trip to mainland China and violated it at least seven times, according to local media.

According to TTV News, the man left his apartment building seven times in just three days to go shopping, get his car fixed and more. He reportedly got into an altercation with one of his neighbors when they confronted him about leaving his home during quarantine.

The Taichung local government confirmed that the man returned from the mainland on January 21. Taiwan's regulations require quarantining for 14 days.

Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen denounced it as "a serious offense" and added that the man "must be given severe punishment."

In addition to the fine -- which is the highest one yet levied in Taiwan -- the man will have to pay \$3,000 NTD (\$107) per day for the cost of his quarantine. The Taiwanese government has been compensating quarantiners \$1,000 NTD (\$35) per day, which he will no longer be eligible for.

Taiwan has been one of the biggest success stories in the world when it comes to containing the coronavirus. The self-governed island closed its border early on, implemented mass testing and contact tracing and has strictly enforced quarantines.

In December 2020, a migrant worker from the Philippines was fined \$3,500 for violating his quarantine for a grand total of eight seconds. The man, who was quarantining in a government-sanctioned hotel, briefly stepped into the hallway outside his room and was captured on CCTV.

As a result of these tight controls, the island of 23 million people has recorded just 889 coronavirus cases and seven deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[Thailand] Thailand reports 819 new virus cases, 1 additional death (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:42 PM, Chayut Setboonsarng, Panarat Thepgumpanat, 5304K, Negative]

Thailand on Wednesday reported 819 new coronavirus cases, taking its total infections to 15,465.

One additional death was reported, bringing total fatalities to 76. More than 700 of the new infections were in Samut Sakhon province, the epicentre of the most recent outbreak, the COVID-19 taskforce said at a briefing.

[Vietnam] Vietnam's Communist Party chief nominated for re-election: state media (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:49 PM, James Pearson, 5304K, Neutral]

Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief and the architect of the country's anti-corruption campaign, has been nominated to serve a rare third term, a Party official said on Wednesday, according to state media.

On Monday, over 1,600 party delegates began nine days of meetings, mostly behind closed doors, at a five-yearly congress. The meetings will pick a new leadership team, aiming to bolster Vietnam's ongoing economic success - and the legitimacy of the Party's rule.

Trong, 76, who is also Vietnam's president, had been widely tipped to continue as party chief despite health issues and old age - which should technically disqualify him for the position, although "special case" exceptions are granted.

"According to the Party Charter, members of the Central Committee up for re-election must not be over 60 and re-elected Politburo members must be under 65," delegate Hau A Lenh told the state-run Tien Phong newspaper.

"The General Secretary and President is one of the overage nominees and a special case," Lenh told Tien Phong.

Vietnam has no paramount ruler and is officially led by four 'pillars': the chief of its Communist Party, a president, a prime minister and the National Assembly chair.

While ascent to the highest levels of Vietnamese politics is governed by party regulations, in reality the highly secretive process revolves around building consensus and vying for control of the powerful, decision-making Politburo.

That means exceptions to rules are often granted - especially if consensus on the top candidates cannot be reached.

Since coming to power in 2011, Trong has become one of Vietnam's most powerful figures in decades after he emerged on top in a power struggle against the former prime minister at the last congress in 2016.

His "blazing furnace" crackdown on corruption, as it has been officially dubbed, has seen dozens of high level officials - including one politburo member - sentenced to lengthy jail

terms.

Government critics have described the crackdown as politically motivated.

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Taliban backs vaccine drive as Afghan government receives \$112 million funding pledge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Hamid Shalizi and Abdul Qadir Sediqi, Neutral]

The Taliban militant movement gave its backing on Tuesday for a coronavirus vaccination campaign in Afghanistan that has received a \$112 million pledge from the World Health Organization's COVAX programme. The immunisation drive will have to take place amid relentless violence in the country despite the government and the Taliban insurgents opening peace talks in September.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters that the group would "support and facilitate" the vaccination drive conducted via health centres. Officials believe the insurgents would not target vaccine teams as they would not be going door-to-door.

Announcing the funding, an Afghan health official said the programme would cover the 20% of the country's 38 million population. The COVAX programme is a global scheme to vaccinate people in poor and middle income countries against the coronavirus. It aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20% of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and middle-income countries.

Afghanistan's Deputy Health Minister Waheed Majroh told journalists it was going to take six months to get the vaccines but authorities were in discussions to get them earlier.

Afghanistan has registered 54,854 infections and 2,390 deaths - but experts say cases are significantly underreported due to low testing and limited access to medical facilities in the war-torn country. Aside from COVAX, the country has also received a pledge of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from India. Dr Ghulam Dastagir Nazari, head of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation at Afghanistan's health ministry, told Reuters.

"The AstraZeneca brand which is manufactured in India will arrive soon in Afghanistan," Nazari said, adding that the government was only concerned about the WHO approval of the vaccine and that the pre-qualification process has already started.

An Indian government source confirmed that 500,000 doses had been set aside for Afghanistan and another official said the first batch of vaccines would land in February, though Kabul had not yet adopted the protocols to administer them.

The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have also said they would finance vaccines for another 20% of the population by the end of 2022, health ministry spokeswoman Masouma Jafari told Reuters.

[India] Farmers back at protest camp after deep challenge to PM Modi (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:32 PM, Ashok Sharma, 2164K, Negative]

Tens of thousands of farmers who stormed the historic Red Fort on India's Republic Day were again camped outside the capital Wednesday after the most volatile day of their two-month standoff left one protester dead and more than 80 police officers injured.

The protests demanding the repeal of new agricultural laws have grown into a rebellion that is rattling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. On Tuesday, more than 10,000 tractors and thousands more people on foot or horseback tried to advance into the capital, shoving aside barricades and buses blocking their path and at times met by police using tear gas and water cannons.

Their brief takeover of the 17th century fort, which was the palace of Mughal emperors, played out live Indian news channels. The farmers, some carrying ceremonial swords, ropes and sticks, overwhelmed police. In a profoundly symbolic challenge to Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, the protesters who stormed Red Fort hoisted a Sikh religious flag.

"The situation is normal now. The protesters have left the streets of the capital," New Delhi police officer Anto Alphonse said Wednesday morning.

Most New Delhi roads were reopened to vehicles by midnight Tuesday, hours after the protest organizer, Samyukt Kisan Morcha, or United Farmers' Front, called off the tractor march and accused two outside groups of sabotage by infiltrating their otherwise peaceful movement.

"Even if it was a sabotage, we can't escape responsibility," said Yogendra Yadav, a protest leader.

He didn't say whether the protesters will go ahead with another march planned for Feb. 1 when the Modi government is scheduled to present the annual budget in Parliament.

Yadav said frustration had built up among the protesting farmers and "how do you control it if the government is not serious about what they have been demanding for two months."

Tuesday's escalation overshadowed Republic Day celebrations, including the annual military parade that was already scaled back because of the coronavirus pandemic. Authorities shut some metro train stations, and mobile internet service was suspended in some parts of the capital, a frequent tactic of the government to thwart protests.

The farmers — many of them Sikhs from Punjab and Haryana states — tried to march into New Delhi in November but were stopped by police. Since then, unfazed by the winter cold and frequent rains, they have hunkered down at the edge of the city and threatened to besiege it if the farm laws are not repealed.

Neeraja Choudhury, a political analyst, said the government failed to anticipate what was coming and prepare for it adequately. "If the farmers are agitated overall India, you can't dismiss the protests as some opposition inciting the farmers."

The police statement said 86 personnel injured in clashes with farmers. Several of them jumped into a deep dry drain in the fort area to escape the protesters who outnumbered

them at several places.

Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

Police said the protesting farmers broke away from the approved protest routes and resorted to "violence and vandalism." Eight buses and 17 private vehicles were damaged, said police, who filed four cases over vandalism against the protesters.

The government insists the agricultural laws passed by Parliament in September will benefit farmers and boost production through private investment. But the farmers fear it will turn agricultural corporate and leave them behind. The government has offered to suspend the laws for 18 months, but the farmers want nothing less than a full repeal.

Since returning to power for a second term, Modi's government has been rocked by several convulsions. The pandemic sent India's already-teetering economy into its first-ever recession, social strife has widened and his government has been questioned over its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2019, the year that witnessed the first major protests against his administration, a diverse coalition of groups rallied against a contentious new citizenship law that they said discriminated against Muslims.

"The government on the national security front has failed. I think this government seems to be quite blinkered on the kind of security challenges that it is creating for itself by alienating minority communities, Muslims and Sikhs," said Arti Jerath, a political analyst.

India is predominantly Hindu while Muslims comprise 14% and Sikhs nearly 2% of its nearly 1.4 billion people.

[India] Protesters supporting Indian farmers demonstrate in NYC (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 6:03 PM, David R. Martin and Deepti Hajela, 13480K, Neutral]

Demonstrators showing solidarity with protesting farmers in India rallied Tuesday outside the Indian consulate in New York, some honking their car horns while others stood in the snowy weather, yelling slogans and waving flags.

The crowd gathered on Manhattan's east side on India's Republic Day, a national holiday that honors the anniversary of India's constitution coming into effect. Indian farmers have been protesting for nearly two months over new laws they say will benefit big corporations and wreak havoc on the earnings of smaller scale farmers. They want the laws withdrawn.

Drivers sounded their horns as they went by the blocked-off street where the consulate is located, off Fifth Avenue near Central Park. Those who stood on the street chanted against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with one sign reading: "Someone stop their boy Modi before he eats us too! Save the farmers!"

Parminder Singh came from Chicago, saying his family in the Indian state of Punjab was

"getting hurt by the law that's made by the Indian government right now."

Many of the farmers are Sikhs from the northern state and neighboring Haryana, which are major agricultural producers. Among those at the New York march were protesters calling for the establishment of Khalistan, a separate homeland for members of the religion, and carrying flags emblazoned with the name of the secessionist movement.

"We are here today to challenge India, who has carried out the genocide of Sikhs and enacted farm bills to carry out the homicide of the Sikhs and the farmers of Punjab and Haryana," said Bakhshish Singh Sandhu, of Philadelphia, the president of the Council of Khalistan. "And so we are here to challenge India under their constitution. It has attacked the Sikh identity and Sikh religious institutions."

Organizers said other protests were planned at consulates in other parts of the country on Tuesday. Other solidarity protests have been held around the United States in the last two months, in cities including Houston and San Francisco.

In India on Republic Day, tens of thousands of farmers stormed the historic Red Fort in New Delhi, breaking through police barricades and shocking onlookers watching as it was broadcast on live television.

Indian authorities used tear gas, water cannons and placed large trucks and buses in roads to try to hold back crowd, including rows upon rows of tractors. Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

[India] Security tight at Red Fort after clashes with farmers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Alasdair Pal, Neutral]

Hundreds of police guarded the historic Red Fort in the heart of the Indian capital on Wednesday following violent clashes between farmers and authorities in which one person was killed and at least 80 injured. Tens of thousands of farmers, protesting against reforms of the agriculture sector that they say benefit big private buyers at the expense of growers, have been camped on the outskirts of the city for two months to demand the reforms be scrapped.

A protest parade of tractors around the city's fringes to coincide with Tuesday's Republic Day celebrations turned to chaos when some farmers diverged from agreed routes, breaking through barricades and clashing with police, who used tear gas and batons to try to restrain them.

Some farmers carrying ceremonial swords reached as far as the Red Fort, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi gives an annual speech, where they scaled outer walls and hoisted flags.

By Tuesday evening police, had removed protesters from the fort complex but a heavy security presence remained on Wednesday. Agriculture employs about half of India's population of 1.3 billion, and unrest among an estimated 150 million landowning farmers is one of the biggest tests Modi has faced since coming to power in 2014.

While the protests are beginning to undermine support for Modi in the countryside, he retains a solid majority in parliament and his government has shown no sign of bending to farmers' demands.

The government says agriculture reform will open up new opportunities for farmers.

Police said they had registered 22 cases against protesters including "rioting, damage to public property and assault on public servants with deadly weapons" in several locations. Roads across the New Delhi remained closed while extra police, including paramilitary were at protest sites on the outskirts.

The government blocked the internet in some parts of the capital, and mobile speeds were low.

Tuesday's violence was condemned by Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the group of farm unions organising the protests, who they have promised to press on with their sit-ins on the outskirts.

"They have to listen to us," said protester Baljeet Singh.

[India] India Has Plenty of Coronavirus Vaccines But Few Takers (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 4:00 PM, Bibhudatta Pradhan and Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 6400K, Neutral]

Most of the world is struggling to secure enough vaccines to inoculate their populations. India has the opposite problem: Plenty of shots, but a shortage of people willing to take them.

As India rolls out one of the world's biggest inoculation programs, some health-care and other frontline workers are hesitating because of safety concerns over a vaccine that has yet to complete phase III trials. As of Monday, only about 56% of people eligible to get the shot have stepped forward in a nation with the world's second-worst Covid-19 outbreak.

Unless the inoculation rate significantly increases, India will fall far short of its target of inoculating 300 million people -- or about a quarter of the population -- by July. That will setback global efforts to contain the virus and snuff out optimism that a recovery is taking root in an economy set for its biggest annual contraction in records going back to 1952.

"At least 40% of doctors here are unsure and want to wait," said Vinod Kumar, a resident doctor at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences of Patna, in the eastern state of Bihar. "Carrying out a vaccine trial on us when India is short of doctors, health-care workers doesn't make sense."

While vaccine hesitancy has surfaced in places like Japan and Brazil, and China's candidates have also faced questions over data, the scale of the problem in India is by far the biggest. The major difficulties facing places like the U.S. and Europe are mostly due to scarce supplies rather than vaccine acceptance, and some countries are turning to New Delhi for help: India says it can produce 500 million shots per month for export, and

countries such as the U.K., Belgium and Saudi Arabia have sought to buy them.

India's domestic vaccine program administers one of two shots: the AstraZeneca Plc vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India Ltd., or the Covaxin shot developed by Bharat Biotech International Ltd., a private company based in Hyderabad. India's approval of the Bharat Biotech shot, which was developed with government-backed research groups, was met with widespread criticism from scientists because of the lack of complete data.

"Many in our institute aren't comfortable with Covaxin because we don't know how effective it is," said Adarsh Pratap Singh, a member of the Resident Doctors Association at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. "To build trust among people the government must come out with the data, evidence of the trials, and encourage free and fair discussions."

Both the company and the government have defended the shot. Krishna Ella, Bharat Biotech's chairman, said earlier this month that the company carried out "200% honest clinical trials" and had a track record of producing 16 safe and effective vaccines. "Indian scientists want to bash on other Indian scientists," he said while dismissing criticisms in a virtual press briefing on Jan. 4. A spokesperson for Bharat Biotech didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

The government, meanwhile, has urged health-care workers to get vaccinated. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan has sent tweets imploring "#CoronaWarriors" to take the shot, while dispelling rumors that the vaccine could cause infertility. A federal health ministry spokesperson wasn't immediately available to comment.

"Vaccine hesitancy among health workers should end -- I am pleading on behalf of the government, that please adopt it, because no one knows how this pandemic will take shape in the future," said V. K. Paul, a member of the planning body Niti Aayog, noting that he's taken the Covaxin shot without any adverse effects.

"These two vaccines are safe," he said. "We have a system to track it and if there is an unusual signal, it will be responded to the way it should be."

Initial apprehension and doubt at the start of any vaccine rollout is normal, said Preeti Sudan, former secretary at the federal ministry of health and family welfare. India was successful in its polio immunization program, she noted, after launching a massive campaign involving children, mothers and opinion leaders to help dispel vaccine fears.

Low Vaccination Rates

As of Monday, India distributed about 2 million shots nationwide. In Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in central India, about 75% of enrolled people turned up for vaccination on Jan. 21, while two days later in Bihar the rate was much lower at 51.6%. On Jan. 19, about 55% of those eligible were vaccinated in Rajasthan and 54% in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, according to state government data.

While the hesitation relates to both vaccines, people are most wary about Bharat Biotech's

Covaxin. In Tamil Nadu, for example, only 23.5% of those allocated Covaxin received the shots on Jan. 19, compared with 56% for the Serum Institute's Covishield, the data show.

Nirmalya Mohapatra, a doctor at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi, plans to "wait and watch" for more clarity before getting vaccinated with Bharat Biotech's shot. If given a choice now, he would opt for Covishield, as its efficacy data was reviewed by leading medical journals.

"Covaxin could turn out to be a better vaccine in the future," said Mohapatra, who is also vice president of the resident doctors' association at the hospital. "But for now there is some apprehension because of the lack of a complete trial."

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Biden DOJ rescinds Trump 'zero tolerance' policy that resulted in family separations at border (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 8:00 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 394K, Neutral]

The Biden administration rescinded a Trump-era policy that had forced migrant families to be separated at the border so that the adults could be prosecuted for unlawful entry.

The Justice Department's top official issued a memo Tuesday that walked back the "zero tolerance" policy, which called for federal law enforcement personnel on the border to refer for prosecution all adults, including those who arrived with children, who illegally crossed the border. The policy only applied to first-time offenders.

"Consistent with this longstanding principle of making individualized assessments in criminal cases, I am rescinding — effective immediately — the policy directive," acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson wrote in a memo shared with the Washington Examiner.

A DOJ spokesperson said in an email that the policy "was inconsistent with the department's longstanding principle that we exercise judgment and make individualized assessments in criminal cases," adding that the move "restores to prosecutors their traditional discretion to make charging decisions based on a careful review of the particular facts and circumstances of individual immigration cases."

The DOJ's move was largely symbolic as the policy has not been enforced since the summer of 2018, but it represents the new administration doing away with its predecessor's tough tone toward immigrants and vows to consider prosecutions on a case-by-case basis. The policy has technically remained on the books even though it was not being followed.

In an effort to deter illegal migration occurring between the Mexican border and Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, the Trump administration in early 2017 rolled out the zero tolerance policy in several regions of the 2,000-mile-long boundary. In April 2018, former President Donald Trump's first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, announced that the Department of Homeland Security would be prosecuting all adults who illegally crossed the southern border in an attempt to deter more people from coming, in light of the increased migration of Central Americans. Because children cannot be held in jail, adults with children had not been prosecuted until then, but the influx of families prompted the government to

take the new harsh action. Separated children were to be transferred to the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, then placed with sponsors in the United States. The initiative was stopped in June 2018 following outcry from Democrats and Republicans.

As of January, an estimated 5,400 families who were separated at the border and more than 600 children have yet to be reunited more than two years later, according to a court filing submitted earlier this month.

A Justice Department audit released this month concluded that Sessions and then-Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein advanced the plan knowing that it would prompt thousands of children to be temporarily orphaned. The DOJ leaders wrongly assumed the courts and federal agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the HHS, would be able to accommodate and track each member of the divided families.

President Biden said last week that his Justice Department will conduct a thorough investigation into the implementation of the policy.

Any person arrested after illegally crossing the U.S. border from Mexico or Canada is taken into custody by Border Patrol, which is part of Customs and Border Protection, a DHS agency. He or she is then transferred from a regional Border Patrol holding station to ICE for longer detention, or immediately removed from the country by CBP, or in the case of children who arrive without parents or are separated from a parent by the government, turned over to ORR, the federal agency that cares for unaccompanied children.

DHS and CBP did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

[Brazil] Brazil approaches 9 million COVID-19 cases, death toll at 218,878 (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 4:19 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Brazil had 61,963 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,214 deaths from COVID-19, the Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

The South American country has now registered 8,933,356 cases since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 218,878, according to ministry data, in the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil's Health Minister under investigation over health crisis in Amazonas (CNN)
CNN [1/26/2021 5:00 PM, Marcia Reverdosa and Tara John, 7975K, Neutral]

A Brazilian court has approved an investigation into Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, after oxygen shortages collapsed the health system of Manaus, capital city of Amazonas state, last week.

Federal Supreme Court Judge Ricardo Lewandowski greenlit the investigation on Monday. Pazuello now has five days to provide testimony to the federal police.

It is alleged that the Ministry of Health was alerted to the city's looming shortages of oxygen -- often critical for treating severe cases of Covid-19 -- on January 8, but only took action on

January 12, according to a request for a probe sent to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) by the political party Cidadania.

Pazuello himself visited Manaus on January 11, and the federal government subsequently sent supplemental oxygen to the city, but neither were enough to prevent a crisis. Hospitals in Amazonas soon ran out of oxygen, and on January 14 and 15 at least 29 patients died due to the shortages, according to an ongoing investigation.

"The reality is that there's a lower supply of oxygen," Pazuello acknowledged later. "Not an interruption, but a lower supply of oxygen."

Pazuello and other top federal officials have defended the government's reaction to warnings of a crisis in Manaus, arguing that no one could have predicted the rapid spike in Covid-19 cases that strained hospitals.

"This was a situation completely unknown to everyone. It was too fast," Pazuello told a press conference on Tuesday.

He added that the city's health crisis was compounded by a number of issues including "oxygen problems, lack of professionals, low number of beds."

A separate report by Brazil's Solicitor General has also alleged that during Pazuello's trip to Manaus, he encouraged medical professionals to adopt an "early treatment" kit against Covid-19 that includes unproven drugs including hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. The health minister has since denied doing this.

House of Representatives President Rodrigo Maia told a Monday press conference that he believed Pazuello had "committed a crime" not only by letting the state's health system collapse, but by promoting ineffective treatments for the city's surging Covid-19 cases and by failing to obtain vaccines for the country earlier.

Mounting criticism

The growing criticism of Pazuello's pandemic response in Manaus follows a recent investigation by CNN Brazil, which found that top executive Abert Bourla sent a letter to the Brazilian government in September offering 70 million doses of its vaccine, which was co-developed with German pharmaceutical company BioNTech.

But Pfizer received no response from the government, according to CNN Brazil.

Pazuello responded to a request for comment by CNN Brazil with an open letter saying that the purchase would only have frustrated Brazilians, as just 2 million doses would have been delivered in the first quarter of 2021.

He also said that certain conditions of the sale were unacceptable to the Brazilian government -- including a payment guarantee and an agreement that contractual issues be tried in a US court -- and accused the drugmaker of "creating embarrassing situations for the Brazilian Government, which will not accept market impositions -- which will also not be accepted by Brazilians."

Brazil began its vaccination campaign last Saturday, but the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro has faced mounting criticism for its mishandling of the pandemic. Since the pandemic began, the country ratcheted more than 8.8 million infections and the second highest number of deaths in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

[Cuba] Cuba's coronavirus cases, death toll surge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:29 PM, Sarah Marsh and Nelson Acosta, 5304K, Neutral]

Cuba's death toll from the coronavirus reached 200 on Tuesday, with authorities reporting nearly as many deaths so far in January as in the six previous months combined, due to an unprecedented acceleration in infections.

While Cuba had just a tenth of the world average of daily infections per capita for much of last year, cases have surged since the government reopened borders in November and loosened restrictions on daily life.

The health ministry has reported 54 deaths in January so far compared with 60 in the previous six months, with daily infection numbers hitting new records on a regular basis - 786 on Tuesday - and cases spread throughout the Caribbean island nation.

Like many countries, Cuba suffered the rebound in cases after opening borders without requiring inbound travelers to provide negative coronavirus test results.

That coincided with a diminished sense of risk as its outbreak appeared successfully contained, not helped by authorities holding rallies celebrating Cuba's socialist values, analysts say.

Many Cubans who live in hard-hit countries like the United States and Mexico flew over to celebrate Christmas and New Year with their relatives on the island, failing to quarantine properly and infecting locals.

The government has since brought down infections from abroad by requiring travelers to present negative coronavirus test results. And it has imposed a new lockdown with schools and restaurants closed throughout much of the island and cultural and sporting activities once more suspended.

The government has also promised to vaccinate the entire population this year with one of its four vaccine candidates that are currently undergoing early and mid-phase trials.

Some Cubans, though, worry whether and when any of those candidates will prove successful. And many complain how hard it is to practice social distancing when they must queue up for hours to shop for scarce goods due to the economic crisis.

[Cuba] Cuba detects presence of South African variant of the coronavirus (Miami Herald)

Miami Herald [1/26/2021 3:11 AM, Nora Gámez Torres, 381K, Neutral]

Cuba has detected a potentially more contagious COVID-19 variant, just as the island experiences its biggest uptick in new cases since the start of the pandemic, health authorities said.

Cuban officials reported the presence of the "501Y.V2" variant first detected in South Africa to the Americas' branch of the World Health Organization in an epidemiological report released Tuesday.

The Pan American Health Organization noted that preliminary studies indicate the new strain is associated with a higher viral load, indicating "a potential for greater transmissibility." However, the variant has not been linked to an increased risk of death.

Virus cases have risen significantly in Cuba in recent weeks after months of low infection rates. The island closed its airports to international travelers for nearly eight months and imposed a strict quarantine. But a severe economic downturn compelled authorities to reopen before the holidays. The government blames travelers for the new outbreak. Now in the country's main cities, Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Santa Clara, the virus is spreading mostly among Cuban residents.

Dr. María Guadalupe Guzmán, a top researcher at the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine, known by its Spanish acronym, IPK, said last Friday that the South African strain was detected in an asymptomatic traveler from that country.

The traveler and his close contacts complied with the island's required quarantine, she said. But she wouldn't rule out the possibility it had entered through other travelers as well.

"With the data we have, we cannot say that it is widespread in the country," Guzmán said. "But we cannot rule it out because a high number of cases are being reported daily."

On Tuesday, the country broke a new record for daily COVID-19 cases, with 786 reported. Since Jan. 2, there have been 50 deaths and 9,404 new cases, a figure that represents 43% of all infections since the government began publishing data in March last year.

Although it is still too early to link the circulation of this variant with the increase in cases in Cuba, epidemiologist Carlos Espinal said it is "very important that the IPK remains transparent and shows the results of studies about the dispersion of this variant in Cuba."

"This is another threat that the United States will have to think about — restricting travel to Cuba, most likely in the near future," said Espinal, who heads the Global Health Consortium at Florida International University.

The United States already requires all international travelers to show a negative COVID-19 test upon arrival. It has also suspended the entry of people from South Africa, the United Kingdom and Brazil to contain new, more contagious mutations identified in those countries.

Guzmán and other Cuban public health officials have attributed the spike in cases to the relaxation of preventive measures and a decrease in the perception of risk among the population.

"Irresponsibility cannot continue to prevail in our country," Dr. Francisco Durán García, Cuba's national director of epidemiology, said Tuesday, adding that citizens should play their part. "We cannot achieve [better results] only based on fines and other measures."

The Cuban government reduced the number of international flights arriving on the island, imposed mandatory testing for all travelers, and ordered a strict quarantine in Havana and other cities in recent weeks. Still, the virus does not appear to be abating.

In Havana, there were 344 new cases reported this Tuesday. According to official figures, more than 9,000 people are currently admitted to hospitals nationwide, most of them confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19.

While health authorities have published data on the number of PCR tests performed to diagnose the virus — recording a little more than 1.8 million administered since March 2020 — they have not said how many samples of the virus they regularly analyze to detect the circulation of new strains.

Espinosa said that the presence of new variants requires establishing a program to sequence the virus and determine which mutations circulate in a country.

The South African variant worries experts because some preliminary studies suggest it might be more resistant to treatments and vaccines.

"The South African strain is the great threat," Espinal said. "The risk is that if left unchecked, it could jeopardize the effectiveness of the vaccination program because it has been able to change its protein structure and partially evade the antibody response that vaccines produce."

[Mexico] Mexico near approving Russian vaccine, with little data (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 9:43 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Positive]

Mexico said Tuesday it is close to granting approval for Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, with lots of spy drama but little public data available.

The approval process described by Hugo López-Gatell, Mexico's assistant health secretary, sounded like a Cold War spy thriller, and may not foment confidence in the shot.

López-Gatell said a Mexican technical committee on new medications has recommended approving the vaccine, adding only "some details" were lacking for COFEPRIS, the government medical safety commission, to give the final go-ahead.

"The technical part, the main part of COFEPRIS, particularly the committee on new medications, has given a favorable recommendation to authorize, that is to say, the crucial part has been solved," López-Gatell said.

But he also said that despite weeks of conversations with Russian officials, he could not get his hands on the results of Phase 3 trials, which are normally published in international medical journals and indicate how effective the vaccine is.

Russian officials have given conflicting accounts, upping the supposed effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine to higher levels every time a U.S. vaccine reports its results.

Desperate, but with no published data, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador

ordered López-Gatell to fly to Argentina, which has already approved and is using Sputnik V, to see what information he could get.

The Argentines had to call the Russians to get permission to share the closely-guarded files with the Mexicans.

Within a day or two, the Argentines gave López-Gatell a copy of Phase 3 trial results and other data on the Sputnik vaccine which he spirited back to Mexico, and then submitted to Mexican regulatory officials.

But the plot got thicker, because even though the technical committee has given a favorable recommendation, it turns out the application hasn't even been formally filed yet. Mexican authorities apparently can't grant authorization based on what may be a sheaf of photocopies from who-knows-where obtained through back channels.

López-Gatell said Mexico is currently trying to get the Russians — who don't appear to have much experience dealing with regulatory agencies — to designate a person to formally submit what appears to be an already-approved application.

Mexico has been unable to get more than about 750,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, about half the amount it needs just to inoculate just front-line health workers. Mexico and had pinned its hopes on China's CanSino vaccine.

But delays in approving that shot drove López Obrador to speak directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday to try to get the Russian vaccine, the first doses of which are expected to arrive next week.

It is unclear whether the lack of public data might affect Mexicans' willingness to get vaccinated, without knowing how effective or safe the Russian shot is.

"I do want vaccines, but ones that have been approved by the World Health Organization and the international scientific community," wrote Sen. Lilly Téllez of the conservative opposition National Action Party. "The Russian vaccine does not have that yet."

"It is the cheap vaccine, that is why the government chose it," Téllez wrote in her Twitter account.

[Mexico] Mexico may approve Russian COVID-19 vaccine within days, health official says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:05 PM, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Positive]

Mexico Deputy Health Minister Hugo Lopez-Gatell said on Tuesday that emergency use of Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine should be authorized within days, after a favorable recommendation by a committee within Mexico's health regulator.

The exact arrival of the first shipments of Sputnik V to Mexico had not been confirmed, Lopez-Gatell said, though officials said earlier in the day that 200,000 doses could arrive next week.

[Peru] Peru volunteer in Sinopharm vaccine trial dies of COVID-19 pneumonia, university says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:12 PM, Marco Aquino, 5304K, Negative]

A volunteer in the local Peruvian trial of a coronavirus vaccine produced by China's Sinopharm Group Co Ltd has died from COVID-19-related pneumonia, the university carrying out the trial said on Tuesday.

Cayetano Heredia University, which is involved with the study, said on the instructions of the Peruvian health regulator it had unblinded the volunteer's participation in the trial and determined she had received the placebo rather than the vaccine.

"It is important to stipulate that the death of the participant is not related to the vaccine since she received the placebo, and we will therefore report to the relevant regulatory and ethics bodies and maintain the course of this phase three study," the university said in a statement.

German Malaga, chief researcher at the Cayetano Heredia University, told Reuters by phone that the deceased volunteer had suffered from diabetes.

Malaga said the trial investigators had so far issued two doses of either the vaccine or placebo to 12,000 volunteers and were now following their responses.

"It is developing without any setbacks. These things can happen, COVID is a disease that causes deaths," he said.

"Our message to the volunteers is to take care of themselves because we don't know if they have the vaccine or the placebo," he added.

The university said in its statement that the volunteer had received "all the necessary care to treat this disease and her complications" and was "fighting for her life" for more than a week.

"It is a painful loss for which we extend our condolences to her family," the statement added.

In December, Peru temporarily suspended trials of the Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine due to a "serious adverse event" that occurred with a volunteer in the study.

In Brazil, clinical trials of China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine were suspended before being allowed to resume late last year due to a study subject's death that was registered in Sao Paulo as a suicide.

[Venezuela] Maduro's 'miracle' treatment for COVID-19 draws skeptics (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Scott Smith and Jorge Rueda, Neutral]

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro appears to be counting on yet another "miracle" to save his citizens from COVID-19, promoting a secretive solution with no published scientific evidence he claims will conquer the new coronavirus.

"Ten drops under the tongue every four hours and the miracle is done," Maduro said in a televised appearance on Sunday. "It's a powerful antiviral, very powerful, that neutralizes the coronavirus."

But his government has released no evidence. He even kept secret the name of the "brilliant Venezuelan mind" behind it, saying he needed to protect them. Scientists at home and abroad remained skeptical. The local National Academy of Medicine said it appeared to be derived from the common herb thyme.

It's not the first time the Venezuelan leader has promoted a cure. In October, he notified the Pan American Health Organization that Venezuelan scientists discovered a molecule that nullifies the replication capacity of the new coronavirus. He hasn't spoken of that development since. He's also promoted a special herbal tea he claims can fend off the virus and other ailments.

Other leaders too have embraced solutions dismissed by scientific studies. Former U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro both stubbornly touted an antimalarial drug despite repeated studies finding it ineffective and possibly dangerous.

The new coronavirus hasn't hit Venezuela as hard as other South American countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, though many experts say that's likely because sanctions against Maduro's government have sharply limited travel there.

Maduro said the treatment, which he called carvativir, has been under testing for nine months among Venezuelans ill with the coronavirus. He said he plans to distribute it nationwide and to other nations as well.

Dr. David Boulware, professor of medicine and an infectious diseases physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School, noted the lack of scientific evidence.

"This is, just as with other things, people trying to sell, you know, some magic beans as the solution to a complex problem," Boulware told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "This would be great if it worked, but I would like to see the data."

Venezuela's National Academy of Medicine said "it's prudent ... to wait for more data from the carvativir tests according to international protocols."

Since October, Venezuela has been part of trials for the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia, a staunch ally of Maduro's government. Venezuela signed a contract in December with Russia to buy the vaccine, but inoculations aren't scheduled to start until April.

Rosa Colina, 58, said authorities should do more to get Venezuelans vaccinated sooner. She said colleagues at a local health center and some neighbors have died from COVID-19.

"I'm of the mind that we need the vaccine, not these droplets," she said. "I think that won't have any effect."

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Mali] Mali says joint military operation with France kills 100 jihadists (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 PM, Tiemoko Diallo, 5304K, Negative]

Malian and French forces killed around 100 jihadists and took another 20 captive in a joint operation this January in central Mali, the West African nation's army said in a statement on Tuesday.

It said the campaign lasted from Jan. 2 to Jan. 20 and targeted areas bordering Burkina Faso, where militant groups with links to al Qaeda and Islamic State control large tracts of the remote desert and regularly carry out raids on the army and civilians.

"The purpose of this operation was to force the enemy out of its areas of refuge," the army said.

France has more than 5,100 military personnel based in the West African Sahel region to help counter the militants, an involvement that is facing increased opposition at home and from some quarters in Mali.

Network TV News Coverage**Antony Blinken Confirmed by Senate as Secretary of State (FOX News)**

(B) FOX News [1/26/2021 7:04 PM, Staff]

President Biden's cabinet is coming into focus. Biden's choice for top diplomat won bipartisan support. Antony Blinken has been confirmed as Secretary of State by the Senate with a 78-22 vote. Blinken is a veteran of the State Department, previously serving as the Deputy Secretary of State and Deputy National Security Advisor during the Obama administration. President Biden plans to reorient US foreign policy, already rejoining the Paris climate accord and signaling an openness to reengaging with Iran and the international nuclear deal. The Senate's Homeland Security Committee also advanced Alejandro Mayorkas to lead the Department of Homeland Security, setting up a full Senate vote.

Anger Rises in Europe as Governments Impose New Restrictions, Vaccines in Short Supply (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/26/2021 6:44 PM, Staff]

Anger is rising in Europe as governments impose new COVID restrictions and vaccines are in short supply. All of this is happening as new strains of the coronavirus sweep through the continent. Strict new lockdown measures triggered a backlash of violence that has spread across the Netherlands for three nights running, angered at a night time curfew drawing rioters on the street. Countries across Europe are resorting to extreme measures to stem the spread of the mutant variant of the virus first identified in the UK, far more contagious than the old coronavirus. Tonight, the UK became the first European country to surpass 100,000 deaths. "It is hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Germany has now made surgical grade masks mandatory on public transport and in stores. In rising tensions, the scramble for vaccines has taken a nationalistic tone. After British-based AstraZeneca said they'd fall short of delivering millions of doses to Europe, the EU threatened to block Pfizer vaccine doses to Britain. The European Commission President demanded a return of the billions provided for vaccine development. The EU is expected to approve the AstraZeneca vaccine this Friday. Britain

has vaccinated far more people than any other European country. The vaccine is also awaiting FDA approval in the US.

Experts Warn US Must Do More to Help Vaccinate the World's Poorest Countries (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:49 PM, Staff]

Even with a vaccine struggle at home, experts warn that the US has to do more outside of its borders because if people in other countries aren't vaccinated, the pandemic could drag on for years. Dr. Larry Brilliant, a leading epidemiologist, said, "We are the indispensable country when it comes to global health, and the absence of our leadership has been felt in every state and every country." He noted that the CDC led America and the rest of the world out of every other pandemic we've faced. He says we play a critical role in helping the world access the vaccine. "Until everyone in the world is safe, no one is safe. This is a pandemic. If one country is left unvaccinated, this disease will bounce back and forth and all of us will be constantly besieged by it," Dr. Brilliant said. Canada has already pre-ordered enough vaccine to inoculate every citizen nearly 6 times and the US has enough purchase options to vaccinate nearly 5 times the population, leaving much of the world scrambling. Australia, Canada, and Japan have less than 1% of the coronavirus cases, but they have more doses than all of Latin America and the Caribbean which has close to 20%. That's where COVAX comes in, a coalition of world health organizations, including the World Health Organization and UNICEF. The starting goal is to buy 2 billion doses of vaccine to inoculate 20% in the world's poorest countries.

[Russia] Biden Holds First Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Raises Many Concerns (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/26/2021 6:45 PM, Staff]

President Biden had his first call with Vladimir Putin, signaling a very different tone than what we saw from former President Trump. Biden is pushing for an extension of a nuclear arms control agreement that caps the size of their arsenals. He also addressed the poisoning and detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. His arrest sparked all of the protests across Russia. The President told reporters he's very concerned about this. He also raised the issue of Russia hacking federal agencies and reports about Moscow placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. The issue of election interference also came up during the phone call.

[Russia] Biden Speaks to Putin in First Phone Call Since Becoming President, Raises Several Concerns (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:41 PM, Staff]

President Biden spoke with Vladimir Putin today, the first the two men have spoken since Biden took office. The White House says Biden raised several issues in that call, including the massive hack of US government agencies and companies that the US blames on Russia. Reports of Russia placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan as well as interference in the 2020 US election, and the poisoning of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Tomorrow, Biden is expected to sign a number of executive actions, specifically on climate change, including making it a national security priority as well as convening a climate summit of world leaders on Earth Day 2021.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration seeks to buy 200 million more vaccine doses, to be delivered through the summerNearly all GOP senators vote against impeachment trial for Trump, signaling likely acquittalBiden signs orders on racial equity, and civil rights groups press for morePentagon restricted commander of D.C. Guard ahead of Capitol riot**The New York Times**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Pledges to Speed Flow of Vaccines to the StatesRepublicans Rally Against Impeachment Trial, Signaling Likely Acquittal for TrumpCapitol Police Detail Failures During Pro-Trump AssaultBiden Will Restore U.S. Relations With Palestinians, Reversing Trump Cutoff**The Wall Street Journal**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of SummerMost Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump ImpeachmentAhead of Riot, Capitol Police Knew of Potential for Violence, Official SaysBiden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir PutinNew Playbook for Covid-19 Protection Emerges After Year of Study, Missteps**ABC News**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden plans to purchase 200M more doses of Pfizer, Moderna COVID-19 vaccinesAntony Blinken confirmed as Biden's secretary of stateBiden to reopen 'Obamacare' markets for COVID-19 relief**CBS News**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration boosting weekly supply of COVID-19 vaccine doses to statesActing Capitol Police chief apologizes for security failuresEurope employs extreme measures to curb spread of mutant COVID strain**CNN**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden sets bold timeline for a return to normal lifeBiden confronts Putin over several issues in first call, White House saysWHO team in Wuhan to begin long-delayed coronavirus investigation after clearing quarantine**Fox News**

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Forty-five Republicans vote against proceeding with Senate impeachment trialBiden chief of staff backs teachers unions refusing to reopen schools, says they're not 'overruling' scienceMexico's president took commercial flight hours before COVID-19 diagnosis: report

NBC News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration orders 200 million more doses of Covid-19 vaccines

Most Senate Republicans declare Trump's trial unconstitutional. Here's what that means for conviction.

Global Covid cases top 100 million as new strains emerge

Washington Schedule**President**

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

9:00 AM In-Town Pool Call Time

9:30 AM The President and The Vice President receive the President's Daily Brief

12:15 PM Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, and National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy

1:30 PM The President delivers remarks and signs executive actions on tackling climate change, creating jobs, and restoring scientific integrity; The Vice President also attends

Vice President

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

10:30 a.m.: Convene and begin a period of morning business.

10:00 AM – SD-G50/VTC Foreign Relations

Hearings to examine the nomination of Linda Thomas-Greenfield, of Louisiana, to be the Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, with the rank and status of the Ambassador, and the Representative of the United States of America in the Security Council of the United Nations, and to be Representative of the United States of America to the Sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations during her tenure of service as Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations.

10:00 AM – SR-325 Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Business meeting to consider the nomination of Peter Paul Montgomery Buttigieg, of Indiana, to be Secretary of Transportation.

2:00 PM – SVC-217 Intelligence

To receive a closed briefing on certain intelligence matters.

3:00 PM – SD-106 Veterans' Affairs

Hearings to examine the nomination of Denis Richard McDonough, of Maryland, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

There are no public events scheduled today.

{End of Report}

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STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

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TO: State Department & Staff

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Secretary of State

U.S. Senate confirms Biden nominee Blinken as secretary of state (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 8:22 PM, Patricia Zengerle, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. Senate on Tuesday confirmed President Joe Biden's nominee, veteran diplomat Antony Blinken, to serve as secretary of state.

The 100-member Senate backed Blinken 78-22, meaning he could be sworn in as the nation's top diplomat later in the day. A simple majority was needed in the Democratic-controlled chamber for his confirmation.

Blinken is a longtime Biden confidant who has been confirmed by the U.S. Senate before, most recently to serve as No. 2 at the State Department during former Democratic President Barack Obama's administration, when Biden was vice president.

At his confirmation before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Blinken pledged to work more closely with allies after former President Donald Trump's "America First" approach to foreign affairs. Blinken said he would work to revitalize damaged American diplomacy and build a united front to counter the challenges posed by Russia, China and Iran.

The 100-member Senate is divided 50-50 but controlled by Biden's fellow Democrats because Vice President Kamala Harris can break any tie.

All of the votes against Blinken's confirmation came from Republicans.

Blinken's confirmation hearing went smoothly, with both Democrats and Republicans offering praise. Blinken was a committee staff director - when Biden, who spent decades in the Senate, was chairman - before he joined the Obama administration.

Department of State News

Biden's UN ambassador: U.S. will support two-state solution in Middle East (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 4:10 PM, Mica Soellner, Neutral]

President Biden is so far making good on his promise to reverse the Trump administration's Israel policy, with a top official vowing the Democrat will support a two-state solution in the Middle East.

Richard Mills, acting U.S. envoy to the United Nations, told the Security Council on Tuesday

that the United States encourages Israel and Palestinians "to avoid unilateral steps that make a two-state solution more difficult, such as annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolition, incitement to violence and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated the administration's intentions in the Arab world, according to a report by Al Jazeera.

"The president's view continues to be that a two-state solution is the only path forward," Psaki said.

In addition to taking steps to create an environment where a two-state solution may be possible, Mills said the Biden administration aims to restore Palestinian aid and reopen the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington, according to a report by Reuters.

Under Trump, the U.S. cut around \$360 million in annual funding for the U.N. agency supporting Palestinian refugees.

On the campaign trail, Biden warned peace would be impossible in the Middle East if Israel didn't stop its threats of annexation. He said last May that he was committed to Israel and hoped to help the nation maintain its "qualitative military edge" while taking steps toward peace.

Despite reversing Trump administration policies, the Biden administration will aim to continue Trump's trajectory of normalizing international ties with Israel. Under the former president, the U.S. secured agreements with four Arab states, which include the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, to begin normalizing relations with Israel.

Mills added, however, that normalizing ties is "not substitute for Israeli-Palestinian peace."

Trump also moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that was viewed as solidifying the latter as the nation's true capital. The Biden administration plans to keep the embassy in Jerusalem.

Kerry aims to talk US back into a lead role in climate fight (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:06 AM, Ellen Knickmeyer, 381K, Neutral]

From a wood-paneled library in his Boston mansion, new climate envoy John Kerry is talking the U.S. back into a leading role in global climate action, making clear the nation isn't just revving up its own efforts to reduce oil, gas and coal pollution but that it intends to push everyone in the world to do more, too.

Kerry's diplomatic efforts match the fast pace of domestic climate directives by the week-old Biden administration, which created the job Kerry now holds. Those directives include a Biden order expected Wednesday spelling out how U.S. intelligence, defense and homeland security agencies should address the security threats posed by worsening droughts, floods and other natural disasters under global warming.

At 77, Kerry is working to make a success out of the global climate accord that he helped negotiate in Paris as President Barack Obama's secretary of state — and that he then saw rejected by President Donald Trump, who also spurned all other Obama-era legacy efforts

to wean the U.S. and global economies off climate-damaging fossil fuels.

Success for Kerry is hardly assured. At home, he faces pushback from the oil and gas industry and hears concerns that jobs will be lost. Internationally, there's uncertainty about whether Biden's climate commitments can survive the United States' intensely divided politics, let alone the next presidential transition.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are pushing him to be aggressive — even demonstrating outside his house on his first full day on the job.

Underscoring the urgency, Kerry — working from his home on Boston's patrician Beacon Hill during the COVID-19 pandemic — sat before a computer screen and started talking before sunup last Thursday, his first full day in his new job, to a global business forum in Europe.

Since then, he has spoken virtually with U.S. mayors, foreign presidents and premiers, government ministers and others, until the light from the setting sun slides down the gilt spines of the shelves of leather-bound books in his library.

Kerry exhorts: Put your big one-off COVID-19 economic recovery funding into projects that boost cleaner energy. Get green projects going fast in Republican-leaning U.S. states to prove renewable energy can mean jobs and build needed political support. Get everyone to talk to China about things like stopping the building of dirty-burning coal-fired power plants.

If China and the U.S., as the world's No. 1 and 2 top carbon emitters, don't spell out exactly how they will curb climate-damaging emissions more quickly, "we're all going to lose credibility," Kerry told an online gathering of American mayors last weekend.

The U.S. has to have the "credibility to go to the table, show people what we're doing and push them to do more," Kerry said then. "So everybody can understand it's not fake, it's not a phony, empty promise — it really is getting real."

Kerry is a full-time principal member for climate on the White House's National Security Council. The role acknowledges what climate and military experts say will be growing conflicts around the world as climate change increases competition for natural resources. It takes into account a lack of U.S. readiness to protect military installations and overall infrastructure from worsening flooding and other natural disasters as temperatures rise.

By giving someone of Kerry's stature a job with equally high prominence, Biden aims to "bring the climate issue into the conversation" on national security matters routinely, said John Podesta, a climate counselor for Obama and a White House chief of staff for President Bill Clinton.

Kerry is expected to have desks at both the White House and the State Department.

In the meantime, the home library where Kerry now holds most of his big online meetings earned him a 10 out of 10 from the popular "Room Rater" Twitter account that judges the backdrop décor in people's Zoom calls and TV appearances. That's despite expressing doubt about whether it was a room or a set.

Kerry and other Biden administration climate leaders will be working to set a tougher goal

for the U.S. for cutting emissions, as well as making good on pledges to increase climate funding for poorer countries.

On Thursday, the progressive Sunrise Movement's Boston branch had demonstrators outside his Boston house holding signs saying "Kerry be brave." The move shows the left keeping up pressure for what could be a politically tricky level of aggressiveness on cutting fossil fuels.

"Our role is ... now to hold them accountable," Sunrise Movement spokesperson Ellen Sciales said Tuesday, and keep them "pushing us forward to meet the scale and the urgency of the climate crisis."

On the right, some Republican lawmakers and the politically influential oil and gas industry have been subdued in the first week of the Biden administration, saying they hope to work with Kerry and others on climate efforts.

Kerry told the mayors he talked with Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia at Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration. Kerry said he and Manchin, who has fought climate regulation he sees threatening his coal state's economy, agreed: Winning the U.S. fight on climate change will depend on getting renewable-energy jobs into places like West Virginia and Tennessee as soon as possible.

Then, "boom, you will begin to have believers," Kerry declared from his library. "They're not going to believe it when we just say it. We have to do it."

Israel's top general says its military is refreshing operational plans against Iran (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 3:15 PM, Jeffrey Heller, Neutral]

Israel's top general said on Tuesday that its military was refreshing its operational plans against Iran and that any U.S. return to a 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran would be "wrong."

The remarks are an apparent signal to U.S. President Joe Biden to tread cautiously in any diplomatic engagement with Iran. Such comments by Israel's military chief of staff on U.S. policymaking are rare and likely would have been pre-approved by the Israeli government.

"A return to the 2015 nuclear agreement, or even if it is a similar accord with several improvements, is bad and wrong from an operational and strategic point of view," Lieutenant-General Aviv Kohavi said in an address to Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, abandoned the nuclear agreement in 2018, a move that was welcomed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who criticised the sanctions relief it offered and warned of the likelihood of Iranian nuclear arms development after its expiration.

Antony Blinken, confirmed on Tuesday as Biden's secretary of state, said last week the United States was "a long way" from deciding whether to rejoin the deal and it would need to see what Iran actually did to resume complying with the pact.

Since Washington pulled out of the deal, Iran has gradually breached its key limits, building up its stockpile of low enriched uranium, enriching uranium to higher levels of purity, and installing centrifuges in ways barred by the accord.

Kohavi said those actions by Iran, which denies it is seeking atomic arms, showed it could ultimately decide to push forward rapidly towards building a nuclear weapon.

"In light of this fundamental analysis, I have instructed the Israel Defense Forces to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to those already in place," Kohavi said.

"It will be up to the political leadership, of course, to decide on implementation, but these plans need to be on the table."

Netanyahu had threatened possible Israeli strikes against Iran in the run-up to the accord. But a senior Israeli officer, who spoke to reporters in 2015 on condition of anonymity, underscored differences in Israel over the issue by saying a deal had potential security benefits.

Head of Israeli military cautions against US return to the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Zachary Halaschak, 394K, Neutral]

Israel Defense Forces Chief of General Staff Aviv Kochavi, in a rare public statement about U.S. foreign policy, urged the Biden administration not to attempt to kick-start the Iran nuclear deal.

Kochavi, speaking virtually at the Institute for National Security Studies think tank's annual conference on Tuesday, said that even if a potential deal could improve on the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it would not be the right move for regional security.

"With the changing of the administration in the United States, the Iranians have said they want to return to the previous agreement," the military commander said, according to the Times of Israel. "I want to state my position, the position that I give to all my colleagues when I meet them around the world: Returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement or even to an agreement that is similar but with a few improvements is a bad thing, and it is not the right thing to do."

The United States withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 and embarked on a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at squeezing Iran into submission. Since the U.S. departure, Iran has continued to breach all aspects of the treaty. Earlier this month, its regime announced that it was rolling out 1,000 additional centrifuges and would begin enriching uranium to levels far in excess of the JCPOA.

"As of today, Iran has increased the amount of enriched material beyond what was permitted. It enriched it to levels beyond what was permitted. It developed and manufactured centrifuges that will allow it to rush ahead and produce a weapon at a much faster rate, within months, maybe even weeks," Kochavi warned.

Kochavi also said he has directed the IDF to refresh the country's operational plans regarding what to do if it needs to strike Iran because of its nuclear program.

"Iran can decide that it wants to advance to a bomb, either covertly or in a provocative way. In light of this basic analysis, I have ordered the IDF to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to the existing ones. We are studying these plans, and we will develop them over the next year," he said.

"The government will, of course, be the one to decide if they should be used. But these plans must be on the table, in existence, and trained for," he added.

In January, the Iranian regime notified the International Atomic Energy Agency in a weekend letter that it is planning to enrich uranium to 20%. The nuclear deal dictated that Iran cannot enrich uranium by more than 3.67%, although the regime has previously broken the pact by upping enrichment to 4.5% purity.

The comments from Kochavi come a day after the Iranian regime reportedly executed 30-year-old wrestler Mehdi Ali Hosseini. Hosseini's death was preceded by 27-year-old champion wrestler Navid Afkari, who was killed in September despite pleas from several human rights groups and prominent international figures.

China: Military flights warn against interference in Taiwan (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:17 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The Chinese government said Wednesday that actions like its warplanes flying near Taiwan last weekend are a warning against both foreign interference in Taiwan and any independence moves by the island.

Asked about the flights, Zhu Fenglian, a spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, said China's military drills are to show the nation's resolution to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"They are a stern warning against external interference and provocation from separatist forces advocating for Taiwan independence," she said at a regular briefing, giving the Chinese government's first official comment on the recent flights. China sent eight bombers and four fighter jets into Taiwan's air defense identification zone on Saturday, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. Taiwan scrambled fighters to monitor the activity.

The U.S. State Department later issued a statement urging China "to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan" following China's sizeable show of force.

China then sent 16 military aircraft into the same area on Sunday, Taiwan said.

Taiwan is a self-governing island about 160 kilometers (100 miles) off China's east coast. The Chinese government regards it as a renegade province that should be united with mainland China.

Zhu said that China would not renounce the use of force to guard against separatist moves and foreign interference.

"We ... reserve the option to use all necessary measures," she said. "Our position has been consistent and will not change."

Defense Secretary Austin to Review Trump's Last-Minute Withdrawal of Troops From Afghanistan, Iraq (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 4:37 PM, Gordon Lubold and Nancy A. Youssef, Neutral]

The Pentagon's new chief is expected to review troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq in an effort to examine American strategy in two conflicts, following former President Donald Trump's drawdown of forces there, according to defense officials.

President Biden's defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, is facing a slew of issues in the U.S. and around the world, but Mr. Trump's decision to quickly withdraw more than 3,000 troops from the two conflicts before he left office this month forces the White House to confront how it will manage the long-running wars.

In his confirmation hearing last week, Mr. Austin indicated he would review the strategies and resources in those conflicts, but left vague his view on the threats either conflict poses and how they are matched by troop levels and other military capabilities.

Mr. Austin's spokesman, John Kirby, said officials hadn't yet made a formal decision to review troop levels in either country.

"It stands to reason that the incoming administration will want to better understand the status of operations in both places and the resources being applied to those missions," he said. "Nothing has changed about our desire to defend the American people from the threat of terrorism, while also making sure we are appropriately resourcing our strategy."

Mr. Kirby said any decisions on troop levels would be taken in consultation with the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan. He didn't say who would be conducting the review nor when it could be completed.

Mr. Trump, who had railed against what he called "endless foreign wars," drew American forces down in Iraq and Afghanistan to 2,500 personnel in each country this month, in an effort to bring the longstanding military engagements to a close.

The decision to pull troops out from Afghanistan was more contentious than the decision to remove troops from Iraq. Top military officials and some lawmakers believed pulling troops from Afghanistan should be based on conditions on the ground, including levels of violence, not on a political timetable. Top military officials have said in recent months that the remaining force may be too small to conduct counterterrorism operations, and train and advise local fighters, while also providing enough security for the American contingent on the ground.

Mr. Biden has few good options, analysts have said. Sending more troops back into either war theater is politically perilous, while reducing them further too quickly could accelerate violence and reverse whatever gains military officials have achieved there.

Helping to facilitate Mr. Biden's decision is Mr. Austin, a retired four-star Army general who is intimately familiar with the issues after having led Central Command, which oversees the wars, before his retirement in 2016.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, declined in an interview to speculate on a review or any potential changes to troop levels. Gen. McKenzie noted that

the size of the force in Afghanistan contributed by Washington's North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies exceeds the size of the U.S. contribution for the first time ever.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are pressing security challenges.

Within days of its tenure, the Biden administration said it told its Afghan counterparts that it would review the continuing peace talks with the Taliban, according to a White House statement.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan told Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib that the review would assess "whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders," the White House statement said.

He didn't identify troop levels in a public readout of the conversation.

Under a 2020 agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban, all U.S. troops would withdraw by May and the Taliban would make security guarantees. But since that agreement, violence has surged.

In Iraq, one day after Mr. Biden's inauguration, a double suicide bombing in a crowded market killed at least 32 people, marking one of the deadliest attacks there since the collapse of Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

Google says North Korea-backed hackers sought cyber research (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:15 AM, Kim Tong-Hyung, Neutral]

Google says it believes hackers backed by the North Korean government have been posing as computer security bloggers and using fake accounts on social media while attempting to steal information from researchers in the field.

Google didn't specify how successful the hackers were or what kind of information could have been compromised. Experts say the attacks reflect North Korean efforts to improve its cyber skills and be able to breach widely used computer products, such as Google's Chrome internet browser and Microsoft's Windows 10 operating system.

While the country has denied involvement, North Korea has been linked to major cyberattacks, including a 2013 campaign that paralyzed the servers of South Korean financial institutions, the 2014 hacking of Sony Pictures, and the WannaCry malware attack of 2017. The U.N. Security Council in 2019 estimated North Korea earned as much as \$2 billion over several years through illicit cyber operations targeting cryptocurrency exchanges and other financial transactions, generating income that is harder to trace and offsets capital lost to U.S.-led economic sanctions over its nuclear weapons program.

Adam Weidemann, a researcher from Google's Threat Analysis Group, said in the online report published late Monday that hackers supposedly backed by North Korea created a fake research blog and multiple Twitter profiles to build credibility and interact with the security researchers they targeted.

After connecting with researchers, the hackers would ask them if they wanted to collaborate

on cyber-vulnerability research and share a tool that contained a code designed to install malicious software on the targets' computers, which would then allow the hackers to control the device and steal information from it.

Several targeted researchers were compromised after following a Twitter link to a blog set up by the hackers, Weidemann said.

"At the time of these visits, the victim systems were running fully patched and up-to-date Windows 10 and Chrome browser versions," Weidemann wrote. "At this time we're unable to confirm the mechanism of compromise, but we welcome any information others might have."

Google published a list of social media accounts and websites it said were controlled by the hackers, including 10 Twitter profiles and five LinkedIn profiles.

Simon Choi, a senior analyst at NSHC, a South Korean computer security firm, said cyberattacks linked to North Korea over the past few years have demonstrated an improving ability in identifying and exploiting vulnerabilities in computer security systems. Before 2016, the North Koreans had mainly relied on methods used by Chinese or Russian hackers, he said. "It's notable that the computer security experts on Twitter who said they were approached by the hackers had been engaged in vulnerability research for Chrome and Windows 10," Choi said.

"It's that not easy to successfully penetrate these systems that are built with the latest security technologies. For the North Koreans, it makes more sense to steal the vulnerabilities already discovered by the researchers because developing their own ways to exploit these systems is harder."

In 2018, U.S. federal prosecutors charged a computer programmer working for the North Korean government for his alleged involvement in the cyberattacks that hacked Sony Pictures and unleashed the WannaCry ransomware virus. Park Jin Hyok, who is believed to be in North Korea, conspired to conduct attacks that also stole \$81 million from Bangladesh's central bank, according to the charges.

The 2014 Sony hack led to the release of tens of thousands of confidential Sony emails and business files. The WannaCry cyberattack in 2017 scrambled data on hundreds of thousands of computers at government agencies, banks and other businesses across the globe and crippled parts of the British health care system.

[Yemen] In a first, Yemenis seek redress for U.S. drone strikes at Inter-American rights body (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:15 PM, Missy Ryan, Souad Mekhennet, 13480K, Neutral] Relatives of at least 34 Yemenis alleged to have been killed in American military actions have asked an international human rights body to determine whether the deaths were unlawful, in a case that could draw attention to the human cost of overseas counterterrorism campaigns.

The petition, the first of its kind to be submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, asserts that six drone strikes and one Special Operations raid targeting Yemen's al-Bayda governorate during the Obama and Trump administrations inflicted

catastrophic damage on two families. Among the dead, the survivors say, were nine children and several members of Yemen's military.

The filing provides new visibility into a counterterrorism campaign that has mostly been shrouded in secrecy, as American military and intelligence officials conduct an extended effort against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other militant threats. Since 2015, a parallel conflict between Yemen's Houthi rebels and forces backed by Saudi Arabia has made communication and media access more difficult, further thrusting the war against extremists into the shadows.

The petition, submitted on behalf of a group of Yemenis by the London-based human rights group Reprieve, which has documented the aftermath of U.S. counterterrorism operations, argues that the repeated targeting of the two families, in addition to lives lost, has taken a psychological toll on survivors.

"Having already suffered enormous loss, the families live in constant fear that the drones flying overhead will strike again, killing more members of their family or their extended tribe or community," Jennifer Gibson, a lawyer with Reprieve, said in one of the petition documents.

A determination in favor of the Yemeni petitioners by the commission, an independent body affiliated with the Organization of American States, would not necessarily force changes in U.S. military operations or policy. But it could have symbolic importance in highlighting the unintended outcome of counterterrorism operations.

"A decision from the [commission] concluding that the U.S. is responsible for a particular human rights violation carries legal and moral weight internationally. It is also an important tool in creating pressure and opportunities to engage the government on reforms," said Lisa Reinsberg, the executive director of the International Justice Resource Center.

"On the flip side, a lot depends on political will at the national level," she said.

Last year, the Inter-American Commission declared that the United States was responsible for torture in the case of a former inmate at the Guantanamo Bay prison.

Lt. Col. Anton Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, declined to comment on the petition but said the U.S. military sought to minimize civilian harm when planning and conducting operations.

"Consistent with our mission, our authorities, and our obligations under the law of war, [U.S. Central Command] will continue to conduct military actions in Yemen when required to protect the nation and our allies and partners from al-Qaeda and [Islamic State] terror cells," he said in a statement.

The filings contain new details on how rural life and counterterrorism concerns have collided in Bayda, an area of central Yemen that officials have also described as a hotbed of AQAP activity. The group was long known as one of the most virulent branches of al-Qaeda, responsible for repeated plots against the United States, including an attempted airliner bombing in 2009.

In the petition, a Yemeni man named Aziz al-Ameri, speaking on behalf of his family and the closely linked al-Taisy family, denies links to militants, saying those killed were mostly shepherds, farmers and their families.

The military actions cited in the petition date to the Obama administration, when a U.S. drone struck a wedding convoy in December 2013 and, according to the filing, killed several members of the Ameri family and five of the Taisy family.

The Yemeni government paid more than \$1 million in compensation to the families of those killed and injured, money that Reprieve has suggested may have come from the United States.

The other six actions occurred during the Trump administration, when the pace of counterterrorism operations accelerated in Yemen as the new president loosened operational rules and new intelligence fueled additional operations. From 2017 to 2019, the military reported more than 160 strikes, the majority of which Reprieve said were carried out in Bayda.

One occurred days after Trump took office, when a raid on the village of Yaklaa resulted in a major firefight, killing a Navy SEAL and multiple civilians.

After an inquiry, military leaders said that as many as 12 civilians had died. But according to the petition, the toll was far higher, with 26 people killed, including at least 10 children, including a full-term baby who was injured by a bullet in the womb and died after being delivered by Caesarean section.

Abdullah al-Taisy, a Yemeni soldier who lives in Yaklaa and witnessed the raid, said none of those killed were militants.

"Our houses and farmers are clear. No one is a member of any terrorist groups," he said in a phone interview from Yemen. Like the Ameri family, Taisy called for greater accountability and fair compensation.

The raid, which U.S. officials said yielded significant intelligence about AQAP, produced a string of follow-on strikes in the same area. According to the petition, a September 2018 strike killed two men serving as soldiers for Yemen's internationally recognized government, which works closely with U.S. allies to battle the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

"How come they can target official military personnel who were on a military mission?" asked Ahmed al-Helou, another Yemeni colonel who worked with Abdullah al-Taisy. "They seem not to understand the difference between the local community and the militants."

The Yemenis asked the commission to urge the United States to take immediate steps to prevent further loss of life while commissioners consider the petition, a process that could take years.

[Yemen] Aid boost in Yemen after U.S. allows Houthi deals (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:12 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The U.S. on Monday approved all transactions involving Yemen's Houthi movement for the next month as Washington reviews a Trump administration designation of the Iran-aligned

group as a foreign terrorist organization. Colette Luke has more. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Russia] In first call with Putin, Biden marks a return to skepticism from the top (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:44 PM, Anne Gearan, Karen DeYoung, 13480K, Neutral]

President Biden laid out a bill of complaint against Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, airing allegations of human rights abuses, cyberspying and more while making a hard pivot away from the deference that former president Donald Trump often displayed toward Russia.

The phone call less than a week into Biden's term was his first known contact with an adversarial foreign leader. It came as the United States has joined European nations and others in condemning the detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and after a crackdown on street protests.

Biden's agenda for the call included protest of "ongoing Russian aggression" against Ukraine, and he confronted Putin over the "Solar Winds" espionage case, alleged interference in U.S. elections and the alleged offer to pay bounties for the deaths of U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday.

"His intention was also to make clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of our national interests in response to malign actions by Russia," Psaki said.

Throughout his presidency, Trump refused to pin blame on Russia for actions ranging from 2016 election interference to the attempted assassination of a British former spy, the poisoning of Navalny last year, the alleged bounties and the extensive cyberhack that affected U.S. federal agencies and corporations. In each of those cases, other elements of the U.S. government blamed Russia.

Alongside the return to official skepticism from the top about Russian actions and motives, Biden made an expected offer to Putin to extend a key arms control agreement.

The pact, known as New START, is the last remaining nuclear arms treaty between the former Cold War enemies, and the timing of Biden's call was partly driven by the clock. The pact would expire next week unless extended by both nations, something the United States can do without congressional approval.

Russia and the United States traded documents Tuesday to extend the pact for five years.

The Kremlin also released a readout of the call between the two leaders. It did not mention the issues Psaki listed and took an optimistic tone about cooperation under Biden's presidency.

"The presidents expressed their satisfaction with today's exchange of the diplomatic notes of having reached an agreement to extend the New START," the statement said. "Over the next few days the two sides will finalize all procedures necessary for further functioning of this important mechanism of international law on the mutual limitation of nuclear missile arsenals."

Biden also spoke Tuesday with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and "conveyed his intention to consult and work with allies on the full range of shared security concerns" and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to "strengthening transatlantic security."

A written summary of the Putin call provided by the White House later Tuesday emphasized extending the arms control treaty. The statement raised the possibility of further talks on other arms control and security issues before listing the allegations and complaints Biden had laid out to Putin.

"The two presidents agreed to maintain transparent and consistent communication going forward," the White House statement said.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the former National Security Council aide fired by Trump after testifying during Trump's 2019 impeachment trial, tweeted Tuesday in support of the shift that the conversation represented.

"An enormous departure from the last four years," he wrote.

Trump repeatedly declined to challenge Putin in public or in private. He took Putin's word over that of U.S. intelligence services that Russia was not involved in undermining the 2016 presidential election and equivocated about Russian culpability in numerous other areas. The reasons are not clear, although former aides said Trump was extremely sensitive about any suggestion that Russia had helped him win in 2016.

"He was the lap dog for Russia rather than the watchdog for America," Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) said in an interview on MSNBC, as he called the Biden phone call a "refreshing" return to the premise that the U.S. president should hold Putin to account.

Trump had 18 one-on-one calls with Putin over four years, according to Kremlin readouts. On a number of occasions, the White House did not even acknowledge the calls until after an announcement by Moscow, and some reported by Moscow do not appear in archived public White House records.

Both sides generally provided anodyne statements acknowledging joint global concerns, along with promises to work together. One of Trump's early calls to Putin, in December 2017, was described by the White House as simply a thank you to the Russian leader for "acknowledging America's strong economic performance in his annual press conference."

In March 2018, according to White House records, Trump called Putin to congratulate him on his reelection. News reports about the call later revealed that Trump had been given briefing notes ahead of the conversation that warned "DO NOT CONGRATULATE."

On the same call, despite international skepticism about the fairness of the race, Trump proposed meeting Putin at the White House, in what would have been the Russian leader's first visit since 2005. No Putin visit ever occurred during the Trump administration.

After Trump's controversial 2019 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky leaked, and its contents led to Trump's first impeachment, the White House ordered new restrictions on those allowed to view internal transcripts of his communications with world leaders.

Trump's last reported calls with Putin took place over a several-week period last year. On June 1 — after Trump had suggested to reporters that he wanted to invite Putin to that year's U.S.-hosted Group of Seven conference — he said that they had discussed "progress toward convening the meeting."

The idea was dropped after other members of the group complained that Russia continued to occupy parts of Ukraine — the reason it was kicked out of the G-7 in 2014 — and planned to boycott.

On Tuesday, the United States joined the other G-7 nations in condemning what a statement called "the politically motivated arrest and detention" of Navalny, who was taken into custody earlier this month upon his return to Russia from Germany, where he had recuperated after a poisoning attempt blamed on the Russian state.

The last reported call between Trump and Putin was July 23, following news reports that Russian intelligence had offered the Taliban bounties to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Asked in an interview with Axios whether he had raised the subject with Putin, Trump said it was "a phone call to discuss other things. And frankly, that's an issue that many people said was fake news."

He then complained that "nobody ever brings up China. They always bring up Russia, Russia, Russia."

[Russia] Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:05 PM, Ken Thomas, Neutral]

The White House said Tuesday that President Biden held his first call as president with Russian President Vladimir Putin and raised concerns about issues including the detaining of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the massive SolarWinds hack and reports of Russia offering bounties on U.S. troops.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Mr. Biden reaffirmed America's "strong support" for Ukraine's sovereignty and addressed concerns about Russian interference in the 2020 election. The call also focused on plans to extend a U.S.-Russia nuclear arms treaty for five years.

Mr. Biden voiced criticism of Mr. Putin throughout his presidential campaign, and the call represented his first opportunity as president to seek to establish a break from the frequently warm rapport between former President Donald Trump and the Russian leader. Mr. Biden, who as vice president held a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Putin in 2011, has warned Moscow that it could face additional sanctions for election interference if it is confirmed by U.S. intelligence officials.

During Mr. Trump's presidency, some Democratic lawmakers accused the administration of pulling its punches against Moscow, as Mr. Trump rejected intelligence findings of Kremlin election interference. But Mr. Trump countered that his administration had levied more sanctions against Russia than previous administrations.

In the days before Mr. Biden's inauguration, the Trump administration sanctioned seven men, including several former Ukrainian officials, for allegedly interfering in U.S. elections

as agents of Russia's government by promoting theories about Mr. Biden's son, Hunter. The U.S. and Russia have been at odds in recent years over issues including its seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, accusations that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Russia's involvement in the war in Syria.

The White House said in a statement following Tuesday's call that Mr. Biden "made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies."

The Kremlin said in a statement that Mr. Putin told Mr. Biden that "normalization in ties between Russia and the U.S. would serve the interests of both countries, underscoring their special responsibility to maintain security and stability in the world, and the whole world."

The Kremlin statement said the conversation was open and businesslike, and both sides agreed to maintain contact.

The Kremlin statement said the two leaders discussed the New START Treaty, Iran's nuclear program and Ukraine but didn't mention Mr. Navalny or the hacking attacks. Ms. Psaki said Mr. Biden had planned to raise the treatment of "peaceful protesters by Russian security forces."

Russian police detained thousands of people during wide-scale protests in support of Mr. Navalny across the country last weekend.

Mr. Navalny, an ardent critic of Mr. Putin, was arrested earlier this month after returning to Russia from Germany, where he had been recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he has accused the Kremlin of perpetrating. Russian officials have denied any role in the poisoning.

Despite the tensions, the Biden administration has sought to find common ground with Russia on the nuclear weapons pact. Mr. Biden's administration said last week that it would seek to maintain the New START treaty as the arms control framework that has constrained U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear arsenals since it took effect in 2011.

The accord is scheduled to lapse on Feb. 5, but Washington and Moscow have sought to extend the agreement despite friction between the two countries.

The Kremlin said the two sides would finish in the coming days final steps needed to ensure the treaty stayed in force. The White House said teams from both countries would "work urgently" to complete the extension by the February deadline.

The White House also said the two leaders agreed to "explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

Some analysts said the readouts showed that the Biden administration would avoid a reset with Russia but instead pursue stability in the relationship.

"By calling for transparency and consistency, those are the two elements that give you that stability," said Jim Townsend, a former deputy assistant secretary of Defense in the Obama administration and an adjunct senior fellow with the Center for New American Security.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow during the Obama administration, said Mr. Navalny's inclusion in the readout by the new administration was significant. "That says to me they're going to talk a lot more about issues of democracy and human rights with respect to Russia in a way that President Trump never did and even his team rarely did," Mr. McFaul said. But James Carafano, a national security and foreign policy analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation, said Mr. Biden lost leverage by simply seeking to extend the arms treaty and raising concerns without threatening tougher action such as new sanctions.

"Action gets the Russians' attention. Words, Putin could care less about," Mr. Carafano said.

Since Mr. Biden's inauguration, he has asked the intelligence community to assess the recent Russian hacking, interference in the 2020 election, use of chemical weapons against Mr. Navalny and the alleged bounty program against U.S. soldiers.

The outgoing Trump administration formally stated that Russia was likely behind the massive cyberattack, a conclusion that senior officials had expressed publicly and privately. Moscow denied involvement in the SolarWinds hack.

Cybersecurity experts have said the hack amounts to one of the worst intelligence failures on record.

Mr. Biden also spoke to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during the day, discussing challenges such as "dealing with a more assertive Russia," NATO said in a statement.

[Russia] First Biden-Putin call shows both cautious on big concerns (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:12 PM, Matthew Lee and Jonathan Lemire, 13480K, Neutral]

U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin held their first conversation as counterparts Tuesday in a phone call that underscored troubled relations and the delicate balance between the former Cold War foes.

According to the White House, Biden raised concerns about the arrest of opposition figure Alexei Navalny, Russia's alleged involvement in a massive cyber espionage campaign and reports of Russian bounties on American troops in Afghanistan. The Kremlin, meanwhile, focused on Putin's response to Biden's proposal to extend the last remaining U.S.-Russia arms control treaty.

While the readouts from the two capitals emphasized different elements, they both suggested that U.S.-Russia relations will be guided, at least at the beginning of the Biden administration, by a desire to do no harm but also no urgency to repair existing damage.

The two presidents agreed to have their teams work urgently to complete a five-year extension of the New START nuclear weapons treaty that expires next month. Former President Donald Trump's administration had withdrawn from two arms control treaties with Russia and had been prepared to let New START lapse.

Unlike his immediate predecessors — including Trump, who was enamored of Putin and

frequently undercut his own administration's tough stance on Russia — Biden has not held out hope for a "reset" in relations. Instead he has indicated he wants to manage differences without necessarily resolving them or improving ties.

And with a heavy domestic agenda and looming decisions needed on Iran and China, a direct confrontation with Russia is not likely something Biden seeks.

Although the leaders agreed to work together to extend New START before it expires Feb. 5 and to look at other areas of potential strategic cooperation, the White House said Biden was firm on U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty, while Russia is supporting separatists in the country's east.

Biden also raised the SolarWinds cyberhack, which has been attributed to Russia, reports of Russian bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan, interference in the 2020 U.S. election, the poisoning of Navalny and the weekend crackdown on Navalny's supporters.

"President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," the White House said. Biden told Putin in the phone call, first reported by The Associated Press, that the U.S. would defend itself and take action, which could include further sanctions, to ensure Moscow does not act with impunity, officials said.

Moscow had reached out last week to request the call, according to U.S. officials familiar with the matter but not authorized to discuss it publicly. Biden agreed, but he wanted first to prepare with his staff and speak with European allies, including the leaders of Britain, France and Germany, which he did.

Before he spoke to Putin, Biden also called NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg to pledge U.S. commitment to the decades-old alliance founded as a bulwark against Russian aggression.

The Kremlin's readout of the call did not address the most contentious issues between the countries, though it said the leaders also discussed other "acute issues on the bilateral and international agenda."

It described the talk as "frank and businesslike" — often a diplomatic way of referring to tense discussions. It also said Putin congratulated Biden on becoming president and "noted that normalization of ties between Russia and the United States would serve the interests of both countries."

Among the issues the Kremlin said were discussed were the coronavirus pandemic, the Iran nuclear agreement, Ukraine and issues related to trade and the economy.

The call came as Putin considers the aftermath of pro-Navalny protests that took place in more than 100 Russian cities over the weekend. Biden's team has already reacted strongly to the crackdown on the protests, in which more than 3,700 people were arrested across Russia, including more than 1,400 in Moscow. More protests are planned for the coming weekend.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and Putin's best-known critic, was arrested Jan. 17 as he returned to Russia from Germany, where he had spent nearly five months recovering

from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Biden has previously condemned the use of chemical weapons.

Russian authorities deny the accusations.

Just from the public accounts, Biden's discussion with Putin appeared diametrically opposed to Trump's relationship with the Russian president.

Trump had seemed to seek Putin's approval, frequently casting doubt on Russian interference in the 2016 elections, including when he stood next to Putin at their 2018 summit in Helsinki. He also downplayed Russia's involvement in the hack of federal government agencies last year and the allegations that Russia offered the Taliban bounties.

Still, despite that conciliatory approach, Trump's administration toed a tough line against Moscow, imposing sanctions on the country, Russian companies and business leaders for issues including Ukraine, energy supplies and attacks on dissidents.

Biden, in his call with Putin, broke sharply with Trump by declaring that he knew that Russia attempted to interfere with both the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections.

[Russia] Russia, U.S. extend arms pact, Kremlin says, as Biden, Putin talk (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 6:08 PM, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, Trevor Hunnicutt, 5304K, Neutral]
Russia and the United States have struck a deal to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty, the Kremlin said on Tuesday, a move that preserves the last major pact of its kind between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

The White House did not immediately confirm the Kremlin's announcement but said President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin had discussed the issue by telephone and agreed that their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5, when the treaty expires.

Signed in 2010, the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) is a cornerstone of global arms control.

It limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads deployed by the United States and Russia to 1,550 each as well as the number of land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them.

The Kremlin declared the breakthrough, which was widely anticipated, in a statement announcing that Putin and Biden had spoken for the first time since Biden took office on Jan. 20.

Moscow and Washington had failed to agree an extension under former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose administration had wanted to attach conditions to a renewal that Moscow rejected.

The Kremlin said Putin and Biden "expressed satisfaction" that diplomatic notes between the two nations had been exchanged earlier on Tuesday confirming the pact would be extended and that procedures required for the pact to come into force before it expires would be completed in the coming days.

The White House, in its description of the call, did not say that an agreement had been reached or that diplomatic notes had been exchanged, though its tone was upbeat.

"They discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years, agreeing to have their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5," the White House said. "They also agreed to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the plan was for the exchange of notes to occur on Tuesday.

Asked why Washington had not explicitly said an agreement had been reached, a second U.S. official, also on condition of anonymity, said some steps were needed, including approval by the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. The treaty itself does not require legislative approval for an extension.

The White House said last week Biden would seek a five-year extension.

In its statement, the Kremlin said that Putin had told Biden a normalisation of relations between Moscow and Washington would be in both countries' interest.

It said the two leaders had also discussed the U.S. decision during Trump's administration to exit the Open Skies treaty. Putin and Biden also talked about Iran's nuclear programme and the conflict in Ukraine.

The White House stressed that it will raise matters where it disagrees with Russia, and said Biden had reaffirmed the United States' "firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty".

Biden had raised "other matters of concern" including the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, the cyber hack blamed on Russia that used U.S. tech company SolarWinds Corp as a springboard to penetrate federal government networks, and reports that Russia offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants to kill coalition forces in Afghanistan.

"President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," the White House statement said.

[China] Declassified U.S. intelligence bolsters Wuhan lab theory in coronavirus outbreak (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/26/2021 2:23 PM, Bill Gertz, 459K, Neutral]

U.S. intelligence findings recently declassified by the State Department provide fresh evidence for the theory that the COVID-19 pandemic likely began at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China's sole high-security laboratory that has links to the country's military.

The department, in a report made public this month by the outgoing Trump administration, disclosed for the first time that several workers at the Wuhan institute, where research on deadly viruses is conducted, were sickened in the autumn of 2019 with COVID-19-like symptoms.

The report also made public U.S. intelligence that the People's Liberation Army conducted secret research on covert biological warfare at the institute. Chinese leaders have consistently denied any link between the lab and the outbreak of COVID-19 and have even promoted speculation that the United States or some other foreign source brought the virus to China.

The lab illnesses were detected prior to the first publicized case of COVID-19 in Wuhan in early December 2019, but China has refused to disclose what happened to the workers.

"Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one," the report states.

"This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

"Based on my experience and understanding of the science, it's hard to believe this is a naturally occurring phenomenon," said Robert G. Darling, a medical doctor and expert on biological weapons formerly with the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

"I think somebody [in Wuhan] caught their experiment," said Dr. Darling, now chief medical officer for Patronus Medical.

William Lang, a former associate chief medical officer at the Homeland Security Department, noted that the State Department report does not accuse China's communist leadership of releasing the virus intentionally.

"But the circumstantial — and more than circumstantial — evidence of some relation to WIV is very strong," said Dr. Lang, now with the health service WorldClinic.

Ms. Shi, the WIV scientist dubbed the "bat woman of China" for her work on bat coronaviruses similar to the one that causes COVID-19, co-authored a scientific study in 2015 that mentions the laboratory manipulation of bat viruses as part of studying how they infect humans.

The U.S. intelligence reports said Chinese authorities for more than a year have systematically prevented a thorough investigation into the origins of the pandemic and instead devoted "enormous resources to deceit and disinformation."

A World Health Organization delegation to China was blocked from entering the country first in the spring of 2020 and again this month. Beijing then relented and permitted a team to visit. The investigators currently are in China.

Likely origins

The State Department report acknowledges that the U.S. government has been unable to determine "exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus — known as SARS-CoV-2 — was transmitted initially to humans."

The two most likely sources are contact with infected animals or "an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China."

China initially said the virus began at a wild animal "wet market" in Wuhan, but Beijing authorities have been unable to identify an animal host that transmitted the pathogen to humans.

The failure to find the host has led many virus experts and intelligence analysts to examine more closely the idea that the virus leaked from the Wuhan laboratory. Skeptics of China's official version say Beijing authorities have actively tried to keep the world from knowing what happened.

"The Chinese government has destroyed all the evidence from the outbreak because they want to avoid saying it began from a laboratory leak," said a U.S. official familiar with intelligence reports. "China is trying to sell a story to the world that it began as a naturally occurring event from a wet market in Wuhan."

Chinese authorities have tried to get WHO investigators to identify a credible animal source during their inquiry.

"Instead of focusing on an animal host that probably doesn't exist, the WHO team should be focusing on the labs and biosafety," the official said.

The official said, "It is very likely this was PLA secret work that went awry."

U.S. intelligence analysts noted that China's military is engaged in covert development of biological weapons and initial research on such arms would include developing vaccines. At least 2,016 Wuhan lab researchers experimented with a virus called RaTG13, a bat coronavirus similar to the SARS-CoV-2, the report said.

"The WIV has a published record of conducting 'gain-of-function' research to engineer chimeric viruses," the report said, using the term for synthetic viruses.

"But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including RaTG13, which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness."

According to the report, a laboratory accident could appear as a natural outbreak if those initially exposed were limited to a few people and spread more easily by those with a lack of initial symptoms.

"Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure," the report said.

The report also revealed that the Wuhan Institute of Virology has links to the People's Liberation Army, China's military, and has conducted secret lab research at the institute since 2017.

American virus experts who have conducted research at the institute denied those claims

as a conspiracy theory. Many private virus experts originally dismissed reports that the institute was linked to China's covert biological weapons program.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," the report said. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

The report said the U.S. government "for many years" has publicly voiced concerns about China's biological weapons work that Beijing has failed to fully document and has not shown that it had eliminated, despite the requirement to do so under the Biological Weapons Convention.

The report said the intelligence disclosures about the WIV "scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19's origin in China."

"Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records," the report said, as well as interviews with Wuhan researchers and access to worker health records.

China's government blocked all efforts to interview researchers at the WIV, including those who became ill in the fall of 2019.

The detailed State Department report concluded that excessive Chinese government secrecy prevented international investigators from determining the origin of the pandemic.

Rising skepticism

Outside experts critical of China say the Trump administration findings only increase the skepticism of Beijing's denials that the virus leaked from the laboratory through an infection of a worker or through a research animal that was sold illicitly to a wild animal market.

"That was a lie. And the Chinese government knew very early on that that was a lie," said Jamie Metzl, a WHO adviser and a former Senate aide to President Biden.

"And so in the face of overwhelming evidence in May of last year, the Chinese government shifted its position," he told the Toronto Sun last week.

China's government instead sought to promote conspiracy theories. Beijing officials even floated the idea that the virus was first introduced to China by the U.S. Army. The U.S. government vehemently denied that charge.

The Chinese government later cited what it said were reports of an outbreak in southern Europe before it appeared in Wuhan at the end of 2019.

A more recent theory pushed by Chinese officials is that the virus was introduced into the country on frozen food packaging. Virus experts have dismissed that theory as highly unlikely.

Mr. Metzl, the WHO adviser, said in an email that U.S. intelligence reports "suggest the Chinese People's Liberation Army was conducting secret animal research with highly contagious viruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, without notifying the World Health Organization even after the pandemic began."

He said WHO investigators must be given full access to the workers and labs at WIV, including notes, a list of all viruses studied both past and present, and all records.

"If the Chinese government fails to immediately change course, however, the Biden administration should bring allies and partners around the world together to demand an impartial and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of COVID-19, with full access to all necessary records, databases, biological samples and key personnel," he said.

Yan Li-meng, an exiled Chinese virology expert who believes the coronavirus was an engineered bioweapon, said the State Department report shows the WIV has been "lying from the beginning" about the virus origin.

She said the report bolsters her contention that the "backbone" virus behind SARS-CoV-2 was discovered by China's military in the 2015 to 2017 time frame and that "its gain-of-function process involved humanized animal experiments."

"Intelligence here shows researchers in WIV were sick last fall, while WIV has denied it in public," she said. "Then it is important to investigate whether the patients were infected with the same original strain of SARS-CoV-2 or similar strains from the lab," Ms. Yan said.

WorldClinic's Dr. Lang said the goal of the international community, including China, "should be to get to the root cause" of the pandemic.

"If it turns out that the root cause does lead to WIV, that means that the international community and [China] need to know that and then work collaboratively to make sure that nothing like this, which has had mortality and economic impact of a scale unseen outside of wartime, ever happens again."

[Ethiopia] US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:10 AM, Cara Anna, Neutral]

The United States said all soldiers from Eritrea should leave Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region "immediately."

A State Department spokesperson in an email to The Associated Press cited "credible reports of looting, sexual violence, assaults in refugee camps and other human rights abuses."

"There is also evidence of Eritrean soldiers forcibly returning Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea," the spokesperson said.

The statement reflects new pressure by the Biden administration on the government of Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country and the anchor of the Horn of Africa, and other combatants as the deadly fighting in Tigray nears the three-month mark. The AP this week cited witnesses who fled the Tigray region as saying Eritrean soldiers were looting,

going house-to-house killing young men and even acting as local authorities. The Eritreans have been fighting on the side of Ethiopian forces as they pursue the fugitive leaders of the Tigray region, though Ethiopia's government has denied their presence.

The U.S. stance has shifted dramatically from the early days of the conflict when the Trump administration praised Eritrea for its "restraint."

The new U.S. statement calls for an independent and transparent investigation into alleged abuses. "It remains unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, or precisely where," it says.

It was not immediately clear whether the U.S. has addressed its demand directly to Eritrean officials.

Witnesses have estimated that the Eritrean soldiers number in the thousands. Eritrean officials have not responded to questions. The information minister for Eritrea, one of the world's most secretive countries, this week tweeted that "the rabid defamation campaign against Eritrea is on the rise again."

The U.S. also seeks an immediate stop to the fighting in Tigray and "full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access" to the region, which remains largely cut off from the outside world, with Ethiopian forces often accompanying aid.

"We are gravely concerned by credible reports that hundreds of thousands of people may starve to death if urgent humanitarian assistance is not mobilized immediately," the statement says.

The U.S. adds that "dialogue is essential between the government and Tigrayans." Ethiopia's government has rejected dialogue with the former Tigray leaders, seeing them as illegitimate, and has appointed an interim administration.

The former Tigray leaders, in turn, objected to Ethiopia delaying a national election last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and considered Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's mandate over.

Editorials and Op-eds

Biden's uphill battle to save the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Ishaan Tharoor, 13480K, Neutral]

There's probably no country in the world outside the United States that was more affected by the November election than Iran. President Biden's victory and entry into the White House was expected to mark a major shift in U.S. strategy toward the regime in Tehran. After weathering the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and rounds of asphyxiating sanctions, Iranian officials hoped for a change in the geopolitical winds and some economic relief.

Biden and his allies say they want to undo the diplomatic harm caused by former president Donald Trump's unilateral reimposition of sanctions on Iran, which happened over the objections of European partners. Along with rejoining the Paris climate accords, salvaging

the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that Trump abrogated would demonstrate the Biden administration's commitment to multilateral diplomacy with long-standing allies. The Biden camp also believes that Trump's hardline tactics failed to achieve their stated goal of curbing Iran's malign activities abroad, driving it closer to amassing a sufficient stockpile of enriched uranium that could be used for a nuclear weapon than it was before Trump took office.

But a return to the status quo that existed before the Trump presidency looks tricky. While Biden is committed to re-engagement with Iran, his aides have yet to indicate clearly when and how, suggesting that the ball is in Iran's court. At his confirmation hearing last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would wait until it was convinced that Tehran was scaling back its revived enrichment operations and returning once more to compliance with the pact.

"We are a long way from there," said Blinken. "We would then have to evaluate whether they were actually making good if they say they are coming back into compliance with their obligations, and then we would take it from there."

The Iranians want to see the Americans take the first major step. "The administration should begin by unconditionally removing, with full effect, all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or relabeled since Trump took office," wrote Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif in a Foreign Affairs op-ed last week. "In turn, Iran would reverse all the remedial measures it has taken in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal."

Zarif added that a "return to the table will be jeopardized" if Washington and its European partners insist on linking a portfolio of other concerns — including Iran's ballistic missile program and ongoing support for proxy militias elsewhere in the Middle East — to the resumption of talks around the nuclear deal.

As the Trump administration fired off a final salvo of punitive actions against Tehran, the regime responded by stepping up enrichment of uranium at five times the rate permitted under the nuclear deal. In November, Iranian parliament passed a law that would restrict U.N. inspectors' access to key nuclear facilities in the absence of sanctions relief; it may get implemented as early next month.

"It is clear that we don't have many months ahead of us," Rafael Gross, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, told Reuters earlier this month, warning that time was running out for diplomacy to get back on course. "We have weeks."

This standoff between Biden and Zarif's boss, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, is made more fraught by domestic pressures within both countries. Republicans and supporters of the Trump administration's approach appear to be waiting to make political hay of any perceived concession to Iran and have already started smearing Biden appointees as soft on the regime. They are joined by officials from Iran's regional adversaries — Israel and the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — who say that Biden should build off the perceived leverage achieved by Trump.

Some analysts of Iranian politics argue that that leverage is not what it's cracked up to be and that the regime has proved remarkably resilient despite the squeeze of sanctions. With

Iranian presidential elections slated for this summer, a camp of hard-liners opposed to rapprochement with the United States already looks ascendant.

"The Iranian president has very difficult months ahead of him before he leaves office," wrote Saeid Jafari for the Atlantic Council's Iran Source blog. "Rouhani's influential political rivals will do their best to deprive him of reviving the [nuclear deal] before the end of his government."

But Iran watchers in Washington caution against worrying too much about internal political fissures within the Islamic Republic. "I would not hold the Iranian presidential election as a serious reason for urgency on our side," said Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution during a webinar last week where she argued Tehran's strategy at present was aimed at goading Biden quickly back into the deal. "The Biden administration should resist the temptation to be drawn into crisis diplomacy with the Iranians."

What Maloney and other experts in Washington advocate is a more measured approach that cools tensions without immediately lifting all of Trump's sanctions. But a risky game of brinkmanship may now unfold, which will test cooperation between the new U.S. administration and its European partners.

"Tehran would be wrong to assume that [the Biden] administration would hesitate to maintain or even intensify pressure on the Islamic Republic — this time in coordination with European allies — if it were to issue excessive demands," noted a report from the International Crisis Group.

Even if the regime is intact, Iranian society is paying a price. "The cost of US sanctions have so far been felt most by ordinary Iranians, who have been hit with high inflation," wrote Iran scholars Ellie Geranmayeh and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj in an op-ed for CNN. "The worsening economic situation did not lead to regime collapse or capitulation as the Trump administration had bet on, but instead contributed ... protests that were met with brutal force by the security apparatus."

My colleague Jason Rezaian argued that Biden ought to make the "concerns and aspirations of ordinary Iranians central to his policy." But after the difficulties of the Trump years, many Iranians are pessimistic about the way ahead.

"I do not think Biden's presidency is going to make any important change in our lives," said Shabnam, 41, a teacher in Tehran who spoke to my colleagues on the condition that only her first name be used for security reasons. "To be honest with you, the degree and depth of hopelessness and despair in Iran is so high that I am not optimistic about any action by any Iranian or American politician."

Hong Kong's Candles in the Wind (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 6:30 PM, Matthew Brooker, 6400K, Neutral]

Beijing chose President Biden's inauguration day to announce sanctions on outgoing members of the Trump administration for, among other things, penalizing Chinese officials blamed for eroding Hong Kong's autonomy. In a familiar refrain, the foreign ministry chastened the U.S. for interfering in China's internal affairs.

Hong Kong is Chinese territory; that isn't in dispute. Yet to assert that what happens in the

city is purely a domestic issue is to ignore the crucial role that the former British colony has played as a bridge between the Communist system and the democratic world, a legacy that has enduring relevance for the prospects of future cooperation between the two spheres.

Deng Xiaoping's "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement, the basis of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration that governed Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, was a visionary formula whose significance reverberated far beyond the shores of the territory. Then in the early stages of its economic reform and opening to the world, China needed Western markets and capital to drive its development.

Deng, in accepting a capitalist enclave with civil liberties on China's doorstep, was embracing more than a willingness to ease the passage of Hong Kong's people back to the motherland. One Country, Two Systems signaled to the U.S. and its allies that Beijing's rulers had decided it was possible for the Communist and democratic worlds to coexist in an atmosphere of mutual benefit — a radical step for a party that came to power through a civil war and was dedicated to the ultimate demise of global capitalism.

The crackdown on Hong Kong since the passage of a national security law enacted by China's National People's Congress last June has essentially repudiated Deng's notion. The actions of authorities go far beyond what was necessary to restore order to the city after the sometimes-violent protests of 2019, the proximate cause for Beijing's decision to impose the new law. These include the disqualification of moderate pro-democracy lawmakers, the arrest of a newspaper publisher and, most recently, the rounding-up of more than 50 people for their involvement in organizing or participating in an unofficial primary election last year — including an American lawyer.

Having blamed "external forces" for fomenting the Hong Kong unrest — another familiar refrain, and one that ignores the role of Beijing's policies in the city's deepening social discontent — China's leaders appear to have decided that the values of an open, pluralist society are incompatible with the Communist state after all. A more cynical interpretation might be that One Country, Two Systems was only ever a tactical arrangement, concluded at a time when China still needed the West and was too weak to stand on its own. Deng, let's not forget, is also known for the dictum: "Hide your strength, bide your time." Under Xi Jinping, the party has decided that the time for biding its time is over.

There are anomalies within the assault on Hong Kong's freedoms. In particular, authorities have yet to target the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, organizer of the annual Tiananmen vigil held in the city's Victoria Park.

The alliance was formed to support the protesting Beijing students before June 4, 1989 and, since the massacre, has been a thorn in Beijing's side. Before 1997, there was speculation that the annual vigil would be banned; Hong Kong's first post-handover chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, urged people to "put the baggage of June 4" behind them. Yet the gatherings went on. Police banned last year's vigil, though they cited health risks from the pandemic. There has been no attempt to shut down the event's organizer.

For a group that openly wishes for an end to Communist rule in China to survive unmolested in the post-national security law environment — when as little as a Facebook post or a tweet, or just going to the polls, could be enough to get an offender into trouble — is striking. It may just be a matter of time. Just perhaps, though, Beijing is genuinely hesitant

about the way such a move would be perceived.

The Tiananmen vigil is the most potent symbol of how Hong Kong differs from mainland China. The city is the only place in the People's Republic where public commemoration of June 4 is permitted. So the gathering's persistent appearance year after year served a purpose in showing to the world that One Country, Two Systems was a reality — even if it irritated the territory's Beijing-backed leaders. Take that away, and the repeated insistence by every official from Xi on down that China is "upholding" One Country, Two Systems becomes harder to sustain.

The foreign ministry announced the sanctions on the departing Trump administration officials during Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20 in what looked like a defiant gesture that China would stand its ground. In reality, Beijing may care more about international public opinion than it would care to admit.

America Can Defend Taiwan (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 1:00 PM, Elbridge Colby, Neutral]

The Biden administration faces a stark reality: Over the next four years it's possible that China will try to take Taiwan. For the first time since 1950, Beijing may reasonably think it has a viable military option to force what it regards as a renegade province to heel. President Xi Jinping has said Taiwan must be part of China—and has signaled he intends to do something about it.

The stakes for America are immense. Keeping Taiwan out of Beijing's grip is crucial for denying China's goal of attaining regional hegemony and eventually global pre-eminence. The island occupies a pivotal geographic position. If Taiwan falls, China would have the ability to project military power throughout Asia. Japan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands would all be more vulnerable to China's military.

The U.S. has long opposed China's belligerence toward Taiwan, and states in the region would read the U.S. response to an attack as a bellwether of American reliability. Forgoing Taiwan's defense would seriously undermine America's credibility among already nervous Asian allies and partners. For these reasons, the recently declassified 2018 Indo-Pacific strategy specifically ordered the Pentagon to implement a defense strategy that will make the U.S. capable of defending Taiwan.

But can America even defend Taiwan from a China that has become so powerful? The People's Liberation Army is growing stronger at an astonishingly fast rate. The PLA Navy already has more ships than the U.S. Navy, its air forces are the largest in the region, and Beijing also boasts the world's largest missile force. Beijing seeks to reach technical parity with America's armed forces by the 2020s, and surpass us by 2030. Despite all this, the answer is yes. Defeating a PLA attack would be far from easy or cheap, and being ready to do so will involve wrenching changes in the U.S. and Taiwanese defense establishments. But it is doable. It would be harder than often appreciated for China to bring Taiwan to its knees. It is true that Taiwan is less than 100 miles off the Chinese coast. But to subordinate Taiwan, China would either have to invade and occupy the island or blockade or bombard it into submission. Any of these courses would be very difficult if China faced a sophisticated and prepared defense, especially combined with Taiwan's resolute population that has watched Beijing bludgeon Hong Kong's freedoms.

Invasion is Beijing's cleanest option, especially a fait accompli that takes the island before the U.S. can mobilize a sufficient response. In such circumstances, Beijing might gamble that Americans would judge the costs and risks of ejecting an entrenched PLA as too great. But to pull this off, China would have to ferry and sustain by sea and air an army large enough to seize and hold an island with 24 million people. This might be feasible if the PLA attacks a Taiwan standing alone. But taking a Taiwan backed up by a well-prepared U.S. military is a far different proposition. Amphibious invasions against a capable, prepared defense are very hard.

To put it simply, defeating a Chinese invasion would require the U.S., Taiwan and any other engaged parties to cripple or destroy enough Chinese amphibious ships and transport aircraft to prevent the PLA from holding the island. For a country spending more than \$700 billion a year on defense, this is a tractable problem, if America focuses on it.

But the U.S. must do four things, urgently. First, deploy an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance system to monitor Chinese airfields and ports of embarkation, and to target Chinese invasion forces should conflict erupt. Second, buy more long-range munitions, especially antiship weapons, and position them in the region at sea and in places like Guam, Japan and the Philippines. This would help make the U.S. ready to blunt the initial waves of the Chinese amphibious fleet and air-assault elements. Third, have powerful forces further back in the Pacific and beyond ready to reinforce those blunting forces. Fourth, routinely exercise these three components together to demonstrate to Chinese military planners that launching an attack would be unlikely to succeed.

The U.S. can likewise handle a Chinese attempt to blockade or bombard Taiwan into submission. Especially with American support, the Taiwanese would be unlikely to buckle under such pressure, even if brutal, since the alternative is to be swallowed up by Xi Jinping's China. This is especially true if Taiwan had stockpiled enough food, energy supplies and other essentials. A well-prepared U.S. could also conduct a "Taipei sealift" to deliver the supplies needed to prevent China's from strangling the island's populace.

Firm and resolute U.S. action is necessary to prevent Asia from falling under Beijing's hegemony. Cutting Taiwan loose would undercut Washington's precious credibility in the region while uncorking Chinese power projection.

Ensuring that the U.S. can defend the island will take focus and heavy investment from both America and Taiwan. But it can be done. And that will be a small price to pay to make sure China doesn't get the wrong idea—with catastrophic results.

Scrapping DHS's travel vetting regime is the wrong approach (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Chad Wolf, 394K, Neutral]

On his first day in office, President Biden revoked the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's travel vetting infrastructure, undoing four years of arduous, and successful, work to protect the public. In his proclamation, he claimed that national security will be enhanced. Unfortunately, the facts don't support that statement.

One of the primary responsibilities of DHS is to keep us safe by ensuring that those who wish to enter our country are properly screened and vetted. It is undisputed after all that there are evil people out there who seek to travel to the United States with ill intent.

In early 2017, former President Donald Trump and DHS first implemented travel restrictions on seven countries. Admittedly, the rollout was less than ideal. The policy was poorly communicated to the public. But let's be clear — no "Muslim Ban" ever existed. Still, the notion did quickly gain momentum as a talking point for the establishment media as well as elected officials of a particular leaning.

Unfortunately, it was this experience four years ago, not the policy itself or even its outcomes, that likely influenced Biden's decision to revoke what was an essential counterterrorism tool.

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has been building, and continues to refine, its vetting infrastructure that detects terrorists trying to enter the country. This capability relies upon documentation provided by prospective travelers as well as information provided by their governments.

For this reason, DHS carefully and methodically developed a complex set of quantifiable criteria by which countries were to be assessed and ranked. Those criteria included the issuance of modern, electronic passports; the ability to report the loss or theft of passports to Interpol; the ability to share information on known or suspected terrorists; and the level of risk posed by a country due to terrorist travel, crime, or illegal migration.

Every country in the world has been aware of these basic standards for years. Those that failed to meet them were identified for tailored travel restrictions in order to incentivize compliance and minimize risk. Again, countries that were deficient, such as Iran, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, had consciously chosen not to take the necessary actions to become compliant.

Importantly, DHS's approach was quantitatively driven, intended to minimize the risk associated with identity management or information-sharing deficiencies of a particular country. And neither religion nor geography ever had anything to do with the vetting. In fact, several countries, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Burma, and Tanzania, were subject to restrictions and are not Muslim-majority countries.

The process DHS employed was not static. Rather, it was constantly evolving. DHS systematically reviewed all countries against the established criteria on five separate occasions since 2017, and the latest review provided the most detailed picture yet of the degree of compliance.

To evaluate a country's performance against the criteria, DHS established a consistent process in coordination with the U.S. departments of State, Justice, and Defense — as well as with the intelligence community. DHS would spend months collecting data from U.S. embassies abroad and uploading it into an assessment tool that ranked each country.

How do we know it was working? The simple answer: the facts. The process yielded major improvements in foreign government identity management and information sharing. We saw an increase in the number of countries reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol, and more countries were sharing their travel documents and actionable intelligence.

In fact, in 2018, the Republic of Chad had its travel restrictions removed after improving its performance across all of the vetting criteria, proving that countries are both becoming safer

and sharing more information with the U.S. government. And in June 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the vetting infrastructure put in place by DHS was valid and within the constitutional authority of the president.

Trump's and DHS's travel restrictions were yielding significant results, making everyone safer and more secure. Our world is complex and dangerous, so now is not the time to fulfill a campaign promise by decommissioning a proven tool in our counterterrorism arsenal.

At the beginning of this administration, I was hopeful Biden would appreciate the effectiveness of the measures implemented over the past four years. Regrettably, with his revocation of commonsense travel vetting, America is now less safe. This is the real peril of political posturing.

[Russia] In Less Than a Minute, Biden Changes U.S.-Russian Dynamics (Yahoo News/Time)

Yahoo News/Time [1/26/2021 1:43 PM, Philip Elliott, 11261K, Neutral]

It's been a busy week in Washington. President Joe Biden yesterday reversed his predecessor's ban on transgender individuals from serving in uniform, boosted a Buy American program for manufacturing and set a new, ambitious goal of 1.5 million vaccinations a day. The House of Representatives sent its second impeachment of former President Donald Trump to the Senate, which got started on its history-making path. Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio announced that he is heading toward retirement and Janet Yellen is starting as the first female to lead the Treasury Department. Today, Biden is signing orders aimed squarely at racism. Oh, and Major and Champ moved into the White House with their humans over the weekend.

Perhaps lost in all that was a seismic development in Washington's posture toward Moscow. The entire pivot took just 58 seconds, but reset four years of Trump-era ambivalence.

Biden, answering questions on Monday from reporters in a formal setting for the first time during his presidency, was asked directly about possible sanctions against Russia for the attempted poisoning and subsequent detention of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, or whether those were being delayed as his government tries to renew an expiring nuclear treaty with Russia called New START.

Biden, who spent years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as its top Democrats and was a leading voice on international affairs inside Barack Obama's White House, knew precisely what needed to be said. He expanded the scope of the question to include not just the treaty, but reports that the Russians put bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan, a massive hacking operation known as SolarWinds, and the sweeping intelligence review he just ordered on what the U.S. knows about Russia's ongoing troublemaking. The ongoing protests across Russia have raised public awareness of it all, and Biden stepped in to lump it all together for a domestic and international audience.

"I find that we can both operate in the mutual self-interest of our countries as a New START agreement, and make it clear to Russia that we are very concerned about their behavior, whether it's Navalny, whether it's the SolarWinds or whether it's the reports of bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan," Biden said. "I will not hesitate to raise those issues with the Russians."

In less than a minute, Biden put the United States on new footing and Vladimir Putin on notice. So when Biden and Putin spoke today for the first time under the new U.S. administration, Putin knew what to expect. According to U.S. officials, Biden did exactly as he promised yesterday and pressed Putin without holding out grand hopes for a reset or even improved relations.

Biden's aides at the White House, State Department and throughout government had been offering a stiffened spine toward Russia. But as much as reporters in Washington respect new White House press secretary Jen Psaki and top State Department spokesman Ned Price, their words don't carry as much weight as the President's. After all, the Trump era often featured a split screen of foreign-policy hands being tough on Russia while the then-President seemed indifferent to Russia's belligerence. It doesn't really matter what the apparatchiks say if the top boss has other plans.

Biden yesterday demonstrated none of Trump's deference to Putin, a relationship that puzzled Washington even before the 2016 election. Nor did he echo Obama's effort to reboot Washington's relationship with Moscow, which started in 2009 with a botched "reset" stunt that had then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton handing her counterpart a plastic toy with the word peregruzka on it. The U.S. side thought it was Russian for 'reset' but it actually said 'overload.' The day left Foggy Bottom red-faced and Clinton with a deep distrust of the Russian openness.

More recently, Biden's stance wasn't George W. Bush's look into Putin's soul, or Bill Clinton's post-Cold War navigation of a totally new dynamic. In all reality, Biden probably retreated to something closer to Ronald Reagan's position: compromise on treaties when it makes sense without forgetting that he's dealing with the vestiges of what Reagan famously called "the Evil Empire."

Biden ran as a sensible candidate, a transitional figure for his party and his country. So far, he has pushed an agenda through executive orders that is far more progressive than Democratic skeptics expected and far more radical than Republicans believed he would dare. So it's a curious comparison between Cold War Reagan and Post-Trump Biden, but it might be an accurate reminder that Presidents often can chase competing ideologies at home and abroad. (Just look at the second President Bush's education reform agenda and his response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.)

Biden's foreign policy circle has its share of Russian hawks. His nominee to lead the CIA is a career diplomat who spent time as the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. No one would mistake William Burns as a Russophile. Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, is as clear-eyed as they come when it comes to Russia's aggression, especially regarding the invasion of Ukraine and meddling in elections. Biden's pick for the State Department's No. 3 post, Victoria Nuland, is a veteran diplomat who served in administrations of both parties; she was a top adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney and an Obama Administration's point-person on pushing back on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan — a top hand during Clinton's days at the State Department and one of Biden's top foreign policy hands as VP — has been working the phones looking to extend the treaty and knows these issues inside and out.

But it's also not a single-note chorus surrounding Biden. Most notably, his nominee for the

State Department's deputy secretary, Wendy Sherman, is an experienced and tough-as-nails negotiator who has sat across the table from America's most bellicose foes and extracted diplomatic agreements with the likes of Iran and North Korea. She's talked the U.S. out of some of the thorniest moments in recent diplomatic history. Where some around Biden are expected to urge hawkish stances, those like Sherman -- who spent months on tough deals with nebulous details -- are more prone to slow trust-building. The same is true of the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, who is heading up Biden's development agenda. She used to court diplomats personally, and counted her Russian counterpart as a friend.

For months, Biden has been signaling to all who would listen that this was where he was heading. The Monday declaration at the former War Department headquarters next to the White House made it official, though. That's not to say Biden is going to be shouting "tear down this wall" any time soon. But he's also not relying on tchotchkes to solve one of the first major foreign policy tests of his presidency.

[China] The US has accused China of carrying out genocide. Will it now boycott the 2022 Beijing Olympics? (CNN)

CNN [1/26/2021 8:24 PM, Ben Westcott, 7975K, Neutral]

The United States' determination that China is committing genocide in Xinjiang presents a rare moral predicament for athletes and countries preparing to compete in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made the announcement on the last day of the Trump administration, drawing attention to the systematic abuse of the minority Uyghur population in China's far west.

The designation is the first by the US State Department since 2016, when then Secretary of State John Kerry determined that the atrocities committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria amounted to genocide, and only among a handful of times a US administration has applied the term to an ongoing crisis.

Genocide is defined by the United Nations as "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," and although the US determination won't trigger any immediate penalties, it will put pressure on anyone who does business with China -- and that includes the 90 or so nations that are due to send athletes to the Winter Games in February next year.

"Right now there is a lot of pressure on any kind of major engagements with the Chinese government that involves lending (them) legitimacy," said Maya Wang, senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The prospect of US athletes competing in the capital of a country accused of carrying out an ongoing genocide, will at the very least send mixed messages about Washington's commitment to human rights.

Beijing has long denied claims of genocide, claiming its policies in Xinjiang are part of a program of mass deradicalization and poverty alleviation. Last week a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused Pompeo of spreading "venomous" lies, inviting people to visit Xinjiang to "see with your own eyes."

Politicians in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the US have publicly raised the prospect of not sending athletes to Beijing in 2022. While in March last year, 12 US senators led by Republican Rick Scott submitted a bipartisan resolution requesting that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) remove the 2022 Games from China and reopen the bidding process. But to date no government or national sports authority has officially announced it will be pulling out.

CNN has reached out to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) for comment.

In a statement to CNN, the IOC said that it had received "assurances" from Chinese authorities that the principles of the Olympic Charter will be respected at the Beijing 2022 Games.

"Awarding the Olympic Games to a National Olympic Committee (NOC) does not mean that the IOC agrees with the political structure, social circumstances or human rights standards in its country," the statement said.

Activists and experts said that US' accusations will undoubtedly fuel calls for at least a partial boycott of the Games. In September 2020, more than 160 human rights groups around the world wrote to the IOC to reverse its decision to hold the 2022 Games in Beijing. Mandie McKeown, executive director of the International Tibet Network, who coordinated the letter, said that if they were to put together another group letter now, the number of organizations would "undoubtedly" be higher.

She said if the Games couldn't be canceled, then her organization was advocating for a diplomatic boycott of the event, which would allow teams to attend while world leaders stayed away.

"The push for diplomatic boycott is definitely growing and noises (from governments) are positive," McKeown said.

Politicizing the Games

Over the years there have been many calls for Olympic boycotts, either over alleged human rights abuses or for political purposes.

In 1936, shortly before the beginning of World War II, pressure was placed on countries to boycott the Summer Olympics in Munich, which was presided over by then-Chancellor Adolf Hitler.

In 1976, more than 20 African nations boycotted the Montreal Summer Games over the participation of New Zealand athletes, after the country's rugby team defied the United Nations to go on a controversial tour of apartheid South Africa.

During the Cold War, the US and its allies boycotted the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow after which the Soviet Union then boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

But Susan Brownell, an Olympics expert and professor of anthropology at the University of

Missouri-St Louis, said that from the Winter Olympics in Albertville in 1992 onwards there had been no national boycotts.

"A broad consensus opposing boycotts emerged among national governments worldwide because of the feeling that they accomplish nothing and only harm the athletes," she said.

There was a push by human rights organizations and NGOs for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics over the Chinese government's restrictions on civil liberties, especially in regards to Tibetan minority groups, but in the end the Olympics went ahead as planned. "No-one with the power to withdraw from the Games was seriously considering it," Brownell said.

But since then, allegations against Beijing in relation to mass detention camps in Xinjiang have mounted. Beijing claims it's offering Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs, an education in Chinese language and values as part of its anti-terrorism program.

"Languages, traditional cultures and customs of all ethnic minorities in Xinjiang have been well protected and inherited. All residents fully enjoy their rights, including the right to subsistence and development," said Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying on January 20.

However, Uyghurs in exile say their families are being imprisoned for arbitrary offenses and subjected to forced labor and abuse.

Even without formal boycotts, the 2022 event is likely to attract protests, though mass demonstrations won't be possible in a country that prides itself on maintaining order.

McKeown, from the International Tibet Network, said her organization and other groups working with it would be undertaking a program of action, including protests around the world, in the lead up to the 2022 Beijing Games to draw attention to the Chinese government's human rights abuses.

She said for now they were advocating for a political boycott, rather than a total boycott, for the sake of the athletes.

"Athletes have worked incredibly hard to get where they are. It's not necessarily their concern that the IOC made such a terrible mistake in giving the Games to Beijing," she said.

Individual athletes could still boycott the 2022 Games, although this would mean compromising years of training and lucrative sponsorships. Under Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, any political protests by individual competitors at the Games are banned.

'The power of sport'

An Olympics can still be heavily political even if there's no boycotts, and the 2022 Beijing Games are likely to be no exception.

In 2018, at the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, North and South Korea marched in the Opening Ceremony under a United Korea banner, a powerful symbol of unity between the

two divided nations.

But the 2018 Games came at the same time as rising tensions between the US and North Korea. At the Opening Ceremony, then-US Vice President Mike Pence appeared to act coldly towards North Korean representatives, including the sister of leader Kim Jong Un.

A boycott by Western political leaders of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2022 Games is possible, said Olympic expert Brownell, but she added that given Winter Olympics rarely attracted the attention of the Summer Games, many leaders were unlikely to go in the first place.

Brownell said that she believed the worst damage to the Olympics' reputation didn't come from an association with China or human rights issues. "The damage seems to have come from the perception of excess cost to the taxpayer and corruption in the IOC," she said.

Despite the genocide ruling by the US, no countries have publicly moved to downsize relations with the Chinese government. And signs point to stronger ties, not weaker. In late December, for example, the European Union struck a wide-reaching investment agreement with Beijing despite the concerns of human rights organizations.

Human rights activists said it was too early to say whether or not a boycott of the 2022 Games, political or otherwise, was likely to go ahead.

And that's assuming the Games even go ahead as planned. Events in Beijing are scheduled to begin on Friday, February 4, 2022 -- just over 12 months away. But as the postponement of last year's Summer Games in Tokyo has shown, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown doubt on countries' ability to host large sporting events.

With numerous potential problems ahead, Wang, of Human Rights Watch, said the Chinese government needed to be given a chance to respond to international concerns over their actions in Xinjiang and the crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong.

But Wang said that she found it hard to see that happening and without demonstrable changes in Beijing's behavior, there could be a "change of perception among other governments."

"They are going to have to make a decision," Wang said. Human Rights Watch is currently not calling for any boycott of the 2022 Games.

In response to a question about a potential boycott in 2022 on January 20, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that "preparations are being smoothly carried out." "We have confidence that it will be an extraordinary gathering," she said.

In 2017, the IOC announced that it would add human rights, anti-corruption and sustainable development clauses to Olympic Host City contracts in the future. However, the new rules will only come into place after the 2022 Winter Olympics, beginning with the 2024 Summer Games. It is unclear how the clauses will be policed or what will happen if a host city breaks them.

In its statement to CNN, the IOC said that it recognizes and upholds human rights but at the

same time, couldn't change laws or the political system in a sovereign country. "This must rightfully remain the legitimate role of governments and respective intergovernmental organizations," the statement said.

The IOC said that the Olympic Games had a unique role in bringing the world together.

"In our fragile world, the power of sport to bring the whole world together, despite all the existing differences, gives us all hope for a better future," the statement said.

Coronavirus News

European Economy Lags China and U.S. on Pandemic Recovery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Craig Stirling, 6400K, Negative]

Europe's economy is starting to follow the familiar script of lagging its international peers when recovering from a crisis.

That was the upshot of the International Monetary Fund's forecasts on Tuesday, which downgraded the growth outlook for 2021 across Europe and underscored a generally poorer performance compared with China and the U.S.

Such diverging fortunes reflect the stringency of lockdowns across the euro zone to contain the coronavirus, as well as a late and stumbling vaccination campaign -- headwinds that threaten to deepen what already looks likely to be a double-dip recession. Political unease over the future leadership of Germany and a crisis in Italy are compounding the gloom.

By contrast, China is fulfilling a V-shaped recovery, and the U.S. is strutting more confidently with a new president overseeing an extra stimulus injection and a more aggressive vaccine effort.

"We've started the year on a softer footing, particularly in Europe, because much of Europe seems to have gone back into recession," Janet Henry, chief global economist at HSBC Holdings Plc in London, told Bloomberg Television. "China is already back above pre-pandemic levels and, on our projections, the U.S. will be by the end of 2021. For the euro zone, it'll be the end of 2022."

That divergence was emphasized in the IMF's forecasts, which showed euro-area gross domestic product rising only 4.2% this year, after falling 7.2% in 2020. The U.S. economy is seen expanding 5.1%, more than recouping last year's 3.4% contraction.

The most immediate cause of Europe's relative weakness is the need for stricter and longer lockdowns to combat a resurgent coronavirus outbreak, and to contain nastier strains of the disease.

As European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde put it last week, a contraction in the fourth quarter will now "travel" into the first three months of the year.

"The short-term risk is tilted to the downside," she added somberly. "Uncertainty is in the air."

Sluggish immunization programs also threaten to widen the disparity between Europe and the rest. The European Union's best performers in that regard, tiny Malta and Denmark, have administered only around 4 shots per 100 people. The U.S. has managed 7 and the U.K. is above 10. The currency bloc is now in a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc over delayed vaccine deliveries.

With such shortcomings likely to cement lockdowns even further, the contrast in economic destinies is looking stark, with banks including Barclays Plc pointing to an "Atlantic divide."

"The U.S. outlook is improving, Europe's is deteriorating" BofA Global Research's economics team wrote in a report. "Don't think of both economies' recovery prospects as equal."

Such a trajectory evokes the frequent impression that Europe has become a natural economic laggard to the rest. That sense has persisted for much of the current century, not least after the region's sovereign-debt crisis impaired its recovery from the global financial crash a decade ago, while the U.S. and China powered ahead, at least in relative terms.

Newfound political disarray is only serving to highlight Europe's listlessness. Post-Brexit trade curbs with the U.K. are already an irksome reminder of the recent trauma of divorce disfiguring the region.

Meanwhile, the succession to Germany's Angela Merkel is still unresolved, keeping open the question of how the bloc will galvanize itself into fighting crises in the era after she leaves. Even after a candidate to replace her as chancellor is settled, an election in September -- no doubt followed by coalition talks -- will prolong the drift.

The sudden resignation of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, against a backdrop of burgeoning debt obligations, also shows how turmoil is never far from erupting somewhere in the region. The country has been the focus of the EU's efforts to forge a joint recovery fund to shore up the integrity of its common currency.

For all their potential despair, European policy makers can still cling to hopes that their economies remain sound beneath the surface.

Government support programs in the region have tended to be highly targeted toward keeping companies and jobs afloat even when output is shut down, possibly avoiding unnecessary destruction to growth potential.

"Economies are being held in an imperfect state of suspended animation, and by and large it keeps underlying economies healthy," said Kallum Pickering, an economist at Berenberg. "My hunch actually is that there's a bit less scarring than most people think."

In any case, Europe's finance chiefs are now resigning themselves to being patient for when vaccination setbacks can be cleared, and the pandemic tamed, so that their economies can finally be unleashed -- even if that happens far later than global rivals.

"We have to divide the year 2021 in two parts," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said in a Bloomberg Television interview. "We have everything that is required to have a very strong, very quick rebound as soon as the pandemic is over."

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 6:28 PM, Stephanie Armour, Sabrina Siddiqui and Andrew Restuccia, Neutral]

The Biden administration on Tuesday said it would boost the supply of coronavirus vaccines sent to states by about 16% for the next three weeks and will purchase enough additional doses to vaccinate most of the U.S. population with a two-dose regimen by the end of the summer.

Senior administration officials said the federal government is working to purchase an additional 100 million doses each of the Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. vaccines, increasing the total U.S. vaccine order by 50% to 600 million from 400 million. Officials said they expect the additional doses to be delivered over the summer.

The purchases will provide enough supply to vaccinate 300 million Americans in a two-dose regimen over the summer. The vaccine is not approved for people under 16 years old.

"We now have a national strategy to beat Covid-19," President Biden said Tuesday. "It's comprehensive. It's based on science, not politics. It's based on truth, not denial. And it is detailed."

He nonetheless urged the public to remain vigilant, referring to the fight against the pandemic as "a wartime undertaking." "The brutal truth is, it's going to take months before we get the majority of Americans vaccinated," Mr. Biden said.

Even with the increase in doses to states starting next week, supplies aren't yet sufficient for what is needed now, a senior administration official said.

The administration will also start providing states with three weeks' advance notice of their estimated vaccine allocations, updated on a running basis, to help with their planning. Governors had said allocations fluctuated under the Trump administration, complicating efforts to staff vaccination sites and manage appointments.

"We've been going week to week, and you really can't plan and schedule," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said on MSNBC. "It will bring some efficiency to the program that we haven't been able to implement."

Members of the Biden administration, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky and White House coronavirus coordinator Jeffrey Zients, briefed governors on the changes on a call Tuesday afternoon, people familiar with the discussion said. The Department of Health and Human Services will boost allocations to states next week to a minimum of 10 million doses a week, up from 8.6 million doses a week, for the next three weeks, a senior administration official said.

Biden administration officials told governors that 5.7 million doses will be Moderna's vaccine and 4.3 million will be Pfizer's vaccine, the people familiar with the call said.

The officials also told governors that the sixth dose that Pfizer recently discovered could be extracted from its five-dose vials won't count toward the allocation of the company's doses to states, the people with knowledge of the call said. Special syringes are required to extract

the additional dose and some pharmacies have struggled to extract it properly.

The vaccine rollout has been hindered by long waits for shots, crashing websites and early evidence that lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color are falling behind more affluent, white areas when it comes to getting vaccinated. Mr. Biden had said he wanted to see 1 million vaccinations administered a day in his first 100 days, and on Monday he said the administration could reach 1.5 million vaccinations a day. Public-health analysts had said that administering 1 million doses a day, an amount almost reached under the Trump administration, would put the U.S. on track to reach herd immunity to the virus in 2022.

Mr. Biden said Monday he was optimistic that any American who wants a coronavirus vaccine should be able to get one by the spring. The president said delivering on that promise will require boosting vaccine supply and the capacity of facilities where people can receive the vaccine. To date, about 44.4 million doses of both vaccines have been distributed in the U.S., of which 23.5 million have been administered, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of the doses administered, 13 million were Pfizer vaccines and 10.4 million were from Moderna. Johnson & Johnson has said it expects to report results of a large clinical trial of its Covid-19 vaccine by early next week and to deliver 100 million doses for use in the U.S. by the end of June if the results are positive and the vaccine is authorized. Mr. Biden's plan would establish 100 federally supported vaccination centers and dispatch mobile units to rural and underserved areas across the country. The CDC will make vaccines available in local pharmacies beginning next month. The Biden administration also plans to launch a national public awareness campaign to promote the importance of the vaccine.

He has invoked the Defense Production Act to take certain steps to expand vaccine manufacturing, such as producing more equipment and materials used to make shots. He also will use the act to boost supplies such as "low dead space" syringes, which can be used to squeeze more doses out of vaccine vials.

Vaccines were initially allocated to states in December based on the size of their population. In December, CDC advisers recommended that initial supplies go to high-risk populations such as front-line health workers and nursing-home residents. The advisory panel said adults 65 years and older should begin vaccinations only after doses were given to essential workers and adults 75 years and older who wanted them.

The Trump administration on Jan. 12 said it was changing the distribution system, providing allocations to states based on the size of state populations over age 65 and how effective states have been in getting the shots administered.

It also called on states to open up vaccinations to adults 65 years and older, but governors said there wasn't enough supply from the reserve to keep up with the surge in demand that followed. Mr. Cuomo said Tuesday that New York was "functionally out" of vaccines but expected new shipments in the next several days. Health officials in New York's Erie County, which includes Buffalo, said Tuesday they were canceling planned vaccination clinics on Friday and Saturday due to a lack of vaccine availability.

As of Tuesday, New York had received 1.3 million first vaccine doses and distributed 1.2 million, the state health department said. According to the CDC, New York had distributed

1.45 million of the 2.4 million doses it was allocated as of Tuesday morning; the federal figures include all doses, including those used in a federal program to vaccinate nursing-home residents.

On a conference call with California officials, Yolanda Richardson, secretary of the Government Operations Agency in Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration, said that the state didn't yet know what its new vaccine allocation would be.

As of Tuesday, about 4.7 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine had been shipped to California and about 2.6 million of those had been administered, according to state data.

California Health and Human Services Secretary Mark Ghaly said Tuesday the state is currently vaccinating 125,000 people each weekday.

"We look forward to increasing the cadence to make sure the needs of Californians are heard loud and clear and we're able to fill the pressing demands on vaccines as quickly as possible," he said.

Moderna said it has supplied 30.4 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccine to the U.S. government for distribution to date and remains on track to meet its targets for providing many more in the coming months. Including what it has supplied so far, the Cambridge, Mass., company said Tuesday it plans to deliver 100 million doses for the U.S. by the end of March, followed by an additional 100 million by the end of June, for a total of 200 million by midyear. U.S. regulators authorized use of the two-dose vaccine in December.

Pfizer and partner BioNTech SE have been providing another Covid-19 vaccine for use in the U.S., which is also given in two doses.

Pfizer said it would do its part to "make more shots-in-arms a reality," a company spokeswoman said. Under the company's agreement, the U.S. government has an option to purchase an additional 400 million doses.

Mr. Biden received his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine in December and a second dose earlier this month. Vice President Kamala Harris got her second dose of the Moderna vaccine on Tuesday.

The U.S. has seen 25.2 million confirmed Covid-19 infections and about 420,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Congressional Activity

Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:13 PM, Siobhan Hughes and Lindsay Wise, Neutral]

Most Republican senators questioned the Senate's authority to hold an impeachment trial for a former president, dealing a blow to Democrats' chances of convicting Donald Trump of inciting an attack on the Capitol.

Forty-five Republicans, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), sided

with Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) on his point of order arguing that the planned trial of a now-private citizen violates the Constitution. Some cautioned, however, that their vote Tuesday didn't necessarily dictate how they would vote at the end of trial.

The proposal was tabled, or killed, in a 55-45 vote that clears the way for the trial to move forward in two weeks. All 50 lawmakers in the Democratic caucus joined GOP Sens. Mitt Romney of Utah, Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.

Seventeen Republicans would have to join the Democrats to reach the two-thirds supermajority required to convict Mr. Trump.

The Republican former president was impeached by the House on allegations of inciting the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, as Congress was holding a joint session to certify the election victory of President Biden, a Democrat. A conviction would allow for a subsequent, simple majority vote to bar Mr. Trump from holding office again. Mr. Paul said the roll call showed that there aren't enough Republican senators willing to convict Mr. Trump. "Forty-five votes means the impeachment trial is dead on arrival," he said.

Democrats countered that the trial is proper and that Republicans are focusing on the constitutional question to avoid having to weigh in on the merits of the case itself—and whether Mr. Trump's actions rise to the level of encouraging an insurrection against the U.S. government.

"The theory that the Senate can't try former officials would amount to a constitutional get-out-of-jail-free card for any president who commits an impeachable offense," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D, N.Y.).

This will be the fourth presidential impeachment trial, and Mr. Trump's second, but the first for a president who has left office. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service, the public-policy research arm of Congress, concludes that while the matter is open to debate, the weight of scholarly authority agrees that the impeachment process, including the trial, can be applied to officials who are no longer in office.

One precedent is the 1876 impeachment and trial of Secretary of War William Belknap, who resigned after the House obtained evidence that he had taken kickbacks from an associate appointed to run a frontier trading post. He was tried by the Senate and acquitted. Mr. Biden supports the Senate Democrats' decision to move ahead with a trial, even if it interferes with his legislative agenda and cabinet confirmations, but predicted in an interview with CNN on Monday there wouldn't be 17 GOP votes to convict Mr. Trump.

"He's going to allow them to move forward at the pace and the manner that the leaders in the Senate determined, and I can promise you that we will leave the vote counting to leaders in the Senate from now on," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday.

Mr. Trump's staff declined to comment.

House managers walked the article of impeachment to the Senate on Monday night, and senators were sworn in as jurors on Tuesday, with Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), the

president pro tempore, sworn in as the presiding officer.

Mr. Leahy, 80 years old, was taken to a local hospital for evaluation after feeling unwell on Tuesday evening, an aide said. Mr. Leahy is the longest-serving Senate Democrat and third in line for the presidency after Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) The trial will begin in earnest the week of Feb. 8, about a month after the Capitol riot that left five people dead, including a U.S. Capitol Police officer. Senators on Tuesday agreed to that timeline in a pretrial organizing resolution.

The House impeachment article, which passed on Jan. 13 by 232-197, drew the support of 10 Republicans.

Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Senate Republican, cautioned that Tuesday's vote shouldn't be interpreted as a guarantee of how GOP senators would vote at the conclusion of the trial.

"I just think that it was a question on the constitutionality of it. I don't think it binds anybody once the trial starts," Mr. Thune said. But he said most Republican senators believe that from a constitutional standpoint, the trial is "on really shaky ground."

Sen. Rob Portman (R., Ohio), who announced Monday he won't run for re-election, said his vote against tabling Mr. Paul's motion was motivated by a desire to allow debate on the trial's constitutionality, but he hasn't decided whether he would convict or acquit Mr. Trump. He said he would wait to hear the evidence. Although Republican senators have criticized the former president for his actions on Jan. 6, many have signaled opposition to voting to convict him. Ahead of the vote Tuesday, a Wall Street Journal survey found that at least 32 senators have said they are opposed to a trial or leaning against convicting Mr. Trump.

Mr. McConnell has been sharply critical of Mr. Trump, saying he provoked the mob that attacked the Capitol earlier this month. At his weekly press conference Tuesday, Mr. McConnell wouldn't answer a reporter's question about whether he believes Trump's actions were impeachable.

Mr. Romney, one of the five Republicans who voted with Democrats on Tuesday, was the only GOP senator to vote to convict Mr. Trump in his impeachment trial last year over his efforts to press Ukraine's president to announce an investigation of Mr. Biden.

Ahead of the vote, Republicans met Tuesday with law professor Jonathan Turley of the George Washington University Law School, who has argued that impeachment proceedings against a former president are at odds with the Constitution. The decision to invite Mr. Turley to the Tuesday Republican lunch was Mr. McConnell's, according to Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee.

Mr. Turley, who testified in favor of Mr. Trump during his first impeachment, argued that Mr. Trump's unfounded assertions to supporters that he was the election's rightful winner, which preceded their rioting, were protected speech, that it is unconstitutional to try a former president, and that Mr. Trump might be best served by simply not participating in the trial.

With the Senate moving ahead with its trial, Mr. Trump could try to appeal to federal courts,

but legal experts say it is unlikely they would intervene either to block a trial or to reverse a potential conviction.

Near East & North Africa

[Iraq] Iraq signs pact with Total for 'large projects' (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 2:00 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, Neutral]

Iraq has signed a memorandum of understanding with Total to execute "large and promising projects" in the Middle Eastern country, particularly regarding use of natural gas and clean energy, its oil ministry said on Wednesday.

The agreement was signed during a visit by Total's Chief Executive Patrick Pouyanne, the ministry said in a statement.

[Lebanon] Amid crisis, Hezbollah 'bank' a lifeline for some Lebanese (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:10 AM, Bassem Mroue, 13480K, Neutral]

When Lebanon's financial meltdown began in late 2019, Hassan Shoumar was locked out of his dollar savings like everyone else in the country as banks clamped down with capital controls.

But the young engineer had an alternative. He could still pull out the dollars in his account at the al-Qard al-Hasan Association, the financial arm of the militant Hezbollah group.

Shoumar had kept an account at the association for years, ever since he had taken a loan from it to pay university fees. Unlike Lebanon's commercial banks, the accounts at the association didn't earn interest. But the 28-year-old Shoumar didn't care about that.

"What I care about is that when I want my money, I can get it," he said by telephone from south Lebanon.

Stepping in where the state and financial institutions have failed, Hezbollah is providing a vital lifeline for some Lebanese. In the country's wrecked economy, everyone is desperate for hard currency and liquidity as the local currency plummets in value. At commercial banks, depositors stand in line for hours and fight with managers in vain to access their dollar savings. Most banks have stopped giving loans.

But at Hezbollah's al-Qard al-Hasan people can take out small, interest-free loans in dollars, enabling them to pay school fees, get married, buy a used car or open a small business. They can also open saving accounts there.

The association, officially a non-profit charity, is one of the tools by which Hezbollah entrenches its support among the country's Shiite population, even as the group has come under enormous criticism over the past year among Lebanese furious at the political elite.

With poverty rising across Lebanon, Hezbollah provides its community with low-cost schools and hospitals and distributes heating fuel to the poor. Hezbollah continues to pay its fighters and employees in its institutions in U.S. dollars, while everyone else gets their salaries in Lebanese pounds, which lost about 80% of their value in the crisis.

Over the past year, the al-Qard al-Hasan association has seen a significant increase in clients, despite it being under U.S. Treasury sanctions since 2007.

"People's lack of confidence in the banking sector forced them to find other places," said Batoul Tahini, a spokeswoman for the association.

She said the number of deposits was much higher than 2019 and previous years, though loans did not increase very much. She declined to give exact figures.

In a recent speech, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said around 300,000 people currently are dealing with the association on loans. The association says its clients are from Lebanon's various sects. But the vast majority are believed to be Shiite Muslims.

Roy Badaro, a Lebanese economist, said the association is part of Hezbollah's state-within-a-state and a "disguised way to complement their activity through microfinance, similar to Hezbollah-run schools, hospitals, etc."

"The aim is to absorb the economic crisis among poor Shiites," he said.

Al-Qard al-Hasan, whose name in Arabic means "the benevolent loan," offers interest-free loans up to \$5,000 and, importantly these days, it gives them in dollars. Active for more than three decades, it is considered Lebanon's largest non-banking financial institution giving microloans.

Clients must put up gold as collateral or bring a guarantor. They then pay back the loan in monthly installments for up to 30 months, after which the collateral is returned. Clients can also set up accounts to deposit money, which is then used to finance the loans. The association operates under Islamic rules forbidding interest.

Lebanon's economic and financial crisis is the country's worst in modern history, with the economy contracting 19% in 2020. Tens of thousands around the country have lost their jobs, and nearly half the population of more than 6 million is in poverty.

The crisis shattered people's confidence in Lebanon's banking system, once among the most respected in the region. As banks took a hit, many people decided to keep their money at home, amounting to up to \$10 billion, according to central bank governor Riad Salameh.

That has proven a boon for the al-Qard al-Hasan association, as some turned to it as an alternative to store their cash.

The risk for Hezbollah is that as poverty rises and the economic crisis worsens, many people might default on their loans, the economist Badaro said. If that happens, Hezbollah might have to use its own funds to cover deposits, he said.

The association's prominence has also made it a target.

A hacking group calling itself "Spiderz" claimed that it broke into the association's system and posted the identities of some clients and security camera footage from some of its branches. It warned clients to withdraw their money or else they might come under

American sanctions.

Al-Qard al-Hasan confirmed there was a cyberattack in late December that it called "partial and limited." It told clients not to worry about their identities being revealed. Tahini said the issue is under investigation.

The sight of the association's clients getting their dollars without problems has also bred resentments over Hezbollah's power in Lebanon.

"This shows that Hezbollah is safe and relaxed, while we are in a dilemma," Walid Joumblatt, political leader of Lebanon's Druze community and a Hezbollah critic, said in an interview with Sky News Arabia. He joked that he was growing his beard like conservative Muslims to get a loan from al-Qard al-Hasan.

In a speech days later, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah shot back, saying all anyone had to do was fill out an application and put up the gold collateral.

He also depicted the association as rock solid, providing \$3.7 billion in loans to some 1.8 million people since it was founded. He boasted that U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah officials only strengthened al-Qard al-Hasan, since some of them moved their accounts from banks to the association.

He revealed for the first time that during the 2006 war with Israel, Israeli warplanes struck a site where money and gold were stored. Despite that, he boasted, every client got their money.

"No one ever lost a cent," he said.

[Tunisia] Tunisia's parliament approves Cabinet reshuffle amid protests (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:13 PM, Tarek Amara, Angus McDowall, 5304K, Neutral]

Tunisia's parliament on Tuesday approved a Cabinet reshuffle that deepened the conflict between the prime minister and the president, as hundreds protested outside the heavily barricaded parliament over social inequality and police abuses.

Riot police turned water cannon on protesters outside the parliament earlier on Tuesday, trying to quell the largest rally since demonstrations began this month.

Hundreds of protesters had marched from the Ettadhamen district of the capital, Tunis, where young people have clashed with police several nights this month, and were joined by hundreds more near the parliament.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi named 11 new ministers and said he hoped it would inject new blood into his government.

"Young people protesting outside parliament reminds us of our priorities. Their protests are legitimate and the government will listen to the angry youth," he said.

But President Kais Saied indicated on Monday he would reject the Cabinet reshuffle, condemned the absence of women among the new ministers and said some likely new Cabinet members may have conflicts of interest.

Saied, who appointed Mechichi last year but has taken issue with some of his moves, said he would not swear in any ministers suspected of corruption.

Police blocked the march with barricades to prevent protesters approaching the parliament building where lawmakers were debating the government reshuffle.

"The government that only uses police to protect itself from the people - it has no more legitimacy," said one protester, Salem Ben Saleh, who is unemployed.

Later, police also blocked Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the broad tree-lined boulevard that is home to the Interior Ministry and where major protests have traditionally taken place, as demonstrators tried to gather there.

ARAB SPRING ANNIVERSARY

Protests flared earlier this month on the 10th anniversary of Tunisia's 2011 revolution that inspired that Arab Spring and introduced democracy in the North African country.

Political paralysis and economic decline have soured many Tunisians on the fruits of the uprising.

The political deadlock in Tunisia since elections in 2019 has stymied efforts to address festering economic problems, with both foreign lenders and the main labour union demanding reforms.

Last year, as the global coronavirus pandemic struck, Tunisia's economy shrank by more than 8%. The fiscal deficit rose above 12% of gross domestic product, ballooning public debt to more than 90% of GDP.

The nightly clashes between young people and police have been matched by growing daytime protests at which demonstrators have chanted slogans including: "The people want the fall of the regime" - echoing Arab Spring uprisings.

On Tuesday, with anger high over the death on Monday of a young man whose family said had been hit by a tear gas canister, protesters chanted against the security forces.

In Sbeitla, the hometown of Haykel Rachdi, who was buried on Tuesday, mourners later clashed with police, witnesses said.

As parliamentary debate on the reshuffle paused, some opposition lawmakers left parliament to join the protest outside.

"Mechichi has transformed this into a police state. ... No work, no development, no investment... just police against the people," said Imed, another protester who did not want to give his family name.

[United Arab Emirates] UAE Central Bank slaps monetary sanction on Bank of Baroda (Yahoo News/Capital Market)

Yahoo News/Capital Market [1/26/2021 10:54 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates has imposed a financial sanction on Bank of Baroda, GCC Operations, Dubai for deficiencies in compliance of Federal Decree Law of 2018 on Anti Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism and Financing of Illegal Organisations.

Bank of Baroda said has been taking steps to ensure compliance with the Federal Decree Law no (20) of 2018 and has been communicating with the Central Bank. Additionally, it has been undertaking measures to improve compliance, the bank said. Under these circumstances, it is informed to the public that the bank has engaged with the relevant stakeholders and is exploring all necessary options available with the bank, including the option to file an appeal against the financial sanctions that have been imposed, it added.

The announcement was made after market hours on Monday, 25 January 2021. Shares of Bank of Baroda rose 0.68% to settle at Rs 73.80 on Monday, 25 January 2021.

Bank of Baroda is a public sector bank. The Government of India held 71.60% stake in the bank as on 30 September 2020.

Europe and Eurasia

[Netherlands] Calm returns to Dutch cities after riots, with police out in force (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 AM, Toby Sterling, Neutral]

With shops boarded up and riot police out in force, it was relatively calm in Dutch cities on Tuesday night after three days of violence during which nearly 500 people were detained.

In several cities, including the capital Amsterdam, some businesses closed early and emergency ordinances were in place to give law enforcement greater powers to respond to the rioting, which was prompted by a nighttime curfew to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

On Tuesday when the 9 p.m. curfew went into effect, rowdy crowds of youths gathered in Amsterdam and Hilversum, but were broken up without incident. In Rotterdam, 17 people were detained for violating social distancing regulations.

That was in stark contrast to Monday night, when rioting rocked cities across the country and more than 180 people were arrested for burning vehicles, stone throwing and widespread looting.

"This was truly a different picture to yesterday," National Police chief Willem Woelders told Dutch public television. "We did not need to use the riot police or other forces."

But he cautioned that one night of quiet did not mean they could let down their guard. "We have to remain alert," Woelders said.

The Netherlands' first curfew since World War Two was imposed on Saturday despite weeks of falling infections, after the National Institute for Health (RIVM) said a faster-spreading variant first found in England was causing a third of cases.

A hospital in Rotterdam had warned visitors of patients to stay away, after rioters tried to attack hospitals in various cities.

A nationwide appeal issued by law enforcement on Tuesday evening called on parents to keep teenagers indoors, warning they could end up with a criminal record and forced to pay for damage to cars, shops or property.

In Amsterdam on Monday, groups of youths threw fireworks, broke store windows and attacked a police truck, but were broken up by a massive police presence.

Ten police officers were injured in Rotterdam, where 60 rioters were detained overnight after widespread looting and destruction in the city centre, a police spokeswoman said. Supermarkets in the port city were emptied, while bins and vehicles were set ablaze.

Two photographers were hurt after being targeted by rock-throwing gangs, one in Amsterdam and another in the nearby town of Haarlem, police said.

Coronavirus infections have been falling in recent weeks, with the number of new cases down by 8% over the past week. A little under 4,000 new infections were reported on Tuesday, the smallest daily increase since Nov. 24.

But the RIVM said the situation in the Netherlands was still very serious as a result of the more contagious variant that has caused a massive surge in cases in Britain.

Schools and non-essential shops across the Netherlands have been shut since mid-December. Bars and restaurants were closed two months earlier. The country's death toll stands at 13,664, with 956,867 infections to date.

[Portugal] Portugal urged to seek international help as COVID-19 deaths hit record (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:09 PM Victoria Waldersee, Catarina Demony, Miguel Pereira and Pedro Nunes, 5304K, Neutral]

Portugal's government was urged to transfer COVID-19 patients abroad on Tuesday as deaths hit a record high and the oxygen supply system of a large hospital near Lisbon partly failed from overuse.

COVID-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours reached a record 291, bringing the total to 653,878 cases and 11,012 deaths. It now has world's the highest seven-day average of cases and deaths per million people, according to ourworldindata.org.

A hospital in the Amadora municipality had to transfer 48 of its patients to other health units in the capital late on Tuesday as oxygen pressure was not enough for the large number of patients, it said in a statement.

"There was a need to relieve oxygen consumption so patients were transferred," said the hospital, which has nearly no empty beds left. "They were never in danger."

News reports showed ambulances rushing through the hospital's main gates to get the patients, while some left escorted by police.

Twenty patients were transferred to Lisbon's largest hospital, Santa Maria, which on Tuesday installed two fridges outside its morgue with the capacity for 30 bodies, its spokesman said.

Across Portugal's health service, 830 intensive care beds have been allocated to COVID-19 patients out of a total of 1,200, the health ministry said. Currently 765 COVID-19 patients are in intensive care units.

As public hospitals struggle to cope, large military health units in Lisbon and Porto stepped in to help. The one in the capital doubled its capacity to tackle the surge. Two cafeterias have been turned into wards.

The local council in Torres Vedras, a municipality near Lisbon which is facing major coronavirus outbreaks in several care homes, urged the foreign ministry to seek international help.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa told a news conference there was no need to create "alarm" about the idea of international aid but added: "We know there is the availability of friendly countries to help."

Health Minister Marta Temido told broadcaster RTP on Monday: "The Portuguese government is triggering all mechanisms available, including in the international framework, to ensure it provides the best assistance to patients."

But Temido noted that patient transfers were constrained by Portugal's location on the westernmost edge of Europe, especially as other EU nations are also under pressure.

[Serbia] Serbia to spend 2.5 billion euros to aid recovery from coronavirus crisis - president (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 4:47 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Serbia plans to spend about 2.5 billion euros (\$3.04 billion) in loans and subsidies to businesses and payments to pensioners and other citizens to help them cope with the economic impact of the coronavirus, President Aleksandar Vucic said on Tuesday.

The package envisions an array of measures including payments amounting to 50% of the minimum wage to employees of micro and small enterprises and state guarantees for borrowing in commercial banks.

"We want to tremendously ... bolster the private sector," Vucic told state-run RTS TV.

The state also plans to distribute 30 euros to every adult Serbian citizen or about 5 million people in May and November, and an additional 50 euros to every pensioner, Vucic said.

"There will be three (such) gifts for pensioners, and two for all adult citizens," Vucic said.

Vucic said the total public debt this year would not exceed 61% of gross domestic product (GDP).

Serbia's 2021 budget sees economic growth at 6%, following an estimated contraction of around 1% in 2020. It also sets the 2021 deficit at 3%. The International Monetary Fund

sees Serbia's economy growing by 5% in 2021, after a forecast 1.5% contraction last year.

Last March, Serbia allocated 5.5 billion euros to help businesses and citizen cope with the crisis. Additional expenditures increased the deficit in 2020 to around 8.9%, up from the previously planned 0.3%.

In Serbia, which has a population of 7 million, 3,924 people have died from COVID-19 and 387,206 fell ill with it. The country, which has started a nationwide inoculation programme, registered a new strain of the coronavirus last week.

[United Kingdom] Britain Faces Up to Painful Lessons After 100,000 Covid Deaths (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 5:31 PM, Tim Ross and Emily Ashton, Neutral]

It's almost exactly a year since coronavirus made its first impression on the U.K., when a government-chartered plane flew 83 British passengers home from Wuhan to a wind-swept military airfield west of London.

Now in the midst of its third national lockdown, the U.K. has hit the devastating milestone of 100,000 deaths from Covid-19.

For Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the country he leads, it's a sobering moment. Fatalities are now already five times the 20,000 figure Johnson's chief scientist once said would represent a "good outcome" for Britain.

"It's hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," Johnson said in a televised press conference on Tuesday evening. "I am deeply sorry for every life that has been lost."

While Johnson vowed to learn lessons once the virus is beaten, he offered few answers to the question of what went so wrong over the past year. How did the U.K. end up with the fifth highest death toll in the world, despite its state-run health service, renowned scientists, and the natural advantages of an island for managing the flow of people?

More pressingly, the prime minister faces questions over the future. The government will need to make the most of the head start it has gained over other European nations in vaccinating its people.

The political stakes are high: Johnson will be put to the test in local and mayoral elections later this year. He also faces a showdown with Scottish nationalists, and with his own increasingly jumpy Conservative colleagues over the restrictions.

The choices confronting Johnson on when to turn off state support for businesses, and how to pay the bill, will determine what kind of an economy is left to revive once the lockdown wreckage has been cleared away.

Much of it will come back to the premier's character. In private his colleagues remark how he makes fewer jokes nowadays, and has struck a more serious tone since the start of the year. Stung by criticism that he has over-promised on when the crisis will be over, he's now more cautious about a timetable for easing the lockdown.

Last March, Johnson breezily brushed aside the threat, openly joking about shaking hands

with staff in a hospital treating Covid patients. In April, he was admitted into intensive care with the virus.

Major events such as soccer matches and the Cheltenham horse races went ahead, and the premier – a libertarian and a crowd pleaser by nature – was reluctant to curtail individual freedoms.

Officials argued that locking down the country too soon would be a mistake – people would get tired of the restrictions and start to break the rules, they said. Yet at the same time, countries such as Australia and New Zealand – which are now almost Covid-free with comparatively low fatalities – quarantined all passengers on arrival.

"We just dithered too much and didn't take it seriously enough at the beginning," Professor Lawrence Young, a virologist at Warwick Medical School, said in an interview. Other countries "went in hard, they went in fast, they didn't prevaricate."

One of the biggest problems was the U.K.'s inability to run an effective test and trace operation to keep track of infections and ensure patients didn't spread the disease.

In the early months of the pandemic, the U.K. had to give up trying to test people because its maximum testing capacity of just 2,000 a day was nowhere near enough as the virus spread exponentially.

A 22 billion-pound (\$30.2 billion) mission eventually ramped up the testing and tracing capacity to rates that are among the highest in the world. Earlier this month, 665,000 Covid tests were carried out in one day in the U.K. But the essential follow-up process of tracing contacts didn't reach enough people to be effective, although it has improved.

British officials insist they simply did not know how helpful mask-wearing would be – even though other countries adopted the policy far earlier. Nor was it clear to the government how easily coronavirus spread among people without symptoms.

Even as the death toll passed 100,000, a policy to isolate arriving passengers in hotels was still being debated.

Almost 3.7 million people in the U.K. have tested positive – the fifth largest caseload worldwide and about half a million more than France. The U.K. has suffered almost twice the number of deaths as Spain and Germany. According to analysis from Johns Hopkins University, the U.K. ranks fourth in deaths per 100,000 people in the population of any country.

In the early days, Britain won praise from economists for its comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting the economy.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak rolled out about 300 billion pounds of measures to support companies and prop up workers' wages, while the Bank of England slashed interest rates to a record low 0.1% and doubled its bond-buying program.

None of this stopped the U.K. suffering its deepest recession since the Great Frost of 1709. Recent figures show the British economy is the worst performing among the Group of

Seven nations, with output still about 9% below its pre-Covid level. Most economists and the Bank of England expect the economy to contract again.

Now Johnson is pinning his hopes on an ambitious vaccination program. A successful rollout would give the government a shot at political redemption, too, and so far the progress has been rapid.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines," Jonathan Ball, professor of molecular virology at Nottingham University, told Bloomberg. With a comprehensive test-and-trace program, and assuming the vaccines are as effective as they seem, "you would hope we would be in a much better position next winter."

The U.K. has administered 6.85 million first doses of the AstraZeneca Plc and Pfizer Inc. vaccine. That puts it largely on target to offer the shot to 15 million of the most vulnerable people by mid-February, and far ahead of the U.S. and Europe. Only Israel and the United Arab Emirates have deployed more vaccines per capita.

But there's another cloud hanging over Britain's battle with the pandemic: Its own mutant strain of the virus.

The recent wave of hospitalizations has been linked to the new variant B.1.1.7 of coronavirus that appears to spread more quickly and officials now believe may be more than 30% deadlier than the original strain. On Tuesday, the government's medical experts warned the death toll will continue to mount and will only start to fall slowly.

Johnson, when pressed on the government's missteps at Tuesday's press conference, said: "We truly did everything we could, and continue to do everything we can, to minimize loss of life and to minimize suffering."

Chaand Nagpaul, from the British Medical Association, said the U.K. "must not and will not forget this day" and needs to understand what went wrong. "As the first nation in Europe to have reached this dark death toll, we must learn the lessons of this tragedy."

[United Kingdom] AstraZeneca Faces EU Grilling Over Delays to Vaccine Delivery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:00 PM, Nikos Chrysoloras, Jonathan Stearns, 6400K, Neutral] The European Union will seek on Wednesday to resolve a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc that threatens to keep its vaccination program in the slow lane, trigger a global spat over coronavirus shots, and prolong damaging lockdowns.

Officials representing national governments and the European Commission will demand the company meets its vaccine commitment. They will also seek "fundamental" information from executives about delivery plans for the first half of the year, according to an official with knowledge of the situation. The call is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Brussels time.

The Anglo-Swedish drugmaker warned late last week of delays at a manufacturing plant in Belgium, which would deal a further blow to the continent's already-sluggish vaccination campaign. The EU responded with fury, vowing to monitor exports of shots, with Germany even signaling support for imposing limits on sales outside the EU.

The risk is that protectionist measures could spark retaliation by other countries, disrupting the flow of life-saving shots just as billions of people wait to be inoculated against a virus that's wreaked havoc on the global economy. Getting people vaccinated is the main hurdle to efforts by European governments to restore normality after 2020's record recession.

Astra Chief Executive Pascal Soriot pushed back against the EU in a newspaper interview published late Tuesday, saying the company signed a so-called best-effort agreement that doesn't specify a quantity. That's because EU insisted on receiving the vaccine about the same time as the U.K. despite putting in its order three months later.

But Soriot added that once Astra gets regulatory approval in Europe -- expected within days -- it will ship at least 3 million doses immediately, with a target of 17 million by February.

"Would I like to do better? Of course," he said in comments published in La Repubblica and other newspapers. "But, you know, if we deliver in February what we are planning to deliver, it's not a small volume. We are planning to deliver millions."

With so much riding on vaccinations, the bloc's executive arm is due to present its export monitoring proposal by the end of this week. An Astra spokesperson said the company hasn't diverted any products from the Europe supply chain.

Shots by Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. are already authorized for use, though the EU lags way behind the U.S. and the U.K. in terms of the share of its population inoculated, according to Bloomberg's global vaccine tracker.

Governments across the bloc are eager to dodge the blame for the underwhelming performance, which could force them to prolong lockdowns. The measures have crippled industries from aviation to hospitality, and are causing growing discontent.

The Netherlands is facing its worst civil unrest in four decades because of its curfew, Belgium has banned everyone from entering or leaving the country without compelling reason as of Wednesday, while Ireland's strict lockdown is set to be extended until at least March 5.

European Medicines Agency Executive Director Emer Cooke said the organization is working with manufacturers to address vaccine delays and expressed hope the shortfalls will be "short-lived." Speaking to a European Parliament committee on Tuesday, Cooke also repeated the EMA's goal to decide this week on approval for Astra's vaccine.

While the details of the EU's plans to monitor exports have yet to be revealed, the World Trade Organization would not hinder the bloc from implementing temporary vaccine export restrictions or even an outright ban.

The WTO rulebook contains a specific exemption that allows nations to temporarily impose such measures to prevent or relieve critical shortages of essential products. There's also a broad exemption if the actions are deemed necessary to protect human life and health.

Protectionist measures could add another layer of complexity for pharmaceutical companies struggling to satisfy an unprecedented demand for vaccines.

But EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis dismissed the idea that a notification system for vaccine exports would limit them in any way.

"We're not planning to impose an export ban or export restrictions," Dombrovskis told reporters on Tuesday in Brussels. "Primarily it's a matter of transparency on the deliveries."

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia set for 10th day of no local COVID-19 cases (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 7:46 PM, Swati Pandey, 5304K, Neutral]

Australia is on track for a 10th day of no new local COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, allowing its most populous state of New South Wales (NSW) to relax coronavirus restrictions after controlling a fast-spreading cluster.

NSW has recorded no local cases for 10 days after low single digit numbers earlier in January. Victoria state, which is hosting the Australia Open tennis tournament, has gone three weeks without a local case.

Other states and territories which have mostly been COVID-free, some for months, will report daily case numbers later on Wednesday, but are expected to report zero local infections.

Australia's success in curbing small outbreaks, with a total 22,000 local cases since March 2020 and 909 deaths, comes at a time when global coronavirus cases are edging towards 100 million with the death toll surpassing 2 million.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklien announced coronavirus restrictions would be eased from Friday, including rules around mask wearing and allowing more people in house parties, weddings, funerals and places of worship.

The restrictions had kicked in late last year to successfully curb virus clusters in Sydney's northern beaches and western suburbs. The outbreaks saw other states and territories close borders or restrict travel from NSW.

Berejiklien hinted that restrictions would be eased further in two weeks if there were no further cases, adding she was "striking the right balance" between economic growth and virus control.

"They both go hand in hand, you can't have an open economy unless you make sure you get the health settings right," she said, while urging Sydneysiders to come out and get tested for COVID-19 even for the "mildest of symptoms".

Despite its relative success in handling the pandemic, Australia's international borders will likely remain shut to non-citizens this year although there may be exclusive travel arrangements called "bubbles" with its South Pacific neighbours.

Australia had a one-way "travel bubble" with New Zealand where those arriving from the latter didn't have to quarantine, but that arrangement was suspended for 72 hours on Monday after a highly infectious coronavirus strain was found in New Zealand.

New Zealand reported a third day of zero cases on Wednesday, allaying fears of a fresh outbreak.

[Australia] Australia's Inflation Exceeds Estimates as Recovery Builds (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/26/2021 9:03 PM, Michael Heath, 6400K, Neutral]

Australia's consumer prices rose faster than forecast in the final three months of last year as the government amended funding to various stimulus programs amid an economy regaining momentum.

The consumer price index advanced 0.9% from the third quarter, underpinned by increases in tobacco excise, compared with economists' estimates of a 0.7% gain, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed Wednesday. Annual CPI also beat forecasts, similarly rising by 0.9% versus an estimated 0.7%.

"Since the June quarter fall of 0.3%, the increase in annual inflation largely reflects the unwinding of free child care and higher petrol prices," said Michelle Marquardt, head of Prices Statistics at the ABS. "The rise in demand for new dwellings is reflected in higher building approvals for houses and a record value for housing loan commitments."

Australian prices have been hit by cross-currents caused by fallout from Covid-19 and governments ending some support programs in favor of stimulus for areas like housing. The Reserve Bank of Australia has adjusted its inflation framework to allow the economy to run a little hotter. It doesn't intend to tighten borrowing costs until inflation is sustainably within the 2-3% target.

Achieving that will require strong wage growth stemming from a tighter labor market, outcomes unlikely to be in the offing any time soon with the jobless rate at 6.6%.

Today's report showed the quarterly trimmed-mean gauge of inflation matched estimates, rising 0.4%, and slightly exceeded them on an annual basis, advancing 1.2% versus a forecast 1.1%

The weighted-median gauge, another core measure, advanced 0.5% from the third quarter for an annual increase of 1.4%, compared with forecast increases of 0.4% and 1.2%, respectively.

Separate data released at the same time as inflation, showed business conditions -- measuring hiring, sales and profits -- surged in December to the highest level since 2018. The employment index surged, reflecting Australia's strengthening labor market that has seen unemployment fall to 6.6% in December from a high of 7.5% in July. The economy entered the pandemic with a jobless rate of 5.1% in February 2020.

"The rise in the employment index is very encouraging," said Alan Oster, chief economist at National Australia Bank Ltd. that runs the monthly business sentiment survey. "The gains have been seen across all states and notably, Victoria appears to have caught up with New South Wales and Queensland -- great news for the state that has suffered an extended lockdown."

Yet, business confidence slid in the period amid a flareup in Covid outbreaks in Sydney and

elsewhere.

Today's inflation report showed tradables prices, which are typically impacted by the currency and global factors, fell 0.4% in the fourth quarter from the previous three months. Non-tradables, which are largely affected by domestic variables like utilities and rents, advanced 1.5% due to the scheduled hike in the tobacco excise.

Other details in the report include:

There was a rise of 6.3% in domestic holiday travel and accommodation following the re-opening of state and territory borders and the peak summer holiday period. International holiday travel and accommodation was again imputed

The most significant price fall was in electricity, down 7.5% after Western Australia provided a one-time credit to households

The Reserve Bank of Australia meets for the first time this year on Tuesday and is expected to keep its cash rate and yield target to 0.10%. It is also set to maintain its A\$100 billion (\$77.4 billion) quantitative easing program.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Appoints Local Lawyer to Prosecute Jimmy Lai (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:56 AM, Chloe Lo, 6400K, Neutral]

Hong Kong's Department of Justice hired Senior Counsel Benjamin Yu to replace British lawyer David Perry in prosecuting media tycoon and activist Jimmy Lai, local media including Apple Daily and Now TV reported, citing unnamed sources.

[Indonesia] Indonesian volcano unleashes river of lava in new eruption (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:08 AM, Slamet Riyadi, 13480K, Neutral]

Indonesia's most active volcano erupted Wednesday with a river of lava and searing gas clouds flowing 1,500 meters (4,900 feet) down its slopes.

It was the Mount Merapi's longest lava flow since authorities raised the volatile volcano's danger level in November, said Hanik Humaida, the head of Yogyakarta's Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Center.

The alert level was being maintained for now at the second-highest level, she said, and people should stay out of the existing 5-kilometer (3-mile) danger zone around the crater as the local administrations in Central Java and Yogyakarta provinces closely monitor the situation.

The 2,968-meter (9,737-foot) volcano is on the densely populated island of Java and near the ancient city of Yogyakarta. It is the most active of dozens of Indonesian volcanoes and has repeatedly erupted with lava and gas clouds recently.

Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed 347 people.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of seismic fault lines around the ocean.

[Japan] Japan's COVID crisis reawakens deflation fears as cash hoarding returns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:00 AM, Leika Kihara, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

A spike in coronavirus infections in Japan is driving local households to do what they have always done in times of crisis: spend less and save more, stoking fears of a deeper retail recession and grinding deflation.

Fifty-year-old Hiromi Suzuki is doing just that having quit her job at a Tokyo novelty store in December after the pandemic hit sales.

"I try not to spend money," she said, walking her dog in the city. "Since I don't go out much, I don't buy cosmetics or clothes any more."

Suzuki's case exemplifies the trouble Japan faces as COVID state of emergency measures were reinstated in January, hitting spending on services, which makes up one-third of total consumption.

High-frequency data shows consumption began to falter even before January's state of emergency, catching policymakers off guard and forcing both the government and central bank to cut their assessments on private spending.

"Service spending is slumping sharply," Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda said last week. "We don't expect Japan to return to deflation. But we need to keep vigilant on price moves given very high uncertainty over the outlook."

While demand for some goods is holding up, analysts warn it won't be strong enough to offset deflationary pressures caused by weak service spending.

"The economy will be in bad shape in the first quarter, which would push prices down," said Hiroshi Ugai, chief Japan economist at JPMorgan Securities. "Prices will essentially remain weak this year."

Despite a rebound after initial lockdown measures were lifted in May, consumption later lost momentum, falling more than 4% in November from January's pre-pandemic levels, according to a BOJ gauge of spending.

That was mostly due to a 10% slump in services spending, which contrasted with an 8% gain in durable goods consumption.

The pain continued in December with consumption falling 11.5% from a year ago, mainly due to a 20% drop in services spending, according to research firm Nowcast and credit card company JCB.

Spending on eat-outs fell 36% and while dining at "izakaya" bars slumped 47%, both marking the biggest declines since May.

A government request for restaurants to close early means retailers are now feeling the pinch.

Monterozza, which runs several popular pub chains, said it was closing 61 of its 337

locations in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, beverage giant Suntory Holdings CEO Takeshi Niinami predicts that 30% of all bars and restaurants might fail in the coming months.

The average number of customers per restaurant fell 60% in January from a year ago, data by booking site TableCheck showed, faster than a 23% slide in November and a 40% drop in December.

And Japanese households aren't spending much on other items either. A BOJ survey showed more than 70% of households don't plan to change the amount spent to enjoy time at home.

Instead, they are hoarding cash in banks, as they have done through every crisis including the two decades of debilitating deflation that haunted Japan until 2013.

Bank deposits surged 9.3% in December from a year earlier to a record 803 trillion yen (\$7.74 trillion).

Households are expected to have saved 45.8 trillion yen, or 8.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), last year, up from 14.5 trillion in 2019, estimates by HSBC showed.

"Unless fears over the pandemic are wiped out, the money piling up in bank accounts won't be spent," said Toshihiro Nagahama, chief economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute.

The BOJ has downplayed concerns about a return to deflation, arguing that companies aren't cutting prices across the board as doing so would eat already thin margins.

Nonetheless, core consumer prices fell 1.0% in December from a year earlier, marking the biggest drop in a decade, a sign weak demand is heightening deflationary pressures.

Even fashion group Fast Retailing Co Ltd, seen as resilient due to brisk demand for its casual at-home attire, plans to lower prices of discount brand GU's spring and summer collections.

While Fast Retailing is wary of cutting prices at its main Uniqlo brand, discounts are planned in coming months to reduce inventory, CFO Takeshi Okazaki said earlier this month.

The hope is that more households will act like Noriko Indo, an 81-year-old pensioner who keeps a tight rein on spending but occasionally indulges in luxuries like tuna sashimi, her favourite food.

"Once the pandemic is over, I'd like to splurge on travel and shop like crazy at a department store," she said.

[Japan] Newly found Fukushima plant contamination may delay cleanup (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:33 AM, Mari Yamaguchi, 2164K, Negative]

A draft investigation report into the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, adopted by Japanese nuclear regulators Wednesday, says it has detected dangerously high levels of radioactive contamination at two of the three reactors, adding to concerns about

decommissioning challenges.

The interim report said data collected by investigators showed that the sealing plugs sitting atop the No. 2 and 3 reactor containment vessels were as fatally contaminated as nuclear fuel debris that had melted and fell to the bottom of the reactors following the March 2011 tsunami and earthquake.

The experts said the bottom of the sealed plug, a triple-layered concrete disc-shaped lid 12 meters (39 feet) in diameter sitting atop the primary containment vessel, is coated with high levels of radioactive Cesium 137.

The No. 1 reactor lid was less contaminated, presumably because the plug was slightly knocked out of place and disfigured due to the impact of the hydrogen explosion, the report said.

The experts measured radiation levels at multiple locations inside the three reactor buildings, and examined how radioactive materials moved and safety equipment functioned during the accident. They also said venting attempt at Unit 2 to prevent reactor damage never worked, and that safety measures and equipment designs still need to be examined.

The lid contamination does not affect the environment as the containment vessels are enclosed inside the reactor buildings. The report did not give further details about if or how the lid contamination would affect the decommissioning progress.

Nuclear Regulation Commission Chairman Toyoshi Fuketa called the findings "extremely serious" and said they would make melted fuel removal "more difficult." He said figuring out how to remove the lids would be a major challenge.

Removing an estimated 900 tons of melted fuel debris from three reactors is a daunting task expected to take decades, and officials have not been able to describe exactly when or how it may end.

The Fukushima plant was to start removing melted fuel debris from Unit 2, the first of three reactors, later this year ahead of the 10th anniversary of the accident. But in December, plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the government announced a delay until 2022. They said the development of a robotic arm for the debris removal — a joint project with Britain — has been delayed due to the pandemic.

Under the current plan, a remote-controlled robotic arm will be inserted from the side of the reactor to reach the molten fuel mixed with melted parts and concrete floor of the reactor. Eventually the lids also would have to be removed, but their contamination is a major setback.

The team of experts entered areas inside the three reactors that were previously highly contaminated and inaccessible after radiation levels came down significantly. They're seeking data and evidence before they get lost in the cleanup.

Massive radiation from the reactors has caused some 160,000 people to evacuate from around the plant. Tens of thousands are still unable to return home.

[Japan] Olympics: IOC's Pound wants to examine reasons for Japan public's concerns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:50 PM, Chris Gallagher, 5304K, Negative]

Senior International Olympic Committee member Dick Pound says he wants to examine the reasons behind the Japanese public's concerns about hosting the Games this summer after recent polls showed around 80% were opposed to the event going ahead in July.

While much of Japan is under a state of emergency due to a third wave of COVID-19 infections, organisers and the government have vowed to forge ahead with preparations for the postponed Games, which are due to run from July 23 to Aug. 8.

"I know there are those in Japan who question holding the event," Pound told the Asahi newspaper in comments published Wednesday in Japanese.

"Together I would like to scrutinise the reasons and respond. Are they are worried about a large number athletes and others from overseas spreading the coronavirus, are they against the cost, or maybe there are people who just don't like the Olympics."

Pound also appealed for people to take the feelings of athletes into consideration, noting that they had put in many years of work in order to step onto sport's biggest stage.

He said the decision on whether the Games go ahead this summer must be made by May at the latest and stressed that another delay was not possible.

"Personally, I think it's possible to hold the Games this summer," Pound said. "Several vaccines have been developed and people in the world are being vaccinated. The risk of coronavirus infection can be reduced."

[Japan] Japan PM apologizes after lawmakers' night club outings (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:52 PM, Yoshifumi Takemoto, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga apologised on Wednesday after lawmakers from his ruling coalition visited night clubs despite his government's call for people to avoid unnecessary outings to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The news is another headache for Suga whose approval rating has tumbled due to dissatisfaction with his handling of the pandemic, which critics have called too slow and inconsistent.

"I'm terribly sorry that this happened when we are asking people not to eat out after 8 p.m. and to avoid non-essential, non-urgent outings," Suga told parliament.

"Each lawmaker should behave to gain the public's understanding."

Japan this month issued a state of emergency in Tokyo and other areas to tame a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases. The measure includes a request for restaurants and bars to close by 8 p.m. although there are currently no penalties for non-compliance.

"My behaviour was careless at a time when we are asking people to be patient," Jun Matsumoto, a senior lawmaker from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters.

Matsumoto was speaking following a Daily Shincho magazine report that he had visited two night clubs in Tokyo's posh Ginza district after dining at an Italian restaurant last Monday.

Kiyohiko Toyama, a lawmaker from the coalition's junior partner Komeito, also apologised after tabloid Shukan Bunshun reported he had visited a high-end night club in Ginza until late last Friday.

Twitter users voiced their frustration.

"It is just a matter of time before public anger explodes. I don't want a blanket cash-payout of 100,000 yen (\$965), I want them to quit!" wrote one user.

"They are really stupid. Don't they think about what they are doing and how the public sees them? If they don't, they are unqualified to represent the public," said another.

[Singapore] Singapore faces talent crunch as tech giants scale up (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 12:48 AM, Chen Lin, Aradhana Aravindan, 11261K, Neutral]

At least three recruiters approach Singapore-based software engineer Xiao Yuguang every day with job offers.

Demand for Xiao's skills has soared since he graduated in 2014 with a computer engineering degree but now he just ignores the offers, having recently joined TikTok owner Bytedance after several years with Southeast Asia's Grab.

"It's not like I want to change jobs frequently," said Xiao.

Singapore is aiming to become a regional tech hub but faces a severe talent crunch as more firms move in, interviews with more than a dozen recruiters, companies and workers show.

China's Tencent, Bytedance, U.S.-based Zoom Video Communications and unicorn Grab and Sea Ltd are among companies expanding in Singapore, fueling a war for tech talent in the city-state, where the jobless rate had reached a 16-year high due to a coronavirus-induced recession.

"Certain member companies have been expanding their operations ... and looking to hire more data scientists, more coders," said Lei Hsien-Hsien, chief executive officer at the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

"So the demand is very strong but the supply is relatively weak, which then slows down some of the expansion plans."

Up to 500 new tech vacancies are posted each week on job sites, according to NodeFlair, which is helping hire for Bytedance and Sea's e-commerce business Shopee.

The information communications sector would need another 60,000 professionals over the next three years, cabinet minister Vivian Balakrishnan said in June.

In response to a Reuters query on the figure, the communications ministry said in mid-September there were nearly 10,000 tech-related job postings on a government-run careers

portal and another 6,800 jobs and traineeships would be created by June 2021 through industry partnerships.

Border curbs due to the coronavirus and tighter foreign worker policies are delaying overseas hiring, exacerbating the shortage, some headhunters said. Some tech professionals can command pay increases of up to 30% when they switch jobs.

"It's not sustainable," said Daljit Sall at recruitment firm Randstad, who expects salaries to even out once borders reopen and as the talent pool develops.

The government has been re-training thousands of people with tech skills while the intake for IT courses at Singapore colleges has risen 17% over the past three years to about 7,600 for the 2020 academic year.

Singapore, an Asian base for many multinationals and banks, has for years had a tight labour market and the country of 5.7 million people does not yet have the capacity to quickly match the tech skills and experience the industry needs.

"There are a lot of tech companies coming in and it's a small island," said Raagulan Pathy, head of enterprise Asia Pacific at Zoom, which plans to hire hundreds of engineers.

"The simple maths of it means that at a certain point you are going to run out of talent," said Pathy, adding that Singapore's programme for allocating visas for foreign workers was pragmatic.

For now, the labour crunch does not seem to be putting anyone off. The Economic Development Board (EDB) is getting healthy interest from global tech companies keen to expand operations, it said.

"We constantly seek to ensure companies who set up here have access to a strong Singaporean workforce complemented by a diverse foreign workforce," said Managing Director Chng Kai Fong.

The EDB has various programmes to bridge the skills shortage including one that helps tech companies bring in talent from overseas and a new work visa for top-tier tech executives.

The work visa, launched this month, has prompted many enquiries, recruiters said. But it is limited to 500 participants and has strict criteria.

Companies are finding ways to cope. Shopping rewards platform ShopBack resorts to reallocating workload to its existing engineers to meet new demands.

Fintech firm Nium's 250-strong engineering team is in India. Its 13-strong team of product managers is being doubled in Singapore, CEO Prajit Nanu said.

Singapore's open economy was hit hard by the pandemic, airlines and tourism in particular, and former Singapore Airlines flight attendant Alloysius Lee is thankful he decided to study data analytics.

"I feel lucky ... I spent the past few years learning and picking up a new skill," said Lee, 32.

[South Korea] South Korea Now Seeks Ways to Live With Low Birth Rate (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:41 PM, Jiyeun Lee, 6400K, Neutral]

After years of failed efforts to boost the birth rate, South Korea's government now says it will focus some of its energy on learning to live with population decline, rather than simply trying to halt it.

The government has "found it will be difficult to reverse the low birth rate trend in the near future" and so will be adopting a "two track" approach of encouraging births, while finding ways to adjust the economy to a shrinking and aging population, according to a joint statement from 11 ministries on Wednesday.

South Korea's fertility rate of 0.92 was the world's lowest in 2019, and likely fell further last year as the uncertainty of the pandemic discouraged young people from marrying and having children. The population fell for the first time ever last year, while more people opting to live alone pushed the number of households to a record.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the negative shock from declining population by causing career breaks for women facing increased childcare burdens and disrupting the inflow of foreign workers," the statement said.

The statement announced the launch of a third government task force on population policy since President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, and outlined its goals.

To minimize the economic hit from a declining population, the government plans to encourage more women and seniors to stay in the labor force, while also seeking ways to accept more foreign workers.

The government will develop a new visa to attract researchers and other professionals from overseas, while also providing ways to help retired people open their own businesses.

Korea will also strengthen "legal and institutional support" for non-traditional types of families such as those based on common-law marriage or non-married couples with babies. Various residential and safety measures for single households will be considered.

The government plans to release detailed measures from May.

[South Korea] South Korea reports big jump in COVID-19 cases on outbreaks in Christian schools (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 10:00 PM, Sangmi Cha, 5304K, Negative]

South Korean authorities were scrambling on Wednesday to contain coronavirus outbreaks centred around Christian schools as the country reported a jump in infections, dampening hopes of a speedy exit from a third wave of the pandemic.

A total of 297 COVID-19 cases had been traced to six churches and mission schools run by a Christian organisation, senior health official Yoon Tae-ho told a briefing.

More than 100 cases were confirmed overnight among people linked to a church and its mission school in Gwangju, about 270 kms (168 miles) south of Seoul, officials said. Another 171 cases had been linked to an affiliated school in the city of Daejeon since Jan. 17.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) said the Daejeon mission school outbreak appeared to have been spreading for some time before it was detected.

The Christian organisation responsible for the facilities, International Mission, was ordered to test everyone linked to 32 of its 40 schools and churches around the country.

The group apologised for not taking early measures to prevent the outbreak. It said that while some infected students may have been asymptomatic it had also failed to require students with cold-like symptoms to get tested.

"We deeply apologise for not responding earlier and for thinking the students could have had a cold when a student first developed fever," it said in a statement.

The organisation said it would submit a full list of students and staff in its schools nationwide.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun called on people affiliated with the affected facilities to get tested.

"The key is speed. I call on the authorities and local governments to make all-out efforts to identify related facilities and prevent further transmission," Chung told a government briefing.

The KDCA reported 559 new cases as of midnight on Tuesday, up from 354 a day before, bringing the national tally to 76,429 infections with 1,378 deaths.

South Korea had managed to keep the virus under control thanks to aggressive testing and contact-tracing, but a third wave that broke out late last year has proven more difficult to contain.

The KDCA has said 45.4% of infections in the country over the past year were caused by cluster infections emerging from specific close-knit groups. Religious facilities were the main source of such clusters.

[Taiwan] Taiwanese man fined \$35K for breaking home quarantine 7 times (CNN)

CNN [1/27/2021 12:13 AM, Lilit Marcus, 7975K, Negative]

A Taiwanese man has been fined \$1 million New Taiwan Dollars (\$35,000) for repeatedly breaking his home quarantine.

The unnamed man, who lives in Taichung in central Taiwan, was doing a home quarantine in his apartment building after returning from a business trip to mainland China and violated it at least seven times, according to local media.

According to TTV News, the man left his apartment building seven times in just three days

to go shopping, get his car fixed and more. He reportedly got into an altercation with one of his neighbors when they confronted him about leaving his home during quarantine.

The Taichung local government confirmed that the man returned from the mainland on January 21. Taiwan's regulations require quarantining for 14 days.

Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen denounced it as "a serious offense" and added that the man "must be given severe punishment."

In addition to the fine -- which is the highest one yet levied in Taiwan -- the man will have to pay \$3,000 NTD (\$107) per day for the cost of his quarantine. The Taiwanese government has been compensating quarantiners \$1,000 NTD (\$35) per day, which he will no longer be eligible for.

Taiwan has been one of the biggest success stories in the world when it comes to containing the coronavirus. The self-governed island closed its border early on, implemented mass testing and contact tracing and has strictly enforced quarantines.

In December 2020, a migrant worker from the Philippines was fined \$3,500 for violating his quarantine for a grand total of eight seconds. The man, who was quarantining in a government-sanctioned hotel, briefly stepped into the hallway outside his room and was captured on CCTV.

As a result of these tight controls, the island of 23 million people has recorded just 889 coronavirus cases and seven deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[Thailand] Thailand reports 819 new virus cases, 1 additional death (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:42 PM, Chayut Setboonsarng, Panarat Thepgumpanat, 5304K, Negative]

Thailand on Wednesday reported 819 new coronavirus cases, taking its total infections to 15,465.

One additional death was reported, bringing total fatalities to 76. More than 700 of the new infections were in Samut Sakhon province, the epicentre of the most recent outbreak, the COVID-19 taskforce said at a briefing.

[Vietnam] Vietnam's Communist Party chief nominated for re-election: state media (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:49 PM, James Pearson, 5304K, Neutral]

Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief and the architect of the country's anti-corruption campaign, has been nominated to serve a rare third term, a Party official said on Wednesday, according to state media.

On Monday, over 1,600 party delegates began nine days of meetings, mostly behind closed doors, at a five-yearly congress. The meetings will pick a new leadership team, aiming to bolster Vietnam's ongoing economic success - and the legitimacy of the Party's rule.

Trong, 76, who is also Vietnam's president, had been widely tipped to continue as party chief despite health issues and old age - which should technically disqualify him for the

position, although "special case" exceptions are granted.

"According to the Party Charter, members of the Central Committee up for re-election must not be over 60 and re-elected Politburo members must be under 65," delegate Hau A Lenh told the state-run Tien Phong newspaper.

"The General Secretary and President is one of the overage nominees and a special case," Lenh told Tien Phong.

Vietnam has no paramount ruler and is officially led by four 'pillars': the chief of its Communist Party, a president, a prime minister and the National Assembly chair.

While ascent to the highest levels of Vietnamese politics is governed by party regulations, in reality the highly secretive process revolves around building consensus and vying for control of the powerful, decision-making Politburo.

That means exceptions to rules are often granted - especially if consensus on the top candidates cannot be reached.

Since coming to power in 2011, Trong has become one of Vietnam's most powerful figures in decades after he emerged on top in a power struggle against the former prime minister at the last congress in 2016.

His "blazing furnace" crackdown on corruption, as it has been officially dubbed, has seen dozens of high level officials - including one politburo member - sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

Government critics have described the crackdown as politically motivated.

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Taliban backs vaccine drive as Afghan government receives \$112 million funding pledge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Hamid Shalizi and Abdul Qadir Sediqi, Neutral]

The Taliban militant movement gave its backing on Tuesday for a coronavirus vaccination campaign in Afghanistan that has received a \$112 million pledge from the World Health Organization's COVAX programme. The immunisation drive will have to take place amid relentless violence in the country despite the government and the Taliban insurgents opening peace talks in September.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters that the group would "support and facilitate" the vaccination drive conducted via health centres. Officials believe the insurgents would not target vaccine teams as they would not be going door-to-door.

Announcing the funding, an Afghan health official said the programme would cover the 20% of the country's 38 million population. The COVAX programme is a global scheme to vaccinate people in poor and middle income countries against the coronavirus. It aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20% of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and middle-income countries.

Afghanistan's Deputy Health Minister Waheed Majroh told journalists it was going to take six months to get the vaccines but authorities were in discussions to get them earlier.

Afghanistan has registered 54,854 infections and 2,390 deaths - but experts say cases are significantly underreported due to low testing and limited access to medical facilities in the war-torn country. Aside from COVAX, the country has also received a pledge of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from India, Dr Ghulam Dastagir Nazari, head of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation at Afghanistan's health ministry, told Reuters.

"The AstraZeneca brand which is manufactured in India will arrive soon in Afghanistan," Nazari said, adding that the government was only concerned about the WHO approval of the vaccine and that the pre-qualification process has already started.

An Indian government source confirmed that 500,000 doses had been set aside for Afghanistan and another official said the first batch of vaccines would land in February, though Kabul had not yet adopted the protocols to administer them.

The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have also said they would finance vaccines for another 20% of the population by the end of 2022, health ministry spokeswoman Masouma Jafari told Reuters.

[India] Farmers back at protest camp after deep challenge to PM Modi (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:32 PM, Ashok Sharma, 2164K, Negative]

Tens of thousands of farmers who stormed the historic Red Fort on India's Republic Day were again camped outside the capital Wednesday after the most volatile day of their two-month standoff left one protester dead and more than 80 police officers injured.

The protests demanding the repeal of new agricultural laws have grown into a rebellion that is rattling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. On Tuesday, more than 10,000 tractors and thousands more people on foot or horseback tried to advance into the capital, shoving aside barricades and buses blocking their path and at times met by police using tear gas and water cannons.

Their brief takeover of the 17th century fort, which was the palace of Mughal emperors, played out live Indian news channels. The farmers, some carrying ceremonial swords, ropes and sticks, overwhelmed police. In a profoundly symbolic challenge to Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, the protesters who stormed Red Fort hoisted a Sikh religious flag.

"The situation is normal now. The protesters have left the streets of the capital," New Delhi police officer Anto Alphonse said Wednesday morning.

Most New Delhi roads were reopened to vehicles by midnight Tuesday, hours after the protest organizer, Samyukt Kisan Morcha, or United Farmers' Front, called off the tractor march and accused two outside groups of sabotage by infiltrating their otherwise peaceful movement.

"Even if it was a sabotage, we can't escape responsibility," said Yogendra Yadav, a protest leader.

He didn't say whether the protesters will go ahead with another march planned for Feb. 1 when the Modi government is scheduled to present the annual budget in Parliament.

Yadav said frustration had built up among the protesting farmers and "how do you control it if the government is not serious about what they have been demanding for two months."

Tuesday's escalation overshadowed Republic Day celebrations, including the annual military parade that was already scaled back because of the coronavirus pandemic. Authorities shut some metro train stations, and mobile internet service was suspended in some parts of the capital, a frequent tactic of the government to thwart protests.

The farmers — many of them Sikhs from Punjab and Haryana states — tried to march into New Delhi in November but were stopped by police. Since then, unfazed by the winter cold and frequent rains, they have hunkered down at the edge of the city and threatened to besiege it if the farm laws are not repealed.

Neeraja Choudhury, a political analyst, said the government failed to anticipate what was coming and prepare for it adequately. "If the farmers are agitated overall India, you can't dismiss the protests as some opposition inciting the farmers."

The police statement said 86 personnel injured in clashes with farmers. Several of them jumped into a deep dry drain in the fort area to escape the protesters who outnumbered them at several places.

Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

Police said the protesting farmers broke away from the approved protest routes and resorted to "violence and vandalism." Eight buses and 17 private vehicles were damaged, said police, who filed four cases over vandalism against the protesters.

The government insists the agricultural laws passed by Parliament in September will benefit farmers and boost production through private investment. But the farmers fear it will turn agricultural corporate and leave them behind. The government has offered to suspend the laws for 18 months, but the farmers want nothing less than a full repeal.

Since returning to power for a second term, Modi's government has been rocked by several convulsions. The pandemic sent India's already-teetering economy into its first-ever recession, social strife has widened and his government has been questioned over its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2019, the year that witnessed the first major protests against his administration, a diverse coalition of groups rallied against a contentious new citizenship law that they said discriminated against Muslims.

"The government on the national security front has failed. I think this government seems to be quite blinkered on the kind of security challenges that it is creating for itself by alienating minority communities, Muslims and Sikhs," said Arti Jerath, a political analyst.

India is predominantly Hindu while Muslims comprise 14% and Sikhs nearly 2% of its nearly 1.4 billion people.

[India] Protesters supporting Indian farmers demonstrate in NYC (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 6:03 PM, David R. Martin and Deepti Hajela, 13480K, Neutral]

Demonstrators showing solidarity with protesting farmers in India rallied Tuesday outside the Indian consulate in New York, some honking their car horns while others stood in the snowy weather, yelling slogans and waving flags.

The crowd gathered on Manhattan's east side on India's Republic Day, a national holiday that honors the anniversary of India's constitution coming into effect. Indian farmers have been protesting for nearly two months over new laws they say will benefit big corporations and wreak havoc on the earnings of smaller scale farmers. They want the laws withdrawn.

Drivers sounded their horns as they went by the blocked-off street where the consulate is located, off Fifth Avenue near Central Park. Those who stood on the street chanted against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with one sign reading: "Someone stop their boy Modi before he eats us too! Save the farmers!"

Parminder Singh came from Chicago, saying his family in the Indian state of Punjab was "getting hurt by the law that's made by the Indian government right now."

Many of the farmers are Sikhs from the northern state and neighboring Haryana, which are major agricultural producers. Among those at the New York march were protesters calling for the establishment of Khalistan, a separate homeland for members of the religion, and carrying flags emblazoned with the name of the secessionist movement.

"We are here today to challenge India, who has carried out the genocide of Sikhs and enacted farm bills to carry out the homicide of the Sikhs and the farmers of Punjab and Haryana," said Bakhshish Singh Sandhu, of Philadelphia, the president of the Council of Khalistan. "And so we are here to challenge India under their constitution. It has attacked the Sikh identity and Sikh religious institutions."

Organizers said other protests were planned at consulates in other parts of the country on Tuesday. Other solidarity protests have been held around the United States in the last two months, in cities including Houston and San Francisco.

In India on Republic Day, tens of thousands of farmers stormed the historic Red Fort in New Delhi, breaking through police barricades and shocking onlookers watching as it was broadcast on live television.

Indian authorities used tear gas, water cannons and placed large trucks and buses in roads to try to hold back crowd, including rows upon rows of tractors. Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

[India] Security tight at Red Fort after clashes with farmers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Alasdair Pal, Neutral]

Hundreds of police guarded the historic Red Fort in the heart of the Indian capital on Wednesday following violent clashes between farmers and authorities in which one person was killed and at least 80 injured. Tens of thousands of farmers, protesting against reforms of the agriculture sector that they say benefit big private buyers at the expense of growers, have been camped on the outskirts of the city for two months to demand the reforms be scrapped.

A protest parade of tractors around the city's fringes to coincide with Tuesday's Republic Day celebrations turned to chaos when some farmers diverged from agreed routes, breaking through barricades and clashing with police, who used tear gas and batons to try to restrain them.

Some farmers carrying ceremonial swords reached as far as the Red Fort, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi gives an annual speech, where they scaled outer walls and hoisted flags.

By Tuesday evening police, had removed protesters from the fort complex but a heavy security presence remained on Wednesday. Agriculture employs about half of India's population of 1.3 billion, and unrest among an estimated 150 million landowning farmers is one of the biggest tests Modi has faced since coming to power in 2014.

While the protests are beginning to undermine support for Modi in the countryside, he retains a solid majority in parliament and his government has shown no sign of bending to farmers' demands.

The government says agriculture reform will open up new opportunities for farmers.

Police said they had registered 22 cases against protesters including "rioting, damage to public property and assault on public servants with deadly weapons" in several locations. Roads across the New Delhi remained closed while extra police, including paramilitary were at protest sites on the outskirts.

The government blocked the internet in some parts of the capital, and mobile speeds were low.

Tuesday's violence was condemned by Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the group of farm unions organising the protests, who they have promised to press on with their sit-ins on the outskirts.

"They have to listen to us," said protester Baljeet Singh.

[India] India Has Plenty of Coronavirus Vaccines But Few Takers (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 4:00 PM, Bibhudatta Pradhan and Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 6400K, Neutral]

Most of the world is struggling to secure enough vaccines to inoculate their populations. India has the opposite problem: Plenty of shots, but a shortage of people willing to take them.

As India rolls out one of the world's biggest inoculation programs, some health-care and

other frontline workers are hesitating because of safety concerns over a vaccine that has yet to complete phase III trials. As of Monday, only about 56% of people eligible to get the shot have stepped forward in a nation with the world's second-worst Covid-19 outbreak.

Unless the inoculation rate significantly increases, India will fall far short of its target of inoculating 300 million people -- or about a quarter of the population -- by July. That will setback global efforts to contain the virus and snuff out optimism that a recovery is taking root in an economy set for its biggest annual contraction in records going back to 1952.

"At least 40% of doctors here are unsure and want to wait," said Vinod Kumar, a resident doctor at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences of Patna, in the eastern state of Bihar. "Carrying out a vaccine trial on us when India is short of doctors, health-care workers doesn't make sense."

While vaccine hesitancy has surfaced in places like Japan and Brazil, and China's candidates have also faced questions over data, the scale of the problem in India is by far the biggest. The major difficulties facing places like the U.S. and Europe are mostly due to scarce supplies rather than vaccine acceptance, and some countries are turning to New Delhi for help: India says it can produce 500 million shots per month for export, and countries such as the U.K., Belgium and Saudi Arabia have sought to buy them.

India's domestic vaccine program administers one of two shots: the AstraZeneca Plc vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India Ltd., or the Covaxin shot developed by Bharat Biotech International Ltd., a private company based in Hyderabad. India's approval of the Bharat Biotech shot, which was developed with government-backed research groups, was met with widespread criticism from scientists because of the lack of complete data.

"Many in our institute aren't comfortable with Covaxin because we don't know how effective it is," said Adarsh Pratap Singh, a member of the Resident Doctors Association at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. "To build trust among people the government must come out with the data, evidence of the trials, and encourage free and fair discussions."

Both the company and the government have defended the shot. Krishna Ella, Bharat Biotech's chairman, said earlier this month that the company carried out "200% honest clinical trials" and had a track record of producing 16 safe and effective vaccines. "Indian scientists want to bash on other Indian scientists," he said while dismissing criticisms in a virtual press briefing on Jan. 4. A spokesperson for Bharat Biotech didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

The government, meanwhile, has urged health-care workers to get vaccinated. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan has sent tweets imploring "#CoronaWarriors" to take the shot, while dispelling rumors that the vaccine could cause infertility. A federal health ministry spokesperson wasn't immediately available to comment.

"Vaccine hesitancy among health workers should end -- I am pleading on behalf of the government, that please adopt it, because no one knows how this pandemic will take shape in the future," said V. K. Paul, a member of the planning body Niti Aayog, noting that he's taken the Covaxin shot without any adverse effects.

"These two vaccines are safe," he said. "We have a system to track it and if there is an unusual signal, it will be responded to the way it should be."

Initial apprehension and doubt at the start of any vaccine rollout is normal, said Preeti Sudan, former secretary at the federal ministry of health and family welfare. India was successful in its polio immunization program, she noted, after launching a massive campaign involving children, mothers and opinion leaders to help dispel vaccine fears.

Low Vaccination Rates

As of Monday, India distributed about 2 million shots nationwide. In Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in central India, about 75% of enrolled people turned up for vaccination on Jan. 21, while two days later in Bihar the rate was much lower at 51.6%. On Jan. 19, about 55% of those eligible were vaccinated in Rajasthan and 54% in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, according to state government data.

While the hesitation relates to both vaccines, people are most wary about Bharat Biotech's Covaxin. In Tamil Nadu, for example, only 23.5% of those allocated Covaxin received the shots on Jan. 19, compared with 56% for the Serum Institute's Covishield, the data show.

Nirmalya Mohapatra, a doctor at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi, plans to "wait and watch" for more clarity before getting vaccinated with Bharat Biotech's shot. If given a choice now, he would opt for Covishield, as its efficacy data was reviewed by leading medical journals.

"Covaxin could turn out to be a better vaccine in the future," said Mohapatra, who is also vice president of the resident doctors' association at the hospital. "But for now there is some apprehension because of the lack of a complete trial."

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Biden DOJ rescinds Trump 'zero tolerance' policy that resulted in family separations at border (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 8:00 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 394K, Neutral]

The Biden administration rescinded a Trump-era policy that had forced migrant families to be separated at the border so that the adults could be prosecuted for unlawful entry.

The Justice Department's top official issued a memo Tuesday that walked back the "zero tolerance" policy, which called for federal law enforcement personnel on the border to refer for prosecution all adults, including those who arrived with children, who illegally crossed the border. The policy only applied to first-time offenders.

"Consistent with this longstanding principle of making individualized assessments in criminal cases, I am rescinding — effective immediately — the policy directive," acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson wrote in a memo shared with the Washington Examiner.

A DOJ spokesperson said in an email that the policy "was inconsistent with the department's longstanding principle that we exercise judgment and make individualized

assessments in criminal cases," adding that the move "restores to prosecutors their traditional discretion to make charging decisions based on a careful review of the particular facts and circumstances of individual immigration cases."

The DOJ's move was largely symbolic as the policy has not been enforced since the summer of 2018, but it represents the new administration doing away with its predecessor's tough tone toward immigrants and vows to consider prosecutions on a case-by-case basis. The policy has technically remained on the books even though it was not being followed.

In an effort to deter illegal migration occurring between the Mexican border and Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, the Trump administration in early 2017 rolled out the zero tolerance policy in several regions of the 2,000-mile-long boundary. In April 2018, former President Donald Trump's first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, announced that the Department of Homeland Security would be prosecuting all adults who illegally crossed the southern border in an attempt to deter more people from coming, in light of the increased migration of Central Americans. Because children cannot be held in jail, adults with children had not been prosecuted until then, but the influx of families prompted the government to take the new harsh action. Separated children were to be transferred to the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, then placed with sponsors in the United States. The initiative was stopped in June 2018 following outcry from Democrats and Republicans.

As of January, an estimated 5,400 families who were separated at the border and more than 600 children have yet to be reunited more than two years later, according to a court filing submitted earlier this month.

A Justice Department audit released this month concluded that Sessions and then-Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein advanced the plan knowing that it would prompt thousands of children to be temporarily orphaned. The DOJ leaders wrongly assumed the courts and federal agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the HHS, would be able to accommodate and track each member of the divided families.

President Biden said last week that his Justice Department will conduct a thorough investigation into the implementation of the policy.

Any person arrested after illegally crossing the U.S. border from Mexico or Canada is taken into custody by Border Patrol, which is part of Customs and Border Protection, a DHS agency. He or she is then transferred from a regional Border Patrol holding station to ICE for longer detention, or immediately removed from the country by CBP, or in the case of children who arrive without parents or are separated from a parent by the government, turned over to ORR, the federal agency that cares for unaccompanied children.

DHS and CBP did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

[Brazil] Brazil approaches 9 million COVID-19 cases, death toll at 218,878 (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 4:19 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Brazil had 61,963 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,214 deaths from COVID-19, the Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

The South American country has now registered 8,933,356 cases since the pandemic

began, while the official death toll has risen to 218,878, according to ministry data, in the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil's Health Minister under investigation over health crisis in Amazonas (CNN)

CNN [1/26/2021 5:00 PM, Marcia Reverdosa and Tara John, 7975K, Neutral]

A Brazilian court has approved an investigation into Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, after oxygen shortages collapsed the health system of Manaus, capital city of Amazonas state, last week.

Federal Supreme Court Judge Ricardo Lewandowski greenlit the investigation on Monday. Pazuello now has five days to provide testimony to the federal police.

It is alleged that the Ministry of Health was alerted to the city's looming shortages of oxygen -- often critical for treating severe cases of Covid-19 -- on January 8, but only took action on January 12, according to a request for a probe sent to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) by the political party Cidadania.

Pazuello himself visited Manaus on January 11, and the federal government subsequently sent supplemental oxygen to the city, but neither were enough to prevent a crisis. Hospitals in Amazonas soon ran out of oxygen, and on January 14 and 15 at least 29 patients died due to the shortages, according to an ongoing investigation.

"The reality is that there's a lower supply of oxygen," Pazuello acknowledged later. "Not an interruption, but a lower supply of oxygen."

Pazuello and other top federal officials have defended the government's reaction to warnings of a crisis in Manaus, arguing that no one could have predicted the rapid spike in Covid-19 cases that strained hospitals.

"This was a situation completely unknown to everyone. It was too fast," Pazuello told a press conference on Tuesday.

He added that the city's health crisis was compounded by a number of issues including "oxygen problems, lack of professionals, low number of beds."

A separate report by Brazil's Solicitor General has also alleged that during Pazuello's trip to Manaus, he encouraged medical professionals to adopt an "early treatment" kit against Covid-19 that includes unproven drugs including hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. The health minister has since denied doing this.

House of Representatives President Rodrigo Maia told a Monday press conference that he believed Pazuello had "committed a crime" not only by letting the state's health system collapse, but by promoting ineffective treatments for the city's surging Covid-19 cases and by failing to obtain vaccines for the country earlier.

Mounting criticism

The growing criticism of Pazuello's pandemic response in Manaus follows a recent investigation by CNN Brazil, which found that top executive Abert Bourla sent a letter to the Brazilian government in September offering 70 million doses of its vaccine, which was co-

developed with German pharmaceutical company BioNTech.

But Pfizer received no response from the government, according to CNN Brazil.

Pazuello responded to a request for comment by CNN Brazil with an open letter saying that the purchase would only have frustrated Brazilians, as just 2 million doses would have been delivered in the first quarter of 2021.

He also said that certain conditions of the sale were unacceptable to the Brazilian government -- including a payment guarantee and an agreement that contractual issues be tried in a US court -- and accused the drugmaker of "creating embarrassing situations for the Brazilian Government, which will not accept market impositions -- which will also not be accepted by Brazilians."

Brazil began its vaccination campaign last Saturday, but the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro has faced mounting criticism for its mishandling of the pandemic.

Since the pandemic began, the country ratcheted more than 8.8 million infections and the second highest number of deaths in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

[Cuba] Cuba's coronavirus cases, death toll surge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:29 PM, Sarah Marsh and Nelson Acosta, 5304K, Neutral]

Cuba's death toll from the coronavirus reached 200 on Tuesday, with authorities reporting nearly as many deaths so far in January as in the six previous months combined, due to an unprecedented acceleration in infections.

While Cuba had just a tenth of the world average of daily infections per capita for much of last year, cases have surged since the government reopened borders in November and loosened restrictions on daily life.

The health ministry has reported 54 deaths in January so far compared with 60 in the previous six months, with daily infection numbers hitting new records on a regular basis - 786 on Tuesday - and cases spread throughout the Caribbean island nation.

Like many countries, Cuba suffered the rebound in cases after opening borders without requiring inbound travelers to provide negative coronavirus test results.

That coincided with a diminished sense of risk as its outbreak appeared successfully contained, not helped by authorities holding rallies celebrating Cuba's socialist values, analysts say.

Many Cubans who live in hard-hit countries like the United States and Mexico flew over to celebrate Christmas and New Year with their relatives on the island, failing to quarantine properly and infecting locals.

The government has since brought down infections from abroad by requiring travelers to present negative coronavirus test results. And it has imposed a new lockdown with schools and restaurants closed throughout much of the island and cultural and sporting activities once more suspended.

The government has also promised to vaccinate the entire population this year with one of its four vaccine candidates that are currently undergoing early and mid-phase trials.

Some Cubans, though, worry whether and when any of those candidates will prove successful. And many complain how hard it is to practice social distancing when they must queue up for hours to shop for scarce goods due to the economic crisis.

[Cuba] Cuba detects presence of South African variant of the coronavirus (Miami Herald)

Miami Herald [1/26/2021 3:11 AM, Nora Gámez Torres, 381K, Neutral]

Cuba has detected a potentially more contagious COVID-19 variant, just as the island experiences its biggest uptick in new cases since the start of the pandemic, health authorities said.

Cuban officials reported the presence of the "501Y.V2" variant first detected in South Africa to the Americas' branch of the World Health Organization in an epidemiological report released Tuesday.

The Pan American Health Organization noted that preliminary studies indicate the new strain is associated with a higher viral load, indicating "a potential for greater transmissibility." However, the variant has not been linked to an increased risk of death.

Virus cases have risen significantly in Cuba in recent weeks after months of low infection rates. The island closed its airports to international travelers for nearly eight months and imposed a strict quarantine. But a severe economic downturn compelled authorities to reopen before the holidays. The government blames travelers for the new outbreak. Now in the country's main cities, Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Santa Clara, the virus is spreading mostly among Cuban residents.

Dr. María Guadalupe Guzmán, a top researcher at the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine, known by its Spanish acronym, IPK, said last Friday that the South African strain was detected in an asymptomatic traveler from that country.

The traveler and his close contacts complied with the island's required quarantine, she said. But she wouldn't rule out the possibility it had entered through other travelers as well.

"With the data we have, we cannot say that it is widespread in the country," Guzmán said. "But we cannot rule it out because a high number of cases are being reported daily."

On Tuesday, the country broke a new record for daily COVID-19 cases, with 786 reported. Since Jan. 2, there have been 50 deaths and 9,404 new cases, a figure that represents 43% of all infections since the government began publishing data in March last year.

Although it is still too early to link the circulation of this variant with the increase in cases in Cuba, epidemiologist Carlos Espinal said it is "very important that the IPK remains transparent and shows the results of studies about the dispersion of this variant in Cuba."

"This is another threat that the United States will have to think about — restricting travel to Cuba, most likely in the near future," said Espinal, who heads the Global Health Consortium at Florida International University.

The United States already requires all international travelers to show a negative COVID-19

test upon arrival. It has also suspended the entry of people from South Africa, the United Kingdom and Brazil to contain new, more contagious mutations identified in those countries.

Guzmán and other Cuban public health officials have attributed the spike in cases to the relaxation of preventive measures and a decrease in the perception of risk among the population.

"Irresponsibility cannot continue to prevail in our country," Dr. Francisco Durán García, Cuba's national director of epidemiology, said Tuesday, adding that citizens should play their part. "We cannot achieve [better results] only based on fines and other measures."

The Cuban government reduced the number of international flights arriving on the island, imposed mandatory testing for all travelers, and ordered a strict quarantine in Havana and other cities in recent weeks. Still, the virus does not appear to be abating.

In Havana, there were 344 new cases reported this Tuesday. According to official figures, more than 9,000 people are currently admitted to hospitals nationwide, most of them confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19.

While health authorities have published data on the number of PCR tests performed to diagnose the virus — recording a little more than 1.8 million administered since March 2020 — they have not said how many samples of the virus they regularly analyze to detect the circulation of new strains.

Espinosa said that the presence of new variants requires establishing a program to sequence the virus and determine which mutations circulate in a country.

The South African variant worries experts because some preliminary studies suggest it might be more resistant to treatments and vaccines.

"The South African strain is the great threat," Espinal said. "The risk is that if left unchecked, it could jeopardize the effectiveness of the vaccination program because it has been able to change its protein structure and partially evade the antibody response that vaccines produce."

[Mexico] Mexico near approving Russian vaccine, with little data (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 9:43 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Positive]

Mexico said Tuesday it is close to granting approval for Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, with lots of spy drama but little public data available.

The approval process described by Hugo López-Gatell, Mexico's assistant health secretary, sounded like a Cold War spy thriller, and may not foment confidence in the shot.

López-Gatell said a Mexican technical committee on new medications has recommended approving the vaccine, adding only "some details" were lacking for COFEPRIS, the government medical safety commission, to give the final go-ahead.

"The technical part, the main part of COFEPRIS, particularly the committee on new medications, has given a favorable recommendation to authorize, that is to say, the crucial part has been solved," López-Gatell said.

But he also said that despite weeks of conversations with Russian officials, he could not get his hands on the results of Phase 3 trials, which are normally published in international medical journals and indicate how effective the vaccine is.

Russian officials have given conflicting accounts, upping the supposed effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine to higher levels every time a U.S. vaccine reports its results.

Desperate, but with no published data, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ordered López-Gatell to fly to Argentina, which has already approved and is using Sputnik V, to see what information he could get.

The Argentines had to call the Russians to get permission to share the closely-guarded files with the Mexicans.

Within a day or two, the Argentines gave López-Gatell a copy of Phase 3 trial results and other data on the Sputnik vaccine which he spirited back to Mexico, and then submitted to Mexican regulatory officials.

But the plot got thicker, because even though the technical committee has given a favorable recommendation, it turns out the application hasn't even been formally filed yet. Mexican authorities apparently can't grant authorization based on what may be a sheaf of photocopies from who-knows-where obtained through back channels.

López-Gatell said Mexico is currently trying to get the Russians — who don't appear to have much experience dealing with regulatory agencies — to designate a person to formally submit what appears to be an already-approved application.

Mexico has been unable to get more than about 750,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, about half the amount it needs just to inoculate just front-line health workers. Mexico had pinned its hopes on China's CanSino vaccine.

But delays in approving that shot drove López Obrador to speak directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday to try to get the Russian vaccine, the first doses of which are expected to arrive next week.

It is unclear whether the lack of public data might affect Mexicans' willingness to get vaccinated, without knowing how effective or safe the Russian shot is.

"I do want vaccines, but ones that have been approved by the World Health Organization and the international scientific community," wrote Sen. Lilly Téllez of the conservative opposition National Action Party. "The Russian vaccine does not have that yet."

"It is the cheap vaccine, that is why the government chose it," Téllez wrote in her Twitter account.

[Mexico] Mexico may approve Russian COVID-19 vaccine within days, health official says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:05 PM, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Positive]

Mexico Deputy Health Minister Hugo Lopez-Gatell said on Tuesday that emergency use of

Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine should be authorized within days, after a favorable recommendation by a committee within Mexico's health regulator.

The exact arrival of the first shipments of Sputnik V to Mexico had not been confirmed, Lopez-Gatell said, though officials said earlier in the day that 200,000 doses could arrive next week.

[Peru] Peru volunteer in Sinopharm vaccine trial dies of COVID-19 pneumonia, university says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:12 PM, Marco Aquino, 5304K, Negative]

A volunteer in the local Peruvian trial of a coronavirus vaccine produced by China's Sinopharm Group Co Ltd has died from COVID-19-related pneumonia, the university carrying out the trial said on Tuesday.

Cayetano Heredia University, which is involved with the study, said on the instructions of the Peruvian health regulator it had unblinded the volunteer's participation in the trial and determined she had received the placebo rather than the vaccine.

"It is important to stipulate that the death of the participant is not related to the vaccine since she received the placebo, and we will therefore report to the relevant regulatory and ethics bodies and maintain the course of this phase three study," the university said in a statement.

German Malaga, chief researcher at the Cayetano Heredia University, told Reuters by phone that the deceased volunteer had suffered from diabetes.

Malaga said the trial investigators had so far issued two doses of either the vaccine or placebo to 12,000 volunteers and were now following their responses.

"It is developing without any setbacks. These things can happen, COVID is a disease that causes deaths," he said.

"Our message to the volunteers is to take care of themselves because we don't know if they have the vaccine or the placebo," he added.

The university said in its statement that the volunteer had received "all the necessary care to treat this disease and her complications" and was "fighting for her life" for more than a week.

"It is a painful loss for which we extend our condolences to her family," the statement added.

In December, Peru temporarily suspended trials of the Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine due to a "serious adverse event" that occurred with a volunteer in the study.

In Brazil, clinical trials of China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine were suspended before being allowed to resume late last year due to a study subject's death that was registered in Sao Paulo as a suicide.

[Venezuela] Maduro's 'miracle' treatment for COVID-19 draws skeptics (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Scott Smith and Jorge Rueda, Neutral]

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro appears to be counting on yet another "miracle" to save his citizens from COVID-19, promoting a secretive solution with no published scientific evidence he claims will conquer the new coronavirus.

"Ten drops under the tongue every four hours and the miracle is done," Maduro said in a televised appearance on Sunday. "It's a powerful antiviral, very powerful, that neutralizes the coronavirus."

But his government has released no evidence. He even kept secret the name of the "brilliant Venezuelan mind" behind it, saying he needed to protect them. Scientists at home and abroad remained skeptical. The local National Academy of Medicine said it appeared to be derived from the common herb thyme.

It's not the first time the Venezuelan leader has promoted a cure. In October, he notified the Pan American Health Organization that Venezuelan scientists discovered a molecule that nullifies the replication capacity of the new coronavirus. He hasn't spoken of that development since. He's also promoted a special herbal tea he claims can fend off the virus and other ailments.

Other leaders too have embraced solutions dismissed by scientific studies. Former U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro both stubbornly touted an antimalarial drug despite repeated studies finding it ineffective and possibly dangerous.

The new coronavirus hasn't hit Venezuela as hard as other South American countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, though many experts say that's likely because sanctions against Maduro's government have sharply limited travel there.

Maduro said the treatment, which he called carvativir, has been under testing for nine months among Venezuelans ill with the coronavirus. He said he plans to distribute it nationwide and to other nations as well.

Dr. David Boulware, professor of medicine and an infectious diseases physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School, noted the lack of scientific evidence.

"This is, just as with other things, people trying to sell, you know, some magic beans as the solution to a complex problem," Boulware told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "This would be great if it worked, but I would like to see the data."

Venezuela's National Academy of Medicine said "it's prudent ... to wait for more data from the carvativir tests according to international protocols."

Since October, Venezuela has been part of trials for the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia, a staunch ally of Maduro's government. Venezuela signed a contract in December with Russia to buy the vaccine, but inoculations aren't scheduled to start until April.

Rosa Colina, 58, said authorities should do more to get Venezuelans vaccinated sooner. She said colleagues at a local health center and some neighbors have died from COVID-19.

"I'm of the mind that we need the vaccine, not these droplets," she said. "I think that won't have any effect."

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Mali] Mali says joint military operation with France kills 100 jihadists (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 PM, Tiemoko Diallo, 5304K, Negative]

Malian and French forces killed around 100 jihadists and took another 20 captive in a joint operation this January in central Mali, the West African nation's army said in a statement on Tuesday.

It said the campaign lasted from Jan. 2 to Jan. 20 and targeted areas bordering Burkina Faso, where militant groups with links to al Qaeda and Islamic State control large tracts of the remote desert and regularly carry out raids on the army and civilians.

"The purpose of this operation was to force the enemy out of its areas of refuge," the army said.

France has more than 5,100 military personnel based in the West African Sahel region to help counter the militants, an involvement that is facing increased opposition at home and from some quarters in Mali.

Network TV News Coverage

Antony Blinken Confirmed by Senate as Secretary of State (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/26/2021 7:04 PM, Staff]

President Biden's cabinet is coming into focus. Biden's choice for top diplomat won bipartisan support. Antony Blinken has been confirmed as Secretary of State by the Senate with a 78-22 vote. Blinken is a veteran of the State Department, previously serving as the Deputy Secretary of State and Deputy National Security Advisor during the Obama administration. President Biden plans to reorient US foreign policy, already rejoining the Paris climate accord and signaling an openness to reengaging with Iran and the international nuclear deal. The Senate's Homeland Security Committee also advanced Alejandro Mayorkas to lead the Department of Homeland Security, setting up a full Senate vote.

Anger Rises in Europe as Governments Impose New Restrictions, Vaccines in Short Supply (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/26/2021 6:44 PM, Staff]

Anger is rising in Europe as governments impose new COVID restrictions and vaccines are in short supply. All of this is happening as new strains of the coronavirus sweep through the continent. Strict new lockdown measures triggered a backlash of violence that has spread across the Netherlands for three nights running, angered at a night time curfew drawing rioters on the street. Countries across Europe are resorting to extreme measures to stem the spread of the mutant variant of the virus first identified in the UK, far more contagious than the old coronavirus. Tonight, the UK became the first European country to surpass 100,000 deaths. "It is hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Germany has now made surgical grade masks mandatory on

public transport and in stores. In rising tensions, the scramble for vaccines has taken a nationalistic tone. After British-based AstraZeneca said they'd fall short of delivering millions of doses to Europe, the EU threatened to block Pfizer vaccine doses to Britain. The European Commission President demanded a return of the billions provided for vaccine development. The EU is expected to approve the AstraZeneca vaccine this Friday. Britain has vaccinated far more people than any other European country. The vaccine is also awaiting FDA approval in the US.

Experts Warn US Must Do More to Help Vaccinate the World's Poorest Countries (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:49 PM, Staff]

Even with a vaccine struggle at home, experts warn that the US has to do more outside of its borders because if people in other countries aren't vaccinated, the pandemic could drag on for years. Dr. Larry Brilliant, a leading epidemiologist, said, "We are the indispensable country when it comes to global health, and the absence of our leadership has been felt in every state and every country." He noted that the CDC led America and the rest of the world out of every other pandemic we've faced. He says we play a critical role in helping the world access the vaccine. "Until everyone in the world is safe, no one is safe. This is a pandemic. If one country is left unvaccinated, this disease will bounce back and forth and all of us will be constantly besieged by it," Dr. Brilliant said. Canada has already pre-ordered enough vaccine to inoculate every citizen nearly 6 times and the US has enough purchase options to vaccinate nearly 5 times the population, leaving much of the world scrambling. Australia, Canada, and Japan have less than 1% of the coronavirus cases, but they have more doses than all of Latin America and the Caribbean which has close to 20%. That's where COVAX comes in, a coalition of world health organizations, including the World Health Organization and UNICEF. The starting goal is to buy 2 billion doses of vaccine to inoculate 20% in the world's poorest countries.

[Russia] Biden Holds First Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Raises Many Concerns (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/26/2021 6:45 PM, Staff]

President Biden had his first call with Vladimir Putin, signaling a very different tone than what we saw from former President Trump. Biden is pushing for an extension of a nuclear arms control agreement that caps the size of their arsenals. He also addressed the poisoning and detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. His arrest sparked all of the protests across Russia. The President told reporters he's very concerned about this. He also raised the issue of Russia hacking federal agencies and reports about Moscow placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. The issue of election interference also came up during the phone call.

[Russia] Biden Speaks to Putin in First Phone Call Since Becoming President, Raises Several Concerns (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:41 PM, Staff]

President Biden spoke with Vladimir Putin today, the first the two men have spoken since Biden took office. The White House says Biden raised several issues in that call, including the massive hack of US government agencies and companies that the US blames on Russia. Reports of Russia placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan as well as interference in the 2020 US election, and the poisoning of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Tomorrow, Biden is expected to sign a number of executive actions, specifically on

climate change, including making it a national security priority as well as convening a climate summit of world leaders on Earth Day 2021.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration seeks to buy 200 million more vaccine doses, to be delivered through the summer

Nearly all GOP senators vote against impeachment trial for Trump, signaling likely acquittal

Biden signs orders on racial equity, and civil rights groups press for more

Pentagon restricted commander of D.C. Guard ahead of Capitol riot

The New York Times

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Pledges to Speed Flow of Vaccines to the States

Republicans Rally Against Impeachment Trial, Signaling Likely Acquittal for Trump

Capitol Police Detail Failures During Pro-Trump Assault

Biden Will Restore U.S. Relations With Palestinians, Reversing Trump Cutoff

The Wall Street Journal

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer

Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment

Ahead of Riot, Capitol Police Knew of Potential for Violence, Official Says

Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin

New Playbook for Covid-19 Protection Emerges After Year of Study, Missteps

ABC News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden plans to purchase 200M more doses of Pfizer, Moderna COVID-19 vaccines

Antony Blinken confirmed as Biden's secretary of state

Biden to reopen 'Obamacare' markets for COVID-19 relief

CBS News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration boosting weekly supply of COVID-19 vaccine doses to states

Acting Capitol Police chief apologizes for security failures

Europe employs extreme measures to curb spread of mutant COVID strain

CNN

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden sets bold timeline for a return to normal life

Biden confronts Putin over several issues in first call, White House says

WHO team in Wuhan to begin long-delayed coronavirus investigation after clearing quarantine

Fox News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Forty-five Republicans vote against proceeding with Senate impeachment trial
Biden chief of staff backs teachers unions refusing to reopen schools, says they're not
'overruling' science

Mexico's president took commercial flight hours before COVID-19 diagnosis: report

NBC News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration orders 200 million more doses of Covid-19 vaccines

Most Senate Republicans declare Trump's trial unconstitutional. Here's what that means for conviction.

Global Covid cases top 100 million as new strains emerge

Washington Schedule**President**

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

9:00 AM In-Town Pool Call Time

9:30 AM The President and The Vice President receive the President's Daily Brief

12:15 PM Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, and National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy

1:30 PM The President delivers remarks and signs executive actions on tackling climate change, creating jobs, and restoring scientific integrity; The Vice President also attends

Vice President

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

10:30 a.m.: Convene and begin a period of morning business.

10:00 AM – SD-G50/VTC Foreign Relations

Hearings to examine the nomination of Linda Thomas-Greenfield, of Louisiana, to be the Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, with the rank and status of the Ambassador, and the Representative of the United States of America in the Security Council of the United Nations, and to be Representative of the United States of America to the Sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations during her tenure of service as Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations.

10:00 AM – SR-325 Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Business meeting to consider the nomination of Peter Paul Montgomery Buttigieg, of Indiana, to be Secretary of Transportation.

2:00 PM – SVC-217 Intelligence

To receive a closed briefing on certain intelligence matters.

3:00 PM – SD-106 Veterans' Affairs

Hearings to examine the nomination of Denis Richard McDonough, of Maryland, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

There are no public events scheduled today.

{End of Report}



STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State

By TechMIS

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TO: State Department & Staff

DATE: Wednesday, January 27, 2021 5:00 AM ET

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Secretary of State

U.S. Senate confirms Biden nominee Blinken as secretary of state (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 8:22 PM, Patricia Zengerle, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. Senate on Tuesday confirmed President Joe Biden's nominee, veteran diplomat Antony Blinken, to serve as secretary of state.

The 100-member Senate backed Blinken 78-22, meaning he could be sworn in as the nation's top diplomat later in the day. A simple majority was needed in the Democratic-controlled chamber for his confirmation.

Blinken is a longtime Biden confidant who has been confirmed by the U.S. Senate before, most recently to serve as No. 2 at the State Department during former Democratic President Barack Obama's administration, when Biden was vice president.

At his confirmation before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Blinken pledged to work more closely with allies after former President Donald Trump's "America First" approach to foreign affairs. Blinken said he would work to revitalize damaged American diplomacy and build a united front to counter the challenges posed by Russia, China and Iran.

The 100-member Senate is divided 50-50 but controlled by Biden's fellow Democrats because Vice President Kamala Harris can break any tie.

All of the votes against Blinken's confirmation came from Republicans.

Blinken's confirmation hearing went smoothly, with both Democrats and Republicans offering praise. Blinken was a committee staff director - when Biden, who spent decades in the Senate, was chairman - before he joined the Obama administration.

Department of State News

Biden's UN ambassador: U.S. will support two-state solution in Middle East (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 4:10 PM, Mica Soellner, Neutral]

President Biden is so far making good on his promise to reverse the Trump administration's Israel policy, with a top official vowing the Democrat will support a two-state solution in the Middle East.

Richard Mills, acting U.S. envoy to the United Nations, told the Security Council on Tuesday

that the United States encourages Israel and Palestinians "to avoid unilateral steps that make a two-state solution more difficult, such as annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolition, incitement to violence and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated the administration's intentions in the Arab world, according to a report by Al Jazeera.

"The president's view continues to be that a two-state solution is the only path forward," Psaki said.

In addition to taking steps to create an environment where a two-state solution may be possible, Mills said the Biden administration aims to restore Palestinian aid and reopen the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington, according to a report by Reuters.

Under Trump, the U.S. cut around \$360 million in annual funding for the U.N. agency supporting Palestinian refugees.

On the campaign trail, Biden warned peace would be impossible in the Middle East if Israel didn't stop its threats of annexation. He said last May that he was committed to Israel and hoped to help the nation maintain its "qualitative military edge" while taking steps toward peace.

Despite reversing Trump administration policies, the Biden administration will aim to continue Trump's trajectory of normalizing international ties with Israel. Under the former president, the U.S. secured agreements with four Arab states, which include the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, to begin normalizing relations with Israel.

Mills added, however, that normalizing ties is "not substitute for Israeli-Palestinian peace."

Trump also moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that was viewed as solidifying the latter as the nation's true capital. The Biden administration plans to keep the embassy in Jerusalem.

Kerry aims to talk US back into a lead role in climate fight (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:06 AM, Ellen Knickmeyer, 381K, Neutral]

From a wood-paneled library in his Boston mansion, new climate envoy John Kerry is talking the U.S. back into a leading role in global climate action, making clear the nation isn't just revving up its own efforts to reduce oil, gas and coal pollution but that it intends to push everyone in the world to do more, too.

Kerry's diplomatic efforts match the fast pace of domestic climate directives by the week-old Biden administration, which created the job Kerry now holds. Those directives include a Biden order expected Wednesday spelling out how U.S. intelligence, defense and homeland security agencies should address the security threats posed by worsening droughts, floods and other natural disasters under global warming.

At 77, Kerry is working to make a success out of the global climate accord that he helped negotiate in Paris as President Barack Obama's secretary of state — and that he then saw rejected by President Donald Trump, who also spurned all other Obama-era legacy efforts

to wean the U.S. and global economies off climate-damaging fossil fuels.

Success for Kerry is hardly assured. At home, he faces pushback from the oil and gas industry and hears concerns that jobs will be lost. Internationally, there's uncertainty about whether Biden's climate commitments can survive the United States' intensely divided politics, let alone the next presidential transition.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are pushing him to be aggressive — even demonstrating outside his house on his first full day on the job.

Underscoring the urgency, Kerry -- working from his home on Boston's patrician Beacon Hill during the COVID-19 pandemic -- sat before a computer screen and started talking before sunup last Thursday, his first full day in his new job, to a global business forum in Europe.

Since then, he has spoken virtually with U.S. mayors, foreign presidents and premiers, government ministers and others, until the light from the setting sun slides down the gilt spines of the shelves of leather-bound books in his library.

Kerry exhorts: Put your big one-off COVID-19 economic recovery funding into projects that boost cleaner energy. Get green projects going fast in Republican-leaning U.S. states to prove renewable energy can mean jobs and build needed political support. Get everyone to talk to China about things like stopping the building of dirty-burning coal-fired power plants.

If China and the U.S., as the world's No. 1 and 2 top carbon emitters, don't spell out exactly how they will curb climate-damaging emissions more quickly, "we're all going to lose credibility," Kerry told an online gathering of American mayors last weekend.

The U.S. has to have the "credibility to go to the table, show people what we're doing and push them to do more," Kerry said then. "So everybody can understand it's not fake, it's not a phony, empty promise — it really is getting real."

Kerry is a full-time principal member for climate on the White House's National Security Council. The role acknowledges what climate and military experts say will be growing conflicts around the world as climate change increases competition for natural resources. It takes into account a lack of U.S. readiness to protect military installations and overall infrastructure from worsening flooding and other natural disasters as temperatures rise.

By giving someone of Kerry's stature a job with equally high prominence, Biden aims to "bring the climate issue into the conversation" on national security matters routinely, said John Podesta, a climate counselor for Obama and a White House chief of staff for President Bill Clinton.

Kerry is expected to have desks at both the White House and the State Department.

In the meantime, the home library where Kerry now holds most of his big online meetings earned him a 10 out of 10 from the popular "Room Rater" Twitter account that judges the backdrop décor in people's Zoom calls and TV appearances. That's despite expressing doubt about whether it was a room or a set.

Kerry and other Biden administration climate leaders will be working to set a tougher goal

for the U.S. for cutting emissions, as well as making good on pledges to increase climate funding for poorer countries.

On Thursday, the progressive Sunrise Movement's Boston branch had demonstrators outside his Boston house holding signs saying "Kerry be brave." The move shows the left keeping up pressure for what could be a politically tricky level of aggressiveness on cutting fossil fuels.

"Our role is ... now to hold them accountable," Sunrise Movement spokesperson Ellen Sciales said Tuesday, and keep them "pushing us forward to meet the scale and the urgency of the climate crisis."

On the right, some Republican lawmakers and the politically influential oil and gas industry have been subdued in the first week of the Biden administration, saying they hope to work with Kerry and others on climate efforts.

Kerry told the mayors he talked with Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia at Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration. Kerry said he and Manchin, who has fought climate regulation he sees threatening his coal state's economy, agreed: Winning the U.S. fight on climate change will depend on getting renewable-energy jobs into places like West Virginia and Tennessee as soon as possible.

Then, "boom, you will begin to have believers," Kerry declared from his library. "They're not going to believe it when we just say it. We have to do it."

Israel's top general says its military is refreshing operational plans against Iran (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 3:15 PM, Jeffrey Heller, Neutral]

Israel's top general said on Tuesday that its military was refreshing its operational plans against Iran and that any U.S. return to a 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran would be "wrong."

The remarks are an apparent signal to U.S. President Joe Biden to tread cautiously in any diplomatic engagement with Iran. Such comments by Israel's military chief of staff on U.S. policymaking are rare and likely would have been pre-approved by the Israeli government.

"A return to the 2015 nuclear agreement, or even if it is a similar accord with several improvements, is bad and wrong from an operational and strategic point of view," Lieutenant-General Aviv Kohavi said in an address to Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, abandoned the nuclear agreement in 2018, a move that was welcomed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who criticised the sanctions relief it offered and warned of the likelihood of Iranian nuclear arms development after its expiration.

Antony Blinken, confirmed on Tuesday as Biden's secretary of state, said last week the United States was "a long way" from deciding whether to rejoin the deal and it would need to see what Iran actually did to resume complying with the pact.

Since Washington pulled out of the deal, Iran has gradually breached its key limits, building up its stockpile of low enriched uranium, enriching uranium to higher levels of purity, and installing centrifuges in ways barred by the accord.

Kohavi said those actions by Iran, which denies it is seeking atomic arms, showed it could ultimately decide to push forward rapidly towards building a nuclear weapon.

"In light of this fundamental analysis, I have instructed the Israel Defense Forces to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to those already in place," Kohavi said.

"It will be up to the political leadership, of course, to decide on implementation, but these plans need to be on the table."

Netanyahu had threatened possible Israeli strikes against Iran in the run-up to the accord. But a senior Israeli officer, who spoke to reporters in 2015 on condition of anonymity, underscored differences in Israel over the issue by saying a deal had potential security benefits.

Head of Israeli military cautions against US return to the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Zachary Halaschak, 394K, Neutral]

Israel Defense Forces Chief of General Staff Aviv Kochavi, in a rare public statement about U.S. foreign policy, urged the Biden administration not to attempt to kick-start the Iran nuclear deal.

Kochavi, speaking virtually at the Institute for National Security Studies think tank's annual conference on Tuesday, said that even if a potential deal could improve on the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it would not be the right move for regional security.

"With the changing of the administration in the United States, the Iranians have said they want to return to the previous agreement," the military commander said, according to the Times of Israel. "I want to state my position, the position that I give to all my colleagues when I meet them around the world: Returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement or even to an agreement that is similar but with a few improvements is a bad thing, and it is not the right thing to do."

The United States withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 and embarked on a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at squeezing Iran into submission. Since the U.S. departure, Iran has continued to breach all aspects of the treaty. Earlier this month, its regime announced that it was rolling out 1,000 additional centrifuges and would begin enriching uranium to levels far in excess of the JCPOA.

"As of today, Iran has increased the amount of enriched material beyond what was permitted. It enriched it to levels beyond what was permitted. It developed and manufactured centrifuges that will allow it to rush ahead and produce a weapon at a much faster rate, within months, maybe even weeks," Kochavi warned.

Kochavi also said he has directed the IDF to refresh the country's operational plans regarding what to do if it needs to strike Iran because of its nuclear program.

"Iran can decide that it wants to advance to a bomb, either covertly or in a provocative way. In light of this basic analysis, I have ordered the IDF to prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to the existing ones. We are studying these plans, and we will develop them over the next year," he said.

"The government will, of course, be the one to decide if they should be used. But these plans must be on the table, in existence, and trained for," he added.

In January, the Iranian regime notified the International Atomic Energy Agency in a weekend letter that it is planning to enrich uranium to 20%. The nuclear deal dictated that Iran cannot enrich uranium by more than 3.67%, although the regime has previously broken the pact by upping enrichment to 4.5% purity.

The comments from Kochavi come a day after the Iranian regime reportedly executed 30-year-old wrestler Mehdi Ali Hosseini. Hosseini's death was preceded by 27-year-old champion wrestler Navid Afkari, who was killed in September despite pleas from several human rights groups and prominent international figures.

China: Military flights warn against interference in Taiwan (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:17 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The Chinese government said Wednesday that actions like its warplanes flying near Taiwan last weekend are a warning against both foreign interference in Taiwan and any independence moves by the island.

Asked about the flights, Zhu Fenglian, a spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, said China's military drills are to show the nation's resolution to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"They are a stern warning against external interference and provocation from separatist forces advocating for Taiwan independence," she said at a regular briefing, giving the Chinese government's first official comment on the recent flights. China sent eight bombers and four fighter jets into Taiwan's air defense identification zone on Saturday, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. Taiwan scrambled fighters to monitor the activity.

The U.S. State Department later issued a statement urging China "to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan" following China's sizeable show of force.

China then sent 16 military aircraft into the same area on Sunday, Taiwan said.

Taiwan is a self-governing island about 160 kilometers (100 miles) off China's east coast. The Chinese government regards it as a renegade province that should be united with mainland China.

Zhu said that China would not renounce the use of force to guard against separatist moves and foreign interference.

"We ... reserve the option to use all necessary measures," she said. "Our position has been consistent and will not change."

Defense Secretary Austin to Review Trump's Last-Minute Withdrawal of Troops From Afghanistan, Iraq (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 4:37 PM, Gordon Lubold and Nancy A. Youssef, Neutral]

The Pentagon's new chief is expected to review troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq in an effort to examine American strategy in two conflicts, following former President Donald Trump's drawdown of forces there, according to defense officials.

President Biden's defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, is facing a slew of issues in the U.S. and around the world, but Mr. Trump's decision to quickly withdraw more than 3,000 troops from the two conflicts before he left office this month forces the White House to confront how it will manage the long-running wars.

In his confirmation hearing last week, Mr. Austin indicated he would review the strategies and resources in those conflicts, but left vague his view on the threats either conflict poses and how they are matched by troop levels and other military capabilities.

Mr. Austin's spokesman, John Kirby, said officials hadn't yet made a formal decision to review troop levels in either country.

"It stands to reason that the incoming administration will want to better understand the status of operations in both places and the resources being applied to those missions," he said. "Nothing has changed about our desire to defend the American people from the threat of terrorism, while also making sure we are appropriately resourcing our strategy."

Mr. Kirby said any decisions on troop levels would be taken in consultation with the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan. He didn't say who would be conducting the review nor when it could be completed.

Mr. Trump, who had railed against what he called "endless foreign wars," drew American forces down in Iraq and Afghanistan to 2,500 personnel in each country this month, in an effort to bring the longstanding military engagements to a close.

The decision to pull troops out from Afghanistan was more contentious than the decision to remove troops from Iraq. Top military officials and some lawmakers believed pulling troops from Afghanistan should be based on conditions on the ground, including levels of violence, not on a political timetable. Top military officials have said in recent months that the remaining force may be too small to conduct counterterrorism operations, and train and advise local fighters, while also providing enough security for the American contingent on the ground.

Mr. Biden has few good options, analysts have said. Sending more troops back into either war theater is politically perilous, while reducing them further too quickly could accelerate violence and reverse whatever gains military officials have achieved there.

Helping to facilitate Mr. Biden's decision is Mr. Austin, a retired four-star Army general who is intimately familiar with the issues after having led Central Command, which oversees the wars, before his retirement in 2016.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, declined in an interview to speculate on a review or any potential changes to troop levels. Gen. McKenzie noted that

the size of the force in Afghanistan contributed by Washington's North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies exceeds the size of the U.S. contribution for the first time ever.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are pressing security challenges.

Within days of its tenure, the Biden administration said it told its Afghan counterparts that it would review the continuing peace talks with the Taliban, according to a White House statement.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan told Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib that the review would assess "whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders," the White House statement said.

He didn't identify troop levels in a public readout of the conversation.

Under a 2020 agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban, all U.S. troops would withdraw by May and the Taliban would make security guarantees. But since that agreement, violence has surged.

In Iraq, one day after Mr. Biden's inauguration, a double suicide bombing in a crowded market killed at least 32 people, marking one of the deadliest attacks there since the collapse of Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

Google says North Korea-backed hackers sought cyber research (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:15 AM, Kim Tong-Hyung, Neutral]

Google says it believes hackers backed by the North Korean government have been posing as computer security bloggers and using fake accounts on social media while attempting to steal information from researchers in the field.

Google didn't specify how successful the hackers were or what kind of information could have been compromised. Experts say the attacks reflect North Korean efforts to improve its cyber skills and be able to breach widely used computer products, such as Google's Chrome internet browser and Microsoft's Windows 10 operating system.

While the country has denied involvement, North Korea has been linked to major cyberattacks, including a 2013 campaign that paralyzed the servers of South Korean financial institutions, the 2014 hacking of Sony Pictures, and the WannaCry malware attack of 2017. The U.N. Security Council in 2019 estimated North Korea earned as much as \$2 billion over several years through illicit cyber operations targeting cryptocurrency exchanges and other financial transactions, generating income that is harder to trace and offsets capital lost to U.S.-led economic sanctions over its nuclear weapons program.

Adam Weidemann, a researcher from Google's Threat Analysis Group, said in the online report published late Monday that hackers supposedly backed by North Korea created a fake research blog and multiple Twitter profiles to build credibility and interact with the security researchers they targeted.

After connecting with researchers, the hackers would ask them if they wanted to collaborate

on cyber-vulnerability research and share a tool that contained a code designed to install malicious software on the targets' computers, which would then allow the hackers to control the device and steal information from it.

Several targeted researchers were compromised after following a Twitter link to a blog set up by the hackers, Weidemann said.

"At the time of these visits, the victim systems were running fully patched and up-to-date Windows 10 and Chrome browser versions," Weidemann wrote. "At this time we're unable to confirm the mechanism of compromise, but we welcome any information others might have."

Google published a list of social media accounts and websites it said were controlled by the hackers, including 10 Twitter profiles and five LinkedIn profiles.

Simon Choi, a senior analyst at NSHC, a South Korean computer security firm, said cyberattacks linked to North Korea over the past few years have demonstrated an improving ability in identifying and exploiting vulnerabilities in computer security systems. Before 2016, the North Koreans had mainly relied on methods used by Chinese or Russian hackers, he said. "It's notable that the computer security experts on Twitter who said they were approached by the hackers had been engaged in vulnerability research for Chrome and Windows 10," Choi said.

"It's that not easy to successfully penetrate these systems that are built with the latest security technologies. For the North Koreans, it makes more sense to steal the vulnerabilities already discovered by the researchers because developing their own ways to exploit these systems is harder."

In 2018, U.S. federal prosecutors charged a computer programmer working for the North Korean government for his alleged involvement in the cyberattacks that hacked Sony Pictures and unleashed the WannaCry ransomware virus. Park Jin Hyok, who is believed to be in North Korea, conspired to conduct attacks that also stole \$81 million from Bangladesh's central bank, according to the charges.

The 2014 Sony hack led to the release of tens of thousands of confidential Sony emails and business files. The WannaCry cyberattack in 2017 scrambled data on hundreds of thousands of computers at government agencies, banks and other businesses across the globe and crippled parts of the British health care system.

[Yemen] In a first, Yemenis seek redress for U.S. drone strikes at Inter-American rights body (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:15 PM, Missy Ryan, Souad Mekhennet, 13480K, Neutral] Relatives of at least 34 Yemenis alleged to have been killed in American military actions have asked an international human rights body to determine whether the deaths were unlawful, in a case that could draw attention to the human cost of overseas counterterrorism campaigns.

The petition, the first of its kind to be submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, asserts that six drone strikes and one Special Operations raid targeting Yemen's al-Bayda governorate during the Obama and Trump administrations inflicted

catastrophic damage on two families. Among the dead, the survivors say, were nine children and several members of Yemen's military.

The filing provides new visibility into a counterterrorism campaign that has mostly been shrouded in secrecy, as American military and intelligence officials conduct an extended effort against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other militant threats. Since 2015, a parallel conflict between Yemen's Houthi rebels and forces backed by Saudi Arabia has made communication and media access more difficult, further thrusting the war against extremists into the shadows.

The petition, submitted on behalf of a group of Yemenis by the London-based human rights group Reprieve, which has documented the aftermath of U.S. counterterrorism operations, argues that the repeated targeting of the two families, in addition to lives lost, has taken a psychological toll on survivors.

"Having already suffered enormous loss, the families live in constant fear that the drones flying overhead will strike again, killing more members of their family or their extended tribe or community," Jennifer Gibson, a lawyer with Reprieve, said in one of the petition documents.

A determination in favor of the Yemeni petitioners by the commission, an independent body affiliated with the Organization of American States, would not necessarily force changes in U.S. military operations or policy. But it could have symbolic importance in highlighting the unintended outcome of counterterrorism operations.

"A decision from the [commission] concluding that the U.S. is responsible for a particular human rights violation carries legal and moral weight internationally. It is also an important tool in creating pressure and opportunities to engage the government on reforms," said Lisa Reinsberg, the executive director of the International Justice Resource Center.

"On the flip side, a lot depends on political will at the national level," she said.

Last year, the Inter-American Commission declared that the United States was responsible for torture in the case of a former inmate at the Guantanamo Bay prison.

Lt. Col. Anton Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, declined to comment on the petition but said the U.S. military sought to minimize civilian harm when planning and conducting operations.

"Consistent with our mission, our authorities, and our obligations under the law of war, [U.S. Central Command] will continue to conduct military actions in Yemen when required to protect the nation and our allies and partners from al-Qaeda and [Islamic State] terror cells," he said in a statement.

The filings contain new details on how rural life and counterterrorism concerns have collided in Bayda, an area of central Yemen that officials have also described as a hotbed of AQAP activity. The group was long known as one of the most virulent branches of al-Qaeda, responsible for repeated plots against the United States, including an attempted airliner bombing in 2009.

In the petition, a Yemeni man named Aziz al-Ameri, speaking on behalf of his family and the closely linked al-Taisy family, denies links to militants, saying those killed were mostly shepherds, farmers and their families.

The military actions cited in the petition date to the Obama administration, when a U.S. drone struck a wedding convoy in December 2013 and, according to the filing, killed several members of the Ameri family and five of the Taisy family.

The Yemeni government paid more than \$1 million in compensation to the families of those killed and injured, money that Reprieve has suggested may have come from the United States.

The other six actions occurred during the Trump administration, when the pace of counterterrorism operations accelerated in Yemen as the new president loosened operational rules and new intelligence fueled additional operations. From 2017 to 2019, the military reported more than 160 strikes, the majority of which Reprieve said were carried out in Bayda.

One occurred days after Trump took office, when a raid on the village of Yaklaa resulted in a major firefight, killing a Navy SEAL and multiple civilians.

After an inquiry, military leaders said that as many as 12 civilians had died. But according to the petition, the toll was far higher, with 26 people killed, including at least 10 children, including a full-term baby who was injured by a bullet in the womb and died after being delivered by Caesarean section.

Abdullah al-Taisy, a Yemeni soldier who lives in Yaklaa and witnessed the raid, said none of those killed were militants.

"Our houses and farmers are clear. No one is a member of any terrorist groups," he said in a phone interview from Yemen. Like the Ameri family, Taisy called for greater accountability and fair compensation.

The raid, which U.S. officials said yielded significant intelligence about AQAP, produced a string of follow-on strikes in the same area. According to the petition, a September 2018 strike killed two men serving as soldiers for Yemen's internationally recognized government, which works closely with U.S. allies to battle the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

"How come they can target official military personnel who were on a military mission?" asked Ahmed al-Helou, another Yemeni colonel who worked with Abdullah al-Taisy. "They seem not to understand the difference between the local community and the militants."

The Yemenis asked the commission to urge the United States to take immediate steps to prevent further loss of life while commissioners consider the petition, a process that could take years.

[Yemen] Aid boost in Yemen after U.S. allows Houthi deals (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:12 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The U.S. on Monday approved all transactions involving Yemen's Houthi movement for the next month as Washington reviews a Trump administration designation of the Iran-aligned

group as a foreign terrorist organization. Colette Luke has more. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Russia] In first call with Putin, Biden marks a return to skepticism from the top (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/26/2021 7:44 PM, Anne Gearan, Karen DeYoung, 13480K, Neutral]

President Biden laid out a bill of complaint against Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, airing allegations of human rights abuses, cyberspying and more while making a hard pivot away from the deference that former president Donald Trump often displayed toward Russia.

The phone call less than a week into Biden's term was his first known contact with an adversarial foreign leader. It came as the United States has joined European nations and others in condemning the detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and after a crackdown on street protests.

Biden's agenda for the call included protest of "ongoing Russian aggression" against Ukraine, and he confronted Putin over the "Solar Winds" espionage case, alleged interference in U.S. elections and the alleged offer to pay bounties for the deaths of U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday.

"His intention was also to make clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of our national interests in response to malign actions by Russia," Psaki said.

Throughout his presidency, Trump refused to pin blame on Russia for actions ranging from 2016 election interference to the attempted assassination of a British former spy, the poisoning of Navalny last year, the alleged bounties and the extensive cyberhack that affected U.S. federal agencies and corporations. In each of those cases, other elements of the U.S. government blamed Russia.

Alongside the return to official skepticism from the top about Russian actions and motives, Biden made an expected offer to Putin to extend a key arms control agreement.

The pact, known as New START, is the last remaining nuclear arms treaty between the former Cold War enemies, and the timing of Biden's call was partly driven by the clock. The pact would expire next week unless extended by both nations, something the United States can do without congressional approval.

Russia and the United States traded documents Tuesday to extend the pact for five years.

The Kremlin also released a readout of the call between the two leaders. It did not mention the issues Psaki listed and took an optimistic tone about cooperation under Biden's presidency.

"The presidents expressed their satisfaction with today's exchange of the diplomatic notes of having reached an agreement to extend the New START," the statement said. "Over the next few days the two sides will finalize all procedures necessary for further functioning of this important mechanism of international law on the mutual limitation of nuclear missile arsenals."

Biden also spoke Tuesday with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and “conveyed his intention to consult and work with allies on the full range of shared security concerns” and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to “strengthening transatlantic security.”

A written summary of the Putin call provided by the White House later Tuesday emphasized extending the arms control treaty. The statement raised the possibility of further talks on other arms control and security issues before listing the allegations and complaints Biden had laid out to Putin.

“The two presidents agreed to maintain transparent and consistent communication going forward,” the White House statement said.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the former National Security Council aide fired by Trump after testifying during Trump’s 2019 impeachment trial, tweeted Tuesday in support of the shift that the conversation represented.

“An enormous departure from the last four years,” he wrote.

Trump repeatedly declined to challenge Putin in public or in private. He took Putin’s word over that of U.S. intelligence services that Russia was not involved in undermining the 2016 presidential election and equivocated about Russian culpability in numerous other areas. The reasons are not clear, although former aides said Trump was extremely sensitive about any suggestion that Russia had helped him win in 2016.

“He was the lap dog for Russia rather than the watchdog for America,” Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) said in an interview on MSNBC, as he called the Biden phone call a “refreshing” return to the premise that the U.S. president should hold Putin to account.

Trump had 18 one-on-one calls with Putin over four years, according to Kremlin readouts. On a number of occasions, the White House did not even acknowledge the calls until after an announcement by Moscow, and some reported by Moscow do not appear in archived public White House records.

Both sides generally provided anodyne statements acknowledging joint global concerns, along with promises to work together. One of Trump’s early calls to Putin, in December 2017, was described by the White House as simply a thank you to the Russian leader for “acknowledging America’s strong economic performance in his annual press conference.”

In March 2018, according to White House records, Trump called Putin to congratulate him on his reelection. News reports about the call later revealed that Trump had been given briefing notes ahead of the conversation that warned “DO NOT CONGRATULATE.”

On the same call, despite international skepticism about the fairness of the race, Trump proposed meeting Putin at the White House, in what would have been the Russian leader’s first visit since 2005. No Putin visit ever occurred during the Trump administration.

After Trump’s controversial 2019 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky leaked, and its contents led to Trump’s first impeachment, the White House ordered new restrictions on those allowed to view internal transcripts of his communications with world leaders.

Trump's last reported calls with Putin took place over a several-week period last year. On June 1 — after Trump had suggested to reporters that he wanted to invite Putin to that year's U.S.-hosted Group of Seven conference — he said that they had discussed "progress toward convening the meeting."

The idea was dropped after other members of the group complained that Russia continued to occupy parts of Ukraine — the reason it was kicked out of the G-7 in 2014 — and planned to boycott.

On Tuesday, the United States joined the other G-7 nations in condemning what a statement called "the politically motivated arrest and detention" of Navalny, who was taken into custody earlier this month upon his return to Russia from Germany, where he had recuperated after a poisoning attempt blamed on the Russian state.

The last reported call between Trump and Putin was July 23, following news reports that Russian intelligence had offered the Taliban bounties to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Asked in an interview with Axios whether he had raised the subject with Putin, Trump said it was "a phone call to discuss other things. And frankly, that's an issue that many people said was fake news."

He then complained that "nobody ever brings up China. They always bring up Russia, Russia, Russia."

[Russia] Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:05 PM, Ken Thomas, Neutral]

The White House said Tuesday that President Biden held his first call as president with Russian President Vladimir Putin and raised concerns about issues including the detaining of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the massive SolarWinds hack and reports of Russia offering bounties on U.S. troops.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Mr. Biden reaffirmed America's "strong support" for Ukraine's sovereignty and addressed concerns about Russian interference in the 2020 election. The call also focused on plans to extend a U.S.-Russia nuclear arms treaty for five years.

Mr. Biden voiced criticism of Mr. Putin throughout his presidential campaign, and the call represented his first opportunity as president to seek to establish a break from the frequently warm rapport between former President Donald Trump and the Russian leader. Mr. Biden, who as vice president held a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Putin in 2011, has warned Moscow that it could face additional sanctions for election interference if it is confirmed by U.S. intelligence officials.

During Mr. Trump's presidency, some Democratic lawmakers accused the administration of pulling its punches against Moscow, as Mr. Trump rejected intelligence findings of Kremlin election interference. But Mr. Trump countered that his administration had levied more sanctions against Russia than previous administrations.

In the days before Mr. Biden's inauguration, the Trump administration sanctioned seven men, including several former Ukrainian officials, for allegedly interfering in U.S. elections

as agents of Russia's government by promoting theories about Mr. Biden's son, Hunter. The U.S. and Russia have been at odds in recent years over issues including its seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, accusations that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Russia's involvement in the war in Syria.

The White House said in a statement following Tuesday's call that Mr. Biden "made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies."

The Kremlin said in a statement that Mr. Putin told Mr. Biden that "normalization in ties between Russia and the U.S. would serve the interests of both countries, underscoring their special responsibility to maintain security and stability in the world, and the whole world."

The Kremlin statement said the conversation was open and businesslike, and both sides agreed to maintain contact.

The Kremlin statement said the two leaders discussed the New START Treaty, Iran's nuclear program and Ukraine but didn't mention Mr. Navalny or the hacking attacks. Ms. Psaki said Mr. Biden had planned to raise the treatment of "peaceful protesters by Russian security forces."

Russian police detained thousands of people during wide-scale protests in support of Mr. Navalny across the country last weekend.

Mr. Navalny, an ardent critic of Mr. Putin, was arrested earlier this month after returning to Russia from Germany, where he had been recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he has accused the Kremlin of perpetrating. Russian officials have denied any role in the poisoning.

Despite the tensions, the Biden administration has sought to find common ground with Russia on the nuclear weapons pact. Mr. Biden's administration said last week that it would seek to maintain the New START treaty as the arms control framework that has constrained U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear arsenals since it took effect in 2011.

The accord is scheduled to lapse on Feb. 5, but Washington and Moscow have sought to extend the agreement despite friction between the two countries.

The Kremlin said the two sides would finish in the coming days final steps needed to ensure the treaty stayed in force. The White House said teams from both countries would "work urgently" to complete the extension by the February deadline.

The White House also said the two leaders agreed to "explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

Some analysts said the readouts showed that the Biden administration would avoid a reset with Russia but instead pursue stability in the relationship.

"By calling for transparency and consistency, those are the two elements that give you that stability," said Jim Townsend, a former deputy assistant secretary of Defense in the Obama administration and an adjunct senior fellow with the Center for New American Security.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow during the Obama administration, said Mr. Navalny's inclusion in the readout by the new administration was significant. "That says to me they're going to talk a lot more about issues of democracy and human rights with respect to Russia in a way that President Trump never did and even his team rarely did," Mr. McFaul said. But James Carafano, a national security and foreign policy analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation, said Mr. Biden lost leverage by simply seeking to extend the arms treaty and raising concerns without threatening tougher action such as new sanctions.

"Action gets the Russians' attention. Words, Putin could care less about," Mr. Carafano said.

Since Mr. Biden's inauguration, he has asked the intelligence community to assess the recent Russian hacking, interference in the 2020 election, use of chemical weapons against Mr. Navalny and the alleged bounty program against U.S. soldiers.

The outgoing Trump administration formally stated that Russia was likely behind the massive cyberattack, a conclusion that senior officials had expressed publicly and privately. Moscow denied involvement in the SolarWinds hack.

Cybersecurity experts have said the hack amounts to one of the worst intelligence failures on record.

Mr. Biden also spoke to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during the day, discussing challenges such as "dealing with a more assertive Russia," NATO said in a statement.

[Russia] First Biden-Putin call shows both cautious on big concerns (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:12 PM, Matthew Lee and Jonathan Lemire, 13480K, Neutral]

U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin held their first conversation as counterparts Tuesday in a phone call that underscored troubled relations and the delicate balance between the former Cold War foes.

According to the White House, Biden raised concerns about the arrest of opposition figure Alexei Navalny, Russia's alleged involvement in a massive cyber espionage campaign and reports of Russian bounties on American troops in Afghanistan. The Kremlin, meanwhile, focused on Putin's response to Biden's proposal to extend the last remaining U.S.-Russia arms control treaty.

While the readouts from the two capitals emphasized different elements, they both suggested that U.S.-Russia relations will be guided, at least at the beginning of the Biden administration, by a desire to do no harm but also no urgency to repair existing damage.

The two presidents agreed to have their teams work urgently to complete a five-year extension of the New START nuclear weapons treaty that expires next month. Former President Donald Trump's administration had withdrawn from two arms control treaties with Russia and had been prepared to let New START lapse.

Unlike his immediate predecessors — including Trump, who was enamored of Putin and

frequently undercut his own administration's tough stance on Russia — Biden has not held out hope for a "reset" in relations. Instead he has indicated he wants to manage differences without necessarily resolving them or improving ties.

And with a heavy domestic agenda and looming decisions needed on Iran and China, a direct confrontation with Russia is not likely something Biden seeks.

Although the leaders agreed to work together to extend New START before it expires Feb. 5 and to look at other areas of potential strategic cooperation, the White House said Biden was firm on U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty, while Russia is supporting separatists in the country's east.

Biden also raised the SolarWinds cyberhack, which has been attributed to Russia, reports of Russian bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan, interference in the 2020 U.S. election, the poisoning of Navalny and the weekend crackdown on Navalny's supporters.

"President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," the White House said. Biden told Putin in the phone call, first reported by The Associated Press, that the U.S. would defend itself and take action, which could include further sanctions, to ensure Moscow does not act with impunity, officials said.

Moscow had reached out last week to request the call, according to U.S. officials familiar with the matter but not authorized to discuss it publicly. Biden agreed, but he wanted first to prepare with his staff and speak with European allies, including the leaders of Britain, France and Germany, which he did.

Before he spoke to Putin, Biden also called NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg to pledge U.S. commitment to the decades-old alliance founded as a bulwark against Russian aggression.

The Kremlin's readout of the call did not address the most contentious issues between the countries, though it said the leaders also discussed other "acute issues on the bilateral and international agenda."

It described the talk as "frank and businesslike" — often a diplomatic way of referring to tense discussions. It also said Putin congratulated Biden on becoming president and "noted that normalization of ties between Russia and the United States would serve the interests of both countries."

Among the issues the Kremlin said were discussed were the coronavirus pandemic, the Iran nuclear agreement, Ukraine and issues related to trade and the economy.

The call came as Putin considers the aftermath of pro-Navalny protests that took place in more than 100 Russian cities over the weekend. Biden's team has already reacted strongly to the crackdown on the protests, in which more than 3,700 people were arrested across Russia, including more than 1,400 in Moscow. More protests are planned for the coming weekend.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and Putin's best-known critic, was arrested Jan. 17 as he returned to Russia from Germany, where he had spent nearly five months recovering

from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Biden has previously condemned the use of chemical weapons.

Russian authorities deny the accusations.

Just from the public accounts, Biden's discussion with Putin appeared diametrically opposed to Trump's relationship with the Russian president.

Trump had seemed to seek Putin's approval, frequently casting doubt on Russian interference in the 2016 elections, including when he stood next to Putin at their 2018 summit in Helsinki. He also downplayed Russia's involvement in the hack of federal government agencies last year and the allegations that Russia offered the Taliban bounties.

Still, despite that conciliatory approach, Trump's administration toed a tough line against Moscow, imposing sanctions on the country, Russian companies and business leaders for issues including Ukraine, energy supplies and attacks on dissidents.

Biden, in his call with Putin, broke sharply with Trump by declaring that he knew that Russia attempted to interfere with both the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections.

[Russia] Russia, U.S. extend arms pact, Kremlin says, as Biden, Putin talk (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 6:08 PM, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, Trevor Hunnicutt, 5304K, Neutral]
Russia and the United States have struck a deal to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty, the Kremlin said on Tuesday, a move that preserves the last major pact of its kind between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

The White House did not immediately confirm the Kremlin's announcement but said President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin had discussed the issue by telephone and agreed that their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5, when the treaty expires.

Signed in 2010, the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) is a cornerstone of global arms control.

It limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads deployed by the United States and Russia to 1,550 each as well as the number of land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them.

The Kremlin declared the breakthrough, which was widely anticipated, in a statement announcing that Putin and Biden had spoken for the first time since Biden took office on Jan. 20.

Moscow and Washington had failed to agree an extension under former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose administration had wanted to attach conditions to a renewal that Moscow rejected.

The Kremlin said Putin and Biden "expressed satisfaction" that diplomatic notes between the two nations had been exchanged earlier on Tuesday confirming the pact would be extended and that procedures required for the pact to come into force before it expires would be completed in the coming days.

The White House, in its description of the call, did not say that an agreement had been reached or that diplomatic notes had been exchanged, though its tone was upbeat.

"They discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years, agreeing to have their teams work urgently to complete the extension by Feb. 5," the White House said. "They also agreed to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the plan was for the exchange of notes to occur on Tuesday.

Asked why Washington had not explicitly said an agreement had been reached, a second U.S. official, also on condition of anonymity, said some steps were needed, including approval by the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. The treaty itself does not require legislative approval for an extension.

The White House said last week Biden would seek a five-year extension.

In its statement, the Kremlin said that Putin had told Biden a normalisation of relations between Moscow and Washington would be in both countries' interest.

It said the two leaders had also discussed the U.S. decision during Trump's administration to exit the Open Skies treaty. Putin and Biden also talked about Iran's nuclear programme and the conflict in Ukraine.

The White House stressed that it will raise matters where it disagrees with Russia, and said Biden had reaffirmed the United States' "firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty".

Biden had raised "other matters of concern" including the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, the cyber hack blamed on Russia that used U.S. tech company SolarWinds Corp as a springboard to penetrate federal government networks, and reports that Russia offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants to kill coalition forces in Afghanistan.

"President Biden made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," the White House statement said.

[China] Declassified U.S. intelligence bolsters Wuhan lab theory in coronavirus outbreak (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/26/2021 2:23 PM, Bill Gertz, 459K, Neutral]

U.S. intelligence findings recently declassified by the State Department provide fresh evidence for the theory that the COVID-19 pandemic likely began at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China's sole high-security laboratory that has links to the country's military.

The department, in a report made public this month by the outgoing Trump administration, disclosed for the first time that several workers at the Wuhan institute, where research on deadly viruses is conducted, were sickened in the autumn of 2019 with COVID-19-like symptoms.

The report also made public U.S. intelligence that the People's Liberation Army conducted secret research on covert biological warfare at the institute. Chinese leaders have consistently denied any link between the lab and the outbreak of COVID-19 and have even promoted speculation that the United States or some other foreign source brought the virus to China.

The lab illnesses were detected prior to the first publicized case of COVID-19 in Wuhan in early December 2019, but China has refused to disclose what happened to the workers.

"Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one," the report states.

"This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

"Based on my experience and understanding of the science, it's hard to believe this is a naturally occurring phenomenon," said Robert G. Darling, a medical doctor and expert on biological weapons formerly with the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

"I think somebody [in Wuhan] caught their experiment," said Dr. Darling, now chief medical officer for Patronus Medical.

William Lang, a former associate chief medical officer at the Homeland Security Department, noted that the State Department report does not accuse China's communist leadership of releasing the virus intentionally.

"But the circumstantial — and more than circumstantial — evidence of some relation to WIV is very strong," said Dr. Lang, now with the health service WorldClinic.

Ms. Shi, the WIV scientist dubbed the "bat woman of China" for her work on bat coronaviruses similar to the one that causes COVID-19, co-authored a scientific study in 2015 that mentions the laboratory manipulation of bat viruses as part of studying how they infect humans.

The U.S. intelligence reports said Chinese authorities for more than a year have systematically prevented a thorough investigation into the origins of the pandemic and instead devoted "enormous resources to deceit and disinformation."

A World Health Organization delegation to China was blocked from entering the country first in the spring of 2020 and again this month. Beijing then relented and permitted a team to visit. The investigators currently are in China.

Likely origins

The State Department report acknowledges that the U.S. government has been unable to determine "exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus — known as SARS-CoV-2 — was transmitted initially to humans."

The two most likely sources are contact with infected animals or "an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China."

China initially said the virus began at a wild animal "wet market" in Wuhan, but Beijing authorities have been unable to identify an animal host that transmitted the pathogen to humans.

The failure to find the host has led many virus experts and intelligence analysts to examine more closely the idea that the virus leaked from the Wuhan laboratory. Skeptics of China's official version say Beijing authorities have actively tried to keep the world from knowing what happened.

"The Chinese government has destroyed all the evidence from the outbreak because they want to avoid saying it began from a laboratory leak," said a U.S. official familiar with intelligence reports. "China is trying to sell a story to the world that it began as a naturally occurring event from a wet market in Wuhan."

Chinese authorities have tried to get WHO investigators to identify a credible animal source during their inquiry.

"Instead of focusing on an animal host that probably doesn't exist, the WHO team should be focusing on the labs and biosafety," the official said.

The official said, "It is very likely this was PLA secret work that went awry."

U.S. intelligence analysts noted that China's military is engaged in covert development of biological weapons and initial research on such arms would include developing vaccines. At least 2,016 Wuhan lab researchers experimented with a virus called RaTG13, a bat coronavirus similar to the SARS-CoV-2, the report said.

"The WIV has a published record of conducting 'gain-of-function' research to engineer chimeric viruses," the report said, using the term for synthetic viruses.

"But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including RaTG13, which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness."

According to the report, a laboratory accident could appear as a natural outbreak if those initially exposed were limited to a few people and spread more easily by those with a lack of initial symptoms.

"Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure," the report said.

The report also revealed that the Wuhan Institute of Virology has links to the People's Liberation Army, China's military, and has conducted secret lab research at the institute since 2017.

American virus experts who have conducted research at the institute denied those claims

as a conspiracy theory. Many private virus experts originally dismissed reports that the institute was linked to China's covert biological weapons program.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," the report said. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

The report said the U.S. government "for many years" has publicly voiced concerns about China's biological weapons work that Beijing has failed to fully document and has not shown that it had eliminated, despite the requirement to do so under the Biological Weapons Convention.

The report said the intelligence disclosures about the WIV "scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19's origin in China."

"Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records," the report said, as well as interviews with Wuhan researchers and access to worker health records.

China's government blocked all efforts to interview researchers at the WIV, including those who became ill in the fall of 2019.

The detailed State Department report concluded that excessive Chinese government secrecy prevented international investigators from determining the origin of the pandemic.

Rising skepticism

Outside experts critical of China say the Trump administration findings only increase the skepticism of Beijing's denials that the virus leaked from the laboratory through an infection of a worker or through a research animal that was sold illicitly to a wild animal market.

"That was a lie. And the Chinese government knew very early on that that was a lie," said Jamie Metzl, a WHO adviser and a former Senate aide to President Biden.

"And so in the face of overwhelming evidence in May of last year, the Chinese government shifted its position," he told the Toronto Sun last week.

China's government instead sought to promote conspiracy theories. Beijing officials even floated the idea that the virus was first introduced to China by the U.S. Army. The U.S. government vehemently denied that charge.

The Chinese government later cited what it said were reports of an outbreak in southern Europe before it appeared in Wuhan at the end of 2019.

A more recent theory pushed by Chinese officials is that the virus was introduced into the country on frozen food packaging. Virus experts have dismissed that theory as highly unlikely.

Mr. Metzl, the WHO adviser, said in an email that U.S. intelligence reports "suggest the Chinese People's Liberation Army was conducting secret animal research with highly contagious viruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, without notifying the World Health Organization even after the pandemic began."

He said WHO investigators must be given full access to the workers and labs at WIV, including notes, a list of all viruses studied both past and present, and all records.

"If the Chinese government fails to immediately change course, however, the Biden administration should bring allies and partners around the world together to demand an impartial and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of COVID-19, with full access to all necessary records, databases, biological samples and key personnel," he said.

Yan Li-meng, an exiled Chinese virology expert who believes the coronavirus was an engineered bioweapon, said the State Department report shows the WIV has been "lying from the beginning" about the virus origin.

She said the report bolsters her contention that the "backbone" virus behind SARS-CoV-2 was discovered by China's military in the 2015 to 2017 time frame and that "its gain-of-function process involved humanized animal experiments."

"Intelligence here shows researchers in WIV were sick last fall, while WIV has denied it in public," she said. "Then it is important to investigate whether the patients were infected with the same original strain of SARS-CoV-2 or similar strains from the lab," Ms. Yan said.

WorldClinic's Dr. Lang said the goal of the international community, including China, "should be to get to the root cause" of the pandemic.

"If it turns out that the root cause does lead to WIV, that means that the international community and [China] need to know that and then work collaboratively to make sure that nothing like this, which has had mortality and economic impact of a scale unseen outside of wartime, ever happens again."

[Ethiopia] US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 2:10 AM, Cara Anna, Neutral]

The United States said all soldiers from Eritrea should leave Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region "immediately."

A State Department spokesperson in an email to The Associated Press cited "credible reports of looting, sexual violence, assaults in refugee camps and other human rights abuses."

"There is also evidence of Eritrean soldiers forcibly returning Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea," the spokesperson said.

The statement reflects new pressure by the Biden administration on the government of Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country and the anchor of the Horn of Africa, and other combatants as the deadly fighting in Tigray nears the three-month mark. The AP this week cited witnesses who fled the Tigray region as saying Eritrean soldiers were looting,

going house-to-house killing young men and even acting as local authorities. The Eritreans have been fighting on the side of Ethiopian forces as they pursue the fugitive leaders of the Tigray region, though Ethiopia's government has denied their presence.

The U.S. stance has shifted dramatically from the early days of the conflict when the Trump administration praised Eritrea for its "restraint."

The new U.S. statement calls for an independent and transparent investigation into alleged abuses. "It remains unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, or precisely where," it says.

It was not immediately clear whether the U.S. has addressed its demand directly to Eritrean officials.

Witnesses have estimated that the Eritrean soldiers number in the thousands. Eritrean officials have not responded to questions. The information minister for Eritrea, one of the world's most secretive countries, this week tweeted that "the rabid defamation campaign against Eritrea is on the rise again."

The U.S. also seeks an immediate stop to the fighting in Tigray and "full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access" to the region, which remains largely cut off from the outside world, with Ethiopian forces often accompanying aid.

"We are gravely concerned by credible reports that hundreds of thousands of people may starve to death if urgent humanitarian assistance is not mobilized immediately," the statement says.

The U.S. adds that "dialogue is essential between the government and Tigrayans." Ethiopia's government has rejected dialogue with the former Tigray leaders, seeing them as illegitimate, and has appointed an interim administration.

The former Tigray leaders, in turn, objected to Ethiopia delaying a national election last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and considered Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's mandate over.

Editorials and Op-eds

Biden's uphill battle to save the Iran nuclear deal (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Ishaan Tharoor, 13480K, Neutral]

There's probably no country in the world outside the United States that was more affected by the November election than Iran. President Biden's victory and entry into the White House was expected to mark a major shift in U.S. strategy toward the regime in Tehran. After weathering the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and rounds of asphyxiating sanctions, Iranian officials hoped for a change in the geopolitical winds and some economic relief.

Biden and his allies say they want to undo the diplomatic harm caused by former president Donald Trump's unilateral reimposition of sanctions on Iran, which happened over the objections of European partners. Along with rejoining the Paris climate accords, salvaging

the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that Trump abrogated would demonstrate the Biden administration's commitment to multilateral diplomacy with long-standing allies. The Biden camp also believes that Trump's hardline tactics failed to achieve their stated goal of curbing Iran's malign activities abroad, driving it closer to amassing a sufficient stockpile of enriched uranium that could be used for a nuclear weapon than it was before Trump took office.

But a return to the status quo that existed before the Trump presidency looks tricky. While Biden is committed to re-engagement with Iran, his aides have yet to indicate clearly when and how, suggesting that the ball is in Iran's court. At his confirmation hearing last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would wait until it was convinced that Tehran was scaling back its revived enrichment operations and returning once more to compliance with the pact.

"We are a long way from there," said Blinken. "We would then have to evaluate whether they were actually making good if they say they are coming back into compliance with their obligations, and then we would take it from there."

The Iranians want to see the Americans take the first major step. "The administration should begin by unconditionally removing, with full effect, all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or relabeled since Trump took office," wrote Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif in a Foreign Affairs op-ed last week. "In turn, Iran would reverse all the remedial measures it has taken in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal."

Zarif added that a "return to the table will be jeopardized" if Washington and its European partners insist on linking a portfolio of other concerns — including Iran's ballistic missile program and ongoing support for proxy militias elsewhere in the Middle East — to the resumption of talks around the nuclear deal.

As the Trump administration fired off a final salvo of punitive actions against Tehran, the regime responded by stepping up enrichment of uranium at five times the rate permitted under the nuclear deal. In November, Iranian parliament passed a law that would restrict U.N. inspectors' access to key nuclear facilities in the absence of sanctions relief; it may get implemented as early next month.

"It is clear that we don't have many months ahead of us," Rafael Gross, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, told Reuters earlier this month, warning that time was running out for diplomacy to get back on course. "We have weeks."

This standoff between Biden and Zarif's boss, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, is made more fraught by domestic pressures within both countries. Republicans and supporters of the Trump administration's approach appear to be waiting to make political hay of any perceived concession to Iran and have already started smearing Biden appointees as soft on the regime. They are joined by officials from Iran's regional adversaries — Israel and the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — who say that Biden should build off the perceived leverage achieved by Trump.

Some analysts of Iranian politics argue that that leverage is not what it's cracked up to be and that the regime has proved remarkably resilient despite the squeeze of sanctions. With

Iranian presidential elections slated for this summer, a camp of hard-liners opposed to rapprochement with the United States already looks ascendant.

"The Iranian president has very difficult months ahead of him before he leaves office," wrote Saeid Jafari for the Atlantic Council's Iran Source blog. "Rouhani's influential political rivals will do their best to deprive him of reviving the [nuclear deal] before the end of his government."

But Iran watchers in Washington caution against worrying too much about internal political fissures within the Islamic Republic. "I would not hold the Iranian presidential election as a serious reason for urgency on our side," said Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution during a webinar last week where she argued Tehran's strategy at present was aimed at goading Biden quickly back into the deal. "The Biden administration should resist the temptation to be drawn into crisis diplomacy with the Iranians."

What Maloney and other experts in Washington advocate is a more measured approach that cools tensions without immediately lifting all of Trump's sanctions. But a risky game of brinkmanship may now unfold, which will test cooperation between the new U.S. administration and its European partners.

"Tehran would be wrong to assume that [the Biden] administration would hesitate to maintain or even intensify pressure on the Islamic Republic — this time in coordination with European allies — if it were to issue excessive demands," noted a report from the International Crisis Group.

Even if the regime is intact, Iranian society is paying a price. "The cost of US sanctions have so far been felt most by ordinary Iranians, who have been hit with high inflation," wrote Iran scholars Ellie Geranmayeh and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj in an op-ed for CNN. "The worsening economic situation did not lead to regime collapse or capitulation as the Trump administration had bet on, but instead contributed ... protests that were met with brutal force by the security apparatus."

My colleague Jason Rezaian argued that Biden ought to make the "concerns and aspirations of ordinary Iranians central to his policy." But after the difficulties of the Trump years, many Iranians are pessimistic about the way ahead.

"I do not think Biden's presidency is going to make any important change in our lives," said Shabnam, 41, a teacher in Tehran who spoke to my colleagues on the condition that only her first name be used for security reasons. "To be honest with you, the degree and depth of hopelessness and despair in Iran is so high that I am not optimistic about any action by any Iranian or American politician."

Hong Kong's Candles in the Wind (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 6:30 PM, Matthew Brooker, 6400K, Neutral]

Beijing chose President Biden's inauguration day to announce sanctions on outgoing members of the Trump administration for, among other things, penalizing Chinese officials blamed for eroding Hong Kong's autonomy. In a familiar refrain, the foreign ministry chastened the U.S. for interfering in China's internal affairs.

Hong Kong is Chinese territory; that isn't in dispute. Yet to assert that what happens in the

city is purely a domestic issue is to ignore the crucial role that the former British colony has played as a bridge between the Communist system and the democratic world, a legacy that has enduring relevance for the prospects of future cooperation between the two spheres.

Deng Xiaoping's "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement, the basis of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration that governed Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, was a visionary formula whose significance reverberated far beyond the shores of the territory. Then in the early stages of its economic reform and opening to the world, China needed Western markets and capital to drive its development.

Deng, in accepting a capitalist enclave with civil liberties on China's doorstep, was embracing more than a willingness to ease the passage of Hong Kong's people back to the motherland. One Country, Two Systems signaled to the U.S. and its allies that Beijing's rulers had decided it was possible for the Communist and democratic worlds to coexist in an atmosphere of mutual benefit — a radical step for a party that came to power through a civil war and was dedicated to the ultimate demise of global capitalism.

The crackdown on Hong Kong since the passage of a national security law enacted by China's National People's Congress last June has essentially repudiated Deng's notion. The actions of authorities go far beyond what was necessary to restore order to the city after the sometimes-violent protests of 2019, the proximate cause for Beijing's decision to impose the new law. These include the disqualification of moderate pro-democracy lawmakers, the arrest of a newspaper publisher and, most recently, the rounding-up of more than 50 people for their involvement in organizing or participating in an unofficial primary election last year — including an American lawyer.

Having blamed "external forces" for fomenting the Hong Kong unrest — another familiar refrain, and one that ignores the role of Beijing's policies in the city's deepening social discontent — China's leaders appear to have decided that the values of an open, pluralist society are incompatible with the Communist state after all. A more cynical interpretation might be that One Country, Two Systems was only ever a tactical arrangement, concluded at a time when China still needed the West and was too weak to stand on its own. Deng, let's not forget, is also known for the dictum: "Hide your strength, bide your time." Under Xi Jinping, the party has decided that the time for biding its time is over.

There are anomalies within the assault on Hong Kong's freedoms. In particular, authorities have yet to target the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, organizer of the annual Tiananmen vigil held in the city's Victoria Park.

The alliance was formed to support the protesting Beijing students before June 4, 1989 and, since the massacre, has been a thorn in Beijing's side. Before 1997, there was speculation that the annual vigil would be banned; Hong Kong's first post-handover chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, urged people to "put the baggage of June 4" behind them. Yet the gatherings went on. Police banned last year's vigil, though they cited health risks from the pandemic. There has been no attempt to shut down the event's organizer.

For a group that openly wishes for an end to Communist rule in China to survive unmolested in the post-national security law environment — when as little as a Facebook post or a tweet, or just going to the polls, could be enough to get an offender into trouble — is striking. It may just be a matter of time. Just perhaps, though, Beijing is genuinely hesitant

about the way such a move would be perceived.

The Tiananmen vigil is the most potent symbol of how Hong Kong differs from mainland China. The city is the only place in the People's Republic where public commemoration of June 4 is permitted. So the gathering's persistent appearance year after year served a purpose in showing to the world that One Country, Two Systems was a reality — even if it irritated the territory's Beijing-backed leaders. Take that away, and the repeated insistence by every official from Xi on down that China is "upholding" One Country, Two Systems becomes harder to sustain.

The foreign ministry announced the sanctions on the departing Trump administration officials during Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20 in what looked like a defiant gesture that China would stand its ground. In reality, Beijing may care more about international public opinion than it would care to admit.

America Can Defend Taiwan (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 1:00 PM, Elbridge Colby, Neutral]

The Biden administration faces a stark reality: Over the next four years it's possible that China will try to take Taiwan. For the first time since 1950, Beijing may reasonably think it has a viable military option to force what it regards as a renegade province to heel. President Xi Jinping has said Taiwan must be part of China—and has signaled he intends to do something about it.

The stakes for America are immense. Keeping Taiwan out of Beijing's grip is crucial for denying China's goal of attaining regional hegemony and eventually global pre-eminence. The island occupies a pivotal geographic position. If Taiwan falls, China would have the ability to project military power throughout Asia. Japan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands would all be more vulnerable to China's military.

The U.S. has long opposed China's belligerence toward Taiwan, and states in the region would read the U.S. response to an attack as a bellwether of American reliability. Forgoing Taiwan's defense would seriously undermine America's credibility among already nervous Asian allies and partners. For these reasons, the recently declassified 2018 Indo-Pacific strategy specifically ordered the Pentagon to implement a defense strategy that will make the U.S. capable of defending Taiwan.

But can America even defend Taiwan from a China that has become so powerful? The People's Liberation Army is growing stronger at an astonishingly fast rate. The PLA Navy already has more ships than the U.S. Navy, its air forces are the largest in the region, and Beijing also boasts the world's largest missile force. Beijing seeks to reach technical parity with America's armed forces by the 2020s, and surpass us by 2030. Despite all this, the answer is yes. Defeating a PLA attack would be far from easy or cheap, and being ready to do so will involve wrenching changes in the U.S. and Taiwanese defense establishments. But it is doable. It would be harder than often appreciated for China to bring Taiwan to its knees. It is true that Taiwan is less than 100 miles off the Chinese coast. But to subordinate Taiwan, China would either have to invade and occupy the island or blockade or bombard it into submission. Any of these courses would be very difficult if China faced a sophisticated and prepared defense, especially combined with Taiwan's resolute population that has watched Beijing bludgeon Hong Kong's freedoms.

Invasion is Beijing's cleanest option, especially a fait accompli that takes the island before the U.S. can mobilize a sufficient response. In such circumstances, Beijing might gamble that Americans would judge the costs and risks of ejecting an entrenched PLA as too great. But to pull this off, China would have to ferry and sustain by sea and air an army large enough to seize and hold an island with 24 million people. This might be feasible if the PLA attacks a Taiwan standing alone. But taking a Taiwan backed up by a well-prepared U.S. military is a far different proposition. Amphibious invasions against a capable, prepared defense are very hard.

To put it simply, defeating a Chinese invasion would require the U.S., Taiwan and any other engaged parties to cripple or destroy enough Chinese amphibious ships and transport aircraft to prevent the PLA from holding the island. For a country spending more than \$700 billion a year on defense, this is a tractable problem, if America focuses on it.

But the U.S. must do four things, urgently. First, deploy an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance system to monitor Chinese airfields and ports of embarkation, and to target Chinese invasion forces should conflict erupt. Second, buy more long-range munitions, especially antiship weapons, and position them in the region at sea and in places like Guam, Japan and the Philippines. This would help make the U.S. ready to blunt the initial waves of the Chinese amphibious fleet and air-assault elements. Third, have powerful forces further back in the Pacific and beyond ready to reinforce those blunting forces. Fourth, routinely exercise these three components together to demonstrate to Chinese military planners that launching an attack would be unlikely to succeed.

The U.S. can likewise handle a Chinese attempt to blockade or bombard Taiwan into submission. Especially with American support, the Taiwanese would be unlikely to buckle under such pressure, even if brutal, since the alternative is to be swallowed up by Xi Jinping's China. This is especially true if Taiwan had stockpiled enough food, energy supplies and other essentials. A well-prepared U.S. could also conduct a "Taipei sealift" to deliver the supplies needed to prevent China's from strangling the island's populace.

Firm and resolute U.S. action is necessary to prevent Asia from falling under Beijing's hegemony. Cutting Taiwan loose would undercut Washington's precious credibility in the region while uncorking Chinese power projection.

Ensuring that the U.S. can defend the island will take focus and heavy investment from both America and Taiwan. But it can be done. And that will be a small price to pay to make sure China doesn't get the wrong idea—with catastrophic results.

Scrapping DHS's travel vetting regime is the wrong approach (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Chad Wolf, 394K, Neutral]

On his first day in office, President Biden revoked the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's travel vetting infrastructure, undoing four years of arduous, and successful, work to protect the public. In his proclamation, he claimed that national security will be enhanced. Unfortunately, the facts don't support that statement.

One of the primary responsibilities of DHS is to keep us safe by ensuring that those who wish to enter our country are properly screened and vetted. It is undisputed after all that there are evil people out there who seek to travel to the United States with ill intent.

In early 2017, former President Donald Trump and DHS first implemented travel restrictions on seven countries. Admittedly, the rollout was less than ideal. The policy was poorly communicated to the public. But let's be clear — no "Muslim Ban" ever existed. Still, the notion did quickly gain momentum as a talking point for the establishment media as well as elected officials of a particular leaning.

Unfortunately, it was this experience four years ago, not the policy itself or even its outcomes, that likely influenced Biden's decision to revoke what was an essential counterterrorism tool.

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has been building, and continues to refine, its vetting infrastructure that detects terrorists trying to enter the country. This capability relies upon documentation provided by prospective travelers as well as information provided by their governments.

For this reason, DHS carefully and methodically developed a complex set of quantifiable criteria by which countries were to be assessed and ranked. Those criteria included the issuance of modern, electronic passports; the ability to report the loss or theft of passports to Interpol; the ability to share information on known or suspected terrorists; and the level of risk posed by a country due to terrorist travel, crime, or illegal migration.

Every country in the world has been aware of these basic standards for years. Those that failed to meet them were identified for tailored travel restrictions in order to incentivize compliance and minimize risk. Again, countries that were deficient, such as Iran, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, had consciously chosen not to take the necessary actions to become compliant.

Importantly, DHS's approach was quantitatively driven, intended to minimize the risk associated with identity management or information-sharing deficiencies of a particular country. And neither religion nor geography ever had anything to do with the vetting. In fact, several countries, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Burma, and Tanzania, were subject to restrictions and are not Muslim-majority countries.

The process DHS employed was not static. Rather, it was constantly evolving. DHS systematically reviewed all countries against the established criteria on five separate occasions since 2017, and the latest review provided the most detailed picture yet of the degree of compliance.

To evaluate a country's performance against the criteria, DHS established a consistent process in coordination with the U.S. departments of State, Justice, and Defense — as well as with the intelligence community. DHS would spend months collecting data from U.S. embassies abroad and uploading it into an assessment tool that ranked each country.

How do we know it was working? The simple answer: the facts. The process yielded major improvements in foreign government identity management and information sharing. We saw an increase in the number of countries reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol, and more countries were sharing their travel documents and actionable intelligence.

In fact, in 2018, the Republic of Chad had its travel restrictions removed after improving its performance across all of the vetting criteria, proving that countries are both becoming safer

and sharing more information with the U.S. government. And in June 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the vetting infrastructure put in place by DHS was valid and within the constitutional authority of the president.

Trump's and DHS's travel restrictions were yielding significant results, making everyone safer and more secure. Our world is complex and dangerous, so now is not the time to fulfill a campaign promise by decommissioning a proven tool in our counterterrorism arsenal.

At the beginning of this administration, I was hopeful Biden would appreciate the effectiveness of the measures implemented over the past four years. Regrettably, with his revocation of commonsense travel vetting, America is now less safe. This is the real peril of political posturing.

[Russia] In Less Than a Minute, Biden Changes U.S.-Russian Dynamics (Yahoo News/Time)

Yahoo News/Time [1/26/2021 1:43 PM, Philip Elliott, 11261K, Neutral]

It's been a busy week in Washington. President Joe Biden yesterday reversed his predecessor's ban on transgender individuals from serving in uniform, boosted a Buy American program for manufacturing and set a new, ambitious goal of 1.5 million vaccinations a day. The House of Representatives sent its second impeachment of former President Donald Trump to the Senate, which got started on its history-making path. Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio announced that he is heading toward retirement and Janet Yellen is starting as the first female to lead the Treasury Department. Today, Biden is signing orders aimed squarely at racism. Oh, and Major and Champ moved into the White House with their humans over the weekend.

Perhaps lost in all that was a seismic development in Washington's posture toward Moscow. The entire pivot took just 58 seconds, but reset four years of Trump-era ambivalence.

Biden, answering questions on Monday from reporters in a formal setting for the first time during his presidency, was asked directly about possible sanctions against Russia for the attempted poisoning and subsequent detention of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, or whether those were being delayed as his government tries to renew an expiring nuclear treaty with Russia called New START.

Biden, who spent years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as its top Democrats and was a leading voice on international affairs inside Barack Obama's White House, knew precisely what needed to be said. He expanded the scope of the question to include not just the treaty, but reports that the Russians put bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan, a massive hacking operation known as SolarWinds, and the sweeping intelligence review he just ordered on what the U.S. knows about Russia's ongoing troublemaking. The ongoing protests across Russia have raised public awareness of it all, and Biden stepped in to lump it all together for a domestic and international audience.

"I find that we can both operate in the mutual self-interest of our countries as a New START agreement, and make it clear to Russia that we are very concerned about their behavior, whether it's Navalny, whether it's the SolarWinds or whether it's the reports of bounties on the heads of Americans in Afghanistan," Biden said. "I will not hesitate to raise those issues with the Russians."

In less than a minute, Biden put the United States on new footing and Vladimir Putin on notice. So when Biden and Putin spoke today for the first time under the new U.S. administration, Putin knew what to expect. According to U.S. officials, Biden did exactly as he promised yesterday and pressed Putin without holding out grand hopes for a reset or even improved relations.

Biden's aides at the White House, State Department and throughout government had been offering a stiffened spine toward Russia. But as much as reporters in Washington respect new White House press secretary Jen Psaki and top State Department spokesman Ned Price, their words don't carry as much weight as the President's. After all, the Trump era often featured a split screen of foreign-policy hands being tough on Russia while the then-President seemed indifferent to Russia's belligerence. It doesn't really matter what the apparatchiks say if the top boss has other plans.

Biden yesterday demonstrated none of Trump's deference to Putin, a relationship that puzzled Washington even before the 2016 election. Nor did he echo Obama's effort to reboot Washington's relationship with Moscow, which started in 2009 with a botched "reset" stunt that had then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton handing her counterpart a plastic toy with the word peregruzka on it. The U.S. side thought it was Russian for 'reset' but it actually said 'overload.' The day left Foggy Bottom red-faced and Clinton with a deep distrust of the Russian openness.

More recently, Biden's stance wasn't George W. Bush's look into Putin's soul, or Bill Clinton's post-Cold War navigation of a totally new dynamic. In all reality, Biden probably retreated to something closer to Ronald Reagan's position: compromise on treaties when it makes sense without forgetting that he's dealing with the vestiges of what Reagan famously called "the Evil Empire."

Biden ran as a sensible candidate, a transitional figure for his party and his country. So far, he has pushed an agenda through executive orders that is far more progressive than Democratic skeptics expected and far more radical than Republicans believed he would dare. So it's a curious comparison between Cold War Reagan and Post-Trump Biden, but it might be an accurate reminder that Presidents often can chase competing ideologies at home and abroad. (Just look at the second President Bush's education reform agenda and his response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.)

Biden's foreign policy circle has its share of Russian hawks. His nominee to lead the CIA is a career diplomat who spent time as the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. No one would mistake William Burns as a Russophile. Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, is as clear-eyed as they come when it comes to Russia's aggression, especially regarding the invasion of Ukraine and meddling in elections. Biden's pick for the State Department's No. 3 post, Victoria Nuland, is a veteran diplomat who served in administrations of both parties; she was a top adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney and an Obama Administration's point-person on pushing back on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan — a top hand during Clinton's days at the State Department and one of Biden's top foreign policy hands as VP — has been working the phones looking to extend the treaty and knows these issues inside and out.

But it's also not a single-note chorus surrounding Biden. Most notably, his nominee for the

State Department's deputy secretary, Wendy Sherman, is an experienced and tough-as-nails negotiator who has sat across the table from America's most bellicose foes and extracted diplomatic agreements with the likes of Iran and North Korea. She's talked the U.S. out of some of the thorniest moments in recent diplomatic history. Where some around Biden are expected to urge hawkish stances, those like Sherman — who spent months on tough deals with nebulous details — are more prone to slow trust-building. The same is true of the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, who is heading up Biden's development agenda. She used to court diplomats personally, and counted her Russian counterpart as a friend.

For months, Biden has been signaling to all who would listen that this was where he was heading. The Monday declaration at the former War Department headquarters next to the White House made it official, though. That's not to say Biden is going to be shouting "tear down this wall" any time soon. But he's also not relying on tchotchkes to solve one of the first major foreign policy tests of his presidency.

[China] The US has accused China of carrying out genocide. Will it now boycott the 2022 Beijing Olympics? (CNN)

CNN [1/26/2021 8:24 PM, Ben Westcott, 7975K, Neutral]

The United States' determination that China is committing genocide in Xinjiang presents a rare moral predicament for athletes and countries preparing to compete in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made the announcement on the last day of the Trump administration, drawing attention to the systematic abuse of the minority Uyghur population in China's far west.

The designation is the first by the US State Department since 2016, when then Secretary of State John Kerry determined that the atrocities committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria amounted to genocide, and only among a handful of times a US administration has applied the term to an ongoing crisis.

Genocide is defined by the United Nations as "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," and although the US determination won't trigger any immediate penalties, it will put pressure on anyone who does business with China -- and that includes the 90 or so nations that are due to send athletes to the Winter Games in February next year.

"Right now there is a lot of pressure on any kind of major engagements with the Chinese government that involves lending (them) legitimacy," said Maya Wang, senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The prospect of US athletes competing in the capital of a country accused of carrying out an ongoing genocide, will at the very least send mixed messages about Washington's commitment to human rights.

Beijing has long denied claims of genocide, claiming its policies in Xinjiang are part of a program of mass deradicalization and poverty alleviation. Last week a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused Pompeo of spreading "venomous" lies, inviting people to visit Xinjiang to "see with your own eyes."

Politicians in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the US have publicly raised the prospect of not sending athletes to Beijing in 2022. While in March last year, 12 US senators led by Republican Rick Scott submitted a bipartisan resolution requesting that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) remove the 2022 Games from China and reopen the bidding process. But to date no government or national sports authority has officially announced it will be pulling out.

CNN has reached out to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) for comment.

In a statement to CNN, the IOC said that it had received "assurances" from Chinese authorities that the principles of the Olympic Charter will be respected at the Beijing 2022 Games.

"Awarding the Olympic Games to a National Olympic Committee (NOC) does not mean that the IOC agrees with the political structure, social circumstances or human rights standards in its country," the statement said.

Activists and experts said that US' accusations will undoubtedly fuel calls for at least a partial boycott of the Games. In September 2020, more than 160 human rights groups around the world wrote to the IOC to reverse its decision to hold the 2022 Games in Beijing. Mandie McKeown, executive director of the International Tibet Network, who coordinated the letter, said that if they were to put together another group letter now, the number of organizations would "undoubtedly" be higher.

She said if the Games couldn't be canceled, then her organization was advocating for a diplomatic boycott of the event, which would allow teams to attend while world leaders stayed away.

"The push for diplomatic boycott is definitely growing and noises (from governments) are positive," McKeown said.

Politicizing the Games

Over the years there have been many calls for Olympic boycotts, either over alleged human rights abuses or for political purposes.

In 1936, shortly before the beginning of World War II, pressure was placed on countries to boycott the Summer Olympics in Munich, which was presided over by then-Chancellor Adolf Hitler.

In 1976, more than 20 African nations boycotted the Montreal Summer Games over the participation of New Zealand athletes, after the country's rugby team defied the United Nations to go on a controversial tour of apartheid South Africa.

During the Cold War, the US and its allies boycotted the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow after which the Soviet Union then boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

But Susan Brownell, an Olympics expert and professor of anthropology at the University of

Missouri-St Louis, said that from the Winter Olympics in Albertville in 1992 onwards there had been no national boycotts.

"A broad consensus opposing boycotts emerged among national governments worldwide because of the feeling that they accomplish nothing and only harm the athletes," she said.

There was a push by human rights organizations and NGOs for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics over the Chinese government's restrictions on civil liberties, especially in regards to Tibetan minority groups, but in the end the Olympics went ahead as planned. "No-one with the power to withdraw from the Games was seriously considering it," Brownell said.

But since then, allegations against Beijing in relation to mass detention camps in Xinjiang have mounted. Beijing claims it's offering Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs, an education in Chinese language and values as part of its anti-terrorism program.

"Languages, traditional cultures and customs of all ethnic minorities in Xinjiang have been well protected and inherited. All residents fully enjoy their rights, including the right to subsistence and development," said Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying on January 20.

However, Uyghurs in exile say their families are being imprisoned for arbitrary offenses and subjected to forced labor and abuse.

Even without formal boycotts, the 2022 event is likely to attract protests, though mass demonstrations won't be possible in a country that prides itself on maintaining order.

McKeown, from the International Tibet Network, said her organization and other groups working with it would be undertaking a program of action, including protests around the world, in the lead up to the 2022 Beijing Games to draw attention to the Chinese government's human rights abuses.

She said for now they were advocating for a political boycott, rather than a total boycott, for the sake of the athletes.

"Athletes have worked incredibly hard to get where they are. It's not necessarily their concern that the IOC made such a terrible mistake in giving the Games to Beijing," she said.

Individual athletes could still boycott the 2022 Games, although this would mean compromising years of training and lucrative sponsorships. Under Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, any political protests by individual competitors at the Games are banned.

'The power of sport'

An Olympics can still be heavily political even if there's no boycotts, and the 2022 Beijing Games are likely to be no exception.

In 2018, at the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, North and South Korea marched in the Opening Ceremony under a United Korea banner, a powerful symbol of unity between the

two divided nations.

But the 2018 Games came at the same time as rising tensions between the US and North Korea. At the Opening Ceremony, then-US Vice President Mike Pence appeared to act coldly towards North Korean representatives, including the sister of leader Kim Jong Un.

A boycott by Western political leaders of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2022 Games is possible, said Olympic expert Brownell, but she added that given Winter Olympics rarely attracted the attention of the Summer Games, many leaders were unlikely to go in the first place.

Brownell said that she believed the worst damage to the Olympics' reputation didn't come from an association with China or human rights issues. "The damage seems to have come from the perception of excess cost to the taxpayer and corruption in the IOC," she said.

Despite the genocide ruling by the US, no countries have publicly moved to downsize relations with the Chinese government. And signs point to stronger ties, not weaker. In late December, for example, the European Union struck a wide-reaching investment agreement with Beijing despite the concerns of human rights organizations.

Human rights activists said it was too early to say whether or not a boycott of the 2022 Games, political or otherwise, was likely to go ahead.

And that's assuming the Games even go ahead as planned. Events in Beijing are scheduled to begin on Friday, February 4, 2022 -- just over 12 months away. But as the postponement of last year's Summer Games in Tokyo has shown, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown doubt on countries' ability to host large sporting events.

With numerous potential problems ahead, Wang, of Human Rights Watch, said the Chinese government needed to be given a chance to respond to international concerns over their actions in Xinjiang and the crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong.

But Wang said that she found it hard to see that happening and without demonstrable changes in Beijing's behavior, there could be a "change of perception among other governments."

"They are going to have to make a decision," Wang said. Human Rights Watch is currently not calling for any boycott of the 2022 Games.

In response to a question about a potential boycott in 2022 on January 20, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that "preparations are being smoothly carried out." "We have confidence that it will be an extraordinary gathering," she said.

In 2017, the IOC announced that it would add human rights, anti-corruption and sustainable development clauses to Olympic Host City contracts in the future. However, the new rules will only come into place after the 2022 Winter Olympics, beginning with the 2024 Summer Games. It is unclear how the clauses will be policed or what will happen if a host city breaks them.

In its statement to CNN, the IOC said that it recognizes and upholds human rights but at the

same time, couldn't change laws or the political system in a sovereign country. "This must rightfully remain the legitimate role of governments and respective intergovernmental organizations," the statement said.

The IOC said that the Olympic Games had a unique role in bringing the world together.

"In our fragile world, the power of sport to bring the whole world together, despite all the existing differences, gives us all hope for a better future," the statement said.

Coronavirus News

European Economy Lags China and U.S. on Pandemic Recovery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:00 AM, Craig Stirling, 6400K, Negative]

Europe's economy is starting to follow the familiar script of lagging its international peers when recovering from a crisis.

That was the upshot of the International Monetary Fund's forecasts on Tuesday, which downgraded the growth outlook for 2021 across Europe and underscored a generally poorer performance compared with China and the U.S.

Such diverging fortunes reflect the stringency of lockdowns across the euro zone to contain the coronavirus, as well as a late and stumbling vaccination campaign -- headwinds that threaten to deepen what already looks likely to be a double-dip recession. Political unease over the future leadership of Germany and a crisis in Italy are compounding the gloom.

By contrast, China is fulfilling a V-shaped recovery, and the U.S. is strutting more confidently with a new president overseeing an extra stimulus injection and a more aggressive vaccine effort.

"We've started the year on a softer footing, particularly in Europe, because much of Europe seems to have gone back into recession," Janet Henry, chief global economist at HSBC Holdings Plc in London, told Bloomberg Television. "China is already back above pre-pandemic levels and, on our projections, the U.S. will be by the end of 2021. For the euro zone, it'll be the end of 2022."

That divergence was emphasized in the IMF's forecasts, which showed euro-area gross domestic product rising only 4.2% this year, after falling 7.2% in 2020. The U.S. economy is seen expanding 5.1%, more than recouping last year's 3.4% contraction.

The most immediate cause of Europe's relative weakness is the need for stricter and longer lockdowns to combat a resurgent coronavirus outbreak, and to contain nastier strains of the disease.

As European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde put it last week, a contraction in the fourth quarter will now "travel" into the first three months of the year.

"The short-term risk is tilted to the downside," she added somberly. "Uncertainty is in the air."

Sluggish immunization programs also threaten to widen the disparity between Europe and the rest. The European Union's best performers in that regard, tiny Malta and Denmark, have administered only around 4 shots per 100 people. The U.S. has managed 7 and the U.K. is above 10. The currency bloc is now in a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc over delayed vaccine deliveries.

With such shortcomings likely to cement lockdowns even further, the contrast in economic destinies is looking stark, with banks including Barclays Plc pointing to an "Atlantic divide."

"The U.S. outlook is improving, Europe's is deteriorating" BofA Global Research's economics team wrote in a report. "Don't think of both economies' recovery prospects as equal."

Such a trajectory evokes the frequent impression that Europe has become a natural economic laggard to the rest. That sense has persisted for much of the current century, not least after the region's sovereign-debt crisis impaired its recovery from the global financial crash a decade ago, while the U.S. and China powered ahead, at least in relative terms.

Newfound political disarray is only serving to highlight Europe's listlessness. Post-Brexit trade curbs with the U.K. are already an irksome reminder of the recent trauma of divorce disfiguring the region.

Meanwhile, the succession to Germany's Angela Merkel is still unresolved, keeping open the question of how the bloc will galvanize itself into fighting crises in the era after she leaves. Even after a candidate to replace her as chancellor is settled, an election in September -- no doubt followed by coalition talks -- will prolong the drift.

The sudden resignation of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, against a backdrop of burgeoning debt obligations, also shows how turmoil is never far from erupting somewhere in the region. The country has been the focus of the EU's efforts to forge a joint recovery fund to shore up the integrity of its common currency.

For all their potential despair, European policy makers can still cling to hopes that their economies remain sound beneath the surface.

Government support programs in the region have tended to be highly targeted toward keeping companies and jobs afloat even when output is shut down, possibly avoiding unnecessary destruction to growth potential.

"Economies are being held in an imperfect state of suspended animation, and by and large it keeps underlying economies healthy," said Kallum Pickering, an economist at Berenberg. "My hunch actually is that there's a bit less scarring than most people think."

In any case, Europe's finance chiefs are now resigning themselves to being patient for when vaccination setbacks can be cleared, and the pandemic tamed, so that their economies can finally be unleashed -- even if that happens far later than global rivals.

"We have to divide the year 2021 in two parts," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said in a Bloomberg Television interview. "We have everything that is required to have a very strong, very quick rebound as soon as the pandemic is over."

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 6:28 PM, Stephanie Armour, Sabrina Siddiqui and Andrew Restuccia, Neutral]

The Biden administration on Tuesday said it would boost the supply of coronavirus vaccines sent to states by about 16% for the next three weeks and will purchase enough additional doses to vaccinate most of the U.S. population with a two-dose regimen by the end of the summer.

Senior administration officials said the federal government is working to purchase an additional 100 million doses each of the Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. vaccines, increasing the total U.S. vaccine order by 50% to 600 million from 400 million. Officials said they expect the additional doses to be delivered over the summer.

The purchases will provide enough supply to vaccinate 300 million Americans in a two-dose regimen over the summer. The vaccine is not approved for people under 16 years old.

"We now have a national strategy to beat Covid-19," President Biden said Tuesday. "It's comprehensive. It's based on science, not politics. It's based on truth, not denial. And it is detailed."

He nonetheless urged the public to remain vigilant, referring to the fight against the pandemic as "a wartime undertaking." "The brutal truth is, it's going to take months before we get the majority of Americans vaccinated," Mr. Biden said.

Even with the increase in doses to states starting next week, supplies aren't yet sufficient for what is needed now, a senior administration official said.

The administration will also start providing states with three weeks' advance notice of their estimated vaccine allocations, updated on a running basis, to help with their planning. Governors had said allocations fluctuated under the Trump administration, complicating efforts to staff vaccination sites and manage appointments.

"We've been going week to week, and you really can't plan and schedule," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said on MSNBC. "It will bring some efficiency to the program that we haven't been able to implement."

Members of the Biden administration, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky and White House coronavirus coordinator Jeffrey Zients, briefed governors on the changes on a call Tuesday afternoon, people familiar with the discussion said. The Department of Health and Human Services will boost allocations to states next week to a minimum of 10 million doses a week, up from 8.6 million doses a week, for the next three weeks, a senior administration official said.

Biden administration officials told governors that 5.7 million doses will be Moderna's vaccine and 4.3 million will be Pfizer's vaccine, the people familiar with the call said.

The officials also told governors that the sixth dose that Pfizer recently discovered could be extracted from its five-dose vials won't count toward the allocation of the company's doses to states, the people with knowledge of the call said. Special syringes are required to extract

the additional dose and some pharmacies have struggled to extract it properly.

The vaccine rollout has been hindered by long waits for shots, crashing websites and early evidence that lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color are falling behind more affluent, white areas when it comes to getting vaccinated. Mr. Biden had said he wanted to see 1 million vaccinations administered a day in his first 100 days, and on Monday he said the administration could reach 1.5 million vaccinations a day. Public-health analysts had said that administering 1 million doses a day, an amount almost reached under the Trump administration, would put the U.S. on track to reach herd immunity to the virus in 2022.

Mr. Biden said Monday he was optimistic that any American who wants a coronavirus vaccine should be able to get one by the spring. The president said delivering on that promise will require boosting vaccine supply and the capacity of facilities where people can receive the vaccine. To date, about 44.4 million doses of both vaccines have been distributed in the U.S., of which 23.5 million have been administered, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of the doses administered, 13 million were Pfizer vaccines and 10.4 million were from Moderna. Johnson & Johnson has said it expects to report results of a large clinical trial of its Covid-19 vaccine by early next week and to deliver 100 million doses for use in the U.S. by the end of June if the results are positive and the vaccine is authorized. Mr. Biden's plan would establish 100 federally supported vaccination centers and dispatch mobile units to rural and underserved areas across the country. The CDC will make vaccines available in local pharmacies beginning next month. The Biden administration also plans to launch a national public awareness campaign to promote the importance of the vaccine.

He has invoked the Defense Production Act to take certain steps to expand vaccine manufacturing, such as producing more equipment and materials used to make shots. He also will use the act to boost supplies such as "low dead space" syringes, which can be used to squeeze more doses out of vaccine vials.

Vaccines were initially allocated to states in December based on the size of their population. In December, CDC advisers recommended that initial supplies go to high-risk populations such as front-line health workers and nursing-home residents. The advisory panel said adults 65 years and older should begin vaccinations only after doses were given to essential workers and adults 75 years and older who wanted them.

The Trump administration on Jan. 12 said it was changing the distribution system, providing allocations to states based on the size of state populations over age 65 and how effective states have been in getting the shots administered.

It also called on states to open up vaccinations to adults 65 years and older, but governors said there wasn't enough supply from the reserve to keep up with the surge in demand that followed. Mr. Cuomo said Tuesday that New York was "functionally out" of vaccines but expected new shipments in the next several days. Health officials in New York's Erie County, which includes Buffalo, said Tuesday they were canceling planned vaccination clinics on Friday and Saturday due to a lack of vaccine availability.

As of Tuesday, New York had received 1.3 million first vaccine doses and distributed 1.2 million, the state health department said. According to the CDC, New York had distributed

1.45 million of the 2.4 million doses it was allocated as of Tuesday morning; the federal figures include all doses, including those used in a federal program to vaccinate nursing-home residents.

On a conference call with California officials, Yolanda Richardson, secretary of the Government Operations Agency in Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration, said that the state didn't yet know what its new vaccine allocation would be.

As of Tuesday, about 4.7 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine had been shipped to California and about 2.6 million of those had been administered, according to state data.

California Health and Human Services Secretary Mark Ghaly said Tuesday the state is currently vaccinating 125,000 people each weekday.

"We look forward to increasing the cadence to make sure the needs of Californians are heard loud and clear and we're able to fill the pressing demands on vaccines as quickly as possible," he said.

Moderna said it has supplied 30.4 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccine to the U.S. government for distribution to date and remains on track to meet its targets for providing many more in the coming months. Including what it has supplied so far, the Cambridge, Mass., company said Tuesday it plans to deliver 100 million doses for the U.S. by the end of March, followed by an additional 100 million by the end of June, for a total of 200 million by midyear. U.S. regulators authorized use of the two-dose vaccine in December.

Pfizer and partner BioNTech SE have been providing another Covid-19 vaccine for use in the U.S., which is also given in two doses.

Pfizer said it would do its part to "make more shots-in-arms a reality," a company spokeswoman said. Under the company's agreement, the U.S. government has an option to purchase an additional 400 million doses.

Mr. Biden received his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine in December and a second dose earlier this month. Vice President Kamala Harris got her second dose of the Moderna vaccine on Tuesday.

The U.S. has seen 25.2 million confirmed Covid-19 infections and about 420,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Congressional Activity

Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/26/2021 8:13 PM, Siobhan Hughes and Lindsay Wise, Neutral]

Most Republican senators questioned the Senate's authority to hold an impeachment trial for a former president, dealing a blow to Democrats' chances of convicting Donald Trump of inciting an attack on the Capitol.

Forty-five Republicans, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), sided

with Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) on his point of order arguing that the planned trial of a now-private citizen violates the Constitution. Some cautioned, however, that their vote Tuesday didn't necessarily dictate how they would vote at the end of trial.

The proposal was tabled, or killed, in a 55-45 vote that clears the way for the trial to move forward in two weeks. All 50 lawmakers in the Democratic caucus joined GOP Sens. Mitt Romney of Utah, Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.

Seventeen Republicans would have to join the Democrats to reach the two-thirds supermajority required to convict Mr. Trump.

The Republican former president was impeached by the House on allegations of inciting the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, as Congress was holding a joint session to certify the election victory of President Biden, a Democrat. A conviction would allow for a subsequent, simple majority vote to bar Mr. Trump from holding office again. Mr. Paul said the roll call showed that there aren't enough Republican senators willing to convict Mr. Trump. "Forty-five votes means the impeachment trial is dead on arrival," he said.

Democrats countered that the trial is proper and that Republicans are focusing on the constitutional question to avoid having to weigh in on the merits of the case itself—and whether Mr. Trump's actions rise to the level of encouraging an insurrection against the U.S. government.

"The theory that the Senate can't try former officials would amount to a constitutional get-out-of-jail-free card for any president who commits an impeachable offense," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D, N.Y.).

This will be the fourth presidential impeachment trial, and Mr. Trump's second, but the first for a president who has left office. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service, the public-policy research arm of Congress, concludes that while the matter is open to debate, the weight of scholarly authority agrees that the impeachment process, including the trial, can be applied to officials who are no longer in office.

One precedent is the 1876 impeachment and trial of Secretary of War William Belknap, who resigned after the House obtained evidence that he had taken kickbacks from an associate appointed to run a frontier trading post. He was tried by the Senate and acquitted. Mr. Biden supports the Senate Democrats' decision to move ahead with a trial, even if it interferes with his legislative agenda and cabinet confirmations, but predicted in an interview with CNN on Monday there wouldn't be 17 GOP votes to convict Mr. Trump.

"He's going to allow them to move forward at the pace and the manner that the leaders in the Senate determined, and I can promise you that we will leave the vote counting to leaders in the Senate from now on," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday.

Mr. Trump's staff declined to comment.

House managers walked the article of impeachment to the Senate on Monday night, and senators were sworn in as jurors on Tuesday, with Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), the

president pro tempore, sworn in as the presiding officer.

Mr. Leahy, 80 years old, was taken to a local hospital for evaluation after feeling unwell on Tuesday evening, an aide said. Mr. Leahy is the longest-serving Senate Democrat and third in line for the presidency after Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) The trial will begin in earnest the week of Feb. 8, about a month after the Capitol riot that left five people dead, including a U.S. Capitol Police officer. Senators on Tuesday agreed to that timeline in a pretrial organizing resolution.

The House impeachment article, which passed on Jan. 13 by 232-197, drew the support of 10 Republicans.

Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Senate Republican, cautioned that Tuesday's vote shouldn't be interpreted as a guarantee of how GOP senators would vote at the conclusion of the trial.

"I just think that it was a question on the constitutionality of it. I don't think it binds anybody once the trial starts," Mr. Thune said. But he said most Republican senators believe that from a constitutional standpoint, the trial is "on really shaky ground."

Sen. Rob Portman (R., Ohio), who announced Monday he won't run for re-election, said his vote against tabling Mr. Paul's motion was motivated by a desire to allow debate on the trial's constitutionality, but he hasn't decided whether he would convict or acquit Mr. Trump. He said he would wait to hear the evidence. Although Republican senators have criticized the former president for his actions on Jan. 6, many have signaled opposition to voting to convict him. Ahead of the vote Tuesday, a Wall Street Journal survey found that at least 32 senators have said they are opposed to a trial or leaning against convicting Mr. Trump.

Mr. McConnell has been sharply critical of Mr. Trump, saying he provoked the mob that attacked the Capitol earlier this month. At his weekly press conference Tuesday, Mr. McConnell wouldn't answer a reporter's question about whether he believes Trump's actions were impeachable.

Mr. Romney, one of the five Republicans who voted with Democrats on Tuesday, was the only GOP senator to vote to convict Mr. Trump in his impeachment trial last year over his efforts to press Ukraine's president to announce an investigation of Mr. Biden.

Ahead of the vote, Republicans met Tuesday with law professor Jonathan Turley of the George Washington University Law School, who has argued that impeachment proceedings against a former president are at odds with the Constitution. The decision to invite Mr. Turley to the Tuesday Republican lunch was Mr. McConnell's, according to Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee.

Mr. Turley, who testified in favor of Mr. Trump during his first impeachment, argued that Mr. Trump's unfounded assertions to supporters that he was the election's rightful winner, which preceded their rioting, were protected speech, that it is unconstitutional to try a former president, and that Mr. Trump might be best served by simply not participating in the trial.

With the Senate moving ahead with its trial, Mr. Trump could try to appeal to federal courts,

but legal experts say it is unlikely they would intervene either to block a trial or to reverse a potential conviction.

Near East & North Africa

[Iraq] Iraq signs pact with Total for 'large projects' (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 2:00 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, Neutral]

Iraq has signed a memorandum of understanding with Total to execute "large and promising projects" in the Middle Eastern country, particularly regarding use of natural gas and clean energy, its oil ministry said on Wednesday.

The agreement was signed during a visit by Total's Chief Executive Patrick Pouyanne, the ministry said in a statement.

[Lebanon] Amid crisis, Hezbollah 'bank' a lifeline for some Lebanese (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 1:10 AM, Bassem Mroue, 13480K, Neutral]

When Lebanon's financial meltdown began in late 2019, Hassan Shoumar was locked out of his dollar savings like everyone else in the country as banks clamped down with capital controls.

But the young engineer had an alternative. He could still pull out the dollars in his account at the al-Qard al-Hasan Association, the financial arm of the militant Hezbollah group.

Shoumar had kept an account at the association for years, ever since he had taken a loan from it to pay university fees. Unlike Lebanon's commercial banks, the accounts at the association didn't earn interest. But the 28-year-old Shoumar didn't care about that.

"What I care about is that when I want my money, I can get it," he said by telephone from south Lebanon.

Stepping in where the state and financial institutions have failed, Hezbollah is providing a vital lifeline for some Lebanese. In the country's wrecked economy, everyone is desperate for hard currency and liquidity as the local currency plummets in value. At commercial banks, depositors stand in line for hours and fight with managers in vain to access their dollar savings. Most banks have stopped giving loans.

But at Hezbollah's al-Qard al-Hasan people can take out small, interest-free loans in dollars, enabling them to pay school fees, get married, buy a used car or open a small business. They can also open saving accounts there.

The association, officially a non-profit charity, is one of the tools by which Hezbollah entrenches its support among the country's Shiite population, even as the group has come under enormous criticism over the past year among Lebanese furious at the political elite.

With poverty rising across Lebanon, Hezbollah provides its community with low-cost schools and hospitals and distributes heating fuel to the poor. Hezbollah continues to pay its fighters and employees in its institutions in U.S. dollars, while everyone else gets their salaries in Lebanese pounds, which lost about 80% of their value in the crisis.

Over the past year, the al-Qard al-Hasan association has seen a significant increase in clients, despite it being under U.S. Treasury sanctions since 2007.

"People's lack of confidence in the banking sector forced them to find other places," said Batoul Tahini, a spokeswoman for the association.

She said the number of deposits was much higher than 2019 and previous years, though loans did not increase very much. She declined to give exact figures.

In a recent speech, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said around 300,000 people currently are dealing with the association on loans. The association says its clients are from Lebanon's various sects. But the vast majority are believed to be Shiite Muslims.

Roy Badaro, a Lebanese economist, said the association is part of Hezbollah's state-within-a-state and a "disguised way to complement their activity through microfinance, similar to Hezbollah-run schools, hospitals, etc."

"The aim is to absorb the economic crisis among poor Shiites," he said.

Al-Qard al-Hasan, whose name in Arabic means "the benevolent loan," offers interest-free loans up to \$5,000 and, importantly these days, it gives them in dollars. Active for more than three decades, it is considered Lebanon's largest non-banking financial institution giving microloans.

Clients must put up gold as collateral or bring a guarantor. They then pay back the loan in monthly installments for up to 30 months, after which the collateral is returned. Clients can also set up accounts to deposit money, which is then used to finance the loans. The association operates under Islamic rules forbidding interest.

Lebanon's economic and financial crisis is the country's worst in modern history, with the economy contracting 19% in 2020. Tens of thousands around the country have lost their jobs, and nearly half the population of more than 6 million is in poverty.

The crisis shattered people's confidence in Lebanon's banking system, once among the most respected in the region. As banks took a hit, many people decided to keep their money at home, amounting to up to \$10 billion, according to central bank governor Riad Salameh.

That has proven a boon for the al-Qard al-Hasan association, as some turned to it as an alternative to store their cash.

The risk for Hezbollah is that as poverty rises and the economic crisis worsens, many people might default on their loans, the economist Badaro said. If that happens, Hezbollah might have to use its own funds to cover deposits, he said.

The association's prominence has also made it a target.

A hacking group calling itself "Spiderz" claimed that it broke into the association's system and posted the identities of some clients and security camera footage from some of its branches. It warned clients to withdraw their money or else they might come under

American sanctions.

Al-Qard al-Hasan confirmed there was a cyberattack in late December that it called "partial and limited." It told clients not to worry about their identities being revealed. Tahini said the issue is under investigation.

The sight of the association's clients getting their dollars without problems has also bred resentments over Hezbollah's power in Lebanon.

"This shows that Hezbollah is safe and relaxed, while we are in a dilemma," Walid Joumblatt, political leader of Lebanon's Druze community and a Hezbollah critic, said in an interview with Sky News Arabia. He joked that he was growing his beard like conservative Muslims to get a loan from al-Qard al-Hasan.

In a speech days later, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah shot back, saying all anyone had to do was fill out an application and put up the gold collateral.

He also depicted the association as rock solid, providing \$3.7 billion in loans to some 1.8 million people since it was founded. He boasted that U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah officials only strengthened al-Qard al-Hasan, since some of them moved their accounts from banks to the association.

He revealed for the first time that during the 2006 war with Israel, Israeli warplanes struck a site where money and gold were stored. Despite that, he boasted, every client got their money.

"No one ever lost a cent," he said.

[Tunisia] Tunisia's parliament approves Cabinet reshuffle amid protests (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:13 PM, Tarek Amara, Angus McDowall, 5304K, Neutral]

Tunisia's parliament on Tuesday approved a Cabinet reshuffle that deepened the conflict between the prime minister and the president, as hundreds protested outside the heavily barricaded parliament over social inequality and police abuses.

Riot police turned water cannon on protesters outside the parliament earlier on Tuesday, trying to quell the largest rally since demonstrations began this month.

Hundreds of protesters had marched from the Ettadhamen district of the capital, Tunis, where young people have clashed with police several nights this month, and were joined by hundreds more near the parliament.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi named 11 new ministers and said he hoped it would inject new blood into his government.

"Young people protesting outside parliament reminds us of our priorities. Their protests are legitimate and the government will listen to the angry youth," he said.

But President Kais Saied indicated on Monday he would reject the Cabinet reshuffle, condemned the absence of women among the new ministers and said some likely new Cabinet members may have conflicts of interest.

Saied, who appointed Mechichi last year but has taken issue with some of his moves, said he would not swear in any ministers suspected of corruption.

Police blocked the march with barricades to prevent protesters approaching the parliament building where lawmakers were debating the government reshuffle.

"The government that only uses police to protect itself from the people - it has no more legitimacy," said one protester, Salem Ben Saleh, who is unemployed.

Later, police also blocked Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the broad tree-lined boulevard that is home to the Interior Ministry and where major protests have traditionally taken place, as demonstrators tried to gather there.

ARAB SPRING ANNIVERSARY

Protests flared earlier this month on the 10th anniversary of Tunisia's 2011 revolution that inspired that Arab Spring and introduced democracy in the North African country.

Political paralysis and economic decline have soured many Tunisians on the fruits of the uprising.

The political deadlock in Tunisia since elections in 2019 has stymied efforts to address festering economic problems, with both foreign lenders and the main labour union demanding reforms.

Last year, as the global coronavirus pandemic struck, Tunisia's economy shrank by more than 8%. The fiscal deficit rose above 12% of gross domestic product, ballooning public debt to more than 90% of GDP.

The nightly clashes between young people and police have been matched by growing daytime protests at which demonstrators have chanted slogans including: "The people want the fall of the regime" - echoing Arab Spring uprisings.

On Tuesday, with anger high over the death on Monday of a young man whose family said had been hit by a tear gas canister, protesters chanted against the security forces.

In Sbeitla, the hometown of Haykel Rachdi, who was buried on Tuesday, mourners later clashed with police, witnesses said.

As parliamentary debate on the reshuffle paused, some opposition lawmakers left parliament to join the protest outside.

"Mechichi has transformed this into a police state. ... No work, no development, no investment... just police against the people," said Imed, another protester who did not want to give his family name.

[United Arab Emirates] UAE Central Bank slaps monetary sanction on Bank of Baroda (Yahoo News/Capital Market)

Yahoo News/Capital Market [1/26/2021 10:54 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates has imposed a financial sanction on Bank of Baroda, GCC Operations, Dubai for deficiencies in compliance of Federal Decree Law of 2018 on Anti Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism and Financing of Illegal Organisations.

Bank of Baroda said has been taking steps to ensure compliance with the Federal Decree Law no (20) of 2018 and has been communicating with the Central Bank. Additionally, it has been undertaking measures to improve compliance, the bank said. Under these circumstances, it is informed to the public that the bank has engaged with the relevant stakeholders and is exploring all necessary options available with the bank, including the option to file an appeal against the financial sanctions that have been imposed, it added.

The announcement was made after market hours on Monday, 25 January 2021. Shares of Bank of Baroda rose 0.68% to settle at Rs 73.80 on Monday, 25 January 2021.

Bank of Baroda is a public sector bank. The Government of India held 71.60% stake in the bank as on 30 September 2020.

Europe and Eurasia

[Netherlands] Calm returns to Dutch cities after riots, with police out in force (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 AM, Toby Sterling, Neutral]

With shops boarded up and riot police out in force, it was relatively calm in Dutch cities on Tuesday night after three days of violence during which nearly 500 people were detained.

In several cities, including the capital Amsterdam, some businesses closed early and emergency ordinances were in place to give law enforcement greater powers to respond to the rioting, which was prompted by a nighttime curfew to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

On Tuesday when the 9 p.m. curfew went into effect, rowdy crowds of youths gathered in Amsterdam and Hilversum, but were broken up without incident. In Rotterdam, 17 people were detained for violating social distancing regulations.

That was in stark contrast to Monday night, when rioting rocked cities across the country and more than 180 people were arrested for burning vehicles, stone throwing and widespread looting.

"This was truly a different picture to yesterday," National Police chief Willem Woelders told Dutch public television. "We did not need to use the riot police or other forces."

But he cautioned that one night of quiet did not mean they could let down their guard. "We have to remain alert," Woelders said.

The Netherlands' first curfew since World War Two was imposed on Saturday despite weeks of falling infections, after the National Institute for Health (RIVM) said a faster-spreading variant first found in England was causing a third of cases.

A hospital in Rotterdam had warned visitors of patients to stay away, after rioters tried to attack hospitals in various cities.

A nationwide appeal issued by law enforcement on Tuesday evening called on parents to keep teenagers indoors, warning they could end up with a criminal record and forced to pay for damage to cars, shops or property.

In Amsterdam on Monday, groups of youths threw fireworks, broke store windows and attacked a police truck, but were broken up by a massive police presence.

Ten police officers were injured in Rotterdam, where 60 rioters were detained overnight after widespread looting and destruction in the city centre, a police spokeswoman said. Supermarkets in the port city were emptied, while bins and vehicles were set ablaze.

Two photographers were hurt after being targeted by rock-throwing gangs, one in Amsterdam and another in the nearby town of Haarlem, police said.

Coronavirus infections have been falling in recent weeks, with the number of new cases down by 8% over the past week. A little under 4,000 new infections were reported on Tuesday, the smallest daily increase since Nov. 24.

But the RIVM said the situation in the Netherlands was still very serious as a result of the more contagious variant that has caused a massive surge in cases in Britain.

Schools and non-essential shops across the Netherlands have been shut since mid-December. Bars and restaurants were closed two months earlier. The country's death toll stands at 13,664, with 956,867 infections to date.

[Portugal] Portugal urged to seek international help as COVID-19 deaths hit record (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:09 PM Victoria Waldersee, Catarina Demony, Miguel Pereira and Pedro Nunes, 5304K, Neutral]

Portugal's government was urged to transfer COVID-19 patients abroad on Tuesday as deaths hit a record high and the oxygen supply system of a large hospital near Lisbon partly failed from overuse.

COVID-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours reached a record 291, bringing the total to 653,878 cases and 11,012 deaths. It now has world's the highest seven-day average of cases and deaths per million people, according to ourworldindata.org.

A hospital in the Amadora municipality had to transfer 48 of its patients to other health units in the capital late on Tuesday as oxygen pressure was not enough for the large number of patients, it said in a statement.

"There was a need to relieve oxygen consumption so patients were transferred," said the hospital, which has nearly no empty beds left. "They were never in danger."

News reports showed ambulances rushing through the hospital's main gates to get the patients, while some left escorted by police.

Twenty patients were transferred to Lisbon's largest hospital, Santa Maria, which on Tuesday installed two fridges outside its morgue with the capacity for 30 bodies, its spokesman said.

Across Portugal's health service, 830 intensive care beds have been allocated to COVID-19 patients out of a total of 1,200, the health ministry said. Currently 765 COVID-19 patients are in intensive care units.

As public hospitals struggle to cope, large military health units in Lisbon and Porto stepped in to help. The one in the capital doubled its capacity to tackle the surge. Two cafeterias have been turned into wards.

The local council in Torres Vedras, a municipality near Lisbon which is facing major coronavirus outbreaks in several care homes, urged the foreign ministry to seek international help.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa told a news conference there was no need to create "alarm" about the idea of international aid but added: "We know there is the availability of friendly countries to help."

Health Minister Marta Temido told broadcaster RTP on Monday: "The Portuguese government is triggering all mechanisms available, including in the international framework, to ensure it provides the best assistance to patients."

But Temido noted that patient transfers were constrained by Portugal's location on the westernmost edge of Europe, especially as other EU nations are also under pressure.

[Serbia] Serbia to spend 2.5 billion euros to aid recovery from coronavirus crisis - president (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 4:47 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Serbia plans to spend about 2.5 billion euros (\$3.04 billion) in loans and subsidies to businesses and payments to pensioners and other citizens to help them cope with the economic impact of the coronavirus, President Aleksandar Vucic said on Tuesday.

The package envisions an array of measures including payments amounting to 50% of the minimum wage to employees of micro and small enterprises and state guarantees for borrowing in commercial banks.

"We want to tremendously ... bolster the private sector," Vucic told state-run RTS TV.

The state also plans to distribute 30 euros to every adult Serbian citizen or about 5 million people in May and November, and an additional 50 euros to every pensioner, Vucic said.

"There will be three (such) gifts for pensioners, and two for all adult citizens," Vucic said.

Vucic said the total public debt this year would not exceed 61% of gross domestic product (GDP).

Serbia's 2021 budget sees economic growth at 6%, following an estimated contraction of around 1% in 2020. It also sets the 2021 deficit at 3%. The International Monetary Fund

sees Serbia's economy growing by 5% in 2021, after a forecast 1.5% contraction last year.

Last March, Serbia allocated 5.5 billion euros to help businesses and citizen cope with the crisis. Additional expenditures increased the deficit in 2020 to around 8.9%, up from the previously planned 0.3%.

In Serbia, which has a population of 7 million, 3,924 people have died from COVID-19 and 387,206 fell ill with it. The country, which has started a nationwide inoculation programme, registered a new strain of the coronavirus last week.

[United Kingdom] Britain Faces Up to Painful Lessons After 100,000 Covid Deaths (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 5:31 PM, Tim Ross and Emily Ashton, Neutral]

It's almost exactly a year since coronavirus made its first impression on the U.K., when a government-chartered plane flew 83 British passengers home from Wuhan to a wind-swept military airfield west of London.

Now in the midst of its third national lockdown, the U.K. has hit the devastating milestone of 100,000 deaths from Covid-19.

For Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the country he leads, it's a sobering moment. Fatalities are now already five times the 20,000 figure Johnson's chief scientist once said would represent a "good outcome" for Britain.

"It's hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," Johnson said in a televised press conference on Tuesday evening. "I am deeply sorry for every life that has been lost."

While Johnson vowed to learn lessons once the virus is beaten, he offered few answers to the question of what went so wrong over the past year. How did the U.K. end up with the fifth highest death toll in the world, despite its state-run health service, renowned scientists, and the natural advantages of an island for managing the flow of people?

More pressingly, the prime minister faces questions over the future. The government will need to make the most of the head start it has gained over other European nations in vaccinating its people.

The political stakes are high: Johnson will be put to the test in local and mayoral elections later this year. He also faces a showdown with Scottish nationalists, and with his own increasingly jumpy Conservative colleagues over the restrictions.

The choices confronting Johnson on when to turn off state support for businesses, and how to pay the bill, will determine what kind of an economy is left to revive once the lockdown wreckage has been cleared away.

Much of it will come back to the premier's character. In private his colleagues remark how he makes fewer jokes nowadays, and has struck a more serious tone since the start of the year. Stung by criticism that he has over-promised on when the crisis will be over, he's now more cautious about a timetable for easing the lockdown.

Last March, Johnson breezily brushed aside the threat, openly joking about shaking hands

with staff in a hospital treating Covid patients. In April, he was admitted into intensive care with the virus.

Major events such as soccer matches and the Cheltenham horse races went ahead, and the premier – a libertarian and a crowd pleaser by nature – was reluctant to curtail individual freedoms.

Officials argued that locking down the country too soon would be a mistake – people would get tired of the restrictions and start to break the rules, they said. Yet at the same time, countries such as Australia and New Zealand – which are now almost Covid-free with comparatively low fatalities – quarantined all passengers on arrival.

"We just dithered too much and didn't take it seriously enough at the beginning," Professor Lawrence Young, a virologist at Warwick Medical School, said in an interview. Other countries "went in hard, they went in fast, they didn't prevaricate."

One of the biggest problems was the U.K.'s inability to run an effective test and trace operation to keep track of infections and ensure patients didn't spread the disease.

In the early months of the pandemic, the U.K. had to give up trying to test people because its maximum testing capacity of just 2,000 a day was nowhere near enough as the virus spread exponentially.

A 22 billion-pound (\$30.2 billion) mission eventually ramped up the testing and tracing capacity to rates that are among the highest in the world. Earlier this month, 665,000 Covid tests were carried out in one day in the U.K. But the essential follow-up process of tracing contacts didn't reach enough people to be effective, although it has improved.

British officials insist they simply did not know how helpful mask-wearing would be – even though other countries adopted the policy far earlier. Nor was it clear to the government how easily coronavirus spread among people without symptoms.

Even as the death toll passed 100,000, a policy to isolate arriving passengers in hotels was still being debated.

Almost 3.7 million people in the U.K. have tested positive – the fifth largest caseload worldwide and about half a million more than France. The U.K. has suffered almost twice the number of deaths as Spain and Germany. According to analysis from Johns Hopkins University, the U.K. ranks fourth in deaths per 100,000 people in the population of any country.

In the early days, Britain won praise from economists for its comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting the economy.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak rolled out about 300 billion pounds of measures to support companies and prop up workers' wages, while the Bank of England slashed interest rates to a record low 0.1% and doubled its bond-buying program.

None of this stopped the U.K. suffering its deepest recession since the Great Frost of 1709. Recent figures show the British economy is the worst performing among the Group of

Seven nations, with output still about 9% below its pre-Covid level. Most economists and the Bank of England expect the economy to contract again.

Now Johnson is pinning his hopes on an ambitious vaccination program. A successful rollout would give the government a shot at political redemption, too, and so far the progress has been rapid.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines," Jonathan Ball, professor of molecular virology at Nottingham University, told Bloomberg. With a comprehensive test-and-trace program, and assuming the vaccines are as effective as they seem, "you would hope we would be in a much better position next winter."

The U.K. has administered 6.85 million first doses of the AstraZeneca Plc and Pfizer Inc. vaccine. That puts it largely on target to offer the shot to 15 million of the most vulnerable people by mid-February, and far ahead of the U.S. and Europe. Only Israel and the United Arab Emirates have deployed more vaccines per capita.

But there's another cloud hanging over Britain's battle with the pandemic: Its own mutant strain of the virus.

The recent wave of hospitalizations has been linked to the new variant B.1.1.7 of coronavirus that appears to spread more quickly and officials now believe may be more than 30% deadlier than the original strain. On Tuesday, the government's medical experts warned the death toll will continue to mount and will only start to fall slowly.

Johnson, when pressed on the government's missteps at Tuesday's press conference, said: "We truly did everything we could, and continue to do everything we can, to minimize loss of life and to minimize suffering."

Chaand Nagpaul, from the British Medical Association, said the U.K. "must not and will not forget this day" and needs to understand what went wrong. "As the first nation in Europe to have reached this dark death toll, we must learn the lessons of this tragedy."

[United Kingdom] AstraZeneca Faces EU Grilling Over Delays to Vaccine Delivery (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:00 PM, Nikos Chrysoloras, Jonathan Stearns, 6400K, Neutral] The European Union will seek on Wednesday to resolve a standoff with AstraZeneca Plc that threatens to keep its vaccination program in the slow lane, trigger a global spat over coronavirus shots, and prolong damaging lockdowns.

Officials representing national governments and the European Commission will demand the company meets its vaccine commitment. They will also seek "fundamental" information from executives about delivery plans for the first half of the year, according to an official with knowledge of the situation. The call is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Brussels time.

The Anglo-Swedish drugmaker warned late last week of delays at a manufacturing plant in Belgium, which would deal a further blow to the continent's already-sluggish vaccination campaign. The EU responded with fury, vowing to monitor exports of shots, with Germany even signaling support for imposing limits on sales outside the EU.

The risk is that protectionist measures could spark retaliation by other countries, disrupting the flow of life-saving shots just as billions of people wait to be inoculated against a virus that's wreaked havoc on the global economy. Getting people vaccinated is the main hurdle to efforts by European governments to restore normality after 2020's record recession.

Astra Chief Executive Pascal Soriot pushed back against the EU in a newspaper interview published late Tuesday, saying the company signed a so-called best-effort agreement that doesn't specify a quantity. That's because EU insisted on receiving the vaccine about the same time as the U.K. despite putting in its order three months later.

But Soriot added that once Astra gets regulatory approval in Europe -- expected within days -- it will ship at least 3 million doses immediately, with a target of 17 million by February.

"Would I like to do better? Of course," he said in comments published in La Repubblica and other newspapers. "But, you know, if we deliver in February what we are planning to deliver, it's not a small volume. We are planning to deliver millions."

With so much riding on vaccinations, the bloc's executive arm is due to present its export monitoring proposal by the end of this week. An Astra spokesperson said the company hasn't diverted any products from the Europe supply chain.

Shots by Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. are already authorized for use, though the EU lags way behind the U.S. and the U.K. in terms of the share of its population inoculated, according to Bloomberg's global vaccine tracker.

Governments across the bloc are eager to dodge the blame for the underwhelming performance, which could force them to prolong lockdowns. The measures have crippled industries from aviation to hospitality, and are causing growing discontent.

The Netherlands is facing its worst civil unrest in four decades because of its curfew, Belgium has banned everyone from entering or leaving the country without compelling reason as of Wednesday, while Ireland's strict lockdown is set to be extended until at least March 5.

European Medicines Agency Executive Director Emer Cooke said the organization is working with manufacturers to address vaccine delays and expressed hope the shortfalls will be "short-lived." Speaking to a European Parliament committee on Tuesday, Cooke also repeated the EMA's goal to decide this week on approval for Astra's vaccine.

While the details of the EU's plans to monitor exports have yet to be revealed, the World Trade Organization would not hinder the bloc from implementing temporary vaccine export restrictions or even an outright ban.

The WTO rulebook contains a specific exemption that allows nations to temporarily impose such measures to prevent or relieve critical shortages of essential products. There's also a broad exemption if the actions are deemed necessary to protect human life and health.

Protectionist measures could add another layer of complexity for pharmaceutical companies struggling to satisfy an unprecedented demand for vaccines.

But EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis dismissed the idea that a notification system for vaccine exports would limit them in any way.

"We're not planning to impose an export ban or export restrictions," Dombrovskis told reporters on Tuesday in Brussels. "Primarily it's a matter of transparency on the deliveries."

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia set for 10th day of no local COVID-19 cases (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 7:46 PM, Swati Pandey, 5304K, Neutral]

Australia is on track for a 10th day of no new local COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, allowing its most populous state of New South Wales (NSW) to relax coronavirus restrictions after controlling a fast-spreading cluster.

NSW has recorded no local cases for 10 days after low single digit numbers earlier in January. Victoria state, which is hosting the Australia Open tennis tournament, has gone three weeks without a local case.

Other states and territories which have mostly been COVID-free, some for months, will report daily case numbers later on Wednesday, but are expected to report zero local infections.

Australia's success in curbing small outbreaks, with a total 22,000 local cases since March 2020 and 909 deaths, comes at a time when global coronavirus cases are edging towards 100 million with the death toll surpassing 2 million.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklien announced coronavirus restrictions would be eased from Friday, including rules around mask wearing and allowing more people in house parties, weddings, funerals and places of worship.

The restrictions had kicked in late last year to successfully curb virus clusters in Sydney's northern beaches and western suburbs. The outbreaks saw other states and territories close borders or restrict travel from NSW.

Berejiklien hinted that restrictions would be eased further in two weeks if there were no further cases, adding she was "striking the right balance" between economic growth and virus control.

"They both go hand in hand, you can't have an open economy unless you make sure you get the health settings right," she said, while urging Sydneysiders to come out and get tested for COVID-19 even for the "mildest of symptoms".

Despite its relative success in handling the pandemic, Australia's international borders will likely remain shut to non-citizens this year although there may be exclusive travel arrangements called "bubbles" with its South Pacific neighbours.

Australia had a one-way "travel bubble" with New Zealand where those arriving from the latter didn't have to quarantine, but that arrangement was suspended for 72 hours on Monday after a highly infectious coronavirus strain was found in New Zealand.

New Zealand reported a third day of zero cases on Wednesday, allaying fears of a fresh outbreak.

[Australia] Australia's Inflation Exceeds Estimates as Recovery Builds (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/26/2021 9:03 PM, Michael Heath, 6400K, Neutral]

Australia's consumer prices rose faster than forecast in the final three months of last year as the government amended funding to various stimulus programs amid an economy regaining momentum.

The consumer price index advanced 0.9% from the third quarter, underpinned by increases in tobacco excise, compared with economists' estimates of a 0.7% gain, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed Wednesday. Annual CPI also beat forecasts, similarly rising by 0.9% versus an estimated 0.7%.

"Since the June quarter fall of 0.3%, the increase in annual inflation largely reflects the unwinding of free child care and higher petrol prices," said Michelle Marquardt, head of Prices Statistics at the ABS. "The rise in demand for new dwellings is reflected in higher building approvals for houses and a record value for housing loan commitments."

Australian prices have been hit by cross-currents caused by fallout from Covid-19 and governments ending some support programs in favor of stimulus for areas like housing. The Reserve Bank of Australia has adjusted its inflation framework to allow the economy to run a little hotter. It doesn't intend to tighten borrowing costs until inflation is sustainably within the 2-3% target.

Achieving that will require strong wage growth stemming from a tighter labor market, outcomes unlikely to be in the offing any time soon with the jobless rate at 6.6%.

Today's report showed the quarterly trimmed-mean gauge of inflation matched estimates, rising 0.4%, and slightly exceeded them on an annual basis, advancing 1.2% versus a forecast 1.1%

The weighted-median gauge, another core measure, advanced 0.5% from the third quarter for an annual increase of 1.4%, compared with forecast increases of 0.4% and 1.2%, respectively.

Separate data released at the same time as inflation, showed business conditions -- measuring hiring, sales and profits -- surged in December to the highest level since 2018. The employment index surged, reflecting Australia's strengthening labor market that has seen unemployment fall to 6.6% in December from a high of 7.5% in July. The economy entered the pandemic with a jobless rate of 5.1% in February 2020.

"The rise in the employment index is very encouraging," said Alan Oster, chief economist at National Australia Bank Ltd. that runs the monthly business sentiment survey. "The gains have been seen across all states and notably, Victoria appears to have caught up with New South Wales and Queensland -- great news for the state that has suffered an extended lockdown."

Yet, business confidence slid in the period amid a flareup in Covid outbreaks in Sydney and

elsewhere.

Today's inflation report showed tradables prices, which are typically impacted by the currency and global factors, fell 0.4% in the fourth quarter from the previous three months. Non-tradables, which are largely affected by domestic variables like utilities and rents, advanced 1.5% due to the scheduled hike in the tobacco excise.

Other details in the report include:

There was a rise of 6.3% in domestic holiday travel and accommodation following the re-opening of state and territory borders and the peak summer holiday period. International holiday travel and accommodation was again imputed

The most significant price fall was in electricity, down 7.5% after Western Australia provided a one-time credit to households

The Reserve Bank of Australia meets for the first time this year on Tuesday and is expected to keep its cash rate and yield target to 0.10%. It is also set to maintain its A\$100 billion (\$77.4 billion) quantitative easing program.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Appoints Local Lawyer to Prosecute Jimmy Lai (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/27/2021 12:56 AM, Chloe Lo, 6400K, Neutral]

Hong Kong's Department of Justice hired Senior Counsel Benjamin Yu to replace British lawyer David Perry in prosecuting media tycoon and activist Jimmy Lai, local media including Apple Daily and Now TV reported, citing unnamed sources.

[Indonesia] Indonesian volcano unleashes river of lava in new eruption (AP)
AP [1/27/2021 1:08 AM, Slamet Riyadi, 13480K, Neutral]

Indonesia's most active volcano erupted Wednesday with a river of lava and searing gas clouds flowing 1,500 meters (4,900 feet) down its slopes.

It was the Mount Merapi's longest lava flow since authorities raised the volatile volcano's danger level in November, said Hanik Humaida, the head of Yogyakarta's Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Center.

The alert level was being maintained for now at the second-highest level, she said, and people should stay out of the existing 5-kilometer (3-mile) danger zone around the crater as the local administrations in Central Java and Yogyakarta provinces closely monitor the situation.

The 2,968-meter (9,737-foot) volcano is on the densely populated island of Java and near the ancient city of Yogyakarta. It is the most active of dozens of Indonesian volcanoes and has repeatedly erupted with lava and gas clouds recently.

Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed 347 people.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of seismic fault lines around the ocean.

[Japan] Japan's COVID crisis reawakens deflation fears as cash hoarding returns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:00 AM, Leika Kihara, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

A spike in coronavirus infections in Japan is driving local households to do what they have always done in times of crisis: spend less and save more, stoking fears of a deeper retail recession and grinding deflation.

Fifty-year-old Hiromi Suzuki is doing just that having quit her job at a Tokyo novelty store in December after the pandemic hit sales.

"I try not to spend money," she said, walking her dog in the city. "Since I don't go out much, I don't buy cosmetics or clothes any more."

Suzuki's case exemplifies the trouble Japan faces as COVID state of emergency measures were reinstated in January, hitting spending on services, which makes up one-third of total consumption.

High-frequency data shows consumption began to falter even before January's state of emergency, catching policymakers off guard and forcing both the government and central bank to cut their assessments on private spending.

"Service spending is slumping sharply," Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda said last week. "We don't expect Japan to return to deflation. But we need to keep vigilant on price moves given very high uncertainty over the outlook."

While demand for some goods is holding up, analysts warn it won't be strong enough to offset deflationary pressures caused by weak service spending.

"The economy will be in bad shape in the first quarter, which would push prices down," said Hiroshi Ugai, chief Japan economist at JPMorgan Securities. "Prices will essentially remain weak this year."

Despite a rebound after initial lockdown measures were lifted in May, consumption later lost momentum, falling more than 4% in November from January's pre-pandemic levels, according to a BOJ gauge of spending.

That was mostly due to a 10% slump in services spending, which contrasted with an 8% gain in durable goods consumption.

The pain continued in December with consumption falling 11.5% from a year ago, mainly due to a 20% drop in services spending, according to research firm Nowcast and credit card company JCB.

Spending on eat-outs fell 36% and while dining at "izakaya" bars slumped 47%, both marking the biggest declines since May.

A government request for restaurants to close early means retailers are now feeling the pinch.

Monterozza, which runs several popular pub chains, said it was closing 61 of its 337

locations in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, beverage giant Suntory Holdings CEO Takeshi Niinami predicts that 30% of all bars and restaurants might fail in the coming months.

The average number of customers per restaurant fell 60% in January from a year ago, data by booking site TableCheck showed, faster than a 23% slide in November and a 40% drop in December.

And Japanese households aren't spending much on other items either. A BOJ survey showed more than 70% of households don't plan to change the amount spent to enjoy time at home.

Instead, they are hoarding cash in banks, as they have done through every crisis including the two decades of debilitating deflation that haunted Japan until 2013.

Bank deposits surged 9.3% in December from a year earlier to a record 803 trillion yen (\$7.74 trillion).

Households are expected to have saved 45.8 trillion yen, or 8.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), last year, up from 14.5 trillion in 2019, estimates by HSBC showed.

"Unless fears over the pandemic are wiped out, the money piling up in bank accounts won't be spent," said Toshihiro Nagahama, chief economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute.

The BOJ has downplayed concerns about a return to deflation, arguing that companies aren't cutting prices across the board as doing so would eat already thin margins.

Nonetheless, core consumer prices fell 1.0% in December from a year earlier, marking the biggest drop in a decade, a sign weak demand is heightening deflationary pressures.

Even fashion group Fast Retailing Co Ltd, seen as resilient due to brisk demand for its casual at-home attire, plans to lower prices of discount brand GU's spring and summer collections.

While Fast Retailing is wary of cutting prices at its main Uniqlo brand, discounts are planned in coming months to reduce inventory, CFO Takeshi Okazaki said earlier this month.

The hope is that more households will act like Noriko Indo, an 81-year-old pensioner who keeps a tight rein on spending but occasionally indulges in luxuries like tuna sashimi, her favourite food.

"Once the pandemic is over, I'd like to splurge on travel and shop like crazy at a department store," she said.

[Japan] Newly found Fukushima plant contamination may delay cleanup (AP)

AP [1/27/2021 12:33 AM, Mari Yamaguchi, 2164K, Negative]

A draft investigation report into the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, adopted by Japanese nuclear regulators Wednesday, says it has detected dangerously high levels of radioactive contamination at two of the three reactors, adding to concerns about

decommissioning challenges.

The interim report said data collected by investigators showed that the sealing plugs sitting atop the No. 2 and 3 reactor containment vessels were as fatally contaminated as nuclear fuel debris that had melted and fell to the bottom of the reactors following the March 2011 tsunami and earthquake.

The experts said the bottom of the sealed plug, a triple-layered concrete disc-shaped lid 12 meters (39 feet) in diameter sitting atop the primary containment vessel, is coated with high levels of radioactive Cesium 137.

The No. 1 reactor lid was less contaminated, presumably because the plug was slightly knocked out of place and disfigured due to the impact of the hydrogen explosion, the report said.

The experts measured radiation levels at multiple locations inside the three reactor buildings, and examined how radioactive materials moved and safety equipment functioned during the accident. They also said venting attempt at Unit 2 to prevent reactor damage never worked, and that safety measures and equipment designs still need to be examined.

The lid contamination does not affect the environment as the containment vessels are enclosed inside the reactor buildings. The report did not give further details about if or how the lid contamination would affect the decommissioning progress.

Nuclear Regulation Commission Chairman Toyoshi Fuketa called the findings "extremely serious" and said they would make melted fuel removal "more difficult." He said figuring out how to remove the lids would be a major challenge.

Removing an estimated 900 tons of melted fuel debris from three reactors is a daunting task expected to take decades, and officials have not been able to describe exactly when or how it may end.

The Fukushima plant was to start removing melted fuel debris from Unit 2, the first of three reactors, later this year ahead of the 10th anniversary of the accident. But in December, plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the government announced a delay until 2022. They said the development of a robotic arm for the debris removal — a joint project with Britain — has been delayed due to the pandemic.

Under the current plan, a remote-controlled robotic arm will be inserted from the side of the reactor to reach the molten fuel mixed with melted parts and concrete floor of the reactor. Eventually the lids also would have to be removed, but their contamination is a major setback.

The team of experts entered areas inside the three reactors that were previously highly contaminated and inaccessible after radiation levels came down significantly. They're seeking data and evidence before they get lost in the cleanup.

Massive radiation from the reactors has caused some 160,000 people to evacuate from around the plant. Tens of thousands are still unable to return home.

[Japan] Olympics: IOC's Pound wants to examine reasons for Japan public's concerns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:50 PM, Chris Gallagher, 5304K, Negative]

Senior International Olympic Committee member Dick Pound says he wants to examine the reasons behind the Japanese public's concerns about hosting the Games this summer after recent polls showed around 80% were opposed to the event going ahead in July.

While much of Japan is under a state of emergency due to a third wave of COVID-19 infections, organisers and the government have vowed to forge ahead with preparations for the postponed Games, which are due to run from July 23 to Aug. 8.

"I know there are those in Japan who question holding the event," Pound told the Asahi newspaper in comments published Wednesday in Japanese.

"Together I would like to scrutinise the reasons and respond. Are they are worried about a large number athletes and others from overseas spreading the coronavirus, are they against the cost, or maybe there are people who just don't like the Olympics."

Pound also appealed for people to take the feelings of athletes into consideration, noting that they had put in many years of work in order to step onto sport's biggest stage.

He said the decision on whether the Games go ahead this summer must be made by May at the latest and stressed that another delay was not possible.

"Personally, I think it's possible to hold the Games this summer," Pound said. "Several vaccines have been developed and people in the world are being vaccinated. The risk of coronavirus infection can be reduced."

[Japan] Japan PM apologizes after lawmakers' night club outings (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:52 PM, Yoshifumi Takemoto, Kaori Kaneko, 5304K, Neutral]

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga apologised on Wednesday after lawmakers from his ruling coalition visited night clubs despite his government's call for people to avoid unnecessary outings to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The news is another headache for Suga whose approval rating has tumbled due to dissatisfaction with his handling of the pandemic, which critics have called too slow and inconsistent.

"I'm terribly sorry that this happened when we are asking people not to eat out after 8 p.m. and to avoid non-essential, non-urgent outings," Suga told parliament.

"Each lawmaker should behave to gain the public's understanding."

Japan this month issued a state of emergency in Tokyo and other areas to tame a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases. The measure includes a request for restaurants and bars to close by 8 p.m. although there are currently no penalties for non-compliance.

"My behaviour was careless at a time when we are asking people to be patient," Jun Matsumoto, a senior lawmaker from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters.

Matsumoto was speaking following a Daily Shincho magazine report that he had visited two night clubs in Tokyo's posh Ginza district after dining at an Italian restaurant last Monday.

Kiyohiko Toyama, a lawmaker from the coalition's junior partner Komeito, also apologised after tabloid Shukan Bunshun reported he had visited a high-end night club in Ginza until late last Friday.

Twitter users voiced their frustration.

"It is just a matter of time before public anger explodes. I don't want a blanket cash-payout of 100,000 yen (\$965), I want them to quit!" wrote one user.

"They are really stupid. Don't they think about what they are doing and how the public sees them? If they don't, they are unqualified to represent the public," said another.

[Singapore] Singapore faces talent crunch as tech giants scale up (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 12:48 AM, Chen Lin, Aradhana Aravindan, 11261K, Neutral]

At least three recruiters approach Singapore-based software engineer Xiao Yuguang every day with job offers.

Demand for Xiao's skills has soared since he graduated in 2014 with a computer engineering degree but now he just ignores the offers, having recently joined TikTok owner Bytedance after several years with Southeast Asia's Grab.

"It's not like I want to change jobs frequently," said Xiao.

Singapore is aiming to become a regional tech hub but faces a severe talent crunch as more firms move in, interviews with more than a dozen recruiters, companies and workers show.

China's Tencent, Bytedance, U.S.-based Zoom Video Communications and unicorn Grab and Sea Ltd are among companies expanding in Singapore, fueling a war for tech talent in the city-state, where the jobless rate had reached a 16-year high due to a coronavirus-induced recession.

"Certain member companies have been expanding their operations ... and looking to hire more data scientists, more coders," said Lei Hsien-Hsien, chief executive officer at the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

"So the demand is very strong but the supply is relatively weak, which then slows down some of the expansion plans."

Up to 500 new tech vacancies are posted each week on job sites, according to NodeFlair, which is helping hire for Bytedance and Sea's e-commerce business Shopee.

The information communications sector would need another 60,000 professionals over the next three years, cabinet minister Vivian Balakrishnan said in June.

In response to a Reuters query on the figure, the communications ministry said in mid-September there were nearly 10,000 tech-related job postings on a government-run careers

portal and another 6,800 jobs and traineeships would be created by June 2021 through industry partnerships.

Border curbs due to the coronavirus and tighter foreign worker policies are delaying overseas hiring, exacerbating the shortage, some headhunters said. Some tech professionals can command pay increases of up to 30% when they switch jobs.

"It's not sustainable," said Daljit Sall at recruitment firm Randstad, who expects salaries to even out once borders reopen and as the talent pool develops.

The government has been re-training thousands of people with tech skills while the intake for IT courses at Singapore colleges has risen 17% over the past three years to about 7,600 for the 2020 academic year.

Singapore, an Asian base for many multinationals and banks, has for years had a tight labour market and the country of 5.7 million people does not yet have the capacity to quickly match the tech skills and experience the industry needs.

"There are a lot of tech companies coming in and it's a small island," said Raagulan Pathy, head of enterprise Asia Pacific at Zoom, which plans to hire hundreds of engineers.

"The simple maths of it means that at a certain point you are going to run out of talent," said Pathy, adding that Singapore's programme for allocating visas for foreign workers was pragmatic.

For now, the labour crunch does not seem to be putting anyone off. The Economic Development Board (EDB) is getting healthy interest from global tech companies keen to expand operations, it said.

"We constantly seek to ensure companies who set up here have access to a strong Singaporean workforce complemented by a diverse foreign workforce," said Managing Director Chng Kai Fong.

The EDB has various programmes to bridge the skills shortage including one that helps tech companies bring in talent from overseas and a new work visa for top-tier tech executives.

The work visa, launched this month, has prompted many enquiries, recruiters said. But it is limited to 500 participants and has strict criteria.

Companies are finding ways to cope. Shopping rewards platform ShopBack resorts to reallocating workload to its existing engineers to meet new demands.

Fintech firm Nium's 250-strong engineering team is in India. Its 13-strong team of product managers is being doubled in Singapore, CEO Prajit Nanu said.

Singapore's open economy was hit hard by the pandemic, airlines and tourism in particular, and former Singapore Airlines flight attendant Alloysius Lee is thankful he decided to study data analytics.

"I feel lucky ... I spent the past few years learning and picking up a new skill," said Lee, 32.

[South Korea] South Korea Now Seeks Ways to Live With Low Birth Rate (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 11:41 PM, Jiyeun Lee, 6400K, Neutral]

After years of failed efforts to boost the birth rate, South Korea's government now says it will focus some of its energy on learning to live with population decline, rather than simply trying to halt it.

The government has "found it will be difficult to reverse the low birth rate trend in the near future" and so will be adopting a "two track" approach of encouraging births, while finding ways to adjust the economy to a shrinking and aging population, according to a joint statement from 11 ministries on Wednesday.

South Korea's fertility rate of 0.92 was the world's lowest in 2019, and likely fell further last year as the uncertainty of the pandemic discouraged young people from marrying and having children. The population fell for the first time ever last year, while more people opting to live alone pushed the number of households to a record.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the negative shock from declining population by causing career breaks for women facing increased childcare burdens and disrupting the inflow of foreign workers," the statement said.

The statement announced the launch of a third government task force on population policy since President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, and outlined its goals.

To minimize the economic hit from a declining population, the government plans to encourage more women and seniors to stay in the labor force, while also seeking ways to accept more foreign workers.

The government will develop a new visa to attract researchers and other professionals from overseas, while also providing ways to help retired people open their own businesses.

Korea will also strengthen "legal and institutional support" for non-traditional types of families such as those based on common-law marriage or non-married couples with babies. Various residential and safety measures for single households will be considered.

The government plans to release detailed measures from May.

[South Korea] South Korea reports big jump in COVID-19 cases on outbreaks in Christian schools (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 10:00 PM, Sangmi Cha, 5304K, Negative]

South Korean authorities were scrambling on Wednesday to contain coronavirus outbreaks centred around Christian schools as the country reported a jump in infections, dampening hopes of a speedy exit from a third wave of the pandemic.

A total of 297 COVID-19 cases had been traced to six churches and mission schools run by a Christian organisation, senior health official Yoon Tae-ho told a briefing.

More than 100 cases were confirmed overnight among people linked to a church and its mission school in Gwangju, about 270 kms (168 miles) south of Seoul, officials said. Another 171 cases had been linked to an affiliated school in the city of Daejeon since Jan. 17.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) said the Daejeon mission school outbreak appeared to have been spreading for some time before it was detected.

The Christian organisation responsible for the facilities, International Mission, was ordered to test everyone linked to 32 of its 40 schools and churches around the country.

The group apologised for not taking early measures to prevent the outbreak. It said that while some infected students may have been asymptomatic it had also failed to require students with cold-like symptoms to get tested.

"We deeply apologise for not responding earlier and for thinking the students could have had a cold when a student first developed fever," it said in a statement.

The organisation said it would submit a full list of students and staff in its schools nationwide.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun called on people affiliated with the affected facilities to get tested.

"The key is speed. I call on the authorities and local governments to make all-out efforts to identify related facilities and prevent further transmission," Chung told a government briefing.

The KDCA reported 559 new cases as of midnight on Tuesday, up from 354 a day before, bringing the national tally to 76,429 infections with 1,378 deaths.

South Korea had managed to keep the virus under control thanks to aggressive testing and contact-tracing, but a third wave that broke out late last year has proven more difficult to contain.

The KDCA has said 45.4% of infections in the country over the past year were caused by cluster infections emerging from specific close-knit groups. Religious facilities were the main source of such clusters.

[Taiwan] Taiwanese man fined \$35K for breaking home quarantine 7 times (CNN)

CNN [1/27/2021 12:13 AM, Lilit Marcus, 7975K, Negative]

A Taiwanese man has been fined \$1 million New Taiwan Dollars (\$35,000) for repeatedly breaking his home quarantine.

The unnamed man, who lives in Taichung in central Taiwan, was doing a home quarantine in his apartment building after returning from a business trip to mainland China and violated it at least seven times, according to local media.

According to TTV News, the man left his apartment building seven times in just three days

to go shopping, get his car fixed and more. He reportedly got into an altercation with one of his neighbors when they confronted him about leaving his home during quarantine.

The Taichung local government confirmed that the man returned from the mainland on January 21. Taiwan's regulations require quarantining for 14 days.

Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen denounced it as "a serious offense" and added that the man "must be given severe punishment."

In addition to the fine -- which is the highest one yet levied in Taiwan -- the man will have to pay \$3,000 NTD (\$107) per day for the cost of his quarantine. The Taiwanese government has been compensating quarantiners \$1,000 NTD (\$35) per day, which he will no longer be eligible for.

Taiwan has been one of the biggest success stories in the world when it comes to containing the coronavirus. The self-governed island closed its border early on, implemented mass testing and contact tracing and has strictly enforced quarantines.

In December 2020, a migrant worker from the Philippines was fined \$3,500 for violating his quarantine for a grand total of eight seconds. The man, who was quarantining in a government-sanctioned hotel, briefly stepped into the hallway outside his room and was captured on CCTV.

As a result of these tight controls, the island of 23 million people has recorded just 889 coronavirus cases and seven deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[Thailand] Thailand reports 819 new virus cases, 1 additional death (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:42 PM, Chayut Setboonsarng, Panarat Thepgumpanat, 5304K, Negative]

Thailand on Wednesday reported 819 new coronavirus cases, taking its total infections to 15,465.

One additional death was reported, bringing total fatalities to 76. More than 700 of the new infections were in Samut Sakhon province, the epicentre of the most recent outbreak, the COVID-19 taskforce said at a briefing.

[Vietnam] Vietnam's Communist Party chief nominated for re-election: state media (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 11:49 PM, James Pearson, 5304K, Neutral]

Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief and the architect of the country's anti-corruption campaign, has been nominated to serve a rare third term, a Party official said on Wednesday, according to state media.

On Monday, over 1,600 party delegates began nine days of meetings, mostly behind closed doors, at a five-yearly congress. The meetings will pick a new leadership team, aiming to bolster Vietnam's ongoing economic success - and the legitimacy of the Party's rule.

Trong, 76, who is also Vietnam's president, had been widely tipped to continue as party chief despite health issues and old age - which should technically disqualify him for the

position, although "special case" exceptions are granted.

"According to the Party Charter, members of the Central Committee up for re-election must not be over 60 and re-elected Politburo members must be under 65," delegate Hau A Lenh told the state-run Tien Phong newspaper.

"The General Secretary and President is one of the overage nominees and a special case," Lenh told Tien Phong.

Vietnam has no paramount ruler and is officially led by four 'pillars': the chief of its Communist Party, a president, a prime minister and the National Assembly chair.

While ascent to the highest levels of Vietnamese politics is governed by party regulations, in reality the highly secretive process revolves around building consensus and vying for control of the powerful, decision-making Politburo.

That means exceptions to rules are often granted - especially if consensus on the top candidates cannot be reached.

Since coming to power in 2011, Trong has become one of Vietnam's most powerful figures in decades after he emerged on top in a power struggle against the former prime minister at the last congress in 2016.

His "blazing furnace" crackdown on corruption, as it has been officially dubbed, has seen dozens of high level officials - including one politburo member - sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

Government critics have described the crackdown as politically motivated.

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Taliban backs vaccine drive as Afghan government receives \$112 million funding pledge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Hamid Shalizi and Abdul Qadir Sediqi, Neutral]

The Taliban militant movement gave its backing on Tuesday for a coronavirus vaccination campaign in Afghanistan that has received a \$112 million pledge from the World Health Organization's COVAX programme. The immunisation drive will have to take place amid relentless violence in the country despite the government and the Taliban insurgents opening peace talks in September.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters that the group would "support and facilitate" the vaccination drive conducted via health centres. Officials believe the insurgents would not target vaccine teams as they would not be going door-to-door.

Announcing the funding, an Afghan health official said the programme would cover the 20% of the country's 38 million population. The COVAX programme is a global scheme to vaccinate people in poor and middle income countries against the coronavirus. It aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20% of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and middle-income countries.

Afghanistan's Deputy Health Minister Waheed Majroh told journalists it was going to take six months to get the vaccines but authorities were in discussions to get them earlier.

Afghanistan has registered 54,854 infections and 2,390 deaths - but experts say cases are significantly underreported due to low testing and limited access to medical facilities in the war-torn country. Aside from COVAX, the country has also received a pledge of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from India, Dr Ghulam Dastagir Nazari, head of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation at Afghanistan's health ministry, told Reuters.

"The AstraZeneca brand which is manufactured in India will arrive soon in Afghanistan," Nazari said, adding that the government was only concerned about the WHO approval of the vaccine and that the pre-qualification process has already started.

An Indian government source confirmed that 500,000 doses had been set aside for Afghanistan and another official said the first batch of vaccines would land in February, though Kabul had not yet adopted the protocols to administer them.

The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have also said they would finance vaccines for another 20% of the population by the end of 2022, health ministry spokeswoman Masouma Jafari told Reuters.

[India] Farmers back at protest camp after deep challenge to PM Modi (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 10:32 PM, Ashok Sharma, 2164K, Negative]

Tens of thousands of farmers who stormed the historic Red Fort on India's Republic Day were again camped outside the capital Wednesday after the most volatile day of their two-month standoff left one protester dead and more than 80 police officers injured.

The protests demanding the repeal of new agricultural laws have grown into a rebellion that is rattling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. On Tuesday, more than 10,000 tractors and thousands more people on foot or horseback tried to advance into the capital, shoving aside barricades and buses blocking their path and at times met by police using tear gas and water cannons.

Their brief takeover of the 17th century fort, which was the palace of Mughal emperors, played out live Indian news channels. The farmers, some carrying ceremonial swords, ropes and sticks, overwhelmed police. In a profoundly symbolic challenge to Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, the protesters who stormed Red Fort hoisted a Sikh religious flag.

"The situation is normal now. The protesters have left the streets of the capital," New Delhi police officer Anto Alphonse said Wednesday morning.

Most New Delhi roads were reopened to vehicles by midnight Tuesday, hours after the protest organizer, Samyukt Kisan Morcha, or United Farmers' Front, called off the tractor march and accused two outside groups of sabotage by infiltrating their otherwise peaceful movement.

"Even if it was a sabotage, we can't escape responsibility," said Yogendra Yadav, a protest leader.

He didn't say whether the protesters will go ahead with another march planned for Feb. 1 when the Modi government is scheduled to present the annual budget in Parliament.

Yadav said frustration had built up among the protesting farmers and "how do you control it if the government is not serious about what they have been demanding for two months."

Tuesday's escalation overshadowed Republic Day celebrations, including the annual military parade that was already scaled back because of the coronavirus pandemic. Authorities shut some metro train stations, and mobile internet service was suspended in some parts of the capital, a frequent tactic of the government to thwart protests.

The farmers — many of them Sikhs from Punjab and Haryana states — tried to march into New Delhi in November but were stopped by police. Since then, unfazed by the winter cold and frequent rains, they have hunkered down at the edge of the city and threatened to besiege it if the farm laws are not repealed.

Neeraja Choudhury, a political analyst, said the government failed to anticipate what was coming and prepare for it adequately. "If the farmers are agitated overall India, you can't dismiss the protests as some opposition inciting the farmers."

The police statement said 86 personnel injured in clashes with farmers. Several of them jumped into a deep dry drain in the fort area to escape the protesters who outnumbered them at several places.

Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

Police said the protesting farmers broke away from the approved protest routes and resorted to "violence and vandalism." Eight buses and 17 private vehicles were damaged, said police, who filed four cases over vandalism against the protesters.

The government insists the agricultural laws passed by Parliament in September will benefit farmers and boost production through private investment. But the farmers fear it will turn agricultural corporate and leave them behind. The government has offered to suspend the laws for 18 months, but the farmers want nothing less than a full repeal.

Since returning to power for a second term, Modi's government has been rocked by several convulsions. The pandemic sent India's already-teetering economy into its first-ever recession, social strife has widened and his government has been questioned over its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2019, the year that witnessed the first major protests against his administration, a diverse coalition of groups rallied against a contentious new citizenship law that they said discriminated against Muslims.

"The government on the national security front has failed. I think this government seems to be quite blinkered on the kind of security challenges that it is creating for itself by alienating minority communities, Muslims and Sikhs," said Arti Jerath, a political analyst.

India is predominantly Hindu while Muslims comprise 14% and Sikhs nearly 2% of its nearly 1.4 billion people.

[India] Protesters supporting Indian farmers demonstrate in NYC (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 6:03 PM, David R. Martin and Deepti Hajela, 13480K, Neutral]

Demonstrators showing solidarity with protesting farmers in India rallied Tuesday outside the Indian consulate in New York, some honking their car horns while others stood in the snowy weather, yelling slogans and waving flags.

The crowd gathered on Manhattan's east side on India's Republic Day, a national holiday that honors the anniversary of India's constitution coming into effect. Indian farmers have been protesting for nearly two months over new laws they say will benefit big corporations and wreak havoc on the earnings of smaller scale farmers. They want the laws withdrawn.

Drivers sounded their horns as they went by the blocked-off street where the consulate is located, off Fifth Avenue near Central Park. Those who stood on the street chanted against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with one sign reading: "Someone stop their boy Modi before he eats us too! Save the farmers!"

Parminder Singh came from Chicago, saying his family in the Indian state of Punjab was "getting hurt by the law that's made by the Indian government right now."

Many of the farmers are Sikhs from the northern state and neighboring Haryana, which are major agricultural producers. Among those at the New York march were protesters calling for the establishment of Khalistan, a separate homeland for members of the religion, and carrying flags emblazoned with the name of the secessionist movement.

"We are here today to challenge India, who has carried out the genocide of Sikhs and enacted farm bills to carry out the homicide of the Sikhs and the farmers of Punjab and Haryana," said Bakhshish Singh Sandhu, of Philadelphia, the president of the Council of Khalistan. "And so we are here to challenge India under their constitution. It has attacked the Sikh identity and Sikh religious institutions."

Organizers said other protests were planned at consulates in other parts of the country on Tuesday. Other solidarity protests have been held around the United States in the last two months, in cities including Houston and San Francisco.

In India on Republic Day, tens of thousands of farmers stormed the historic Red Fort in New Delhi, breaking through police barricades and shocking onlookers watching as it was broadcast on live television.

Indian authorities used tear gas, water cannons and placed large trucks and buses in roads to try to hold back crowd, including rows upon rows of tractors. Police said one protester died after his tractor overturned, but farmers said he was shot. Several bloodied protesters could be seen in television footage.

[India] Security tight at Red Fort after clashes with farmers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/27/2021 1:20 AM, Alasdair Pal, Neutral]

Hundreds of police guarded the historic Red Fort in the heart of the Indian capital on Wednesday following violent clashes between farmers and authorities in which one person was killed and at least 80 injured. Tens of thousands of farmers, protesting against reforms of the agriculture sector that they say benefit big private buyers at the expense of growers, have been camped on the outskirts of the city for two months to demand the reforms be scrapped.

A protest parade of tractors around the city's fringes to coincide with Tuesday's Republic Day celebrations turned to chaos when some farmers diverged from agreed routes, breaking through barricades and clashing with police, who used tear gas and batons to try to restrain them.

Some farmers carrying ceremonial swords reached as far as the Red Fort, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi gives an annual speech, where they scaled outer walls and hoisted flags.

By Tuesday evening police, had removed protesters from the fort complex but a heavy security presence remained on Wednesday. Agriculture employs about half of India's population of 1.3 billion, and unrest among an estimated 150 million landowning farmers is one of the biggest tests Modi has faced since coming to power in 2014.

While the protests are beginning to undermine support for Modi in the countryside, he retains a solid majority in parliament and his government has shown no sign of bending to farmers' demands.

The government says agriculture reform will open up new opportunities for farmers.

Police said they had registered 22 cases against protesters including "rioting, damage to public property and assault on public servants with deadly weapons" in several locations. Roads across the New Delhi remained closed while extra police, including paramilitary were at protest sites on the outskirts.

The government blocked the internet in some parts of the capital, and mobile speeds were low.

Tuesday's violence was condemned by Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the group of farm unions organising the protests, who they have promised to press on with their sit-ins on the outskirts.

"They have to listen to us," said protester Baljeet Singh.

[India] India Has Plenty of Coronavirus Vaccines But Few Takers (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/26/2021 4:00 PM, Bibhudatta Pradhan and Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 6400K, Neutral]

Most of the world is struggling to secure enough vaccines to inoculate their populations. India has the opposite problem: Plenty of shots, but a shortage of people willing to take them.

As India rolls out one of the world's biggest inoculation programs, some health-care and

other frontline workers are hesitating because of safety concerns over a vaccine that has yet to complete phase III trials. As of Monday, only about 56% of people eligible to get the shot have stepped forward in a nation with the world's second-worst Covid-19 outbreak.

Unless the inoculation rate significantly increases, India will fall far short of its target of inoculating 300 million people -- or about a quarter of the population -- by July. That will setback global efforts to contain the virus and snuff out optimism that a recovery is taking root in an economy set for its biggest annual contraction in records going back to 1952.

"At least 40% of doctors here are unsure and want to wait," said Vinod Kumar, a resident doctor at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences of Patna, in the eastern state of Bihar. "Carrying out a vaccine trial on us when India is short of doctors, health-care workers doesn't make sense."

While vaccine hesitancy has surfaced in places like Japan and Brazil, and China's candidates have also faced questions over data, the scale of the problem in India is by far the biggest. The major difficulties facing places like the U.S. and Europe are mostly due to scarce supplies rather than vaccine acceptance, and some countries are turning to New Delhi for help: India says it can produce 500 million shots per month for export, and countries such as the U.K., Belgium and Saudi Arabia have sought to buy them.

India's domestic vaccine program administers one of two shots: the AstraZeneca Plc vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India Ltd., or the Covaxin shot developed by Bharat Biotech International Ltd., a private company based in Hyderabad. India's approval of the Bharat Biotech shot, which was developed with government-backed research groups, was met with widespread criticism from scientists because of the lack of complete data.

"Many in our institute aren't comfortable with Covaxin because we don't know how effective it is," said Adarsh Pratap Singh, a member of the Resident Doctors Association at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. "To build trust among people the government must come out with the data, evidence of the trials, and encourage free and fair discussions."

Both the company and the government have defended the shot. Krishna Ella, Bharat Biotech's chairman, said earlier this month that the company carried out "200% honest clinical trials" and had a track record of producing 16 safe and effective vaccines. "Indian scientists want to bash on other Indian scientists," he said while dismissing criticisms in a virtual press briefing on Jan. 4. A spokesperson for Bharat Biotech didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

The government, meanwhile, has urged health-care workers to get vaccinated. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan has sent tweets imploring "#CoronaWarriors" to take the shot, while dispelling rumors that the vaccine could cause infertility. A federal health ministry spokesperson wasn't immediately available to comment.

"Vaccine hesitancy among health workers should end -- I am pleading on behalf of the government, that please adopt it, because no one knows how this pandemic will take shape in the future," said V. K. Paul, a member of the planning body Niti Aayog, noting that he's taken the Covaxin shot without any adverse effects.

"These two vaccines are safe," he said. "We have a system to track it and if there is an unusual signal, it will be responded to the way it should be."

Initial apprehension and doubt at the start of any vaccine rollout is normal, said Preeti Sudan, former secretary at the federal ministry of health and family welfare. India was successful in its polio immunization program, she noted, after launching a massive campaign involving children, mothers and opinion leaders to help dispel vaccine fears.

Low Vaccination Rates

As of Monday, India distributed about 2 million shots nationwide. In Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in central India, about 75% of enrolled people turned up for vaccination on Jan. 21, while two days later in Bihar the rate was much lower at 51.6%. On Jan. 19, about 55% of those eligible were vaccinated in Rajasthan and 54% in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, according to state government data.

While the hesitation relates to both vaccines, people are most wary about Bharat Biotech's Covaxin. In Tamil Nadu, for example, only 23.5% of those allocated Covaxin received the shots on Jan. 19, compared with 56% for the Serum Institute's Covishield, the data show.

Nirmalya Mohapatra, a doctor at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi, plans to "wait and watch" for more clarity before getting vaccinated with Bharat Biotech's shot. If given a choice now, he would opt for Covishield, as its efficacy data was reviewed by leading medical journals.

"Covaxin could turn out to be a better vaccine in the future," said Mohapatra, who is also vice president of the resident doctors' association at the hospital. "But for now there is some apprehension because of the lack of a complete trial."

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Biden DOJ rescinds Trump 'zero tolerance' policy that resulted in family separations at border (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/26/2021 8:00 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 394K, Neutral]

The Biden administration rescinded a Trump-era policy that had forced migrant families to be separated at the border so that the adults could be prosecuted for unlawful entry.

The Justice Department's top official issued a memo Tuesday that walked back the "zero tolerance" policy, which called for federal law enforcement personnel on the border to refer for prosecution all adults, including those who arrived with children, who illegally crossed the border. The policy only applied to first-time offenders.

"Consistent with this longstanding principle of making individualized assessments in criminal cases, I am rescinding — effective immediately — the policy directive," acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson wrote in a memo shared with the Washington Examiner.

A DOJ spokesperson said in an email that the policy "was inconsistent with the department's longstanding principle that we exercise judgment and make individualized

assessments in criminal cases," adding that the move "restores to prosecutors their traditional discretion to make charging decisions based on a careful review of the particular facts and circumstances of individual immigration cases."

The DOJ's move was largely symbolic as the policy has not been enforced since the summer of 2018, but it represents the new administration doing away with its predecessor's tough tone toward immigrants and vows to consider prosecutions on a case-by-case basis. The policy has technically remained on the books even though it was not being followed.

In an effort to deter illegal migration occurring between the Mexican border and Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, the Trump administration in early 2017 rolled out the zero tolerance policy in several regions of the 2,000-mile-long boundary. In April 2018, former President Donald Trump's first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, announced that the Department of Homeland Security would be prosecuting all adults who illegally crossed the southern border in an attempt to deter more people from coming, in light of the increased migration of Central Americans. Because children cannot be held in jail, adults with children had not been prosecuted until then, but the influx of families prompted the government to take the new harsh action. Separated children were to be transferred to the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, then placed with sponsors in the United States. The initiative was stopped in June 2018 following outcry from Democrats and Republicans.

As of January, an estimated 5,400 families who were separated at the border and more than 600 children have yet to be reunited more than two years later, according to a court filing submitted earlier this month.

A Justice Department audit released this month concluded that Sessions and then-Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein advanced the plan knowing that it would prompt thousands of children to be temporarily orphaned. The DOJ leaders wrongly assumed the courts and federal agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the HHS, would be able to accommodate and track each member of the divided families.

President Biden said last week that his Justice Department will conduct a thorough investigation into the implementation of the policy.

Any person arrested after illegally crossing the U.S. border from Mexico or Canada is taken into custody by Border Patrol, which is part of Customs and Border Protection, a DHS agency. He or she is then transferred from a regional Border Patrol holding station to ICE for longer detention, or immediately removed from the country by CBP, or in the case of children who arrive without parents or are separated from a parent by the government, turned over to ORR, the federal agency that cares for unaccompanied children.

DHS and CBP did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

[Brazil] Brazil approaches 9 million COVID-19 cases, death toll at 218,878 (Reuters)
Reuters [1/26/2021 4:19 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Brazil had 61,963 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,214 deaths from COVID-19, the Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

The South American country has now registered 8,933,356 cases since the pandemic

began, while the official death toll has risen to 218,878, according to ministry data, in the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil's Health Minister under investigation over health crisis in Amazonas (CNN)

CNN [1/26/2021 5:00 PM, Marcia Reverdosa and Tara John, 7975K, Neutral]

A Brazilian court has approved an investigation into Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, after oxygen shortages collapsed the health system of Manaus, capital city of Amazonas state, last week.

Federal Supreme Court Judge Ricardo Lewandowski greenlit the investigation on Monday. Pazuello now has five days to provide testimony to the federal police.

It is alleged that the Ministry of Health was alerted to the city's looming shortages of oxygen -- often critical for treating severe cases of Covid-19 -- on January 8, but only took action on January 12, according to a request for a probe sent to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) by the political party Cidadania.

Pazuello himself visited Manaus on January 11, and the federal government subsequently sent supplemental oxygen to the city, but neither were enough to prevent a crisis. Hospitals in Amazonas soon ran out of oxygen, and on January 14 and 15 at least 29 patients died due to the shortages, according to an ongoing investigation.

"The reality is that there's a lower supply of oxygen," Pazuello acknowledged later. "Not an interruption, but a lower supply of oxygen."

Pazuello and other top federal officials have defended the government's reaction to warnings of a crisis in Manaus, arguing that no one could have predicted the rapid spike in Covid-19 cases that strained hospitals.

"This was a situation completely unknown to everyone. It was too fast," Pazuello told a press conference on Tuesday.

He added that the city's health crisis was compounded by a number of issues including "oxygen problems, lack of professionals, low number of beds."

A separate report by Brazil's Solicitor General has also alleged that during Pazuello's trip to Manaus, he encouraged medical professionals to adopt an "early treatment" kit against Covid-19 that includes unproven drugs including hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. The health minister has since denied doing this.

House of Representatives President Rodrigo Maia told a Monday press conference that he believed Pazuello had "committed a crime" not only by letting the state's health system collapse, but by promoting ineffective treatments for the city's surging Covid-19 cases and by failing to obtain vaccines for the country earlier.

Mounting criticism

The growing criticism of Pazuello's pandemic response in Manaus follows a recent investigation by CNN Brazil, which found that top executive Abert Bourla sent a letter to the Brazilian government in September offering 70 million doses of its vaccine, which was co-

developed with German pharmaceutical company BioNTech.

But Pfizer received no response from the government, according to CNN Brazil.

Pazuello responded to a request for comment by CNN Brazil with an open letter saying that the purchase would only have frustrated Brazilians, as just 2 million doses would have been delivered in the first quarter of 2021.

He also said that certain conditions of the sale were unacceptable to the Brazilian government -- including a payment guarantee and an agreement that contractual issues be tried in a US court -- and accused the drugmaker of "creating embarrassing situations for the Brazilian Government, which will not accept market impositions -- which will also not be accepted by Brazilians."

Brazil began its vaccination campaign last Saturday, but the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro has faced mounting criticism for its mishandling of the pandemic.

Since the pandemic began, the country ratcheted more than 8.8 million infections and the second highest number of deaths in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

[Cuba] Cuba's coronavirus cases, death toll surge (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 6:29 PM, Sarah Marsh and Nelson Acosta, 5304K, Neutral]

Cuba's death toll from the coronavirus reached 200 on Tuesday, with authorities reporting nearly as many deaths so far in January as in the six previous months combined, due to an unprecedented acceleration in infections.

While Cuba had just a tenth of the world average of daily infections per capita for much of last year, cases have surged since the government reopened borders in November and loosened restrictions on daily life.

The health ministry has reported 54 deaths in January so far compared with 60 in the previous six months, with daily infection numbers hitting new records on a regular basis - 786 on Tuesday - and cases spread throughout the Caribbean island nation.

Like many countries, Cuba suffered the rebound in cases after opening borders without requiring inbound travelers to provide negative coronavirus test results.

That coincided with a diminished sense of risk as its outbreak appeared successfully contained, not helped by authorities holding rallies celebrating Cuba's socialist values, analysts say.

Many Cubans who live in hard-hit countries like the United States and Mexico flew over to celebrate Christmas and New Year with their relatives on the island, failing to quarantine properly and infecting locals.

The government has since brought down infections from abroad by requiring travelers to present negative coronavirus test results. And it has imposed a new lockdown with schools and restaurants closed throughout much of the island and cultural and sporting activities once more suspended.

The government has also promised to vaccinate the entire population this year with one of its four vaccine candidates that are currently undergoing early and mid-phase trials.

Some Cubans, though, worry whether and when any of those candidates will prove successful. And many complain how hard it is to practice social distancing when they must queue up for hours to shop for scarce goods due to the economic crisis.

[Cuba] Cuba detects presence of South African variant of the coronavirus (Miami Herald)

Miami Herald [1/26/2021 3:11 AM, Nora Gámez Torres, 381K, Neutral]

Cuba has detected a potentially more contagious COVID-19 variant, just as the island experiences its biggest uptick in new cases since the start of the pandemic, health authorities said.

Cuban officials reported the presence of the "501Y.V2" variant first detected in South Africa to the Americas' branch of the World Health Organization in an epidemiological report released Tuesday.

The Pan American Health Organization noted that preliminary studies indicate the new strain is associated with a higher viral load, indicating "a potential for greater transmissibility." However, the variant has not been linked to an increased risk of death.

Virus cases have risen significantly in Cuba in recent weeks after months of low infection rates. The island closed its airports to international travelers for nearly eight months and imposed a strict quarantine. But a severe economic downturn compelled authorities to reopen before the holidays. The government blames travelers for the new outbreak. Now in the country's main cities, Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Santa Clara, the virus is spreading mostly among Cuban residents.

Dr. María Guadalupe Guzmán, a top researcher at the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine, known by its Spanish acronym, IPK, said last Friday that the South African strain was detected in an asymptomatic traveler from that country.

The traveler and his close contacts complied with the island's required quarantine, she said. But she wouldn't rule out the possibility it had entered through other travelers as well.

"With the data we have, we cannot say that it is widespread in the country," Guzmán said. "But we cannot rule it out because a high number of cases are being reported daily."

On Tuesday, the country broke a new record for daily COVID-19 cases, with 786 reported. Since Jan. 2, there have been 50 deaths and 9,404 new cases, a figure that represents 43% of all infections since the government began publishing data in March last year.

Although it is still too early to link the circulation of this variant with the increase in cases in Cuba, epidemiologist Carlos Espinal said it is "very important that the IPK remains transparent and shows the results of studies about the dispersion of this variant in Cuba."

"This is another threat that the United States will have to think about — restricting travel to Cuba, most likely in the near future," said Espinal, who heads the Global Health Consortium at Florida International University.

The United States already requires all international travelers to show a negative COVID-19

test upon arrival. It has also suspended the entry of people from South Africa, the United Kingdom and Brazil to contain new, more contagious mutations identified in those countries.

Guzmán and other Cuban public health officials have attributed the spike in cases to the relaxation of preventive measures and a decrease in the perception of risk among the population.

"Irresponsibility cannot continue to prevail in our country," Dr. Francisco Durán García, Cuba's national director of epidemiology, said Tuesday, adding that citizens should play their part. "We cannot achieve [better results] only based on fines and other measures."

The Cuban government reduced the number of international flights arriving on the island, imposed mandatory testing for all travelers, and ordered a strict quarantine in Havana and other cities in recent weeks. Still, the virus does not appear to be abating.

In Havana, there were 344 new cases reported this Tuesday. According to official figures, more than 9,000 people are currently admitted to hospitals nationwide, most of them confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19.

While health authorities have published data on the number of PCR tests performed to diagnose the virus — recording a little more than 1.8 million administered since March 2020 — they have not said how many samples of the virus they regularly analyze to detect the circulation of new strains.

Espinosa said that the presence of new variants requires establishing a program to sequence the virus and determine which mutations circulate in a country.

The South African variant worries experts because some preliminary studies suggest it might be more resistant to treatments and vaccines.

"The South African strain is the great threat," Espinal said. "The risk is that if left unchecked, it could jeopardize the effectiveness of the vaccination program because it has been able to change its protein structure and partially evade the antibody response that vaccines produce."

[Mexico] Mexico near approving Russian vaccine, with little data (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 9:43 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Positive]

Mexico said Tuesday it is close to granting approval for Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, with lots of spy drama but little public data available.

The approval process described by Hugo López-Gatell, Mexico's assistant health secretary, sounded like a Cold War spy thriller, and may not foment confidence in the shot.

López-Gatell said a Mexican technical committee on new medications has recommended approving the vaccine, adding only "some details" were lacking for COFEPRIS, the government medical safety commission, to give the final go-ahead.

"The technical part, the main part of COFEPRIS, particularly the committee on new medications, has given a favorable recommendation to authorize, that is to say, the crucial part has been solved," López-Gatell said.

But he also said that despite weeks of conversations with Russian officials, he could not get his hands on the results of Phase 3 trials, which are normally published in international medical journals and indicate how effective the vaccine is.

Russian officials have given conflicting accounts, upping the supposed effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine to higher levels every time a U.S. vaccine reports its results.

Desperate, but with no published data, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ordered López-Gatell to fly to Argentina, which has already approved and is using Sputnik V, to see what information he could get.

The Argentines had to call the Russians to get permission to share the closely-guarded files with the Mexicans.

Within a day or two, the Argentines gave López-Gatell a copy of Phase 3 trial results and other data on the Sputnik vaccine which he spirited back to Mexico, and then submitted to Mexican regulatory officials.

But the plot got thicker, because even though the technical committee has given a favorable recommendation, it turns out the application hasn't even been formally filed yet. Mexican authorities apparently can't grant authorization based on what may be a sheaf of photocopies from who-knows-where obtained through back channels.

López-Gatell said Mexico is currently trying to get the Russians — who don't appear to have much experience dealing with regulatory agencies — to designate a person to formally submit what appears to be an already-approved application.

Mexico has been unable to get more than about 750,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, about half the amount it needs just to inoculate just front-line health workers. Mexico had pinned its hopes on China's CanSino vaccine.

But delays in approving that shot drove López Obrador to speak directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday to try to get the Russian vaccine, the first doses of which are expected to arrive next week.

It is unclear whether the lack of public data might affect Mexicans' willingness to get vaccinated, without knowing how effective or safe the Russian shot is.

"I do want vaccines, but ones that have been approved by the World Health Organization and the international scientific community," wrote Sen. Lilly Téllez of the conservative opposition National Action Party. "The Russian vaccine does not have that yet."

"It is the cheap vaccine, that is why the government chose it," Téllez wrote in her Twitter account.

[Mexico] Mexico may approve Russian COVID-19 vaccine within days, health official says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:05 PM, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Positive]

Mexico Deputy Health Minister Hugo Lopez-Gatell said on Tuesday that emergency use of

Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine should be authorized within days, after a favorable recommendation by a committee within Mexico's health regulator.

The exact arrival of the first shipments of Sputnik V to Mexico had not been confirmed, Lopez-Gatell said, though officials said earlier in the day that 200,000 doses could arrive next week.

[Peru] Peru volunteer in Sinopharm vaccine trial dies of COVID-19 pneumonia, university says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 9:12 PM, Marco Aquino, 5304K, Negative]

A volunteer in the local Peruvian trial of a coronavirus vaccine produced by China's Sinopharm Group Co Ltd has died from COVID-19-related pneumonia, the university carrying out the trial said on Tuesday.

Cayetano Heredia University, which is involved with the study, said on the instructions of the Peruvian health regulator it had unblinded the volunteer's participation in the trial and determined she had received the placebo rather than the vaccine.

"It is important to stipulate that the death of the participant is not related to the vaccine since she received the placebo, and we will therefore report to the relevant regulatory and ethics bodies and maintain the course of this phase three study," the university said in a statement.

German Malaga, chief researcher at the Cayetano Heredia University, told Reuters by phone that the deceased volunteer had suffered from diabetes.

Malaga said the trial investigators had so far issued two doses of either the vaccine or placebo to 12,000 volunteers and were now following their responses.

"It is developing without any setbacks. These things can happen, COVID is a disease that causes deaths," he said.

"Our message to the volunteers is to take care of themselves because we don't know if they have the vaccine or the placebo," he added.

The university said in its statement that the volunteer had received "all the necessary care to treat this disease and her complications" and was "fighting for her life" for more than a week.

"It is a painful loss for which we extend our condolences to her family," the statement added.

In December, Peru temporarily suspended trials of the Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine due to a "serious adverse event" that occurred with a volunteer in the study.

In Brazil, clinical trials of China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine were suspended before being allowed to resume late last year due to a study subject's death that was registered in Sao Paulo as a suicide.

[Venezuela] Maduro's 'miracle' treatment for COVID-19 draws skeptics (AP)

AP [1/26/2021 5:36 PM, Scott Smith and Jorge Rueda, Neutral]

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro appears to be counting on yet another "miracle" to save his citizens from COVID-19, promoting a secretive solution with no published scientific evidence he claims will conquer the new coronavirus.

"Ten drops under the tongue every four hours and the miracle is done," Maduro said in a televised appearance on Sunday. "It's a powerful antiviral, very powerful, that neutralizes the coronavirus."

But his government has released no evidence. He even kept secret the name of the "brilliant Venezuelan mind" behind it, saying he needed to protect them. Scientists at home and abroad remained skeptical. The local National Academy of Medicine said it appeared to be derived from the common herb thyme.

It's not the first time the Venezuelan leader has promoted a cure. In October, he notified the Pan American Health Organization that Venezuelan scientists discovered a molecule that nullifies the replication capacity of the new coronavirus. He hasn't spoken of that development since. He's also promoted a special herbal tea he claims can fend off the virus and other ailments.

Other leaders too have embraced solutions dismissed by scientific studies. Former U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro both stubbornly touted an antimalarial drug despite repeated studies finding it ineffective and possibly dangerous.

The new coronavirus hasn't hit Venezuela as hard as other South American countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, though many experts say that's likely because sanctions against Maduro's government have sharply limited travel there.

Maduro said the treatment, which he called carvativir, has been under testing for nine months among Venezuelans ill with the coronavirus. He said he plans to distribute it nationwide and to other nations as well.

Dr. David Boulware, professor of medicine and an infectious diseases physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School, noted the lack of scientific evidence.

"This is, just as with other things, people trying to sell, you know, some magic beans as the solution to a complex problem," Boulware told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "This would be great if it worked, but I would like to see the data."

Venezuela's National Academy of Medicine said "it's prudent ... to wait for more data from the carvativir tests according to international protocols."

Since October, Venezuela has been part of trials for the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia, a staunch ally of Maduro's government. Venezuela signed a contract in December with Russia to buy the vaccine, but inoculations aren't scheduled to start until April.

Rosa Colina, 58, said authorities should do more to get Venezuelans vaccinated sooner. She said colleagues at a local health center and some neighbors have died from COVID-19.

"I'm of the mind that we need the vaccine, not these droplets," she said. "I think that won't have any effect."

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Mali] Mali says joint military operation with France kills 100 jihadists (Reuters)

Reuters [1/26/2021 5:34 PM, Tiemoko Diallo, 5304K, Negative]

Malian and French forces killed around 100 jihadists and took another 20 captive in a joint operation this January in central Mali, the West African nation's army said in a statement on Tuesday.

It said the campaign lasted from Jan. 2 to Jan. 20 and targeted areas bordering Burkina Faso, where militant groups with links to al Qaeda and Islamic State control large tracts of the remote desert and regularly carry out raids on the army and civilians.

"The purpose of this operation was to force the enemy out of its areas of refuge," the army said.

France has more than 5,100 military personnel based in the West African Sahel region to help counter the militants, an involvement that is facing increased opposition at home and from some quarters in Mali.

Network TV News Coverage

Antony Blinken Confirmed by Senate as Secretary of State (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/26/2021 7:04 PM, Staff]

President Biden's cabinet is coming into focus. Biden's choice for top diplomat won bipartisan support. Antony Blinken has been confirmed as Secretary of State by the Senate with a 78-22 vote. Blinken is a veteran of the State Department, previously serving as the Deputy Secretary of State and Deputy National Security Advisor during the Obama administration. President Biden plans to reorient US foreign policy, already rejoining the Paris climate accord and signaling an openness to reengaging with Iran and the international nuclear deal. The Senate's Homeland Security Committee also advanced Alejandro Mayorkas to lead the Department of Homeland Security, setting up a full Senate vote.

Anger Rises in Europe as Governments Impose New Restrictions, Vaccines in Short Supply (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/26/2021 6:44 PM, Staff]

Anger is rising in Europe as governments impose new COVID restrictions and vaccines are in short supply. All of this is happening as new strains of the coronavirus sweep through the continent. Strict new lockdown measures triggered a backlash of violence that has spread across the Netherlands for three nights running, angered at a night time curfew drawing rioters on the street. Countries across Europe are resorting to extreme measures to stem the spread of the mutant variant of the virus first identified in the UK, far more contagious than the old coronavirus. Tonight, the UK became the first European country to surpass 100,000 deaths. "It is hard to compute the sorrow contained in that grim statistic," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Germany has now made surgical grade masks mandatory on

public transport and in stores. In rising tensions, the scramble for vaccines has taken a nationalistic tone. After British-based AstraZeneca said they'd fall short of delivering millions of doses to Europe, the EU threatened to block Pfizer vaccine doses to Britain. The European Commission President demanded a return of the billions provided for vaccine development. The EU is expected to approve the AstraZeneca vaccine this Friday. Britain has vaccinated far more people than any other European country. The vaccine is also awaiting FDA approval in the US.

Experts Warn US Must Do More to Help Vaccinate the World's Poorest Countries (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:49 PM, Staff]

Even with a vaccine struggle at home, experts warn that the US has to do more outside of its borders because if people in other countries aren't vaccinated, the pandemic could drag on for years. Dr. Larry Brilliant, a leading epidemiologist, said, "We are the indispensable country when it comes to global health, and the absence of our leadership has been felt in every state and every country." He noted that the CDC led America and the rest of the world out of every other pandemic we've faced. He says we play a critical role in helping the world access the vaccine. "Until everyone in the world is safe, no one is safe. This is a pandemic. If one country is left unvaccinated, this disease will bounce back and forth and all of us will be constantly besieged by it," Dr. Brilliant said. Canada has already pre-ordered enough vaccine to inoculate every citizen nearly 6 times and the US has enough purchase options to vaccinate nearly 5 times the population, leaving much of the world scrambling. Australia, Canada, and Japan have less than 1% of the coronavirus cases, but they have more doses than all of Latin America and the Caribbean which has close to 20%. That's where COVAX comes in, a coalition of world health organizations, including the World Health Organization and UNICEF. The starting goal is to buy 2 billion doses of vaccine to inoculate 20% in the world's poorest countries.

[Russia] Biden Holds First Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Raises Many Concerns (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/26/2021 6:45 PM, Staff]

President Biden had his first call with Vladimir Putin, signaling a very different tone than what we saw from former President Trump. Biden is pushing for an extension of a nuclear arms control agreement that caps the size of their arsenals. He also addressed the poisoning and detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. His arrest sparked all of the protests across Russia. The President told reporters he's very concerned about this. He also raised the issue of Russia hacking federal agencies and reports about Moscow placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. The issue of election interference also came up during the phone call.

[Russia] Biden Speaks to Putin in First Phone Call Since Becoming President, Raises Several Concerns (NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt)

(B) NBC Nightly News With Lester Holt [1/26/2021 6:41 PM, Staff]

President Biden spoke with Vladimir Putin today, the first the two men have spoken since Biden took office. The White House says Biden raised several issues in that call, including the massive hack of US government agencies and companies that the US blames on Russia. Reports of Russia placing bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan as well as interference in the 2020 US election, and the poisoning of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Tomorrow, Biden is expected to sign a number of executive actions, specifically on

climate change, including making it a national security priority as well as convening a climate summit of world leaders on Earth Day 2021.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration seeks to buy 200 million more vaccine doses, to be delivered through the summer

Nearly all GOP senators vote against impeachment trial for Trump, signaling likely acquittal

Biden signs orders on racial equity, and civil rights groups press for more

Pentagon restricted commander of D.C. Guard ahead of Capitol riot

The New York Times

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Pledges to Speed Flow of Vaccines to the States

Republicans Rally Against Impeachment Trial, Signaling Likely Acquittal for Trump

Capitol Police Detail Failures During Pro-Trump Assault

Biden Will Restore U.S. Relations With Palestinians, Reversing Trump Cutoff

The Wall Street Journal

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Administration to Buy Enough Doses to Vaccinate Most Americans by End of Summer

Most Republican Senators Reject Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment

Ahead of Riot, Capitol Police Knew of Potential for Violence, Official Says

Biden Has First Call With Russian President Vladimir Putin

New Playbook for Covid-19 Protection Emerges After Year of Study, Missteps

ABC News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden plans to purchase 200M more doses of Pfizer, Moderna COVID-19 vaccines

Antony Blinken confirmed as Biden's secretary of state

Biden to reopen 'Obamacare' markets for COVID-19 relief

CBS News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration boosting weekly supply of COVID-19 vaccine doses to states

Acting Capitol Police chief apologizes for security failures

Europe employs extreme measures to curb spread of mutant COVID strain

CNN

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden sets bold timeline for a return to normal life

Biden confronts Putin over several issues in first call, White House says

WHO team in Wuhan to begin long-delayed coronavirus investigation after clearing quarantine

Fox News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Forty-five Republicans vote against proceeding with Senate impeachment trial
Biden chief of staff backs teachers unions refusing to reopen schools, says they're not
'overruling' science
Mexico's president took commercial flight hours before COVID-19 diagnosis: report

NBC News

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden administration orders 200 million more doses of Covid-19 vaccines
Most Senate Republicans declare Trump's trial unconstitutional. Here's what that means for
conviction.
Global Covid cases top 100 million as new strains emerge

Washington Schedule**President**

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

9:00 AM In-Town Pool Call Time

9:30 AM The President and The Vice President receive the President's Daily Brief

12:15 PM Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, and National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy

1:30 PM The President delivers remarks and signs executive actions on tackling climate change, creating jobs, and restoring scientific integrity; The Vice President also attends

Vice President

The White House

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

10:30 a.m.: Convene and begin a period of morning business.

10:00 AM – SD-G50/VTC Foreign Relations

Hearings to examine the nomination of Linda Thomas-Greenfield, of Louisiana, to be the Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, with the rank and status of the Ambassador, and the Representative of the United States of America in the Security Council of the United Nations, and to be Representative of the United States of America to the Sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations during her tenure of service as Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations.

10:00 AM – SR-325 Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Business meeting to consider the nomination of Peter Paul Montgomery Buttigieg, of Indiana, to be Secretary of Transportation.

2:00 PM – SVC-217 Intelligence

To receive a closed briefing on certain intelligence matters.

3:00 PM – SD-106 Veterans' Affairs

Hearings to examine the nomination of Denis Richard McDonough, of Maryland, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(1/27/2021 6:00 AM)

There are no public events scheduled today.

{End of Report}

From: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>
To: <noreply@techmis.com>
Subject: State Department News Clips (1-16-21)
Date: Fri, 15 Jan 2021 23:40:14 -1000

STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
By TechMIS
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Mobile User Copy

TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Saturday, January 16, 2021 5:00 AM ET

Secretary of State

[China] U.S. Steps Up Claims Covid-19 May Have Escaped From Chinese Lab (Bloomberg)

[China] Pompeo: US 'has reason to believe' Wuhan lab staff caught COVID-19 months before pandemic (Washington Examiner)

Department of State News

Trump gives award to Morocco's king in private ceremony (AP)

US calls Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners' (AP)

UN hopes to take first step to elect next chief by Jan. 31 (AP)

Wikileaks asks reporters for help in desperate bid to score Julian Assange last-minute pardon (CNN)

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency (Reuters)

[Iran] US sanctions 7 entities, 2 persons over alleged ties to Iran shipping companies (Yahoo News/ANI)

[Iran] Will Biden lift sanctions on Iran? Crisis Group says it should (Washington Times)

[China] Minimise procurement of Chinese goods, Trump directs US government agencies (Yahoo News/ANI)

[China] China's security chief optimistic about winning 'protracted war' with US (Washington Examiner)

[India] India's friction with U.S. rises over planned purchase of Russian S-400 defence systems (Reuters)

Editorials and Op-eds

Donald Trump's Dismal Legacy in East Asia (The National Interest)

Trump has trashed Americas most important alliance. The rift with Europe could take decades to repair (CNN)

Doctor on Covid's first year: We made a lot of mistakes (CNN)

What WHO Won't Learn From China (Wall Street Journal)

[Switzerland] The End of Swiss Neutrality (Foreign Policy Magazine)

[China] One year in, was the China trade deal worth it? (Washington Examiner)

[North Korea] North Korea's theater-of-fear submarine nuclear weapon (Washington Examiner)

[Mexico] Can Mexico force the US to vaccinate migrant workers against Covid-19? (CNN)

Coronavirus News

China Stonewalls WHO Investigators (Washington Free Beacon)

Global immunisation: low-income countries rush to access Covid vaccine supply (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says (Wall Street Journal)

Near East & North Africa

Abbas announces first Palestinian elections in 15 years (Axios)

[Iran] Diary shows how quest for love landed Navy vet in Iran jail (AP)

[Iraq] Iraq oil minister sees oil at \$60 a barrel in second quarter (Reuters)

[Iraq] Iraq says it will not negotiate with OPEC+ its overproduction cut share (Reuters)

Europe and Eurasia

Turkish leader eyes favorably Greek PM meet amid tensions (AP)

[Germany] Do not break with Merkel, Bavarian leader warns before CDU leadership vote (Reuters)

[Germany] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 18,678 - RKI (Reuters)

[Greece] Greece: Lockdown extended indefinitely but stores to reopen (AP)

[United Kingdom] England Isn't Listening to Johnson's Lockdown Orders Any More (Bloomberg)

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus sparks exodus of foreign-born people from U.K. (Los Angeles Times)

[United Kingdom] Johnson takes stand against 'cruel' Japanese whaling – The Telegraph (Reuters)

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Two COVID-19 cases on Australian Open flight, one locally transmitted case (Reuters)

[China] China builds hospital in 5 days after surge in virus cases (AP)

[China] China's Xi Looks to Take Advantage of a Strong Economic Hand (Wall Street Journal)

[Fiji] Fiji Will Lead U.N. Rights Body, Over Russian and Chinese Opposition (New York Times)

[Malaysia] Malaysia takes WTO legal action against EU over palm biofuel curbs (Reuters)

[Myanmar] Myanmar police scuffle with nationalist monk's followers (Reuters)

[South Korea] South Korea is cracking down on digital sex crimes. Has it done enough? (CNN)

[Thailand] Thailand's Failed Tourism Experiment (Bloomberg)

[Vietnam] U.S. Won't Penalize Vietnam for Alleged Currency Manipulation (Wall Street Journal)

South and Central Asia

Nepal's 'COVID Rush' To India: Will Bilateral Ties Now Improve? (Yahoo News/The Quint)

[India] India is launching one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns. But it's unclear if one of the vaccines works. (Washington Post)

[India] India starts world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drive (AP)

[India] India's Modi kicks off vaccination campaign, among world's largest (Reuters)

[India] 'India Has Taken Very Decisive Steps' in Managing Pandemic: IMF (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil airlifts emergency oxygen into pandemic-struck state, vaccine drive lags (Reuters)

[Brazil] Oxygen shortage forces evacuation of 60 premature babies from Amazon city (CNN)

[Brazil] Brazil reports more than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths for fourth consecutive day (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil company requests emergency use approval for Russian vaccine (Reuters)

[Canada] Trudeau says Canada needs to 'buckle down' as cases surge, vaccines delayed (CNN)

[Canada] Detained Huawei CFO enjoys private shopping and evenings at open-air theaters 'under the stars,' wants bail conditions eased (Washington Post)

[Canada] Canada Faces Indigenous Push Back to Study of Pipeline Stake (Bloomberg)

[Mexico] López Obrador lashes out at DEA after Mexico exonerates ex-minister on drug charges (Washington Post)

[Mexico] Mexico Accuses U.S. of Fabricating Drug-Trafficking Charges Against General (Wall Street Journal)

[Mexico] U.S. Case Against Mexican General Was Baseless, AMLO Says (Bloomberg)

[Mexico] Mexico publishes US evidence on ex-defense secretary (AP)

[Mexico] Mexico president backs dropping of drug case against ex-defense minister (Reuters)

[Mexico] Mexico's president rips big tech flexing like 'all-powerful' gatekeepers of speech (Washington Times)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] UN peacekeeper killed in Central African Republic (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Congo] Dozens killed, some decapitated, in suspected rebel attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (CNN)

[Nigeria] Nigeria's Big Oil-Refining Revamp Gets Off to a Slow Start (Bloomberg)

[South Africa] Exhausted Nurses Toil on South African Wards Full of Virus Cases (Bloomberg)

Network TV News Coverage

Troops in Afghanistan, Iraq Reach Pentagon's Drawdown Goal (FOX News)

Nation's Capitol Braces for Violence Ahead of Inauguration Day (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

CDC Warns of Highly Contagious Variant as Coronavirus Cases Surge, Vaccine Rollout Faces Issues (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

[Russia] Russia Plans to Withdraw From Open Skies Treaty (FOX News)

[United Kingdom] Britain Makes Changes for Incoming Travelers Amid COVID Surge (FOX News)

[North Korea] North Korean Leader Unveils New Ballistic Missile Ahead of Washington Transition (FOX News)

Headlines

The Washington Post

The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

ABC News

CBS News

CNN

Fox News

NBC News

Secretary of State

[China] U.S. Steps Up Claims Covid-19 May Have Escaped From Chinese Lab (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 8:50 PM, Bill Faries, 6400K, Negative]

The State Department on Friday said it had new information suggesting the Covid-19 pandemic could have emerged from a Chinese laboratory and not through contact with infected animals, the latest salvo in the Trump administration's efforts to pressure Beijing over the virus's origins.

Specifically, the U.S. said it had obtained new evidence that researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick in the fall of 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak in the surrounding city, with symptoms it said were consistent with either Covid-19 or common seasonal illnesses.

The department said China's lack of transparency about the pandemic's origin more than a year ago, as well as efforts to mask early shortcomings in the country's response to the outbreak, make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. But the brief, unsigned statement issued by the U.S. -- less than a week before the end of the Trump administration -- provided no data to back up its claims.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," according to the State Department. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection."

A State Department spokesperson declined to elaborate when asked for further comment.

China has repeatedly rejected charges that the virus might have emerged from a laboratory. The U.S. didn't say how it obtained the new information about illnesses at the lab.

The comments, in a State Department fact sheet, come as China faces criticism for initially preventing some members of a World Health Organization mission from entering China as part of an effort to trace the origin of Covid-19, saying they hadn't passed health screenings. While the experts were eventually granted clearance, China had already been criticized by the WHO for delaying the mission's plans to visit the country.

China has been under scrutiny since the outbreak exploded in and around Wuhan, but the Trump administration also sought to pin more blame on authorities in Beijing after the pandemic took off in the U.S. and deaths soared. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo frequently refer to the illness as the "China virus", "China plague" and "Wuhan virus."

For its part, China is mounting a campaign to cast doubt the virus originated within its borders. State media have played up research suggesting that there were cases in Italy and the U.S. that pre-date those in Wuhan, and hinted that the pathogen could have entered the country via frozen food or packaging.

On Friday it was announced that 2 million people had died worldwide from the outbreak, with almost 400,000 deaths in the U.S.

[China] Pompeo: US 'has reason to believe' Wuhan lab staff caught COVID-19 months before pandemic (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 7:35 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

U.S. officials have "reason to believe" that Chinese researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology caught the novel coronavirus months before it developed into a pandemic,

according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

"The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses," Pompeo said in Friday evening announcement. "This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

World Health Organization investigators arrived in China on Thursday, but they remain in quarantine. Pompeo's statement amplifies U.S. suspicions that the contagion leaked out of a lab, a finding that would tend to reinforce the perception that the Chinese Communist government is to blame for the public health calamity.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," Pompeo added. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

In May, Pompeo declared that U.S. officials possessed "enormous evidence" that the pandemic originated in a Chinese laboratory, although he acknowledged this week that "we don't know for sure" that it did. Chinese officials suggested in the early months of the pandemic that the virus emerged from a "wet market" where wild animal meat was sold, but Beijing's envoys have also launched disinformation operations to blame the U.S. military or suggest that it began in another country.

The allocation of blame for the pandemic has driven major international controversies over the last year — a war of words between Chinese and American diplomats paralleled by Beijing's use of economic restrictions to punish Australia's call for an investigation. The pandemic triggered an ideological showdown between Washington and Beijing, as Pompeo pointed to Chinese Communist censorship of early warnings to undercut the regime's influence, while Chinese officials have cited their handling of the pandemic to tout their system of governance.

"Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese side has maintained close communication and cooperation with WHO on global origin-tracing in an open, transparent and responsible manner," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said this week. "China will continue close cooperation with WHO and international experts and contribute our share to the global origin-tracing work."

Pompeo has rebuked China over the last year for failing to provide the early "virus samples" that researchers prize. Chinese officials acknowledged "destroying the samples" in May, a move justified as a way "to temporarily manage the pathogen." State Department officials made a point to emphasize that they are suggesting that the pandemic may have resulted from "an accident at a laboratory," as opposed to any intentional malign behavior.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," a State Department fact sheet released alongside Pompeo's statement observed. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident

could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection. Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure."

Chinese researchers have been studying a bat coronavirus that is "96.2% similar" to the virus that caused COVID-19, the State Department noted. "Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible 'gain of function' experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality," Pompeo said.

World Health Organization investigators have maintained a collegial public posture toward China, in their attempt to gain access to the country and begin the long-awaited probe. "I don't think we should be pointing fingers here," professor Marion Koopmans, a member of the team sent by the WHO, told Chinese state-run media recently.

President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the World Health Organization in July, citing outrage over the WHO's amplification of false information provided by Beijing. Pompeo, who has predicted a "completely whitewashed investigation," put pressure on the just-arrived investigators.

"The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report," he said. "Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world."

Department of State News

Trump gives award to Morocco's king in private ceremony (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump has awarded a top U.S. honor to King Mohammed VI of Morocco, citing his decision to begin normalization of relations with Israel.

The Legion of Merit is a rarely awarded decoration that can only be bestowed by the president, and typically on heads of state or government of other countries.

The honor comes after the United States in December recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory, including disputed area between southern Morocco and Mauritania. Morocco, in turn, agreed to resume partial diplomatic ties with Israel in the near future, establish direct flights between the nations, and promote economic and technological cooperation.

Trump has sought to make bolstering regional support for Israel as a countermeasure to Iranian aggression a signature foreign policy legacy of his administration.

King Mohammed was not in Washington to accept the award. Morocco's ambassador to the U.S., Princess Lalla Jourmala, accepted it on his behalf in a private ceremony, according to

a White House statement.

Trump in his final days in office has spent time honoring friends and allies with the presidential awards.

Earlier this week, Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, one of his fiercest GOP allies, in a private ceremony at the White House. The White House also announced this week that Trump would be awarding New England coach Bill Belichick, a six-time Super Bowl winner, the Medal of Freedom. But Belichick declined to accept the award.

US calls Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners' (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:32 AM, Jon Gambrell, 13480K, Neutral]

The United States called Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates "major security partners" early Saturday, a previously unheard of designation for the two countries home to major American military operations.

A White House statement tied the designation to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates normalizing ties to Israel, saying it "reflects their extraordinary courage, determination and leadership." It also noted the two countries long have taken part in U.S. military exercises.

It's unclear what the designation means for Bahrain, an island kingdom off Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, and the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, while the UAE's Jebel Ali port is the busiest port of call for American warships outside of the U.S. Bahrain hosts some 5,000 American troops, while the UAE hosts 3,500, many at Al-Dhafra Air Base.

Already, the U.S. uses the designation of "major non-NATO ally" to describe its relationship with Kuwait, which hosts the forward command of U.S. Army Central. That designation grants a country special financial and military considerations for nations not part of NATO. Bahrain also is a non-NATO ally.

The U.S. military's Central Command and the Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The 5th Fleet referred queries to the State Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The White House designation comes in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration. Trump forged close ties to Gulf Arab countries during his time in office in part over his hard-line stance on Iran. That's sparked a series of escalating incidents between the countries after Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also comes after Bahrain and the UAE joined Egypt and Saudi Arabia in beginning to resolve a yearslong boycott of Qatar, another Gulf Arab nation home to Al-Udeid Air Base that hosts Central Command's forward operating base. That boycott began in the early days of Trump's time in office after he visited Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip.

UN hopes to take first step to elect next chief by Jan. 31 (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 4:50 PM, Edith M. Lederer, 13480K, Neutral]

The U.N. General Assembly and Security Council are expected to take the first step toward electing the next head of the global organization this month.

Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said Friday that he and Tunisia's U.N. Ambassador Tarek Ladeb, the current council president, hope to send a letter before Jan. 31 asking the U.N.'s 193 member nations to submit any candidates to challenge Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The former Portuguese prime minister and U.N. refugee chief, whose five-year term at the helm of the United Nations ends on Dec. 31, said in letters to Bozkir and Ladeb on Monday that he will seek a second term.

The General Assembly elects the secretary-general on the recommendation of the 15-member Security Council where the five permanent members have veto power, so their support is crucial. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson immediately announced his support for Guterres, but there has been no word yet from The United States, Russia, China and France.

A General Assembly resolution adopted in September 2015 asks the presidents of the assembly and Security Council to "start the process of soliciting candidates for the position of secretary-general through a joint letter addressed to all member states."

Bozkir said he met Tuesday with Ladeb and shared a draft letter to member states which the Tunisian ambassador then circulated to council members. "We are hoping that we will be able to sign this letter together before the end of the month," he said.

Bozkir told a news conference he will then ensure that any candidate appear before the General Assembly "to share their vision and explain what they're going to do during the five-term in office and there will be a question and answer part."

Legally, he said, there is no deadline for countries to submit candidates, but he expects "the first wave" — with one or more candidates — to appear before the General Assembly in April or the beginning of May.

Guterres was elected by the 193-member assembly to succeed Ban Ki-moon after a hotly contested and transparent race in October 2016 that initially included 13 candidates -- seven women and six men. He took office on Jan. 1, 2017.

Wikileaks asks reporters for help in desperate bid to score Julian Assange last-minute pardon (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:39 PM, Oliver Darcy, 7975K, Neutral]

In a last-minute bid to persuade President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange, Wikileaks has reached out to several high-profile reporters asking for help in its efforts to rescue its founder from potential life in prison.

The messages sent to reporters over Twitter direct message said that Assange's partner,

Stella Moris, had directed Wikileaks to reach out for possible assistance.

"She was hoping that you may have ideas or contacts that could help convince Trump to pardon Assange," said one version of the message sent to multiple reporters.

Another version of the message characterized Assange as someone who faces prison "for journalistic activities."

"He is a free speech hero," the message added.

The messages were sent to reporters, including this one, at some of the nation's top news organizations.

Wikileaks did not respond to a request for comment, but Moris confirmed to CNN that she did ask the organization to "reach out to some of its most influential followers."

Moris said that some journalists, who she did not name, have responded by asking for interviews with Assange. She argued that Assange's case has "major Constitutional implications" and it could essentially "turn investigative reporting into a criminal enterprise."

Moris added that she hopes to make contact with someone in the White House about Assange's case, but so far has not been in contact with anyone.

"I am not in touch with anyone in the White House, hence the effort to ask people who might have contacts to speak to them themselves, and make the principled case for a pardon," Moris said.

Assange was arrested in April 2019 when British authorities entered the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he had been holed up for seven years, and took him into custody on a US extradition warrant.

The Wikileaks founder has been charged under the Espionage Act for his role in publishing classified military and diplomatic cables. He faces up to 175 years in prison.

A British judge last week denied Assange bail, saying that "there are substantial grounds for believing that if Mr. Assange is released today he would fail to surrender to court and face the appeal proceedings."

The judge in the case, however, has denied a request to extradite Assange to the US.

Trump has issued a number of controversial pardons as his days in office dwindle. In December, he pardoned longtime ally Roger Stone and former campaign manager Paul Manafort. He also pardoned four Blackwater guards convicted in an Iraq massacre.

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:51 PM, Arshad Mohammed, Humeyra Pamuk, Daphne Psaedakis, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States on Friday imposed sanctions on companies in Iran, China and the United Arab Emirates for doing business with the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines and on three Iranian entities over conventional arms proliferation.

They are the latest in a series of measures aimed at stepping up pressure on Tehran in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration, which ends on Wednesday.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington had sanctioned seven companies, including Chinese-based Jiangyin Mascot Special Steel Co and UAE-based Accenture Building Materials, and two people for shipping steel to or from Iran.

He said Iran's Marine Industries Organization, Aerospace Industries Organization and the Iran Aviation Industries Organization had also been blacklisted over conventional arms proliferation.

In a statement later on Friday, Pompeo said he was also increasing the scope of metals-related sanctions against Iran administered by the State Department.

Those who knowingly transfer 15 materials which the State Department says are used in connection with Iran's nuclear, military or ballistic missile programs, including certain types of aluminum and steel, would be subject to sanctions, he said.

During his four years in office, Trump has tried to force Tehran back into talks over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its activities in the Middle East. Saying the agreement did not go far enough, Trump in 2018 quit an Iran nuclear deal, which Tehran struck with world powers in 2015 to rein in its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, who will succeed Trump on Wednesday, has said he will return to the 2015 nuclear pact if Iran resumes strict compliance with it.

[Iran] US sanctions 7 entities, 2 persons over alleged ties to Iran shipping companies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 1:35 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The United States has designated seven entities and two individuals for allegedly flouting US sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Friday.

"In June 2020, the State Department sanctioned the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) pursuant to Executive Order 13382 (WMD Proliferators and Their Supporters)," Pompeo said.

"We have warned the industry that those who do business with IRISL, its subsidiaries, and other Iranian shipping entities, risk sanctions. Today, we are sanctioning seven entities and two individuals for such conduct," he added.

[Iran] Will Biden lift sanctions on Iran? Crisis Group says it should (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 5:15 PM, Guy Taylor, 459K, Negative]

Iran has engaged in "worrying violations" of the 2015 nuclear deal, including uranium enrichment at "a level perilously close to weapons-grade," according to a prominent international think tank, which argues the incoming Biden administration should respond not by punishing Tehran, but by moving quickly to revive the accord.

The International Crisis Group, headed by a former Obama administration official who helped negotiate the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), said in a report Friday that the incoming administration "should swiftly re-enter the deal, if Iran reverses its JCPOA breaches."

The report, which is just as likely to be read closely by President-elect Joseph R. Biden's team as it is to be criticized by U.S. foreign policy hawks, was circulated against a backdrop of fresh provocations by Tehran.

Iranian military forces held exercises Friday involving ballistic missiles that U.S. officials have accused Tehran building up in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that undergirded the 2015 nuclear deal. The drills, reported by Iranian state media, followed recent threats by Tehran to expel United Nations nuclear inspectors from the country if the incoming Biden administration doesn't quickly remove sanctions that have been imposed on Tehran during the Trump era.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pleaded with the international community last week to unify against that threat amid uncertainty over the future U.S. policy under Mr. Biden. On Friday, with only a few days left before Mr. Biden replaces Mr. Trump in the White House, Mr. Pompeo announced fresh U.S. sanctions targeting several Iranian shipping companies and entities accused of facilitating Tehran's weapons procurement activities.

The announcement marked the latest in the so-called "maximum pressure" strategy Mr. Trump set in motion in 2018 when he withdrew the United States from the Obama-era nuclear deal. The strategy has featured the unilateral re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, as well as a U.S.-led push to crush Iran's economy by upholding a global embargo on Iranian crude oil.

Mr. Trump has argued the sanctions would coerce Iran into fresh negotiations with Washington that could result in a new deal addressing not only Tehran's nuclear activities, but also its ballistic missile programs and subversive backing of militants in other Mideast nations — two things that were not resolved by the 2015 deal.

The approach created a rift with other signatories to the deal, including Britain, France and Germany, who have sought, along with China and Russia, to keep the accord alive since 2018. The big question now is whether the incoming Biden administration will keep the re-imposed U.S. sanctions in place or lift them.

The International Crisis Group is calling for the latter, asserting in its report Friday that the Trump administration "insisted that its 'maximum pressure' strategy would deliver a superior nuclear agreement."

"Not only did the coercion fail, but it also reversed the significant non-proliferation gains the

agreement had secured and prompted a more aggressive Iranian regional posture," the report's executive summary claimed.

Re-entering the deal on the condition that Iran roll back its enrichment activities and its threats to kick out U.N. inspectors, the summary argued, will be the "best way" for the Biden administration to "avoid a nuclear crisis early in its tenure, restore transatlantic cooperation, facilitate the financial dividends the agreement was meant to deliver to the Iranian people and provide a foundation for future negotiations on matters outside the JCPOA's nuclear portfolio."

The report argued the Trump administration was incorrect in thinking it could "squeeze greater concessions out of Iran on its nuclear program and also with regard to the other concerns."

"The economic toll on Iran has been severe — three years of recession in a row — and the deal's remaining participants have been unable to relieve the pain," the report's executive summary said. "But removing the central incentive for Iran's commitment to its JCPOA obligations led Tehran to slip those bonds, not to acquiesce in tighter ones."

"In early January, Iran announced the latest in a series of worrying violations, raising uranium enrichment rates to 20 percent, a level perilously close to weapons-grade, and threatening to severely curb international monitoring and verification, the accord's hallmarks," it said, adding that the "'maximum pressure' era has produced the worst of all worlds: economic stagnation for Iran, mounting international concern about its nuclear program and simmering regional tensions."

Critics of the original nuclear deal, including most Republicans, say that characterization is off the mark.

"The problem with the rush to reaffirm the old, flawed deal is that it would benefit only one country: Iran," according to James Carafano, a national security analyst with the Heritage Foundation, and Adam Milstein, the chairman emeritus of the Israeli-American Council.

"The cascading consequences of that decision could destabilize not just the Middle East, but trigger problems around the world," the two argued in a commentary published earlier this month by The Washington Times.

"The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the deal and slap Iran with severe sanctions has crippled the Iranian economy, decreased its oil production and caused a significant devaluation of the rial," they wrote. "Tehran is even more desperate now than it was in 2015. It would be a mistake to waste the gains of the outgoing administration."

The incoming administration is seen to be carefully weighing how to proceed.

International Crisis Group President Robert Malley, a critic of President Trump's overall foreign policy who served as White House coordinator for the Middle East under President Obama, has argued that if Mr. Biden desires, he should have no problem rejoining the nuclear deal and repealing the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration.

However, Mr. Malley and Philip Gordon, another former Obama administration official now with the Council on Foreign Relations, asserted in a November New York Times op-ed that the Trump administration "worked resolutely to build a so-called sanctions wall that would deter businesses from trading with Iran even if the United States rejoined the deal, repackaging nuclear-related sanctions as terrorism-related penalties to make it politically costlier for a Democratic administration to remove them."

"More broadly, the Trump administration seemed to be trying to erode any Iranian faith that an arrangement entered into with the United States would survive America's political vicissitudes."

[China] Minimise procurement of Chinese goods, Trump directs US government agencies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 7:26 PM, Staff, 4021K, Positive]

US President Donald Trump on Friday (local time) directed departments and agencies laws, regulations and policies to minimise the procurement of Chinese goods.

According to an official statement by Robert C O'Brien, National Security Advisor, "Today, President Donald J. Trump directed departments and agencies to review applicable laws, regulations, and policies and to propose regulatory and policy changes, including potential executive actions, to minimize the procurement of People's Republic of China (PRC) goods and services by the Federal Government."

He said that the PRC 2017 National Intelligence Law obligates individuals, organisations, and institutions to assist the PRC security and intelligence services in carrying out a wide variety of intelligence work.

"The PRC government, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, remains free to coerce and coopt PRC manufacturers and services providers to target the United States Government for espionage and information advantage. Some of this activity could further the goals of the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which calls for all Chinese civil institutions, both public and private, to aid in advancing the capabilities of the PRC military through the acquisition and application of critical and emerging technologies," he added.

Quoting the Director of National Intelligence report, O'Brien said, "The PRC poses the single greatest national security threat to America today. Beijing sees the United States as the main impediment to achieving its regional and global ambitions and consequentially invests significant resources in MCF and other strategies to gain relative advantage. The PRC targets the information systems of the United States Government for personnel records, military plans, and other exploitable data through cyber and other means."

[China] China's security chief optimistic about winning 'protracted war' with US (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

Chinese officials are optimistic about winning a geopolitical competition with the United States due to the perceived "decline of the West," according to the boasts of a top Chinese Communist security chief.

"The rise of the East and the decline of the West has become [a global] trend, and changes of the international landscape are in our favor," Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission chief Chen Yixin told colleagues, per a South China Morning Post translation. "The U.S. suppression [of us] is a major threat, but [our struggle with the US] is both a skirmish and a protracted war."

American and Chinese officials have moved into open rivalry in recent years after U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Beijing has been "waging ... a cold war" against the U.S. Those tensions have underpinned a yearlong controversy over China's censorship of information about the coronavirus pandemic, as well as disputes over Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong and high-stakes debates over whether American allies can rely on Chinese state-backed tech companies.

"The coronavirus pandemic is a major test, but [we should] rise to the challenge of this crisis and turn threats into opportunities," Chen said.

Success or failure in key arenas of the competition, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's campaign to thwart state-backed Huawei's bids to build fifth-generation wireless technology networks around the world, depends on European allies. Their confidence in the U.S. could be shaken by the attack on the U.S. Capitol and President Trump's success in convincing supporters that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, despite his failure to prove that case in courts across the country, according to a prominent Senate Democrat.

"The Republican Party will have something to say about this because European nations will sort of hedge their bets on getting in too deep with America, if they think that Donald Trump is coming back four years from now or Donald Trump Jr. is coming back four years from now," Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a member for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during an Atlantic Council event Friday.

Murphy, a Democrat, said that he has advised Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken to draft the Republican lawmakers who accepted the election results into a diplomatic initiative.

"I think he should deploy Republicans and Democrats in the Senate who voted to certify the elections, who have condemned those that tried to undermine democracy, and send us out around the world to try to tell the story of how we overcame this moment," he said. "This transition, as messy as it will be, will still be a transition, and that, in the end, is, again, still a miracle of American democracy."

Chinese officials, for their part, have pointed to the crisis at the U.S. Capitol to justify their crackdown on Hong Kong dissidents who protested Beijing's plans to undercut the rule of law in the former British colony.

"While the society is stable overall, there are still many risks, and hidden dangers ... intertwine, resulting in a wide range of public security risks," said Chen, the security chief. "Security is the cornerstone of development ... Without security, we cannot achieve anything."

[India] India's friction with U.S. rises over planned purchase of Russian S-400 defence systems (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 1:25 PM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has told India it is unlikely to get a waiver on its planned acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence systems, raising the risk of sanctions similar to those imposed on Turkey for buying that equipment, people aware of the matter said.

The Trump administration has been telling the Indians to drop the \$5.5 billion deal for five missile systems and avoid a diplomatic crisis, saying New Delhi did not have a wide waiver from a 2017 U.S. law aimed at deterring countries from buying Russian military hardware.

That position is unlikely to change under the Biden administration that takes over next week and that has promised an even tougher U.S. approach towards Russia, the people aware of the discussions told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

India says it needs the long-range surface-to-air missiles to counter the threat from China. India and China have been locked in a face-off on the disputed Himalayan border since April, the most serious in decades.

New Delhi has also affirmed its right to choose its defence supplies, potentially setting up an early point of friction with the new U.S. administration.

"India and the U.S. have a comprehensive global strategic partnership. India has a special and privileged strategic partnership with Russia," foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said about the proposed S-400 purchase.

"India has always pursued an independent foreign policy. This also applies to our defence acquisitions and supplies which are guided by our national security interests."

The United States imposed sanctions on Turkey last month for its acquisition of the Russian air defence systems under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)

A U.S. embassy spokesperson in Delhi said the United States was aware of reports of India's planned purchase of the S-400s, but noted there had been no deliveries yet.

"We urge all of our allies and partners to forgo transactions with Russia that risk triggering sanctions under the CAATSA. CAATSA does not have any blanket or country-specific waiver provision."

"We have not made any waiver determinations with respect to Indian transactions with Russia," the spokesperson told Reuters.

There was no immediate comment from Russian officials. Moscow has previously said that the sanctions imposed on Turkey were illegitimate and showed arrogance toward international law.

INITIAL PAYMENT IN 2019

India made an initial payment of \$800 million in 2019 toward the Russian deal and the first set of missile batteries are expected towards the end of this year.

Russia has traditionally been India's main weapons supplier but in recent decades the Indian government has turned to the United States and Israel for new planes and drones.

U.S. officials believe there is still time for Delhi to reconsider, and that the punitive measures would only kick in if the deal with the Russians was "consummated."

Washington has told New Delhi that if India acquires the S-400 it would affect how its systems interact with U.S. military equipment that India now has and would jeopardise future arms transfers such as high-end fighter planes and armed drones, according to the people aware of the matter.

"There is a narrow chance India can avoid sanctions, presuming the S-400 purchase is completed. At the moment, it's a good bet that sanctions will be applied against India," Richard Rossow, a specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said.

But the outcome could depend on how India-U.S. defence cooperation progresses, he said, adding that India had been working with Washington on security in Asia more than ever before and this could be a mitigating factor.

Editorials and Op-eds

Donald Trump's Dismal Legacy in East Asia (The National Interest)

The National Interest [1/15/2021 1:15 PM, Paul Heer, 289K, Negative]

A few days ago, the White House released a declassified document from 2018 outlining the Trump administration's "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific." The document summarized the challenges the administration saw the United States facing in the region, the U.S. interests and "desired end states" it would pursue there, and the "lines of effort" it would follow toward those goals. In an accompanying statement, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the strategy document was released "to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners America's enduring commitment to this vital region." It seems more likely that it was issued one week before the end of the administration in an effort to frame the discourse on Donald Trump's legacy in policy toward East Asia, and probably also to box in the Biden administration's approach to the region. Trump's supporters have characterized his East Asia policy primarily as a strong and decisive pushback against the growing threat from China after what they characterize as decades of passive policies that allowed Beijing to extend its influence globally and resist pressure to democratize internally. They will probably characterize any divergence from the document by the Biden administration as a reversion to weakness and failure to fully recognize the China threat.

But what has the Trump administration actually accomplished in the Indo-Pacific region, pursuant to its agenda? According to the strategy document, the key challenges were to:

"maintain US strategic primacy" in the region

"promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing a new, illiberal sphere of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity"

"advance US global economic leadership while promoting fair and reciprocal trade."

It's hard to see how any of these goals has been significantly advanced over the past four years. On the contrary, the United States is in a worse position in the Indo-Pacific region than it was four years ago.

Instead of maintaining U.S. strategic primacy there, the Trump administration has almost certainly confirmed that it is irretrievably lost. Through inattention, rhetoric largely devoid of strategy, and policies and behaviors that have eroded the confidence American allies and partners have in Washington's credibility and reliability, Trump has profoundly undermined the historical leadership role that the United States has played in the Indo-Pacific region during and since the Cold War. Two of the document's operating assumptions were that "loss of US prestige in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve US interests globally" and that "Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military influence will continue to increase in the near-term and challenge the US ability to achieve its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region." Both of those assumptions have been amply validated: the United States has lost prestige relative to China, thereby weakening its ability to achieve its interests.

In terms of countering Chinese influence and promoting the alternative of a "liberal economic order" and "fair and reciprocal trade," it is hard to give Trump high marks after his early withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which inevitably reinforced China's economic role and clout in the region. This was followed by Trump's protectionist trade policies, which did not spare U.S. allies and partners in Asia, and his administration's inadequate efforts to compete with China's infrastructure and investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Overall, Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, implicitly targeted at building a coalition to counterbalance Chinese power and influence, never yielded a coherent strategy or much substance—or sustained attention from Washington.

Perhaps the biggest setback has been to the vitality of the U.S. alliance network. The strategy document included among the Trump administration's "top interests" that of "enhanc[ing] the credibility and effectiveness of our alliances," and O'Brien's statement highlighted the goal of "strengthen[ing] our wide and diverse network of allies and partners." Instead, Trump's relative neglect of the allies, and especially his pressure on Tokyo and Seoul to increase their financial contributions to mutual defense or face a drawdown of the U.S. forward military presence, exasperated our closest friends in Northeast Asia. Trump's neglect extended to Southeast Asia, where he only intermittently showed interest in the multilateralism that is central to the identity of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations and its members' collaboration with Washington on regional economic and security issues. Overall, the Trump administration was relatively inattentive to the particular interests, priorities, and perspectives of U.S. partners in the region—often taking them for granted and pressuring them to choose Washington's side against Beijing while repeatedly denying that it was doing so. The strategy document characterized its "desired end state" as one in which "most nations in the Indo-Pacific view the United States as their preferred partner."

That preference remains, but regional confidence in and reliance on it has been severely diminished.

All this was reinforced by Trump's general disregard for human-rights issues, best exemplified by his reported statement to Chinese president Xi Jinping that Beijing's massive reeducation camps in Xinjiang—essentially aimed at brainwashing Muslims to abandon their faith—were “exactly the right thing to do.” And Trump's increasingly blatant disregard for American democracy, which culminated in his claims of electoral fraud after his defeat in the November 2020 election and his instigation of the assault on the U.S. Capitol and U.S. Congress on Jan. 6, has deflated America's stature across the Indo-Pacific region as an exemplar of democratic values and constitutionalism.

Trump has trashed Americas most important alliance. The rift with Europe could take decades to repair (CNN)

CNN [1/16/2021 12:15 AM, Luke McGee, 7975K, Neutral]

The presidency of Donald Trump has left such a wretched stench in Europe that it's hard to see how, even in four years, Joe Biden could possibly get America's most important alliance back on track.

This week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled a final trip to meet with European and NATO leaders. While the State Department claimed the reason for his cancellation was so Pompeo could work on the Biden transition, European officials suspect that America's top diplomat realized he'd arranged a leaving party no one wanted to attend.

Throughout Trump's term, Europeans have been walking a tightrope, trying to balance outright condemnation of the President's most destructive behavior with not alienating the leader of the Western world.

Pompeo was unlikely to be received warmly on his farewell tour, even before the insurrection at the US Capitol last Wednesday. For many, Trump's incitement of rioters was the final straw.

The foreign minister of Luxembourg openly called Trump a “pyromaniac,” while diplomats are privately saying they “blame Trump squarely for the chaos in America since the election, including the Capitol riot,” as one did to CNN, reflecting the sentiments of others in the same role.

“It was clearly not going to be a congenial trip, as many European institutions and diplomats are happily turning their back on the Trump administration. It's no secret that Europe is very much looking forward to working with Biden,” said Tyson Barker, a senior Europe analyst and former State Department official under Barack Obama.

This week's snub of Pompeo brings an ignominious end to four years of exacerbation with a White House that went out of its way to burn bridges with allies who were caught off guard by the election of Trump, then horrified at his administration's inability to rein in his worst instincts.

“From our perspective, Trump saw Europe as an enemy,” a senior European diplomat told

CNN. "The lasting impact of 'America First' is the US having fewer friends in Europe."

A senior European Union official said the general view in Brussels was that Trump went out of his way to "gradually undo a lot of what the EU was working towards on the world stage," pointing specifically to the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accord.

While the assumption is that the transatlantic relationship will improve under Biden, four years of carnage has spooked the European political scene.

"The European relationship has changed and will now be shrouded in skepticism," said Cathryn Cluver Ashbrook, executive director of the Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship at the Harvard Kennedy School.

"The arrival of a Biden administration has yet to be embraced with the same fanfare as Obama as President-elect, because Trump has done more damage to the relationship than George W. Bush. Trump's outward aggression affected all aspects of European life, be it trade, defense or even the emotional shared ideas and cultural ties. All those things suddenly seem debased and of less value."

The repudiation of shared ideas and cultural ties Cluver describes are one prong of the fork that has punctured the alliance. According to Barker, officials in European capitals were agog at the types of people Trump employed to work as envoys overseas.

"Europeans have considered the last four years extremely distasteful. They've been bemused by Trump's envoys, like Richard Grenell in Germany, who have turned up and started behaving like Fox News anchors and insulting the country they were supposed to be building relations with," Barker said.

Another prong has been the practical implication of Trump's approach to foreign policy. "Trump's disengagement and hollowing out of the State Department meant that we were suddenly without our most important ally on projects in the Middle East and Africa," a senior German diplomat told CNN.

"When they did take big stances on things like China or Iran, they chose not to involve anyone, leaving Europeans scrambling for a response," the diplomat added.

Cluver says this has forced a structural change in the dynamics between allies. "Europeans have had to carry the can on things like the Iran deal and climate change. On one hand, this means that Biden can pick up where Obama left off with some serious American muscle. But he might have to accept that America's role in these relationships has changed."

Barker agreed, saying it would be "important to see how the new administration acknowledges the damage that has been done by Trump to America's reputation." And on top of the big picture issues like Iran and China, Barker said, "how can [Biden] send State Department officials to Ukraine to warn about corruption with any immediate credibility?"

This idea, that Europe has lost its trust in America, comes up time and again when speaking to European diplomats and EU officials. Cluver believes the combination of unpredictability from the White House and "US bureaucracy being dismantled from the inside to make it

less effective worldwide" under Trump means we have crossed the Rubicon. "American influence in European defense, security, and other global priorities has diminished. This has led to lots of countries having to think more seriously about their future with a less assertive US," she added.

Despite optimism that Biden will restore a more collaborative approach to shared priorities, European diplomats and officials are adamant that moves towards an independent defense policy and international "strategic autonomy" will not slow down.

"In some respects, it was a good thing Trump forced us to think more about diplomatic initiatives, NATO and withdrawal of US troops," said the German diplomat. "It might come as a shock to Biden, but the prospect of the US underpinning European security is not as attractive as it was when he and Obama left office."

A view many European officials share is that no matter how friendly Biden is, Trump happened once -- and could happen again. The President lost the election, but clearly there is still a lot of support for his politics. In 2024, Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr., Mike Pompeo, or any other of his allies could conceivably pick up the torch and win an election.

"We cannot afford to be naive. If you look at the number of votes that Trump got, he wields an influence on American voters. This anti-global, 'America First' undercurrent in American politics is still very much alive and we have to hedge our bets," said the EU diplomat. Cluver is equally convinced that Trump's supporters are going nowhere, not least because they are unlike traditional voters. "A lot of his followers have been radicalized by conspiracy theories spread by groups like QAnon," she said. "Even if Biden succeeds in his domestic agenda, it will be difficult to pull people away from Trump's movement. Worse, elected representatives who want to bank on their support in the midterms and might continue pandering to them."

If this all sounds a little gloomy, to some extent, it is. "Bush was supposed to be an aberration and Obama a restoration," said Barker. "This idea of a reset seems a much tougher sell, especially since Trump's used his lame-duck period to burn the house on the way out."

It will take more than four years for the fog to lift over the Atlantic, and there are fears the relationship between Europe and America will never go back to what it was. For Europeans, that's a reality they're determined to make the best of. For the US, it's unclear whether being downgraded as a diplomatic force is something that its citizens, who've lived through four introspective years of "America First," will even care about.

Regardless, the Trump era has left Europeans with little choice but to wait and see how much of a priority Biden places on reclaiming America's place on the world stage. And they will use the four years of relative quiet under Biden to build safeguards against the all too real possibility of another Euroskeptic firestarter winning the White House in 2024.

Doctor on Covid's first year: We made a lot of mistakes (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:04 PM, Kent Sepkowitz, 7975K, Neutral]

The first case of Covid-19 in the United States was reported a year ago, on January 20,

2020. The patient, a 35-year-old man who had recently returned from visiting his family in Wuhan, China, sought medical care because of a cough and fever. He was hospitalized and survived the infection.

Since that time, more than 23 million Americans (almost 7% of the population) have been diagnosed with the infection and at least 385,000 have died. In response, effective treatments, public health containment strategies and vaccines have been developed, but the pandemic continues to worsen, both in the US and in other parts of the world.

The one-year mark provides an opportunity to prepare for year two by examining the mistakes and accomplishments of the last 12 months. I will focus only on medical decisions and dilemmas of year one and leave to others the task of evaluating the mostly disastrous political decisions that were made -- though I will note without comment that the first anniversary of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention laboratory confirmation of the initial case falls on the exact day that the Trump presidency ends and the Biden administration commences.

Personally, the year has been extremely humbling. We infectious disease specialists have been wrong repeatedly -- a predictable problem with a once-in-a-century event, but still. We are long accustomed to dealing with talk of a devastating pandemic from SARS, MERS, influenza, Ebola and smallpox to name a few. To keep calm and carry on, we have adopted an "oh now, not so fast, let's just wait and see" tone better suited to the gentleman physicians who populated Victorian novels than 21st century global village realists.

And, for many years, our Mister Rogers tone was the right one. But not this time. During late January and early February 2020, perhaps because of misleading information from China, we soft peddled the threat. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, called the risk to most Americans "miniscule" and articulated more concern about seasonal flu than the new coronavirus. He advised people to wash their hands and stay away from crowded places but to not bother wearing a mask.

I and countless others echoed this advice which was based on a well-articulated medical literature on influenza -- which ultimately was proven to be incorrect. It is uncertain whether an "everyone must wear masks" decree would have influenced many people's behavior at that early moment in the pandemic, given the paucity of US cases, but it was and remains a glaring misjudgment.

It was not the only mistake. From mid-February on, scientists stumbled to develop and deliver a reliable and widely available diagnostic test. And then came the political dawdling and decision to let the states fight among themselves for PPE supplies and ventilators.

Even leaving aside the hydroxychloroquine debacle, therapies to treat Covid-19 patients have fallen short: We have a mediocre, very expensive drug, remdesivir, directed at the virus itself. It must be given intravenously. Its uncertain efficacy has led to its exclusion from the World Health Organization treatment guidelines. Another category of therapy aimed at improving the immune response to infection includes the expensive antibody infusions the President and his buddies received. Full scale, definitive trials are still pending but this approach clearly has a role for patients with risk for severe disease.

Thankfully, the cheap old standby, dexamethasone, a steroid typically used to treat inflammation and a handful of illnesses, has reduced mortality in just about every study to date. Plus medical care overall has also lowered the rate of death among those diagnosed.

These problems are sobering reminders of how difficult it can be to make decisions when incomplete information leads to incomplete understanding of an actively evolving situation.

On a much smaller scale, though, this is the challenge for any doctor taking care of a sick, unstable patient. The situation may change hourly as test results return and new bits of a patient's history are uncovered; yet decisions must be made immediately despite uncertainty. This means that some of the decisions will be wrong.

This weighs heavily on any doctor. But despite the emotions around an error, doctors and public health experts have to wake up the next day and make more decisions, most of them also relying on incomplete information. And today's decisions must not be colored by yesterday's mistakes. Learning from a mistake is crucial but over-reacting to a mistake can be paralyzing. Knowing how to balance the two opposing forces is the largest challenge of all.

This dynamic is the biggest risk to Covid-19 pandemic control as we head into year two. The "miniscule worry" and the "don't wear a mask" mistakes and the failed "20 million vaccine doses given by December" promise can cause further problems if they over-influence the countless complex decisions that lie ahead.

The looming issues -- vaccine availability and safety, variant strains of the virus, waning immunity, when to loosen public measures after a critical mass of vaccinations -- are fraught with uncertainty, incomplete information and enormous consequences.

But decisions must be made. Inevitably they will be imperfect and will draw criticism. Adjustments made as more evidence becomes available will be viewed as waffling; a change in course will be called incompetence; the need to reimpose restrictions would be labeled a colossal failure. But everyone must come to work the next day and make the best decisions they can. The buck must no longer be passed to states and counties and hospitals.

The Biden team surely is aware of what lies ahead. We can only hope that its decisions will rely on evidence, sound judgment and, most of all, the lonely humility of a doctor caring for a critically ill patient.

What WHO Won't Learn From China (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:08 PM, Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., Neutral]

After much wrangling to gain entry a World Health Organization visit to China is not going to solve the mystery of Covid-19's origins.

Its mission will consist of interviewing Chinese medical and research personnel to see if they tell stories at odds with Beijing's official version. They won't. An obvious reason for the long delay and politicking over WHO's invitation was to make sure word was dispatched down the bureaucracy to let local officials and medics know what they were supposed to

say.

The real challenge now, which I doubt will enlist much Chinese cooperation, is to ransack China's inventory of patient and autopsy samples from before the Wuhan outbreak to find out where and when the new virus manifested itself without being recognized. Other countries have been willing to do this outside of China. We know the virus was present in France in December 2019 before the Wuhan eruption. A woman with a characteristic Covid rash who turned up at a Milan hospital in November 2019 has been identified as Italy's possible Patient Zero; some blood samples suggest the virus may have been present since September 2019. In comments to the press, WHO officials have alluded to the assumption that China has collected such samples too and hasn't made the results public. Don't hold your breath. Chinese officials now delight in suggesting, based on such evidence, that the virus started elsewhere. China gets credit for alerting the world to its existence. Guess what? Anything is possible until we establish some pattern in unrecognized early cases.

What's happening in China today might be a more fruitful subject of WHO inquiry than what happened in Wuhan a year ago. In Hebei province this week, 22 million people have been commanded not to leave their homes, in response to what's described as a "handful" of cases. Such instances have repeatedly popped up across China with little analysis leaking into the outside world. A lockdown in the city of Kashgar was imposed after a single asymptomatic case led to 137 others, all asymptomatic. Is this a medical miracle or have China's citizens gotten the message that they should hide their sore throats and fevers from authorities? No Western society would stand for the costs China has asked its citizens to bear: enforced mass testing, enforced quarantining, the locking of symptomless or uninfected people in their homes.

China is not Taiwan, Singapore or even South Korea, a country with water on three sides and an impassible military border on the fourth.

Before the pandemic hit, China was the world's No. 4 international tourist destination with 60 million visitors a year. Business travelers kept investment and trade flowing. Losing these benefits is among the costs China's people have been forced to bear. What's harder to understand is that they did so to avoid costs Western countries didn't have to worry about.

By a count published in January 2020, China has 3.6 intensive-care beds for every 100,000 citizens—compared with 29.4 for the U.S. and 38.7 for Germany.

China has nine cities bigger than New York, 27 bigger than Los Angeles, and 40 bigger than Chicago. Now think of the virus raging through these cities the way it did New York in the spring or L.A. today, with one-tenth the hospital capacity. In case you're wondering, the median age in China is roughly the same as the U.S.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million, is 30% bigger than New York yet its hospital system broke down under a case and death load that, by official statistics, was less than a quarter of that experienced by New York several weeks later. In Wuhan, patients died not only in the hallways but in the streets.

Covid has been a rough experience for everybody. In threatening to land on China's large

urban agglomerations, though, it might well have looked like the end of the road for the Communist Party.

I was happy to see a New York Times piece the other day that, instead of touting the superiority of its officials, acknowledged that Taiwan benefited from being an island that could shut off travel.

The U.S. has 328 ports of international entry. Even with tourism down 68%, even with the Mexican and Canadian borders closed to "nonessential" travel, more than 100,000 people cross our borders every day (not including illegal border crossers).

China may not be a model for any country that isn't China. We can still be grateful for its example. While others have accepted epidemics and focused on treating patients, its economy has helped the world stay upright. Its agricultural and industrial imports have surged. Its factories have been churning out, as the Journal put it, "medical equipment and work-from-home gear" in vast quantities to help other countries manage their own adaptations to Covid's arrival in the world.

[Switzerland] The End of Swiss Neutrality (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [1/15/2021 1:13 PM, Stéphanie Fillion, 722K, Neutral]

Late last October, Switzerland officially launched its first-ever election campaign for a temporary seat on the U.N. Security Council. As part of the virtual event, the Swiss mission in New York City sent goody bags to delegations from the other countries that will ultimately vote to decide if Switzerland should sit on the council. The centerpiece amid chocolate and Swiss cheese samples: a kit to make a Swiss culinary delicacy, a cheesy raclette.

Switzerland's cheese and chocolate diplomacy is in full swing at the United Nations ahead of the June 2022 vote, but it is actually running unopposed. There are two seats available for Western countries for the 2023-2024 period, and the only other country running is Malta. Nevertheless, the campaign—which was allocated some \$28 million by the government—has kicked up controversy. "It's a very interesting situation at the moment," said Angela Müller, the vice president of Switzerland's U.N. Association, "because we have this clean-slate situation with Malta, but the actual opposition is coming from inside."

For some in Switzerland, they believe that taking a seat on the world's highest security body—one that has the power to take military action to restore peace if it deems necessary—could harm the country's unique international reputation as a neutral power and the prized diplomatic role that comes with it.

One of those critics is Paul Widmer, a retired Swiss diplomat who was posted in Berlin, Amman, Zagreb, Washington, and at the U.N. in New York. "Our neutrality has become an international trademark," he said. "Through a constant policy of neutrality, Switzerland has acquired high credibility in foreign policy." Switzerland is regularly asked to represent countries where they do not have diplomatic relations, for example, between the United States and Iran and Russia and Georgia. The peak of such diplomacy was during World War II, when Switzerland had 200 mandates in about 35 countries. Indeed, as Widmer put it, the country's neutrality "is the reason why many states bestow Switzerland with international mandates—be it as a protecting power, be it as a go-between, or a mediator."

Switzerland's neutrality is in both the country's DNA and its legal system.

Internationally, it was enshrined in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and under the 1907 Law of Neutrality. Nationally, it is also mentioned in the Swiss Constitution. However, the specifics of the country's neutrality policy have evolved in the last few decades, especially after Switzerland became a full-fledged U.N. member state in the early 2000s. "We managed to stay out of two world wars," Pascale Baeriswyl, Switzerland's ambassador to the U.N., said in December. Because the country hasn't been involved in an armed conflict for nearly two centuries, she continued, Swiss neutrality has become something of a nation myth. Moreover, "in a country as diverse as Switzerland, the popular support for neutrality is good for national cohesion. The concept is, however, understood in very different ways. So, when it comes to working in international organizations, we must take our cues from neutrality law—we can't rely on myths."

Even though Geneva is the European capital of the United Nations, it stayed away from U.N. membership until a 2002 popular vote. Since then, Switzerland has taken part in most of the U.N. body's activities, including the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and the Economic and Social Council. And although neutrality is still at the heart of Switzerland's decision-making, it does take a stance at the United Nations through votes, especially when it comes to human rights violations. Now, after almost 20 years at the U.N., Baeriswyl believes, the natural next step is a seat on the Security Council. "It has always been clear that if we wanted to be a member of the United Nations, we wanted to be a member in all the organs," she said.

Switzerland's seven-member Federal Council officially decided to run for a council seat in 2011, following consultation with the country's parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committees, which saw it as a natural follow-on to U.N. membership. Concerns over neutrality have been ripe for debate since then. In 2015, for example, the Federal Council even published a report on possible situations that could jeopardize Switzerland's neutrality, concluding that it could stay on the council and in the clear. After all, the report noted, other neutral countries—such as Austria, Sweden (to some extent), and Costa Rica—have successfully done so, in particular by abstaining from votes regarding the use of force. However, as one diplomat from another neutral country pointed out, each of these countries has its own definition of neutrality. For Costa Rica, for example, it means nonmilitarization. For Switzerland, its armed neutrality. Amnesty International has even criticized Switzerland for its ongoing arms sales to human rights violators such as Bangladesh, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

So far, Switzerland's campaign for a seat has survived every parliamentary motion to reverse the country's decision to run, and the race is pretty much a fait accompli. However, politically, the matter could become more complicated once Switzerland actually finds itself in the council chambers. Today's divisions in the Security Council remind some diplomats of the Cold War era, and navigating big powers while not taking a side could be more challenging than ever. "What would be the role of Switzerland if the Security Council is asked by the United States to strengthen the sanctions regime against Iran? Should it vote in favor (and displease Iran), should it vote against (and displease the U.S.), or should it abstain (and weaken the decision-making of the Security Council)?" Widmer asked.

Last summer, the Trump administration decided to attempt to unilaterally trigger a snapback mechanism that would restore U.N. sanctions against Iran that were in place prior to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The move left the council scrambling since Washington had already left the JCPOA. Washington's proposal was mostly either ignored by council members or rebutted through letters and statements, but it has added more tension to the relationship between Washington and its European allies. If Switzerland had been on the council at the time—even if it had attempted to stay neutral—Widmer argued, it would not have been exempt from a difficult political choice: displease Washington or lose its status as go-between for the United States and Iran.

Baeriswyl, though, is convinced that Switzerland could deal with similar matters on the council without hurting its relationship on one side or another. "Neutrality has never been neutral when it comes to law. It has never been neutral when we have made a commitment," she explained. "It is neutral in terms of we do not take sides in a conflict, except for humanitarian law and international law. That is also true when it comes to the JCPOA." When it came to the Security Council and the JCPOA, she said, "there was a huge unity, and I would expect Switzerland not to be an exception to that."

Even if Switzerland doesn't have much convincing to do with fellow member states because it is running unopposed, the public relations efforts continue. It may take more than raclette and chocolate to convince every canton in the diverse country, but despite some pushback, the "benefits [of being on the council] outweigh the risks," Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis concluded in June.

It is a rite of passage for any U.N. member state to sit on the council and indicates real engagement internationally. But only time will tell if the risks were worth the reward.

[China] One year in, was the China trade deal worth it? (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 4:49 PM, Daniel De Petris, 394K, Neutral]

Friday marks the one-year anniversary of one of President Trump's most significant agreements: the "phase one" trade deal with China.

Addressing a crowd of company executives, trade representatives, and lawmakers in the East Room of the White House on that day, Trump was as giddy as can be. "Today, we take a momentous step," Trump told the audience, "one that has never been taken before with China — toward a future of fair and reciprocal trade, as we sign phase one of the historic trade deal between the United States and China."

Twelve months removed from that signing ceremony, the trade deal with Beijing hasn't lived up to the administration's expectations.

While the Chinese have made some improvements on opening their market to U.S. financial firms and credit card companies, the additional tens of billions of dollars in goods that China promised to import from the U.S. has lagged.

The 91-page agreement may have been full of legalese, but the core was pretty straightforward: The U.S. would lessen the tariffs on certain Chinese products in exchange

for Beijing purchasing more U.S. goods and introducing structural reforms into its economy. Over time, the concept went, U.S. and Chinese trade negotiators would return to the negotiating table to hammer out a more comprehensive agreement.

The results of the deal thus far have been a mixed bag. According to tracking from the Peterson Institute of International Economics, China agreed to purchase approximately \$159 billion in U.S. goods by the end of 2020. The Chinese, however, are nowhere near that goal, one the majority of trade officials and analysts largely wrote off as aspirational.

Back in the real world, China's total purchases were roughly half of what the U.S. hoped to see at this time. Total U.S. exports to China in 2020 added up to \$110 billion, only \$4 billion more than the previous year. While U.S. imports of Chinese goods were reduced by 12.8% between 2019 and 2020, most of this can be chalked up to the coronavirus, which shocked global trade across the board. The overall U.S. trade deficit with China clocked in at just north of \$283.5 billion, and in July 2020, the monthly deficit reentered pre-deal levels.

While Chinese purchase levels aren't up to par, it would be unfair to overlook the benefits of the trade deal. U.S. credit card companies are finally beginning to enter the vast Chinese market after years of pushback from Beijing. Mastercard got the go-ahead from Chinese officials one month after the deal was inked. In June 2020, American Express was given approval to set up shop on Chinese soil.

The biggest achievement of the U.S.-China trade deal, however, may not have to do with trade at all. At a time when Washington and Beijing are increasingly drifting apart, and to the delight of the Peter Navarros of the world, the trade agreement is preserving some mode of communication between the world's two economic superpowers. U.S. and Chinese officials who negotiated the pact continue to hold periodic meetings about implementation, which points back to the days when the two nations still considered each other "frenemies" rather than opponents in a long, brutal, geopolitical boxing match.

With the U.S. and China slapping restrictions on one another's technology, poking each other in the eye over issues such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, and skipping meetings about subjects that should not be controversial (like preventing military de-escalation in the Pacific), the communication channels provided by the "phase one" deal have proven to be more important as time goes on.

Overall, the Trump administration was likely anticipating more economic dividends from its trade talks with the Chinese, but look on the bright side: It wasn't a total flop.

[North Korea] North Korea's theater-of-fear submarine nuclear weapon (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Tom Rogan, 2164K, Neutral]

North Korea on Friday unveiled what it says is the fifth iteration of its Pukguksong-class submarine-launched ballistic missile. Kim Jong Un hopes his display will pressure the Biden administration into early concessions.

Still, when we look beneath the surface of this performance, it becomes clear that Kim is playing a weaker hand than he presents.

The North Korean leader's first challenge is that his submarine-launched ballistic missile capability is still in its early infancy. The North Koreans have not yet successfully tested one under battle conditions. Moreover, most weapons system analysts believe that the Pukguksong-5 is unlikely to have a range of more than 2,500 kilometers. That might sound like a lot, but it's actually very low in comparison to the ones deployed with the U.S. and Russian navies, which have effective ranges of more than 10,000 kilometers.

Another problem for Kim is his lack of a submarine force capable of delivering the submarine-launched ballistic missiles against Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, or the U.S. West Coast. The nuclear submarine on which these missiles will be embarked isn't exactly a gem of technological advancement. Instead, it is an adaptation of the 1950s-era Soviet Romeo-class diesel-powered submarines. It will be extremely vulnerable to detection by U.S. sonar and other sensor systems that populate the western Pacific Ocean, the Yellow Sea, and the Sea of Japan. The moment this submarine left port, it would be shadowed by U.S. nuclear attack submarines. Probably more than one. The North Koreans wouldn't know those submarines were there unless and until they rose to their launch depth, which is shallower than that of other ballistic submarines. Then, they would be destroyed. Even a launch close to North Korea toward a U.S. military base on Okinawa would be very difficult to pull off. Top line: If the United States can detect the Russian Borei and Khabarovsk submarines, and it can, it can detect Kim's submarine.

His soaring rhetoric aside, Kim is aware of these limitations.

The dictator might be rotund, but he is not stupid. In turn, this submarine-launched ballistic missile is ultimately designed not for war or strategic deterrence but for the same purpose as Kim's new multiwarhead ICBM: to spark American civilian fear. Kim wants Americans to be afraid and to pressure the Biden administration into making concessions. Equally important, he wants to put Xi Jinping in a position to leverage U.S. concessions in return for Beijing's influence on North Korea. In recent weeks, China has further relaxed its enforcement of sanctions against North Korea. Xi knows that the Biden administration will see the U.S. intelligence reporting to know what he is up to but will also hope that Biden chooses to appease Beijing in response.

The appropriate U.S. strategy to deal with Kim and Xi thus remains the familiar realist one. First, the offer of a deal that balances North Korea's ICBM disarmament to its retention of a limited number of nuclear warheads. Next, the dangling of new trade and sanctions against Pyongyang and Beijing in support of that objective.

[Mexico] Can Mexico force the US to vaccinate migrant workers against Covid-19? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:42 PM, Matt Rivers, 7975K, Neutral]

Mexico wants the US to vaccinate all Mexican migrant workers currently working in the United States — and it says Trump's own signature trade deal requires it.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Marcelo Ebrard told reporters this week that under the terms of the recently enacted United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), millions of migrant workers should receive Covid-19 vaccines.

"It is a responsibility of each of the two countries to guarantee that all workers, independent of their immigration status, receive the vaccine," said Ebrard, referring to both documented and undocumented immigrants.

The issue came front and center after remarks by Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts last week appeared to suggest that undocumented migrant workers in the state's myriad meatpacking plants, would not be eligible to receive the vaccine.

Ricketts came under fierce and immediate criticism for the remarks, with advocates saying that migrants both documented and undocumented are essential workers, and play an indispensable part in putting food on American tables.

Ricketts later backed away from the remarks, saying immigration status would not be checked prior to receiving a vaccine. His office did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

Migrants workers are a critical part of industries ranging from agriculture to construction. However, there remains no national US policy of vaccinating migrant workers, as each state sets its own rules.

As a result, Mexico has not dropped the issue, leading to Ebrard's comments this week where he argued two articles in the USMCA require the US to protect foreign workers from the coronavirus.

The first is Article 23.3, point 2, which reads in part, "Each Party shall adopt and maintain statutes and regulations, and practices thereunder, governing acceptable conditions of...occupational safety and health."

He also cited Article 23.8, which holds that all parties must ensure migrant workers are protected under labor laws---whether they are citizens or not.

The articles cited are vague, though, and experts say if the US doesn't want to do this, it doesn't have to.

"There is very little bite in terms of enforcement," said Monica de Bolle, a Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute of International Economics. "There isn't really any way the Mexicans use what's written in the agreement...to force the US to vaccinate migrant workers."

De Bolle says the USMCA has weaker dispute resolution provisions than its predecessor NAFTA. Taking such a dispute to the World Trade Organization is also highly unlikely and would be unprecedented.

Mexico could stop allowing its nationals to go to the US as migrant workers, potentially crippling numerous crucial supply chains. However, that is highly unlikely, given the significance of that foreign-earned income so many Mexican families struggling to stay afloat.

Despite Mexico's lack of recourse, though, Ebrard's claims could signal a short to medium-

term strategy.

"Mexico know its current position is weak, but perhaps they are hoping the Biden administration will be much more open to that kind of demand than the Trump administration would be," said de Bolle.

Drawing a line in the sand now lets the incoming administration — which is already expected to be friendlier to immigrants — know that for Mexico, this is an important issue that should be addressed early on in the new term.

"In a country that is currently experiencing an epidemic that is completely out of control, from a labor protections perspective it makes absolute sense that Mexico would demand something like this," said de Bolle.

Coronavirus News

China Stonewalls WHO Investigators (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [1/15/2021 1:19 PM, Yuichiro Kakutani, 101K, Negative]

The Chinese government barred the entry of two investigators who are part of a World Health Organization team tasked with finding the origins of the coronavirus.

On Monday, Beijing granted permission to 15 WHO scientists to enter Wuhan—where the deadly virus first emerged—only to stonewall researchers upon their arrival. The regime barred entry to two of the scientists, claiming they tested positive for coronavirus antibodies, and required the rest of the team to quarantine for two weeks, according to a Thursday tweet by the WHO. The international organization said that all members had "multiple negative PCR and antibody tests for COVID-19 in their home countries prior to traveling."

The Chinese government has repeatedly stymied efforts by the WHO and other international observers to conduct independent investigations into the pandemic's origin in China. The country imposed economic sanctions on Australia after the country called for an international investigation and has refused to allow any foreign scientists to enter Wuhan for months.

The Chinese government has long tried to dismiss concrete evidence that the coronavirus pandemic started in Wuhan. Its top diplomats and propagandists have instead promoted a wide range of conspiracy theories, including a bizarre theory that the virus actually originated in a U.S. military lab.

"When did patient zero begin in [the United States]? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be the U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! [The United States] owe us an explanation," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted in March 2020.

Global immunisation: low-income countries rush to access Covid vaccine supply (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [1/15/2021 7:23 AM, Sarah Boseley, 4021K, Neutral]

There are triumphant scenes as lorries leave a vaccine plant in Pune, India, loaded with

boxes that will prevent thousands of deaths. Adar Poonawalla, the owner and chief executive of the Serum Institute of India, poses on the tailgate of a truck, making the most of his company's "proud and historic" moment as the potential saviour of the nation – and even a large chunk of the world.

Poonawalla's factory, the largest vaccine manufacturing complex in the world, is the best hope for immunisation for people in Africa and some low-income countries elsewhere – which could save them from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. The Serum Institute has been contracted to supply the UN-backed Covax initiative, which subsidises low-income countries, with 200m doses of Covid-19 vaccines with an option on 900m more.

For a heart-stopping moment last week, it seemed that vaccine nationalism within India might slam the door. On 4 January, just after the Serum Institute got approval from the Indian regulator for the vaccine – made under licence from AstraZeneca – Poonawalla was reported as saying there was a condition attached, which was that only India could have the vaccine for the time being.

The following day, he clarified the "confusion in the public domain" on Twitter, saying "exports of vaccines are permitted to all countries".

But the lorries are headed across India for now and the episode underlines the tension as every country with cash wades into the fight for vaccines, putting manufacturers under unprecedented pressure to deliver for them.

As affluent Europe and North America scramble to deploy the Covid vaccines they have pre-bought – amid accusations that immunisation programmes are too slow and the wrong people are getting the jabs – there has been not a single shot in the arm in many countries elsewhere.

Three vaccines have been approved in the west. Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are expensive and need long-term storage at -70C. Pfizer offered to sell the vaccine to South Africa at a 50% discounted price of \$10 a shot, but was told the cost was still prohibitive.

But Oxford/AstraZeneca's vaccine is stable at fridge temperatures of 2-8C and AstraZeneca has promised not to make a profit for the duration of the pandemic. It aims to provide 3bn doses this year, made in factories around the world under licence. It is the mainstay of the Covax initiative, which has now bought a total of 1.97bn doses of four different vaccines to distribute when they become available. The AstraZeneca vaccine accounts for most of it.

The Serum Institute has promised to make 100m doses for Covax of the AstraZeneca vaccine and a further 100m of the Novavax jab – if and when that is approved. Covax has an option on a further 900m doses of one or the other of those vaccines.

Deliveries could start as early as February, said a spokesperson for Gavi, the vaccine alliance which is a partner in Covax.

"We anticipate being able to provide each participating economy with the first tranche – enough to protect approximately 3% of the population – in the first half of 2021. This process could begin as early as February, pending favourable regulatory outcomes and the

readiness of health systems and national regulatory systems in individual participating economies.

"In terms of which vaccines will be rolled out to which countries, as well as timeframes, we hope to be able to share more on that very soon."

Seven countries have now given emergency authorisation to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine or the Serum Institute version: the UK, India, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico and Morocco. The Carlos Slim Foundation in Mexico is licensed by AstraZeneca to supply 150m doses to Latin America. These countries could take delivery right away.

But other countries without a regulatory body will be waiting for the World Health Organization to give the green light, which is said to need data from the Serum Institute. In what sounded like a nudge, the director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said on 11 January it looked forward "to Serum Institute of India submitting full datasets for rapid assessment so WHO can determine whether we can recommend their AstraZeneca vaccine for international use".

The AstraZeneca vaccine will also be manufactured by SKbioscience in Korea, BioKangtai in China, Siam BioScience and the local conglomerate SCG in Thailand and CSL Behring in Australia. The Fiocruz Institute in Brazil has signed a deal for 100m doses of the Serum Institute vaccine, which it will put into vials in a process known as "fill and finish".

In an attempt to queue-jump, the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, wrote to the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, on 9 January. "To enable the immediate implementation of our national immunisation programme, I would appreciate ... the supply to Brazil, with the possible urgency and without jeopardising the Indian vaccination programme, of 2m doses," Bolsonaro wrote.

Brazil is also now buying 10m doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine. It is late to the party. At the very end of last year, Argentina took delivery of 300,000 doses and has been immunising healthcare workers. The Russians claim it is 92% effective, but the data has not been published.

A few middle-income countries have started vaccination programmes using the Pfizer/BioNTech jab. Mexico took delivery of 3,000 doses in December. Chile and Costa Rica have also started using the vaccine. Mexican officials have been to talk to their counterparts in Argentina about buying Sputnik.

Chinese vaccines are also beginning to be used. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates both gave emergency approval to the vaccine made by Sinopharm in December, which the manufacturers say is 86% efficacious, although – as with the Russian vaccine – the full data has not been made public. Turkey has bought the Chinese vaccine, and Morocco, Egypt and Nigeria have all been in discussions.

There are other promising jabs on the way. Novavax aims to make 2bn doses for global use – but has not yet finished its trials. Covax has an option on 500m doses of the Janssen vaccine, which has the advantage of being one shot, but although results from phase 3

trials are expected within weeks, there are said to be manufacturing delays. It could be a major player, however.

"Johnson & Johnson aims to provide global access to Janssen's Covid-19 vaccine candidate, if proven to be safe and effective. We have committed to producing 1bn vaccine doses a year starting in 2021 and have expedited manufacturing scale-up to reach this goal," said a spokesperson. "We are leveraging a global supply base for our vaccine candidate, including facilities in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa."

David Salisbury, associate fellow of Chatham House's global health programme and director of immunisation at the Department of Health until 2013, said that even if the amount of vaccine distributed across the world increased, not all countries would be able to run vaccination programmes for everyone who needed it.

"There's a huge gap between a desire to have vaccine and political statements that your country will have vaccine – and actually having contracts either in place yourself or on your behalf and the ability to pay for it – and much more, the ability to implement it," he said.

The vaccination against Covid-19 is not like running childhood vaccination programmes, but more similar to the effort to immunise against the seasonal flu. Most low-income countries do not have enough clinics or databases to tell them how to access those at risk.

Countries that get enough vaccine for 20% of the population, which is what Covax hopes to provide eventually, will not be able to stop transmission. They will be in an "endless cycle", said Salisbury – vaccinating health workers and those most at risk of dying, with more people getting older and moving into the at-risk groups all the time.

The coronavirus is not going away, especially in low income countries. It could be argued the vaccines are just a temporary fix.

"Predicting the future for vaccine campaigns in all parts of the world is something many of us are already thinking about. Will this become institutionalised as an annual vaccination programme for industrialised countries? Unless this virus goes away I think the answer is yes," said Salisbury. "But what will the appetite be in low-income countries for resources that are already under huge pressure to be used for prevention of coronavirus?"

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:07 PM, Betsy McKay, Neutral]

A highly transmissible coronavirus variant that was first identified in the U.K. is spreading rapidly in the U.S. and likely to become the dominant strain circulating domestically in March unless steps are taken to slow it, federal health authorities said.

Health officials called Friday for increasing measures like wearing masks and social distancing to curb the spread of the more contagious variant. Otherwise, it will intensify the squeeze on already-overwhelmed hospitals.

A year after a new coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China, the pandemic it spawned

has reached a perilous point. There are now vaccines to stop it, but their rollout in the U.S. has been slow and new, faster-spreading variants of the virus are now threatening surges in illness. The variant, known as B.1.1.7, had infected at least 76 people in 12 states as of Jan. 13 and threatens to worsen the pandemic in the U.S., the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report modeling the strain's potential impact.

"We expect these numbers to rise in the coming weeks," Jay Butler, the CDC's deputy director for infectious diseases, said in an interview.

The variant could fuel exponential growth in new cases, becoming the dominant strain by late March if more public-health measures aren't put in place to stop it, said Michael Johansson, a biologist and modeler for the CDC's Covid-19 response.

While the new variant doesn't appear to cause more severe illness, it is more contagious than the currently dominating strain of the coronavirus, the CDC said. That means it could lead to more hospitalizations and deaths by infecting more people overall, the agency said, exacerbating pressures on health-care systems that are already at or near capacity. U.S. hospitalizations totaled 128,947 as of Thursday, the lowest level since Jan. 4, according to the Covid Tracking Project. Intensive-care units, though, remain under stress, with 23,891 patients. The number of Covid-19 patients in ICUs across the country has surpassed 23,000 every day since Dec. 29, according to the Covid Tracking Project.

The U.S. daily death toll again surpassed 3,000 on Thursday, with more than 3,700 fatalities recorded, according to Johns Hopkins University. So far, more than 390,000 deaths in the U.S. have been attributed to Covid-19.

The U.S. reported more than 229,000 new coronavirus cases for Thursday, the 10th consecutive day the figure has topped 200,000, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The U.S. has a short window of time to step up measures such as social distancing and wearing masks to prevent B.1.1.7 from spreading widely, the CDC said. Such precautions would also buy time for vaccination campaigns to start having an effect on transmission rates, the agency said.

People should be wearing masks, keeping at least 6 feet apart from others, avoiding crowds, washing hands and getting vaccinated, the CDC said. While the new variant is believed to be 50% more transmissible than the currently dominant strain in the U.S., agency experts said they believe the existing prevention strategies work. "If you're not wearing a mask or if you're getting sort of lax about it because you're getting tired of wearing the mask, I really encourage you to wear the mask," Dr. Butler said.

He urged the same stamina in avoiding gatherings with people outside one's own household: "This is not the time to let up by any means."

"It doesn't mean that businesses need to be shut down or things like that, but it does mean that we have to take steps to be able to protect ourselves and limit our contacts with others," Dr. Butler said. The CDC also warned health-care systems to prepare for an even greater surge and said that people who don't have Covid-19 symptoms but are at risk of

infection should be tested.

Covid-19 vaccines should work against the new variant, according to Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc., which make the two shots authorized for use in the U.S. Researchers are continuing to study that matter. However, the spread of the new variant means that about 80% of the population would need to be vaccinated to stop Covid-19, CDC scientists said. That is about 10 percentage points higher than some federal officials originally anticipated. Reported vaccinations appear to be picking up speed, with 11.1 million total doses administered as of Thursday morning, including 1.3 million second doses, according to the CDC.

At the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, intensive-care unit beds are filling up with Covid-19 patients. Richard Medford, associate chief medical informatics officer, said the university has just started sequencing Covid-19 samples to find out how widely the new variant is circulating in the Dallas area.

"I am worried that if you walk around you can see people aren't necessarily wearing their masks properly," Dr. Medford said. "The potential of this variant to take hold in our population is definitely concerning."

The CDC is monitoring for other new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus to appear in the U.S., Dr. Butler said. The agency recently issued an order requiring all international air passengers to the U.S. to test negative for Covid-19 within three days before their flights.

The CDC and other health entities are increasing genomic surveillance to better detect cases of the new variant. The agency established a new SARS-CoV-2 strain surveillance program in November and is working with other health agencies to boost monitoring efforts.

Laboratories are now sequencing about 6,000 positive SARS-CoV-2 samples a week in the U.S., said Gregory Armstrong, director of the CDC's advanced molecular detection program. More than 200,000 people are currently testing positive every day in the U.S.

"We think that's more than we need to pick up new and emerging variants, but we've got the capacity to increase that," Dr. Armstrong said.

Near East & North Africa

Abbas announces first Palestinian elections in 15 years (Axios)

Axios [1/15/2021 2:11 PM, Barak Ravid, 526K, Neutral]

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas published a decree on Friday announcing the dates for parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority.

Why it matters: This is the first time in 15 years that such a decree has been published. The last presidential elections took place in 2005, with Abbas winning, and the last parliamentary elections took place in 2006, with Hamas winning.

Driving the news: The parliamentary elections are scheduled for on May 22 and the presidential elections for July 31 — though those plans could still fall through.

Abbas met today with the chairman of the central election committee and instructed him to make preparations for elections in the West Bank, in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem.

Last week, the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, told Abbas in a letter that the movement would agree to hold elections as part of a national reconciliation process.

Flashback: After Hamas won the 2006 elections, the Palestinian Authority deteriorated into a deep political crisis between Hamas and Fatah, Abbas' party.

The U.S. and other world powers announced they would not cooperate with Hamas until it recognized Israel, denounced terrorism and committed to previous agreements with Israel.

Hamas refused to adhere to those conditions and continues to reject them to this day. The U.S., U.K., EU and other Western governments still boycott Hamas, and the U.S. designates the group as a terror organization.

In 2007, a civil war broke out in the Gaza Strip and Hamas took over the area by force.

The big picture: Abbas' announcement comes after numerous failed attempts at reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and after several plans to hold elections fell through.

Abbas, who is 85 and in the 15th year of his four-year term, is not very popular. Recent public opinion polls indicate he could lose to a Hamas candidate.

What's next: Many analysts are skeptical about whether this election will actually take place.

One of the main stumbling blocs is East Jerusalem. If Israel doesn't allow voting there, the election could be canceled.

[Iran] Diary shows how quest for love landed Navy vet in Iran jail (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:52 AM, Eric Tucker, 2164K, Neutral]

Michael White's long-anticipated trip to Iran was already a disappointment. The love interest he'd gone to visit had stopped seeing him and he'd idled away hours in his hotel room by himself.

Then it got much worse.

On his final day, the car he and his tour guide were in was abruptly cut off by another vehicle with a passenger frantically waving his hands at them. He recalls three men getting out, one with a video camera, forcing him into their car and driving him to an office for questioning. From there, it was on to jail, where orange-tinted water spewed from the sink and shower and prison-issued dirty sandals proved useful in shoving sewer roaches in the bathroom into the toilet.

A handwritten journal he wrote behind bars — a copy of which was provided exclusively to

The Associated Press — offers new details about his ordeal in Iran, which ended last June when the State Department secured the Navy veteran's release. In it, he catalogues physical abuse from his jailers and taunts from fellow inmates while held on dubious allegations. He writes tenderly of the woman he visited even while likening himself to a mouse lured into a trap. And he brands himself a "political hostage," held on pretextual charges to secure concessions from the U.S.

Seven months after his release, White is trying to reassemble his life in Mexico, unsure what comes next but eager to share his story.

"I don't want the government of Iran to think that, 'Oh, Mike White's out of here, he's going away, he's going to be quiet,'" he said in a recent interview. "That's not going to happen. Believe me, if only you understood the fear and anger inside of me as a result of what they did."

The peculiar saga began in July 2018 when White flew to Iran to visit a woman he'd met years earlier in a Yahoo chat room and with whom he hoped to rekindle an on-off relationship that included two prior visits to the country. But the bond turned sour on the most recent trip when the woman stopped seeing him and encouraged him to return home earlier than he'd planned.

His 156-page manuscript is told from his own perspective with details that are vivid though sometimes difficult to corroborate. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment. But according to the document, the men who arrested him pulled him into their car and drove him, blindfolded and handcuffed, to a building for questioning. His interrogator asked about his relationship with the woman, seeming to know details of her family, and telling White, vaguely, that some in Iran were concerned about his intentions there.

He was taken to what he calls the "intel jail," where he says he was given no food for days, nor blanket or pillow even as the vent blew frigid air. The conditions were compounded, he says, by his cancer diagnosis that had resulted in chemotherapy treatment and hospital stays in the months before he left for Iran.

He was repeatedly interrogated over several months about why he'd come to Iran, as officials suspicious that he may be a spy handed him questionnaires focused on his military background and any intelligence service connections. At one point, he writes, he fabricated a tale about being tasked to gather intelligence by an acquaintance he said was with the National Security Agency, figuring that interrogators wanted to hear something like that before setting him free.

"I was just saying something out of desperation, doing whatever to hopefully get them to just cut me loose," he said in the interview. "It turned out it wasn't really helpful at all."

The truth was more mundane, he says, albeit more difficult to comprehend: He was a "dumb American" pursuing love.

White's decisions were undoubtedly risky: His Iran visits came despite that country's hostile relationship with the U.S. He says he and his girlfriend got together in 2014 in Iran's Kish

Island, even though retired FBI agent Robert Levinson vanished from there years earlier.

But White, 48, who grew up in Southern California and was honorably discharged from the Navy, says he's long been drawn to Iran's culture and people and had felt safe there, connecting through social media to a network of acquaintances. He'd once thought of law school or entering politics, but at the time of a 2018 trip he hoped would recharge his life, he was working as a Job Corps resident adviser.

He struggles to reconcile his affection for the woman he perceived as his girlfriend — "Her voice melts me with its softness and tenderness. My heart flutters when I see her," he writes — with the suspicion that he was somehow set up during his visit. His Instagram page reflects that ambivalence, with photos posted this year of them together.

"Yet, sadly, I was lured into a trap, like a mouse trap. I was the mouse," he writes. "I followed my heart instead of my head and missed signs."

In jail, he writes, he was once awakened by a guard dumping a bucket of cold water on him. Another time, an interrogator snapped a whip on his toes as he completed a questionnaire. After White tossed water on a surveillance camera to get the guards' attention, they pummeled him in the ribs and threw him to the floor, he writes.

He was relocated to another prison where some inmates tauntingly referred to him as "The Great Satan." One placed a cockroach inside his pants pocket as a prank.

At the suggestion of a prisoner he befriended, he began a handwritten manuscript, writing it under the cover of playing Sudoku to hide it from the guards. He gave the pages to the prisoner who he says was able to smuggle it out through a cousin.

White ultimately faced various charges, including posting private images, collaborating with the U.S. against Iran and disrespecting Iran's supreme leader. He was sentenced to 10 years but calls the charges a pretext to "extort" concessions.

He insists he's not a spy and never posted any inappropriate photos of his girlfriend. He writes in his manuscript that he has indeed made social media posts about Iran but denies having disparaged Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An unexpected development came last spring as the coronavirus ravaged Iran. White, who was himself infected, was among thousands of prisoners released on medical furlough, permitted to live freely in Tehran in the Swiss Embassy's custody while required to remain in Iran.

The State Department, which has maintained that White was wrongfully detained, arranged for his release in June, flying him back to the U.S. as part of a deal that spared additional prison time for an American-Iranian doctor convicted in the U.S. of sanctions violations.

In August, he visited the White House with other freed hostages and detainees to record a Republican National Convention segment praising the Trump administration. He sat beside President Donald Trump in a three-piece suit in an experience he says made him feel like a celebrity, though he recalls Trump not shaking his hand.

"He was like, well, you know, if the media sees that, they're going to be flipping out of because of the corona(virus) thing," White said.

White isn't sure what comes next. He had contemplated opening a Persian restaurant, but isn't sure he'll do that now. He likens his life to the aftermath of a city-flattening hurricane.

"I'm just picking up the pieces, regrouping and trying to figure out how I'm going to move forward and stuff."

[Iraq] Iraq oil minister sees oil at \$60 a barrel in second quarter (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 4:29 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Iraqi Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar expects oil prices to reach around \$60 in the second quarter of 2021, he said in an interview with Iraq's Sharqiya TV on Friday.

The minister added that in past meetings he had asked OPEC members to allow Iraq to postpone compensating for earlier overproduction and this had helped to "bring back hope to Iraq's economy".

"Iraq will stay committed to OPEC decisions and compensate its overproduction", he said in the interview.

Abdul Jabbar said Saudi Arabia's voluntary output cut of 1 million bpd helped to prevent oil market from collapsing.

On Friday, Brent fell \$1.32, or 2.3%, to settle at \$55.10 a barrel and U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude CLc1 settled down \$1.21, or 2.3%, at \$52.36 a barrel.

[Iraq] Iraq says it will not negotiate with OPEC+ its overproduction cut share (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Ahmed Rasheed, 2164K, Neutral]

Iraq's oil minister affirmed Iraq's commitment to the OPEC+ reduction decision and the compensation of its overproduction share, he said in a statement on Saturday.

The minister added that Iraq has no intention to negotiate with OPEC+ members regarding its oil production share or compensation of overproduction.

Europe and Eurasia

Turkish leader eyes favorably Greek PM meet amid tensions (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 12:45 PM, Staff, 13480K, Neutral]

Turkey's president indicated on Friday that he would be open to easing tensions with neighboring Greece by floating the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with the Greek prime minister following months of saber-rattling over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters after prayers in Istanbul that he would "positively" consider a meeting that he said Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis

had requested.

Erdogan said the two countries' foreign ministers had met and bilateral talks were ongoing. "So we said we can take the steps for talks between our special representatives and then between the Prime Minister and myself could happen."

Relations between the neighbors and nominal NATO allies hit new lows over the summer due to a dispute over maritime borders and energy rights, bringing them to the brink of war.

Turkey dispatched a research vessel, escorted by warships, to search for hydrocarbon resources in disputed waters. Greece answered by sending its own frigates, claiming Turkey had violated its sovereign rights.

Earlier this week, both countries announced the resumption of exploratory talks on Jan. 25. The talks would be the latest in a long-running process of negotiations between Greece and Turkey that aim to improve their often testy relations.

A Greek government official said the Greek side viewed the possibility of a meeting between the two leaders as positive, if the current positive climate in relations continued. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the issue.

The official said the prime minister has repeatedly stated his desire for open channels of communication with Turkey at the highest level.

In December, the European Union gave the green light for the expansion of sanctions against Turkey over its exploration of gas reserves in waters claimed by EU members Greece and Cyprus.

Though Ankara has repeatedly said sanctions would not deter Turkey from defending its energy rights, Erdogan has expressed a readiness to put frayed relations with the EU "back on track" and called on them display the same determination.

Erdogan spoke with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte Friday, thanking him for his support within the EU. "I believe Italy will direct the European Union to a prudent and just attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean," the Turkish president said.

[Germany] Do not break with Merkel, Bavarian leader warns before CDU leadership vote (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:45 PM, Paul Carrel, 11261K, Neutral]

Breaking with Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies is not the way to win Germany's federal election in September, the leader of her Bavarian sister party said as her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) prepares to elect a new leader on Saturday.

Merkel, who steps down after September's elections, is heading into the last months of her tenure with her conservative CDU squabbling over how to position the party following 15 years of rule marked by her instinct to compromise.

Markus Soeder, leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU's Bavarian sister party, said it would be a mistake to break with her popular brand of politics, which is consensus orientated and centrist.

"Anyone who thinks they can win the Bundestag elections by breaking with Angela Merkel is fundamentally mistaken," Soeder told the Funke media group in comments published on Friday. Her legacy must be preserved and combined with new ideas, he said.

Friedrich Merz, a former Merkel rival who is contesting the CDU leadership, wants to shift the party to the right.

Merz is running against Armin Laschet, premier of the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and Norbert Roettgen, a foreign policy expert. Both are more centrist than Merz.

Soeder has signalled his support for Laschet, but may take on the role of conservative candidate to succeed Merkel if the winner of Saturday's CDU vote flops.

A survey by pollster Forsa for news network RND published on Friday showed 29% of voters would back Roettgen for the CDU leadership, 21% Merz and 19% Laschet. The leader will be elected at Saturday's digital congress by 1,001 party delegates.

Roettgen has suggested that if elected CDU leader he could back Soeder, who leads among conservatives in voter opinion polls, to run as chancellor candidate for their CDU/CSU alliance, the Union.

On the chancellor candidacy, Soeder told the Funke group: "The CDU, as the bigger sister, has the right of initiative. In the end, however, we decide together."

[Germany] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 18,678 - RKI (Reuters)
Reuters [1/16/2021 12:16 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany increased by 18,678 to 2,019,636, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for infectious diseases showed on Saturday. The reported death toll rose by 980 to 45,974, the tally showed.

[Greece] Greece: Lockdown extended indefinitely but stores to reopen (AP)
AP [1/15/2021 5:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Greece's government has extended nationwide lockdown measures indefinitely but says retail stores and malls will reopen Monday with strict entrance limits.

Civil protection chief Nikos Hardalias said Friday that a nightly curfew, domestic travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders will all remain in effect after being first imposed in early November.

Retail stores, closed since Jan. 3, will reopen with limited entrance and for customers who have filled out permission notices to leave their homes that are usually made available by cellphone message.

The lockdown was imposed on Nov. 7 to fight a surge in cases and deaths that has eased in recent weeks.

Speaking in parliament ahead of Friday's announcement, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said each month of lockdown was costing the Greek economy more than 3 billion euros (\$3.6 billion).

"I want to be absolutely clear, every opening of economic activity harbors the danger of an increase in (COVID-19) cases," Mitsotakis said. "As long as this increase in cases is moderate and controlled and as long as it doesn't put pressure on the health system, it is something we can bear. These are the delicate balances we must find."

Primary schools and kindergartens reopened this week, but high school lessons are being held online only.

The seven-day rolling average of new deaths per 100,000 population in Greece was at 0.34 on Jan. 13, down from 0.94 in early December. The figure is currently at 0.77 in the European Union and 1.01 in the United States, according to data compiled from national health agencies.

[United Kingdom] England Isn't Listening to Johnson's Lockdown Orders Any More (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 1:00 AM, Emily Ashton, Neutral]

People across England are about to be hit with a deluge of new government adverts on television, radio and social media containing one blunt demand: Stay at home.

It's a familiar message -- and that may be why the public seems to be shrugging it off.

The data shows Britons are far more active during the current third national lockdown than when the first emergency "stay at home" order was given last spring. There's more traffic on the roads, more people on trains and more shoppers making trips out.

Government officials worry too many are flouting the rules as Prime Minister Boris Johnson urges the public to try harder to avoid spreading coronavirus. With the National Health Service buckling under the weight of Covid-19 patients, the U.K. already has the highest death toll in Europe at more than 87,000. While there are early signs that infection rates are starting to fall in places like London, and one person in 20 has now been vaccinated, officials warn life still might not be back to normal by spring.

Images of a state health-care system collapsing would risk inflicting further huge damage to Johnson's standing, with public confidence in the government's handling of the crisis already severely dented since it began. "We are now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queuing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," Johnson said on Friday. "This is not the time for the slightest relaxation of our national resolve and our individual efforts."

Last week, schools and businesses were shut and people were told to stay home for work if they possibly could, and to avoid all journeys unless they were essential. Despite the crisis,

traffic on U.K. roads was still running at 63% of pre-pandemic levels on Jan. 11, government figures showed. That's almost double the rate at the beginning of the first lockdown in early April, when traffic fell to 35% of normal levels.

Public transport use is also up, with four times the number of rail passengers this week than at the start of the spring lockdown. Despite the closure of non-essential stores, more people are out shopping this time, too, according to research firm Springboard.

Schools are open only for children of key workers but are reporting much higher attendance levels than in the spring. Latest government figures show that 14% of pupils in state-funded schools were in on Jan. 11, compared to an overall level of just 2% in April. Given the stark threat facing the country, why are people going out more than they did when the pandemic first hit? Is there more rule-breaking, is the public just bored, or are the rules themselves not tough enough? The picture is not unique to the U.K. Elsewhere in Europe, people have grown tired of wave after wave of restrictions. What makes England different is that even from the start, the messaging was mixed from a government that was reluctant to curb people's liberties.

In Spain and Italy, which imposed harsh lockdowns from the beginning, entire families became accustomed to living with life-altering restrictions. In Madrid and Milan, everyone wears a mask outside, and children must wear them at school. In London, face coverings outdoors are still optional.

Back at the beginning of the pandemic, England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty warned that citizens would "understandably get fatigued" with the restrictions. But in recent surveys people insist they are still following the rules. Stephen Reicher, a U.K. government adviser and professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews, dismissed the concept of lockdown "fatigue" as a way for the authorities to shift the blame onto the public.

"Some of the rules and the messaging around them may be the problem," he wrote in the British Medical Journal. For one thing, during the summer ministers encouraged people to go back to work and gave them discounts to eat in restaurants.

Some of the restrictions do appear to be more relaxed now compared to the start of the first lockdown: Nurseries are open to all children, there are childcare and support bubbles, and people can meet up with someone else for exercise. Restaurants are also open -- albeit only for takeaway meals. Susan Michie, a professor of health psychology at University College London and a government adviser, said "having more things open sends a mixed message" and makes people doubt that the country is "at crisis point." "On the one hand they are saying 'stay at home,' on the other hand they are allowing universities, nurseries, places of worship, non-essential businesses to stay open," she said.

But increased activity could also be down to a change in attitude toward the virus some 11 months into the pandemic. Robert Dingwall, professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, said people were understandably frightened in the spring but it's now become "normalized, a routine hazard." He said that for many people who hadn't fallen ill with the virus, there was "more and more discrepancy" between their everyday experiences and the government press conferences reporting countless deaths. The Cabinet Office said the government had "set out clear instructions to the public about what they need to do" to

suppress the disease and the "public has made enormous sacrifices, to prevent our NHS from becoming overwhelmed and help save lives."

But senior government ministers have confused the picture by offering different versions of the rules. Home Secretary Priti Patel said Thursday that people should exercise alone, even though the rules allow activity with a friend. Johnson himself was criticized for cycling in the Olympic Park in east London, 7 miles away from his Westminster home, despite guidelines saying people should stay in their local areas. In the end, it all comes back to the prime minister. A libertarian at heart, he has struggled from the start with the idea of curbing freedoms. In December he declared it would be "frankly inhuman" to ban people from gathering over Christmas, before being forced to do just that as the virus surged days later. Even now, Johnson can't quite bring himself to be definitive in his messaging. In a Twitter video on Friday, he addressed people planning to leave their homes to go out this weekend. "Please," he said. "Really, think twice."

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus sparks exodus of foreign-born people from U.K. (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [1/15/2021 8:53 PM, Chris Giles 1825K, Neutral]

Coronavirus has sparked an exodus of immigrants from the U.K. in what is likely to be the largest fall in Britain's population since the second world war, according to a statistical analysis of official data.

A blog, published on Thursday by the government-funded Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence, estimated that up to 1.3 million people born abroad left the U.K. between the third quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2020.

In London alone, almost 700,000 foreign-born residents have probably moved out, the authors of the blog calculated, leading to a potential 8% drop in the capital's population last year.

The study drew a clear link between the departure of so many foreign-born nationals and the high number of job losses in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality, which has typically relied on overseas workers.

"It seems that much of the burden of job losses during the pandemic has fallen on non-U.K. workers and that has manifested itself in return migration, rather than unemployment," the authors concluded.

Large changes in regional populations would make it difficult for the National Health Service to distribute COVID-19 vaccines fairly around Britain and may raise questions over how business will fill jobs traditionally taken by European migrants.

The picture is further complicated by post-Brexit immigration rules. These mean that European Union nationals who left the U.K. in the past year will need work visas to return and work in Britain. Those with settled status would be able to return to fill jobs, but new migrants would not.

The ESCoE's calculations assume that official data, published by the Office for National

Statistics, are flawed. The blog highlighted "hardly plausible" official statistics which showed employment of British-born people in London rising during the pandemic.

With officials unable to collect data in the usual way at airports and other transport hubs owing to the pandemic, the Office of National Statistics has faced severe difficulties in measuring migration numbers.

However, the agency has continued to measure employment trends during the pandemic through its labor force survey and has used this to form the basis of its regional population analysis.

Having found far fewer migrants to survey, especially in London, the ONS gave all the Londoners it surveyed much higher weights. This has resulted in the official figures showing the number of British-born employed Londoners rising sharply.

The blog by the ESCoE noted that the official figures show that the number of employed people in London and born in the U.K. grew by more than 250,000 in the year to the third quarter of 2020 with the total British-born population in the capital rising 440,000.

And yet the capital has been hit hardest by COVID-19 and has a high concentration of jobs in tourism, entertainment and hospitality, which have disappeared over the past year. The ONS figures showing a rise in British workers in London jobs did not remotely match other data such as benefit claimants in the capital or customs data from income tax records.

The authors of the study, Michael O'Connor and Jonathan Portes, said the only way to reconcile hard evidence of an employment crash in London with official figures suggesting a surge of U.K.-born employees was big problems in the ONS migration assumptions.

The ONS does not dispute the logic of the analysis and accepts anomalies being in its current estimates of employment and population. It blames these on difficulties of counting migration during the pandemic when its normal surveys have been suspended.

The agency added that it was working to transform its migration statistics and has promised an update early this year on its progress in improving them.

[United Kingdom] Johnson takes stand against 'cruel' Japanese whaling – The Telegraph (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 3:57 PM, Staff, Neutral]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is taking a stand against "cruel" Japanese whaling, The Telegraph newspaper said on Friday, after a minke whale became caught in fishing nets for 19 days before being killed by fishermen this week,

Drone footage of the trapped whale in the port of Taiji captured the world's attention and received flak from animal rights activists and environmentalists across the world.

"At a time when we are already seeing the tragic and irreversible destruction of our natural world, with the sea increasingly pumped full of plastics and climate change threatening entire ecosystems, it is more important than ever to take a stand against the cruel practice

of whaling," Johnson told the newspaper.

The Foreign Office is also raising the issue with counterparts in Japan, the report added.

A Japanese fleet caught whales in 2019 in the country's first commercial hunt in more than three decades, a move that aroused global condemnation.

Taiji is known for its annual dolphin hunt.

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Two COVID-19 cases on Australian Open flight, one locally transmitted case (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 9:46 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

Two coronavirus infections were reported on Saturday on a flight to the Australian Open, as the country recorded a single locally transmitted case and said a cluster appeared to have been contained.

The positive cases were recorded after the charter flight from Los Angeles landed in Melbourne, carrying players and their entourage for the tennis grand slam, according to online posts from two players.

Players on the flight now face two weeks of hotel quarantine and must to train indoors, instead of being allowed out for five hours training per day, part of conditions that allowed the event to go ahead, the newspaper reported.

The inbound infections came as states began to relax travel bans on signs an outbreak in the northern state of Queensland has been contained.

"Unfortunately we have been informed by the health authorities that two people on your flight AR7493 from LAX that arrived at 5.15am on Friday 15 January have returned positive COVID-19 PCR tests on arrival in Melbourne," said a message posted on social media by Mexico's Santiago Gonzalez, who is ranked 48 on the doubles circuit.

"From having 5 hours of training in a bubble to this ... (strict quarantine x 15 days). I will be showing you my workouts x Instagram (inside the room)," Uruguayan world number 68 Pablo Cuevas said on Twitter.

The news was first reported by The Age.

Australia has agreed to accept around 1,200 players, officials and staff for the major sporting event that is due to begin next month. Tennis and Victorian health officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The local case, in western Sydney, is likely linked a known cluster in New South Wales, the most populous state, which recorded 11 cases in hotel quarantine, contact tracers say.

Australia has halved the number of returning travellers that it will accept, to lower the risk of

highly infectious strains seeping into the community, as occurred at a site in Queensland two weeks ago.

Emirates Airline said Friday it would suspend flights between Dubai and Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane by early next week until further notice.

Queensland's chief health officer, Jeannette Young, told a news briefing there was "every chance we have contained this cluster" thanks to quick work, especially in the state capital Brisbane.

A two-week infection cycle has elapsed since a cleaner at a Brisbane hotel tested positive for the highly infectious coronavirus strain first detected in Britain, a sign health officials say suggests that efforts, including a three-day city wide lockdown, has stopped its spread.

As a result, Victoria and South Australia states will reopen borders to travellers from Brisbane within 24 hours, as long as they submit to coronavirus testing once they return.

Victoria may make a similar move in coming days with neighbouring New South Wales, given signals that it has also controlled an outbreak there that emerged before Christmas, said Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

Borders between Australia's two most populous states have been closed since Jan. 1.

Australia, which has logged 15 infections hotel quarantine, has been one of the world's most successful nations in managing the coronavirus spread, with about 28,700 infections and 909 deaths.

[China] China builds hospital in 5 days after surge in virus cases (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 2:20 AM, Joe McDonald, Neutral]

China on Saturday finished building a 1,500-room hospital for COVID-19 patients in five days to fight a surge in infections in a city south of Beijing, state media reported.

The hospital is one of six with a total of 6,500 rooms being built in Nangong in Hebei province, the Xinhua News Agency said. All are due to be completed within the next week.

China, which largely contained the spread of the coronavirus, has suffered hundreds of infections this month in Nangong and the Hebei provincial capital of Shijiazhuang, southwest of the Chinese capital.

A similar program of rapid hospital construction was launched by the ruling Communist Party at the start of the outbreak last year to set up isolation hospitals in Wuhan, the central city where the virus was first detected in late 2019. Nationwide, the National Health Commission reported 130 new confirmed cases — 90 of those in Hebei — in the 24 hours through midnight Friday.

There were 645 cases, two of them acquired abroad, being treated in Nangong and Shijiazhuang, according to Xinhua.

In Shijiazhuang, authorities have finished construction of one-third of the rooms in a planned 3,000-room coronavirus facility, state TV said Saturday.

More than 10 million people in Shijiazhuang underwent virus tests by late Friday, Xinhua said, citing a deputy mayor, Meng Xianghong. It said 247 locally transmitted cases were found.

Meanwhile, researchers sent by the World Health Organization are in Wuhan preparing to investigate the origins of the virus. The team, which arrived Thursday, was under a two-week quarantine but was due to talk with Chinese experts by video link.

The team's arrival was held up for months by diplomatic wrangling that prompted a rare public complaint by the head of the WHO.

That delay, and the secretive ruling party's orders to scientists not to talk publicly about the disease, have raised questions about whether Beijing might try to prevent discoveries that would hurt its self-proclaimed status as a leader in the anti-virus battle.

[China] China's Xi Looks to Take Advantage of a Strong Economic Hand (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 3:59 PM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

China arguably weathered the chaos of 2020 better than any other major power. In the months ahead, its leader, Xi Jinping, appears ready to press his advantage, taking on the new Biden administration and projecting a confident Communist Party in its centennial year. Mr. Xi and his lieutenants have struck a buoyant tone in recent weeks, trumpeting their professed success last year in containing the coronavirus and eliminating rural poverty. They have portrayed China as a responsible power, offering steady leadership amid a global economic pullback and rising geopolitical tensions that they blame on U.S. belligerence. Signs of a healthy recovery in the world's second-largest economy have given Mr. Xi a stronger hand in dealings with countries still struggling with the pandemic and its economic fallout.

While President-elect Joe Biden has signaled plans to rally multilateral efforts to check China on issues ranging from trade to human rights, Mr. Xi has sought to offset any U.S. pressure with his own diplomatic wins. Since Mr. Biden's electoral victory in November, China has anchored a new 15-nation Asia-Pacific trade pact and struck an investment deal with the European Union—overriding concerns from the incoming Biden administration. China nonetheless faces weighty challenges at home and abroad. Many nations are growing wary about the superpower's aggressive foreign policy. Its investment pact with Europe has yet to be ratified. And it must overcome the pandemic's long-term economic fallout and widening doubts about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines that officials have hoped can win global hearts and minds.

Beijing has shown no sign of backing down. In a reflection of its confidence, Mr. Xi's administration has asserted control along his country's periphery, launching mass arrests of opposition figures in Hong Kong this month, while flying high-frequency warplane sorties near the island democracy of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

"I think we're going to see a more defiant China," says Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Stanford University and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "A China that is not only more aggressive, but also feels more and more justified in its aggression." At the same time, China has expressed hope that Mr. Biden can usher in a calmer phase in bilateral relations, which have frayed dramatically as the Trump administration jostled with Beijing on trade, technology, the Covid-19 pandemic and a range of other issues.

In a recent state-media interview, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the Biden administration to "restore normalcy to bilateral relations" and pledged to shape an international environment that's favorable to China's interests. "The year 2021 will be of historic significance to China's national rejuvenation," he said.

"China holds a relatively advantageous position," capable of fending off U.S. pressure while winning international support by providing economic support and vaccines, says Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University. In contrast, "Biden would be running a somewhat weak government. He must first tackle the domestic pandemic, manage an economic recovery and resolve racial tensions."

While rocky relations with the U.S. remain a risk for China, Mr. Biden would likely be more discerning in his efforts to pressure Beijing, compared with Mr. Trump, says Mr. Wu, reflecting a view commonly expressed within China's foreign-policy circles. "This year, Beijing has more self-confidence.... Biden has come back, but the U.S. can't make a comeback."

Some analysts say China's confidence could herald more forceful efforts to assert its interests, from suppressing anti-Communist Party dissent in restive areas to flexing its military muscle to assert territorial claims. In Hong Kong, authorities have conducted sweeping arrests of politicians, activists and lawyers linked to the city's pro-democracy movement—ignoring criticism from U.S. and European governments.

Mr. Xi has also tightened his grip on China's armed forces, following legislative changes last month that vested more decision-making powers in the military commission that Mr. Xi chairs, rather than the civilian government. In an annual order issued in early January, Mr. Xi reiterated demands that the military be ready to wage war "at any time."

Analysts say one potential flashpoint is Taiwan, which Beijing has vowed to assimilate, by force if necessary. The Chinese military has conducted an intensifying array of aerial sorties, naval maneuvers and invasion drills near the island over the past year.

Chinese warplanes flew 380 sorties into the island's southwestern air-defense identification zone in 2020, and more than a dozen have taken place so far this year, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. The frequency and intensity of such flights have increased significantly over recent years, up from the 20 long-range flights that Chinese aircraft conducted near Taiwan in 2017, Taipei's Institute for National Defense and Security Research said in a December report.

Beijing wants to "make these types of operations routine" so that "everyone would just accept this increased presence," says Ms. Mastro, the Stanford fellow. Even so, Beijing still faces significant risks to its interests.

Mr. Xi's hard-nosed diplomacy "has created a de facto global coalition of concern with Chinese behavior," says Bilahari Kausikan, a retired senior Singaporean diplomat. "Nobody will ever shun China, but every major economy will deal with China with greater caution and reserve."

U.S.-China relations will remain a key concern for Beijing, with the Biden administration likely to bring a more orderly and methodical approach to dealing with China on issues spanning economics, security, technology and human rights, Mr. Kausikan says.

China's investment agreement with Europe still faces a ratification process across EU member governments and the European legislature. "Is this the time to be cutting deals with China? I think it shows geopolitical [naiveté] instead of geostrategic autonomy," Guy Verhofstadt, a member of the European Parliament and former Belgian prime minister, wrote on Twitter this month. "Thankfully, unlike China, the EU is a democracy & the [European Parliament] will have the final say!"

Diplomatic spats over perceived culpability for the Covid-19 pandemic, which first emerged in central China, appear likely to continue, especially after the World Health Organization criticized China this month for holding up the entry of investigators sent to probe the origins of the coronavirus. Beijing has since granted entry to a team of WHO experts, who arrived Thursday in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. Beijing's efforts to win goodwill by supplying or donating Chinese vaccines to developing countries would likely be hampered by a widening "credibility gap," particularly after new trial data showed that a vaccine developed by Chinese firm Sinovac was much less effective than previously believed, says Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

China also confronts a world that appears less receptive to its overtures. The Pew Research Center, in survey results published in October, found public perceptions of China souring significantly in the U.S. and 13 other developed economies over the previous year, largely due to Beijing's perceived mishandling of the initial Covid-19 outbreak.

Mr. Wu, the Fudan University professor, plays down these findings, pointing to Beijing's Asia-Pacific trade pact and EU investment deal. "We don't need to worry too much about public opinion," Mr. Wu says. "National interests are the most important factor."

[Fiji] Fiji Will Lead U.N. Rights Body, Over Russian and Chinese Opposition (New York Times)

New York Times [1/15/2021 2:58 PM, Nick Cumming-Bruce, 28290K, Neutral]

The Pacific island nation of Fiji won election on Friday as president of the United Nations' top human rights body, ending a shadowy proxy battle waged by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia seeking to strengthen their influence by installing a more compliant candidate.

Fiji won decisively, with support from 29 countries in a secret ballot of the Human Rights Council's 47 members, fending off a challenge from Bahrain, which garnered 14 votes, and Uzbekistan, which received four votes.

The result puts the small, remote island nation, which has a record of support for human

rights initiatives, into a leadership position at a time of intensifying competition between states over holding rights abusers to account.

China and Russia will return as members of the council in 2021, giving voice to two powerful nations that have faced widespread criticism over human rights abuses. Human rights groups say the council has been effective at highlighting many of the worst crises, and hope the incoming U.S. administration of President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. will bolster that role by re-engaging with the body, which President Trump quit in 2018.

"Fiji's victory is a victory for those who believe the Human Rights Council should be used to defend human rights," said Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch. "That Fiji's candidacy was opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia reflects the determination of these and other autocratic governments to stymie the work of the Human Rights Council."

The council's president has significant influence over its priorities and the selection of independent experts to report on human rights abusers and their misdeeds. The president is also responsible for pushing back against states that seek to thwart the council's work by cracking down on people who cooperate with its investigations.

On Politics with Lisa Lerer: A guiding hand through the political news cycle, telling you what you really need to know.

Fiji announced its candidacy in July 2020, and, initially running unopposed, seemed a shoo-in for the job. Its ambassador, Nazhat Shameem Khan, a Cambridge-educated lawyer who went on to become Fiji's first female High Court Judge, is well respected in Geneva's diplomatic community and has been a vice-president of the council. In the Council, Fiji had backed investigations into reported abuses in Venezuela, the Philippines, Belarus, Syria and Yemen.

Those positions, fiercely opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, appear to have prompted Bahrain to make a late bid for the post, setting off weeks of maneuvering within the Asia-Pacific group of countries to try to pressure Fiji to step aside.

Human rights activists have assailed Bahrain for repressing critics at home and for its refusal to cooperate with United Nations human rights bodies, which critics said was disqualifying for its bid.

"It was quite ham-fisted, there was no pretense even of support for human rights," Mr. Roth said, describing Bahrain's bid as a brazen attempt to install a candidate that was "going to do Saudi Arabia's dirty work."

As the contest moved toward a vote in the council, where Fiji enjoyed strong support, China publicly played down its opposition, issuing statements saying it would be content to see any of the candidates elected, including Fiji.

But diplomats and human rights groups say the outcome gives Beijing grounds for concern. China faces intensifying scrutiny in the United Nations over its incarceration of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang and its harsh crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

President-elect Biden has promised a return to multilateral institutions like the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, which President Trump abandoned. Mr. Biden has also promised to emphasize human rights in his foreign policy, but he has yet to take a public position on returning to the council, which has influential critics in the United States, particularly among supporters of Israel.

Fiji's success "unquestionably makes it easier for Biden to bring the U.S. back into the council rather than having a country with a demonstrably poor human rights record in the job," said Marc Limon, director of the Geneva-based Universal Rights Group.

Beijing has so far avoided direct criticism by the Human Rights Council, although that may change, Mr. Roth said. A council resolution last year to investigate systemic racism in the United States and other countries set a precedent for action targeting global powers.

"If Biden really makes an effort to rally other governments to condemn China," Mr. Roth said, "it could tip the balance and for the first time we could see condemnatory resolutions on China coming out of the council."

[Malaysia] Malaysia takes WTO legal action against EU over palm biofuel curbs (Reuters)

Reuters [1/16/2021 12:35 AM, Liz Lee, 5304K, Neutral]

Malaysia is taking legal action at the global trade watchdog against the European Union and member states France and Lithuania for restricting palm oil-based biofuels, the government said.

The world's second largest palm oil producer, which has called a EU renewable-energy directive "discriminatory action," is seeking consultations under the World Trade Organization's Dispute Settlement Mechanism, the Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry said in a statement on Friday.

Minister Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali said the EU proceeded with implementing the directive without considering Malaysia's commitment and views, even after Malaysia gave feedback and sent economic and technical missions to Europe.

The EU directive "will mean the use of palm oil as biofuel in the EU cannot be taken into account in the calculation of renewable energy targets and in turn create undue trade restrictions to the country's palm oil industry," he said in the statement.

The ministry filed the WTO request with cooperation from the Attorney General's Chambers and the International Trade and Industry Ministry, taking action it had warned of in July against EU Renewable Energy Directive II.

Malaysia will act as a third party in a separate WTO case lodged by neighbouring Indonesia, the world's biggest palm oil producer, as a sign of solidarity and support, the ministry statement said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar police scuffle with nationalist monk's followers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 2:08 AM, Matthew Tostevin and William Mallard, Neutral]

Myanmar police scuffled on Saturday with dozens of followers of Buddhist nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu at a demonstration calling for him to be put on trial more than two months after he handed himself in to face sedition charges.

Protesters, many of them monks, gathered outside the Insein Prison in Myanmar's main city of Yangon, where Wirathu has been held since November last year.

Police said they had not set out to break the protest up but had been provoked and has arrested one protester. "We were trying to negotiate and that man talked back rudely and started fighting," Tin Latt, the head of Insein police station, told Reuters by phone.

The protest by about 50 people dispersed after the scuffle.

Wirathu is known for his rhetoric against minority Muslims, particularly the Rohingya community. But he has also been critical of the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi and supportive of Myanmar's powerful military. "Although he handed himself courageously and decisively to face trial, he was not brought to court or given a verdict," one monk at the protest told reporters. He said other prisoners in custody should also be brought to trial.

Wirathu faces trial under a law that prohibits bringing "hatred or contempt" or exciting disaffection toward the government. It carries a prison sentence of up to three years.

He denies wrongdoing. He handed himself in after more than a year on the run.

[South Korea] South Korea is cracking down on digital sex crimes. Has it done enough? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 7:09 PM, Yoonjung Seo and Julia Hollingsworth, 7975K, Negative]

Between the ages of 11 and 14, South Korean teenager Ji-o was threatened, stalked and pressured into taking sexually explicit photos of herself by men on the internet.

She joined Twitter in 2015 as a lonely 11-year-old elementary student, hoping to make friends, according to Choi Yunu, from non-governmental organization Mental Health Korea. As she interacted with people on the platform, she read about a way to make pocket money. People online would send her vouchers for snacks, and all she had to do was share pictures of her breasts.

But the exchange was a trick -- ultimately, those uploads were used to blackmail her into accepting an exploitative pattern of abuse. One man claiming to be a 36-year-old father threatened to tell Ji-o's parents what she was doing if she didn't take explicit pictures for him. Another man set up a rule that she needed to respond to his messages within two minutes or he would send men to beat her up, although it's unclear whether he knew where she lived and if so, how he had that information. Terrified of missing a notification, she slept with earphones in so that she would be woken by the buzz of an incoming message.

As a young girl, she lacked the maturity to rationalize what was happening to her. South Korea's culture of victim blaming -- even for people as young and vulnerable as Ji-o -- prevented her from seeking help.

Now 16, Ji-o -- not her real name -- is still dealing with the aftermath of the three-plus years she spent subjected to online abuse and threats. She says she switched her phone number eight times and moved away from her parents' home in rural South Korea to the capital Seoul, where she lives with her sister. She wants to change her name.

While digital sex crimes are a problem all over the world, they are a particular issue in South Korea, which has one of the world's highest rates of smartphone ownership. Inadequate laws, weak sentencing, and poor policing mean that such crimes are rarely treated seriously by the justice system -- and as a result, activists say victims feel discouraged from coming forward.

Last year, however, a digital sex crime case that bore some chilling similarities to Ji-o's situation appears to have sparked change. After an outpouring of disgust over the case, some laws have been tightened and, in November, the ringleader was handed an unusually long sentence.

But advocates say much more needs to be done to take the issue of digital sex crime seriously -- and keep young girls and women safe from dangers on the other side of the screen.

As he recovered from an operation to make his limbs longer, then-23-year-old Cho Joo-bin began trying to make money on the internet. He styled himself as a businessman in his 40s who had served prison time and had an amputated foot, and gave himself a nickname: Guru.

In September 2019, he founded a group chat called Guru's Room on the encrypted platform Telegram, where messages can be set to disappear after they have been read. That room would become the setting for the most notorious digital sex crime case in South Korea, where men spent thousands of dollars to witness -- and demand -- the abuse of young girls and women.

Cho and his collaborators had a simple playbook for recruiting victims online. They offered them jobs as part-time models, then solicited compromising photographs from them, before coercing them into making degrading material by threatening to release their personal information and images to other internet users. Cho told them to raise their pinky finger in pictures which he later admitted was a way of branding the content. Authorities say there were more than 100 victims, including 26 girls in their teens.

"Foolishly, I was confident I wouldn't be caught and I intended to make my own brand with my sexual content," Cho said in September at one of his collaborator's trials.

At the same time, he and his collaborators recruited members, offering teaser videos of sexually explicit content to try to lure them into paying for entry into one of the exclusive rooms where they had access to women and girls -- referred to by Cho as "slaves" -- who they could instruct to create sexually explicit material. These rooms were illegal -- South Korean law forbids producing any sexually explicit material.

He attracted thousands of members, some of them paid. One group member -- who is

known only as Lee -- sent his personal information and 3.6 million won (\$3,300) to Cho as an entrance fee to get into the chat rooms, he testified in court, according to South Korean non-governmental organization Tacteen Naeil. That seems to have been on the higher end for entry -- police said last year that buyers normally spent about \$1,200 to enter a room paying with bitcoin.

Lee also paid into a "slave funding account," which he believed was going to the victims as payment, but which he later found out went to Cho.

Another member, who paid Cho more than 1 million won (about \$920) and verified himself by taking a selfie holding his social security ID card, said that Cho often deleted and created new rooms. Entry fees to the different rooms were higher for those with victims considered to be better looking.

As paid users became involved in the criminal rooms, the information they had given at the start became incriminating. When Cho contacted Lee saying he was low on cash, Lee gave him 650,000 won (\$600) as he was afraid Cho might contact his wife. The other member -- who cannot be named for legal reasons -- said he remained a member as he was afraid of being threatened by Cho.

In 2019, two university journalism students alerted authorities to his illegal enterprise after joining the groups undercover using nicknames. In March 2020, authorities busted the network of chatrooms.

Dozens were arrested over their involvement in the Telegram ring. One alleged collaborator was only 16 years old. "He has been good with computers since he was in elementary school," his lawyer said in court. "Because of the lack of parents' protection or supervision, he consequently reached a trash island named 'Guru's Room' in the vast sea of the internet."

Guru's Room was hardly the only place on the South Korean internet where women and girls were victims of digital sex crimes.

Cho had been inspired by other Telegram groups, including one named Nth room, run by someone who called himself GodGod. The journalism students, who asked to use the pseudonyms Kwon and Ahn to protect their safety, said there were many operators running similar chats on Telegram -- and links to the groups could be found from a simple keyword search on Google.

A Telegram spokesperson told CNN that publicly available content which violates their terms of conditions is taken down. Already this month, more than 7,000 groups and channels related to child abuse have been banned, according to Telegram's Stop Child Abuse channel.

"Sexual violence and the abuse of minors are not welcome on our platform," Telegram's spokesperson said in a statement.

According to police, more than 2,500 people were detained last year for digital sex crimes in South Korea. Of those, 220 were arrested for alleged sex crimes on Telegram, Discord and

so-called darknet sites which cannot be accessed by a regular browser.

The Telegram rooms were among the most egregious examples of South Korea's sex crimes, and were difficult to track given the app's encryption. But Ji-o's case shows young girls are also vulnerable on widely used social media platforms.

Years before Guru's Room or Nth Room were even set up, Ji-o found herself trapped by her own personal information. When she refused to take degrading pictures for the man claiming to be a 36-year-old father, he spread her private details around the internet which others formatted into a graphic, a process known online as "taxidermy" because the victim's information is preserved forever. She still doesn't know how he got her personal details. After that, huge numbers of people contacted her. Some told her to take off all her clothes, others told her to take photos of herself in school uniform.

"Did you do everything I told you to do?" one man wrote to Ji-o, in direct messages on Twitter seen by CNN.

"Remember: You're not a human, but my toy."

Even as the demands from strangers grew online, Ji-o was afraid to tell anyone. She was scared that telling the police would land her in a juvenile protection facility -- under South Korean law at the time, minors seen as voluntary participants to digital sex crimes faced the prospect of mandatory attendance at such a center. And she was scared to tell her parents, worrying that they wouldn't understand.

In 2018, police asked to speak to her. They had begun investigating a man she had been talking to online, and found her conversation with him while inspecting his phone. They told her that what she had been doing was not good, and that she could end up in a juvenile facility for posting videos and pictures of herself as they violated child and youth protection laws.

Then, because she was underage, they called her parents. Her dad asked why she posted pictures of herself online when she already had everything she needed and hit her, she alleges. Her mother cried and fell silent. They have never talked with Ji-o about the digital sex crimes again.

"It was hell, I blamed myself a lot and I still do," she said, according to Mental Health Korea's Choi. "Most of all, I am disappointed in my parents."

The Telegram victims didn't alert police to what was happening. Nor did Ji-o.

In countries all over the world, stigma and the difficulty of going through the justice system prevent victims of digital sex crimes from talking to police. But in South Korea, the barriers are particularly pronounced.

Until the laws changed in 2020, South Korea assumed that some minors were willing participants in crimes perpetrated against them. Minors aged between 13 and 16 who were victims of sexual abuse or rape were viewed legally as consenting parties if they got some kind of benefit -- such as money -- from the perpetrator. These victims could also be sent to

juvenile centers for education and protection.

Activist groups said the threat of these education centers seemed like punishment and deterred victims from telling police. The rules also meant that rapists didn't necessarily get punished. In a well-known case in 2014, a 13-year-old girl with a mental disability who left home after breaking her mother's mobile phone screen -- as she was worried her mom would be upset -- was raped by six adults who took her into their care and gave her food. A court decided she had voluntarily prostituted herself to receive food and accommodation.

Even if victims told police, crimes were often not investigated. In the past, police found it "almost impossible" to investigate digital sex crimes as they don't have powers to adopt undercover investigation methods online, said Korean National Police Agency's commissioner general Kim Chang-yong. He wants to see police given new powers to investigate online and more importantly, to be able to stop crimes before abuse begins.

And even when cases were investigated, few resulted in a lengthy sentence. Between 2011 and 2015, only 5% of people indicted in South Korea for filming, distributing and selling porn were sent to prison, according to a 2018 paper by Korean Women's Development Institute, a government think tank.

Although producers of child exploitation images can receive a possible life sentence, the average sentence for people convicted of producing and distributing sexually exploitative material of minors was 2.6 years in 2018, according to the Korea Institute of Criminology. The United States also has high penalties for similar crimes, but unlike South Korea, these punishments are actually enforced -- the average sentence for distributing child exploitation images was 11 years and 8 months, according to a 2019 report into US federal sex offenses.

The various problems with South Korea's system all fed into one another, reinforcing the idea that digital sex crimes were not that serious and were not worth reporting, activists argued. Kim admitted police might not have seemed aggressive enough, but said few digital sex offenders were indicted -- and even fewer received jail terms. "That discouraged police from investigating," he said.

Despite that, research suggests such crimes may be widespread. According to a survey by Tacteen Naeil, 12% of middle school students and 4% of elementary school students have experienced a sexual approach online.

When the Guru's Room case was revealed, to many it felt like the last straw. It followed other high-profile crimes that had received weak penalties, including the South Korean mastermind behind the darknet's largest-known site of child exploitation videos, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail in 2019 for producing and distributing child pornography -- a charge that carries a possible 10-year jail term. South Korean authorities refused to extradite him to the US where he faced several charges, including advertising child pornography, which carries a possible 30-year sentence.

An online petition demanding a heavy punishment for Cho attracted more than 2 million signatures, well over the 200,000 needed to prompt an official response. The justice system needed to take action.

On a cold day in November last year, after a monthslong trial, Cho Joo-bin was sentenced to 40 years in prison for producing and distributing illegal sexual visual material, forced sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, recording sexually abusive behaviors, coercion, violation of private information protection, and fraud.

It was a stark contrast from the weak penalties digital sex offenders typically receive. After the sentencing, a dozen women gathered outside Seoul's Central District Court, holding a deep red banner that read: "This is just the beginning."

In the months leading up to the sentence, parliament overturned the law making minors subject to education after being the victim of a sex crime, meaning all children are now considered victims. South Korea raised the age of consent from 13 to 16, meaning any adults who have sex with anyone under 16 could be liable for charges of child sexual abuse or rape. In December, shortly after Cho's sentencing, Korea's top court finalized new sentencing guidelines, aimed at making the penalties for sexual crimes stronger.

Lawyer Cho Eun-ho, no relation of Cho Joo-bin, said the stronger punishments made people more aware of digital sex crimes and their seriousness -- and had only been implemented thanks to the victims who survived violence and reported crimes.

But many worry that even with those new measures, South Korea's handling of digital sex crimes still falls short.

Even with the new sentencing guidelines, penalties are below other international jurisdictions. The new base penalty for producing child sexual exploitation images is five years, still lower than in the US where there is a minimum of 15 years in prison under federal law. There are also legal gaps. Some countries -- including the United Kingdom -- have laws punishing online sexual grooming. South Korea does not have such a law.

And some are concerned that, when cases are not as high profile as the Telegram case, penalties may not be as severe. There also remains a lack of understanding about digital sex crimes within the justice and policing system.

Attorney Baek So-yoon analyzed more than 200 rulings from November 2018 to July 2020, where people had been found guilty of distributing sexual exploitation videos of children and juveniles. She found that judges tended to have little understanding of digital sex crimes and often did not comprehend the scale and impact of the crimes on victims. That meant perpetrators were given a lighter sentence.

And Choi Yunu, from Mental Health Korea, said victims remain afraid that, if they report crimes to police, their parents will find out. Police also need to be careful to avoid adding to the victim's trauma, she said.

"Please think of them as their own children, and understand how they're fighting on the battlefield, being chased by an invisible enemy," Choi said.

The prosecution of others involved in the Guru's Room is still going through the courts. One key player is due to be sentenced in late January.

But even once the court processes are done, victims fear the crimes are never truly over.

In the trial of another of Cho's collaborators, who cannot be named for legal reasons, the prosecutor said victims are struggling to recover from the trauma. Videos showing the abuse perpetrated against them have been spread throughout the internet.

"I'm so busy deleting videos distributed by Cho Joo-bin that my daily scars seem to be endless," said one victim through her lawyer Oh Sun-hee.

Shin Jin-hee, a lawyer representing 30 victims in the Telegram case, said they could not continue with their normal lives.

"As a lawyer, after the sentencing the case is over -- but the case isn't over for the victims," she said. "(They) continue to live their lives worrying if other people who saw or downloaded their materials would spread the videos or pictures.

"Some victims want to change their social security number or their names but many underaged victims have to get their parents involved in. Of course it's not easy for adults either. How do you explain to your friends or colleagues when you change your name?"

For Ji-o, the crimes ended in 2018, but in a lot of ways, her story isn't over. She has never made an official complaint to police about what happened to her. She remains afraid of the repercussions she could face if she tells them. That means no one has ever been held to account for what happened -- and her images and private information are still on the internet.

"(My information) is still out there, somewhere. Somebody might be watching. It could be in a year's time that it reappears again -- there is no end to it," she said.

[Thailand] Thailand's Failed Tourism Experiment (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 7:56 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

"There aren't enough tourist arrivals to save the industry that used to contribute to about 1/5 of Thailand's economy." Thailand's reopening experiment during Covid-19 hasn't gone to plan. Randy Thanthong-Knight explains from beach destination Phuket. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Vietnam] U.S. Won't Penalize Vietnam for Alleged Currency Manipulation (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 6:23 PM, Yuka Hayashi, Neutral]

The Trump administration said Vietnam's currency practices, including "excessive foreign exchange market interventions," hurt American businesses, but that it decided not to take any punitive action.

The decision to skip penalties in a new trade dispute came days before President-elect Joe Biden is to be sworn into office, and followed opposition during a recent hearing from U.S. companies doing business in Vietnam

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative had been investigating Vietnam's policies and practices related to currency valuation since October.

It was the first case in which the U.S. cited currency manipulation as a reason to investigate a trading partner under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, the same legal tool the Trump administration used to impose massive tariffs on imports from China. "Unfair acts, policies and practices that contribute to currency undervaluation harm U.S. workers and businesses, and need to be addressed," U.S. Trade Representative Robert E. Lighthizer said in a statement Friday.

The USTR added while it wasn't taking any specific action at this time, it would continue to "evaluate all available options."

The Vietnamese Embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Imports from Vietnam have grown sharply in recent years, rising from \$14.9 billion a decade ago to \$66.6 billion in 2019, according to Commerce Department data. The Southeast Asian country has been a popular destination for investments by U.S. businesses avoiding China due to growing political tensions and rising costs there.

The announcement follows a decision last month by the Treasury Department to label Vietnam and Switzerland as currency manipulators, and USTR hearings in late December where representatives of American companies expressed concerns that tariffs prompted by the investigation would harm their businesses.

South and Central Asia

Nepal's 'COVID Rush' To India: Will Bilateral Ties Now Improve? (Yahoo News/The Quint)

[Yahoo News/The Quint](#) [1/15/2021 5:50 AM, Akansha Shah, 4021K, Neutral]

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held talks with his Nepalese counterpart Pradeep Kumar Gyawali on Friday, 15 January, the first time since the border row. Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali reached New Delhi on Thursday, for a three-day visit, to participate in the sixth Indo-Nepal Joint Commission meeting which commenced on Friday.

This is the highest bilateral level mechanism between Nepal and India, mandated to discuss the entire gamut of bilateral relations, including the boundary dispute which only recently pushed India-Nepal relations to the back burner.

The Commission last met 17 months back when India's external affairs minister travelled to Kathmandu. Before leaving for Delhi, Gyawali told this author that his visit is aimed at restoring trust and confidence between the two neighbours.

""We want to have an open and friendly dialogue with India based on renewed trust and respect for each other's sovereignty."" - Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali to Akanshya Shah for The Quint.

There existed a vacuum in the Indo-Nepal engagement after Nepal's parliament endorsed a new map in May 2020 incorporating three areas – Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura – also claimed by India since long.

Following the telephonic conversation between the prime ministers of the two countries on Indian Independence Day 2020, a series of visits came up that ultimately paved the way for the present Commission meeting.

Director of the Indian intelligence agency R&AW, Samanta Kumar Goel's visit to Nepal in October 2020 was followed by the Indian Army Chief General MM Naravane and Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visits to Nepal in quick succession in November 2020.

In between, there has also been a meeting of the joint technical committee to discuss some important bilateral issues. Meanwhile, BJP's foreign cell chair Vijay Chauthaiwale too went to Kathmandu in December 2020 on an informal visit — reportedly to bridge the gap between the political leadership of the two neighbours.

Gyawali's visit comes at a time when Nepal's domestic politics is witnessing a most delicate situation. PM K P Sharma Oli dissolved the House of Representatives on 20 December 2020, thereby pushing the country towards instability and inviting a constitutional crisis.

His move has been criticised by the opposition and the other faction of NCP (Nepal Communist Party) led by Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal, as 'undemocratic, unconstitutional and regressive'. PM Oli has been criticised for his autocratic way of functioning and dissolving the House in order to save his government just a few hours before the no-confidence motion was to be registered in the House. The matter is now at the Supreme Court of Nepal.

Gyawali's visit must be understood in this context. The good part of this visit is re-establishing and re-starting of bilateral engagements that can bridge the trust deficit.

Since this mechanism is all-encompassing, there could be renewed talks in every sector from connectivity to hydropower to tourism and trade. Most importantly, Nepal and India would discuss modalities to deal with the COVID-19 threat and assistance to Nepal in terms of medicines and vaccination.

There are said to be around 33 agendas already set for the meeting.

Many of the past problems were because of poor communication.

Oli's government had blamed India for lack of response over the boundary dispute before issuing the new map. This meeting will certainly open new windows for deeper and meaningful dialogues between the two countries. Any indication — even a deliberation — on the map row would be good signal for Oli government, which is now perceived to be cozying up to New Delhi.

However, in Nepal there are various groups which see Gyawali's visit as holding little

significance. They argue that a 'caretaker government' cannot enter any new agreement or even negotiate with a foreign country. Talking to this author, former PM Baburam Bhattarai said:

""Oli's autocratic way of functioning is a threat to the Constitution. We would have liked to welcome the new engagement, but the timing is most inappropriate. How can a caretaker government deal with another country?"" - Former Nepal PM Baburam Bhattarai to Akanshya Shah for The Quint

Civil society and some media in Nepal have also been equally critical of Gyawali's visit.

In reality, the joint commission meeting has been pending since pre-COVID times. The MEA had said that India would talk to Nepal at "an appropriate time" indicating that it would do so once the COVID threat subsides.

The Oli government too has been more than keen to talk to India's MEA

Moreover, this is also an emergency visit in terms of Nepal's urgent requirement for COVID vaccine. The Nepal government is under pressure to collect the right vaccine within a short time span.

The humanitarian perspective of the visit has unfortunately not been highlighted by Oli government. Third, from India's point of view, the present Oli government has not been labeled as 'caretaker', neither by Nepal's President nor the international community.

Thus within Nepal, there is no unified voice on the kind of approach to be adopted towards India, a country Nepal shares close relation with. At the heart of the problem is the present political turmoil in Nepal that could push the country towards instability and chaos.

Even when the two governments have opened dialogues, and is said that Gyawali is carrying a 'special message' from Oli to PM Modi (that could amount to the extension of an invitation to the latter to visit Nepal), it is difficult to ascertain whether the two countries have truly put past misunderstandings to rest. Given the fierce criticisms facing Oli government at home, it would be difficult for the two foreign ministers to enter into concrete agreements on various bilateral issues, especially on the controversial border dispute.

[India] India is launching one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns. But it's unclear if one of the vaccines works. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 9:32 PM, Joanna Slater and Niha Masih, 13480K, Neutral]

The boxes began arriving at airports across this vast nation earlier this week, escorted by police and stamped with a message of hope: "May all be free from disease."

India on Saturday is set to launch one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns with the aim of immunizing 300 million people by this summer.

The mammoth undertaking is a leap forward in the fight against the coronavirus in India, second only to the United States in its total number of cases.

The effort is being buoyed by two locally made vaccines and India's prior experience with large-scale immunization campaigns. But what might have been a triumph for the country's vaccine industry has been dogged by controversy.

The Indian government granted emergency approval to two vaccines -- a locally manufactured version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and a vaccine called Covaxin developed by Bharat Biotech, an Indian pharmaceutical company.

Only the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has completed a Phase 3 clinical trial for safety and efficacy. Bharat Biotech has finished earlier-stage trials on its vaccine but has so far provided no data on whether it works. Yet both vaccines will be administered starting Saturday, and people being immunized will not be able to choose which they receive.

Complicating matters further, Indian regulators have said that the Bharat Biotech vaccine will be used in "clinical trial mode," a phrase that left experts baffled. One of India's foremost vaccine experts, Gagandeep Kang, told an interviewer that she had "no clue" what it meant.

Unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, India is starting its vaccination campaign at a moment when the virus is in retreat. New cases have dropped drastically since peaking in September: India is recording about 14,000 cases a day and fewer than 200 deaths.

The massive vaccine push is expected to kick off at 3,000 sites across the country on Saturday, a number that authorities say will grow in the coming weeks.

To start, the Indian government has purchased 11 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, and 5.5 million doses of the Bharat Biotech vaccine. Both vaccines were sold at \$2.75 a dose (the Pfizer vaccine, by comparison, costs \$19.50). If targets are met, 300,000 people could receive doses on Saturday.

The first to receive vaccines will be approximately 30 million health-care workers, soldiers, paramilitary personnel and municipal employees dealing with sanitation. They'll receive it free of cost. Then the immunization drive will target 270 million people over the age of 50 as well as those below 50 who have co-morbidities.

The rollout of the vaccine program matters not just for India, but for the entire developing world. India is a vaccine powerhouse with a proven track record of low-cost manufacturing. The Serum Institute of India is the world's largest vaccine maker by volume.

The Serum Institute will be a major supplier to COVAX, a global initiative backed by the World Health Organization to distribute vaccines equitably to poorer countries. Several countries — including Brazil, Bangladesh and Nepal — are looking to purchase vaccines directly from Indian companies.

Adar Poonawalla, the chief executive officer of the Serum Institute, said that the company would start delivering doses to COVAX by the end of January. The company has also forged deals to supply the AstraZeneca vaccine to Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Morocco, he said.

In India, health officials have been preparing for weeks — registering recipients, training vaccinators and conducting dry runs. Neither the AstraZeneca vaccine nor the Bharat Biotech vaccine requires ultracold storage, a crucial plus in a country such as India.

Rajesh Bhaskar, the official in charge of covid-19 management in the state of Punjab, said he expected to be able to vaccinate 30,000 people Saturday and to complete the immunization of the state's health-care workers within 10 days.

"There is a sense of relief, big relief," Bhaskar said. "We hope this will suppress the pandemic and eventually we will get rid of it."

The distribution effort has already spread across the country. In Chandrapur, a predominantly rural district in central India, an initial shipment of 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived by road in a government van earlier this week.

They were stored in an ice-lined refrigerator guarded by a private security firm specially hired for the occasion, said Rajukumar Gahlot, the district's health officer. Nearly 100 health-care personnel in the district have contracted covid-19, he said. Six of them died.

The AstraZeneca vaccine will represent the large majority of vaccines administered on Saturday, but Covaxin is also a key part of the launch, particularly in cities. There remains "a lot of conjecture" around how regulators reached the decision to grant emergency approval to the Bharat Biotech vaccine in the absence of efficacy data, said Anant Bhan, a public health and bioethics expert.

Bhan said that by granting approval to Bharat Biotech's vaccine in "clinical trial mode," regulators raised many unanswered questions. Critics of the government went further. "Indians are not guinea pigs," Manish Tewari, a spokesman for the opposition party, told Asian News International.

Bharat Biotech declined to respond to questions about concerns over the efficacy of its vaccine, but it has pointed to the results of early-stage studies showing an immune response as an indicator of future results.

Bharat Biotech's vaccine is "incredibly safe but I don't know if the d--- thing works," said one expert on India's vaccine industry, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to comment frankly. Both vaccines are "less than ideal," the expert added, noting that the data on the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine showed huge variations, partly as the result of a dosing mistake.

Some experts worry that the lack of transparency in the process of approving vaccines for emergency use could undermine confidence in them more broadly. That would represent a break from the past in India, a place where vaccine skepticism is low and immunization is seen as an essential tool in reducing mortality.

[India] India starts world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drive (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:44 AM, Aniruddha Ghosal, Sheikh Saaliq, 13480K, Neutral]

India started inoculating health workers Saturday in what is likely the world's largest COVID-

19 vaccination campaign, joining the ranks of wealthier nations where the effort is already well underway.

The country is home to the world's largest vaccine makers and has one of the biggest immunization programs. But there is no playbook for the enormity of the challenge.

Indian authorities hope to give shots to 300 million people, roughly the population of the U.S. and several times more than its existing program that targets 26 million infants. The recipients include 30 million doctors, nurses and other front-line workers to be followed by 270 million others, who are either aged over 50 or have illnesses that make them vulnerable to COVID-19.

The first dose of a vaccine was administered to a health worker at All India Institute of Medical Sciences in the capital New Delhi, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi kickstarted the campaign with a nationally televised speech. Priority groups across the vast country, from the Himalayan mountains to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, began receiving it shortly after.

"We are launching the world's biggest vaccination drive and it shows the world our capability," Modi said in his address. He implored citizens to keep their guard up and not to believe any "rumors about the safety of the vaccines."

It was not clear if Modi, 70, has taken the vaccine himself like other world leaders as an example of the shot's safety. His government has said politicians will not be considered priority groups in the first phase of the rollout.

Health officials haven't specified what percentage of the nearly 1.4 billion people will be targeted by the campaign. But experts say it will almost certainly be the largest such drive globally.

The sheer scale has its obstacles. For instance, India plans to rely heavily on a digital platform to track the shipment and delivery of vaccines. But public health experts point out that the internet remains patchy in large parts of the country, and some remote villages are entirely unconnected.

Around 100 people will be vaccinated in each of the 3,006 centers across the country on the first day, the Health Ministry said this week.

India gave nod for emergency use of two vaccines, one developed by Oxford University and U.K.-based drugmaker AstraZeneca, and another by Indian company Bharat Biotech, on Jan. 4. Cargo planes flew 16.5 million shots to different Indian cities last week.

Health experts worry that the regulatory shortcut taken to approve the Bharat Biotech vaccine without waiting for concrete data that would show its efficacy in preventing illness from the coronavirus could amplify vaccine hesitancy. At least one state health minister has opposed its use.

India's Health Ministry has bristled at the criticism and says the vaccines are safe, but maintains that health workers will have no choice in deciding which vaccine they would get

themselves.

According to Dr. S.P. Kalantri, the director of a rural hospital in Maharashtra, India's worst-hit state, such an approach was worrying because he said the regulatory approval was hasty and not backed by science.

"In a hurry to be populist, the government (is) taking decisions that might not be in the best interest of the common man," Kalantri said.

Against the backdrop of the rising global COVID-19 death toll — it topped 2 million on Friday — the clock is ticking to vaccinate as many people as possible. But the campaign has been uneven.

In wealthy countries including the United States, Britain, Israel, Canada and Germany, millions of citizens have already been given some measure of protection with at least one dose of vaccine developed with revolutionary speed and quickly authorized for use.

But elsewhere, immunization drives have barely gotten off the ground. Many experts are predicting another year of loss and hardship in places like Iran, India, Mexico and Brazil, which together account for about a quarter of the world's deaths.

India is second to the U.S. with 10.5 million confirmed cases, and ranks third in the number of deaths, behind the U.S. and Brazil, with 152,000.

Over 35 million doses of various COVID-19 vaccines have been administered around the world, according to the University of Oxford.

While the majority of the COVID-19 vaccine doses have already been snapped up by wealthy countries, COVAX, a U.N.-backed project to supply shots to developing parts of the world, has found itself short of vaccine, money and logistical help.

As a result, the World Health Organization's chief scientist warned it is highly unlikely that herd immunity — which would require at least 70% of the globe to be vaccinated — will be achieved this year. As the disaster has demonstrated, it is not enough to snuff out the virus in a few places.

"Even if it happens in a couple of pockets, in a few countries, it's not going to protect people across the world," Dr. Soumya Swaminathan said this week.

[India] India's Modi kicks off vaccination campaign, among world's largest (Reuters)
Reuters [1/16/2021 12:21 AM, Krishna N. Das, Mayank Bhardwaj, 5304K, Neutral]
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched on Saturday one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns, as part of efforts by the populous nation to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control starting with two locally-manufactured shots.

Modi, who addressed healthcare workers through video conferencing, will not immediately take the vaccine himself as India is initially prioritizing nurses, doctors and others on the front line.

[India] 'India Has Taken Very Decisive Steps' in Managing Pandemic: IMF (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [1/15/2021 1:03 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The International Monetary Fund chief, Kristalina Georgieva on Thursday, 14 January gave accolades to India's "very decisive" steps in dealing with the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking at a global media roundtable she said, "India moved to more targeted restrictions and lockdowns. What we see is that that the transition, combined with policy support, seems to have worked well. Why? Because if you look at mobility indicators, we are almost where we were before COVID in India, meaning that economic activities have been revitalised quite significantly," quoted PTI.

The IMF chief added that India's update as part of the 26 January World Economic Update session would be, "Less bad, because the country has taken very decisive action." She encouraged the country to "do more" since there is "still space to do more."

In October, IMF did a report where India was predicted to contract by 10.3 per cent in 2020, but bounce back by 8.8 per cent growth rate in 2021, stated PTI.

Appreciating the economic policies, and calling India's lockdown dramatic in consideration of the nation's population, Georgieva said, "What the government has done on the monetary policy and the fiscal policy side is commendable. It is actually slightly above the average for emerging markets."

She added that India is doing better than the average emerging markets GDP, which stands at six per cent.

The IMF chief recommended policymakers to support the "fast structural transformation and cushion the impact on those that are on the losing side of it" in order to support the economy in a "more targeted manner".

However, Georgieva brought forward issues of gender inequality, where job loss in the pandemic is affecting women the most. Speaking about aid not reaching women who are often frontline workers, she said,

"Women are front line workers. They are often in the informal economy, help cannot easily reach them, so they are hit. Once people start losing jobs, who is to lose jobs first? (Again) women are on the front line. Labour market participation in India for women has been low. It is shrinking," quoted PTI.

"I know the government is paying attention, it is moving in that (direction), but there is so much space to tap into the productive potential of women and the entrepreneurial potential of women," she added.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil airlifts emergency oxygen into pandemic-struck state, vaccine drive lags (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 5:48 PM, Bruno Kelly and Ricardo Brito, Neutral]

Brazil's Air Force delivered emergency oxygen supplies on Friday to the jungle state of Amazonas devastated by a resurgent pandemic and the government scrambled to organize a nationwide vaccine effort while President Jair Bolsonaro said he "should be at the beach."

Doctors in the northern Brazilian state were using their own vehicles to transport patients, as locals sought to buy oxygen tanks on the black market, according to media reports. Desperate relatives, protesting outside hospitals in the state capital of Manaus, said patients had been taken off ventilators as oxygen ran out.

Health authorities there said oxygen supplies had run out at some hospitals and intensive care wards were so full that scores of patients were being airlifted to other states.

The Air Force flew cylinders with 9,300 kilograms of oxygen in from Sao Paulo state with another cargo expected on Friday. It said a flight carried nine patients from Manaus to Teresina in northeastern Brazil, and evacuations will continue with two planes taking patients to six cities.

Officials had planned to airlift 61 premature babies in incubators out of Manaus, but the relocation ultimately was not needed because emergency oxygen supplies were procured.

A government plan to start inoculating Brazilians against COVID-19 early next week was in disarray. Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro said a plane standing by since Friday to pick up 2 million doses of an AstraZeneca vaccine from India's Serum Institute would now depart in "two or three days."

Brazil's Health Ministry requested immediate delivery of 6 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by China's Sinovac and imported by Sao Paulo state's Butantan biomedical center, saying it needed them for its planned launch of immunizations next week.

Health regulator Anvisa was set to decide on authorizing emergency use of Sinovac's Coronavac as well as the AstraZeneca vaccine on Sunday.

Bolsonaro, who has denied the gravity of COVID-19 and has stated he will not be vaccinated, said in a television interview there was little he could do about the pandemic as a second wave of the new coronavirus tore through the country.

"I should be at the beach right now," he said on Band TV, adding that his health minister was doing an "exceptional job."

Critics of the president said the grim situation in Manaus was just the latest example of his poor handling of the world's second highest COVID-19 death toll after the United States.

Brazil is now dealing with a snowballing second wave and a new, potentially more contagious, coronavirus variant that originated in Amazonas and prompted Britain on Thursday to bar entry to Brazilians.

Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has opposed lockdowns to halt the pandemic's spread, said the government had already done what it could in Manaus.

The hoped-for 2 million AstraZeneca doses from the Serum Institute now face delays while India decides whether to loosen export regulations as it begins its own inoculation drive this weekend, a source briefed on the matter said.

India will be able to decide on exports of coronavirus vaccines within the next few weeks, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Reuters this week.

"The policy of course is we will start the rollout in India. We have our own challenges," Jaishankar said.

The worldwide coronavirus death toll surpassed 2 million on Friday, according to a Reuters tally.

In Amazonas, emergency services were pushed to a breaking point and Governor Nelson Lima announced a 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. statewide curfew to fight the spread of coronavirus.

[Brazil] Oxygen shortage forces evacuation of 60 premature babies from Amazon city (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 5:20 PM, Rodrigo Pedroso and Rob Picheta, 7975K, Negative]

Brazil's Amazonas State is airlifting 60 premature babies from hospitals in Manaus for emergency care in Sao Paulo, a distance of 3,875 kilometers (2,407 miles), because of a shortage of oxygen supplies in health facilities in the state.

The information, published by CNN Brasil, was confirmed on Friday by Sao Paulo's State Governor Joao Doria, who also criticized Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for his handling of the pandemic in Brazil.

"Sao Paulo will receive all babies that can be transported. This is the end of the world, not having oxygen for premature babies. What irresponsibility of the Bolsonaro government," said Doria.

Private hospitals in Manaus, a city of 2 million people, only have oxygen supplies for the next 36 hours, the general secretary of the Brazilian Federation of Hospitals, Aramacy Pinto, told CNN Brasil on Friday.

Pinto said the last delivery of oxygen cylinders to Manaus hospitals arrived early on Friday, and although the next delivery is scheduled to arrive in the next 24 hours, he fears it will be delayed due to high demand across the entire region.

Authorities have asked oxygen plants and local industries to produce as much supply for hospitals as they can. Home appliance firm Electrolux said it will hand over its oxygen supplies used in manufacturing air conditioners to public hospitals, according to CNN Brasil.

Since early Wednesday, hospitals and emergency rooms in Manaus, the capital of

Amazonas State, have been facing an acute shortage of oxygen.

Although state and municipal authorities have not released official figures, health workers have told local news organizations that dozens of patients have died recently due to a lack of oxygen, vital in the treatment of the novel coronavirus.

On Wednesday, 1,454 new cases of Covid-19 were reported in Amazonas and 186 people were buried in Manaus, surpassing the previous record set on April 26 when 140 people were buried.

Bolsonaro said Friday that "all means" are being made available to help Amazonas tackle its outbreak, which has been complicated by a new variant of the virus.

His claim came a day after Brazilian Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello described the healthcare system in the Amazonas state capital, Manaus, as being in "collapse," and warned of a looming oxygen shortage.

Manaus, globally known as the gateway to the Amazon region, also suffered badly in the first wave of the pandemic between April and May, when its public health and funeral systems collapsed.

[Brazil] Brazil reports more than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths for fourth consecutive day (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Anthony Boadle, 2164K, Neutral]

Brazil had 69,198 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,151 deaths from COVID-19, the fourth consecutive day with more than 1,000 fatalities, the Health Ministry said on Friday.

The ministry updated the data with 3,151 new cases and 113 deaths in the last 24 hours in the city of Manaus, which is running out of oxygen as a second wave surge in COVID-19 infections overwhelms its hospitals.

The South American country has now registered 8,390,341 cases since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 208,133, according to ministry data. It is the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil company requests emergency use approval for Russian vaccine (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:32 PM, Anthony Boadle, 5304K, Neutral]

Brazilian pharmaceutical company União Química said on Friday that, together with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), it has requested regulatory approval for emergency use of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V.

The request, filed with Brazilian health regulator Anvisa, seeks approval for the use of 10 million doses of Sputnik V in Brazil in the first quarter of 2021, the company said in a statement issued in Moscow. Anvisa officials said the Russian vaccine would have to be submitted to Phase III clinical trials in Brazil before its use can be authorized.

[Canada] Trudeau says Canada needs to 'buckle down' as cases surge, vaccines delayed (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:54 PM, Paula Newton, 7975K, Neutral]

Canada got a one-two punch Friday as public health officials said vaccine deliveries would be delayed and its Covid-19 measures still aren't working to control a resurging virus.

"We have to buckle down, this is our best way through in the coming weeks of winter," said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a news conference Friday in Ottawa. "We've seen the kinds of impossible choices hospitals in other countries have had to face when they become overwhelmed, deciding who gets an ICU bed and who doesn't. Well, that's not where we want to be."

The vast majority of Canadians have been dealing with weeks of stay-at-home orders and yet daily case counts have, at best, plateaued at a high levels.

More worrying, government officials say Covid-19 related deaths are steadily rising and may soon exceed levels seen during the first peak.

"We have yet to see the kind of widespread and sustained declines in daily case counts that would indicate we're bringing the pandemic under control nationally," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer during a news briefing Friday.

Health officials released new modeling Friday that showed Covid-19 remains on a "rapid growth trajectory" in most of Canada.

Hospitalizations and daily case numbers have already surpassed those of the first peak in the spring. Earlier this week the province of Ontario warned one in four of its hospitals has run out of ICU beds.

Data released Friday shows Canada now has an average of more than 4,700 people being treated in hospital on any given day, with nearly 20% of those patients in ICUs.

All of this comes despite lockdowns already in place in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Taken together, that means more than 60% of Canadians are under stay-at-home orders, with most retail and restaurants closed for anything other than pickup or delivery.

Health officials pleaded with provincial leaders Friday to keep stringent measures in place with healthcare systems at a critical point and already overloaded.

"If we ease measures too soon, the epidemic will resurge even stronger, this is why measures need to be consistent and sustained long enough to sufficiently suppress epidemic growth to allow for lasting control," Tam said.

The grim forecast comes as Canada announced it would receive fewer Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines in the coming weeks. The company announced a temporary slowdown in its European manufacturing facilities.

"Pfizer believes that by the end of March we will be able to catch up, such that we will be on track with the total committed doses for Q1. This is unfortunate, however such delays and

issues are to be expected when global supply chains are stretched well beyond their limit," said Anita Anand, Canada's procurement minister during a news conference Friday.

Canadian government data reveals little more than 1% of Canadians have been vaccinated so far. Given mounting problems with vaccine supply, health officials say the rollout will be too slow to have a significant impact on infection rates for months to come.

"This kind of issue is out of our hands," said Trudeau, adding, "I want to be very clear, this does not impact our goal to have enough vaccines available by September for every Canadian who wants one."

[Canada] Detained Huawei CFO enjoys private shopping and evenings at open-air theaters 'under the stars,' wants bail conditions eased (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 1:38 PM, Amanda Coletta, 13480K, Negative]

Meng Wanzhou, the Huawei executive wanted by the United States on fraud charges, spent Christmas dining in a Vancouver restaurant opened exclusively for her party of 14, in an apparent violation of coronavirus rules forbidding holiday gatherings with those living outside one's household.

Those assembled with Meng, who is out on bail and living in a seven-bedroom mansion while she fights her extradition, included her husband and two children. Canadian officials had granted them an exemption from travel restrictions that have kept many families apart during the deadly pandemic.

Some 5,000 miles away, Michael Spavor, one of two Canadians detained by China in what is widely seen as retaliation for Meng's arrest, was in a prison near the North Korean border. When China let him call home over Christmas, it was the first time he'd heard a loved one's voice in more than two years.

New details about Meng's life of luxury while on bail — and its stark contrast with the conditions in which the two Canadians are being held — emerged this week in a two-day hearing in which the chief financial officer of Huawei argued that her bail conditions were too confining and should be relaxed.

Meng travels to designer stores in Vancouver where she can shop in private, a British Columbia court heard. She has spent time at an open-air theater "under the stars." She receives visitors at the larger of her two multimillion-dollar mansions where she lives. Among them: a masseuse and an art teacher.

Under her \$8 million bail terms, Meng must wear a GPS monitor and is kept under 24-hour surveillance by a court-appointed security firm. She has an 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew but is otherwise free to travel around a designated area of Vancouver while accompanied by security guards.

The guards are the problem. She wants to lose them.

Meng, 48, daughter of billionaire Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei, was arrested in Vancouver in December 2018 at the behest of U.S. authorities seeking her extradition, touching off a

geopolitical dispute that has Canada caught in the middle between China and the United States.

The U.S. Justice Department alleges that Meng misled banks about the nature of Huawei's relationship with an Iranian-based subsidiary, effectively tricking them into clearing transactions that violated U.S. sanctions prohibiting business dealings with Iran. She denies wrongdoing.

Meng's arrest enraged China. Several days later, it detained the two Canadians — Spavor, a businessman, and former diplomat Michael Kovrig — and formally indicted them some 18 months later on espionage charges for which it has provided no evidence.

In this week's hearing, Liu Xiaozong, Meng's husband, told the court that the presence of the guards is difficult for their children, who fear that it risks identifying them to the public. He also said he worried that the changing roster of guards puts Meng, a cancer survivor, at increased risk of covid-19.

But Doug Maynard, president of the private security firm enforcing Meng's bail conditions, told the court that when it came to the coronavirus, he too had concerns. He said Meng and her entourage put his employees at risk by mixing social bubbles and drinking from the same coffee cup.

"I know I wouldn't want anyone to drink from my water bottle," Maynard said.

He also said he saw no reason to change her bail conditions. He said she had received about a half-dozen threatening letters in the mail last year, some including bullets, prompting Chinese officials to press Canada to immediately release her and return her to China.

John Gibb-Carsley, the crown prosecutor representing U.S. interests in the case, said Meng is a flight risk. He said a plane was chartered to take her back to China last May when a key ruling that could have ended her extradition case was released. The ruling did not go Meng's way.

Kovrig and Spavor are cut off from the world in separate prisons, where they have endured sleep deprivation and been barred from seeing their families. The International Crisis Group, Kovrig's employer, said he passes the time by walking 7,000 steps each day in a cramped jail cell.

China has sought to deny that the detention of the two men was tit-for-tat retaliation for Meng's arrest, but a Foreign Ministry spokesman said last June that releasing her "could open up space for resolution to the situation of the two Canadians."

Kovrig and Spavor were permitted a single call home over Christmas. For Spavor, it was the first call home since his detention. Kovrig had previously been granted a brief call to his sick father. For much of last year, they went without consular visits, ostensibly because of what China said were coronavirus rules.

Meng's extradition hearings are slated to resume March 1, when she is expected to argue

that the case against her is political and that the proceedings should be stayed because of an "abuse of process." With appeals possible, it could be years before a final decision is made on her extradition.

The judge reserved a decision on her bail for Jan. 29.

Meng can have a bail hearing. But when a reporter asked Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, when the country would provide bail for the two Canadian men, he responded with what he said was a Chinese saying.

"The one who tied a knot should be the one that undoes it," he said, adding that it was up to the Canadian government to see whether it could "work out a way to undo this knot."

[Canada] Canada Faces Indigenous Push Back to Study of Pipeline Stake (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 3:54 PM, Robert Tuttle, 6400K, Neutral]

Efforts by Canada's government to hire a firm to do a financial analysis of its Trans Mountain pipeline and a facilitator to help Indigenous communities have rankled at least one group in British Columbia.

"It's a joke," Chief Mike LeBourdais, head of the B.C.-based Western Indigenous Pipeline Group, said in a phone interview about the contract. "They are going to advise the Indians on whether buying a pipeline is good or not."

The government issued a tender notice on Dec. 23 for a Department of Finance contract "to support participating Indigenous groups in making informed decisions about participating economically in Trans Mountain and participating in the Department's engagement process," according to the document, which was updated this week.

The government also seeks to hire an individual or group to bring Indigenous groups and government officials together in multilateral discussions, according to a notice issued Jan. 11.

At least three groups of Indigenous communities in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan have banded together to buy a stake in Trans Mountain from the government, which bought the Alberta-to-B.C. pipeline for \$3.5 billion in 2018. The pipeline was nationalized to keep alive a project to expand the line after original owner Kinder Morgan Inc. threatened to scrap it amid opposition in B.C.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has said it will sell its ownership once the expansion is completed and de-risked and is open to "Indigenous economic participation" in the line. Two years ago, the finance ministry started an engagement process with First Nations communities on economic participation and "nearly all" of the 60 Indigenous groups that participated indicated that additional financial information was needed as a precondition, according to the notice.

The Western Indigenous Pipeline Group is already working with bankers for its plans, LeBourdais said, adding that he sees little benefit in the government's proposal. "I have

people working in the field drawing up cashflows," he said.

"The government is committed to engaging with Indigenous groups about economic participation in Trans Mountain," a Department of Finance official said Friday by email. "The government does not intend to be the long-term owner of Trans Mountain Corp."

The government said it seeks to build consensus on the form of economic participation preferred by the communities and to identify or support the formation of "counterparties" that could represent them in a future negotiation with Canada, according to the tender document.

Construction on the Trans Mountain expansion began last year after more than a decade of court battles and delays caused by opposition from groups including many First Nations in B.C., which see the line as a threat to the environment.

Alberta's oil-sands producers have struggled for years with a shortage of export pipelines and see the pipeline as crucial for getting their crude to markets in Asia. Some in the oil industry argue that indigenous ownership is a way to both lessen opposition to pipeline projects and provide financial help to those communities.

[Mexico] López Obrador lashes out at DEA after Mexico exonerates ex-minister on drug charges (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 5:32 PM, Mary Beth Sheridan, 13480K, Neutral]

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador lashed out at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on Friday, accusing it of fabricating a narcotics case against Mexico's former defense secretary, in comments that underscored the fragile state of relations with Washington as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office.

"Why did they do this investigation this way? Without substance, without evidence?" the president demanded at his daily news conference, referring to the DEA and its case against retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos.

Cienfuegos was arrested Oct. 15 at Los Angeles International Airport on charges of working with the H-2 cartel to ship thousands of kilos of heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines and marijuana to the United States. Facing the fury of the Mexican government, the U.S. Justice Department dropped the case the following month and sent Cienfuegos back home for investigation. On Thursday, the Mexican attorney general's office announced that it had found no grounds to charge the general, who served as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

Cienfuegos was the most senior Mexican official ever detained in the United States on drug charges. The arrest enraged the military, which has become a pillar of López Obrador's government — responsible for the anti-drug fight and a plethora of other activities, including building airports and railways. The Mexican government responded by rushing a law through Congress in December that limits the DEA's ability to work in Mexico.

López Obrador said Friday that he would make public the hundreds of pages of evidence the Justice Department sent to Mexico — even though it might anger the U.S. government.

That evidence mainly consists of intercepted BlackBerry messages in which a mysterious figure known as "the Godfather" communicates with suspected traffickers. U.S. prosecutors had said Cienfuegos was the shadowy individual, a charge he has denied.

Outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau explained the U.S. decision to drop charges against Cienfuegos by telling Mexican journalists this week that U.S. prosecutors "don't necessarily understand all the repercussions of their decisions" when they charge a foreign dignitary, according to media reports.

Prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York have insisted that their case was strong. Mexican officials have argued otherwise.

The exoneration of Cienfuegos unleashed stinging criticism from Mexican analysts, who accused López Obrador of backpedaling on his campaign promises to attack corruption and impunity. The president denied that and sought to blame the episode on the DEA, hinting at conspiracy theories that the agency had a vendetta against Mexico's military.

"We believe that impunity must end, and of course corruption, but also that there can't be reprisals, vengeance, and you can't invent crimes," López Obrador said. He accused the DEA of having "little professionalism" and torpedoing the relationship between his government and the Trump administration.

The Justice Department, asked for reaction, said: "The United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the Government of Mexico fails to do so."

Analysts said López Obrador's comments were a message to Biden after an arrest that stunned senior Mexican officials and prompted concerns that they, too, were being surveilled by U.S. agents. The president is asking Biden to "improve coordination and communication between the two countries in security," said Gustavo Mohar, a former top intelligence official.

Another former senior intelligence official, Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, said López Obrador's statements amounted to "a very complicated signal" to Biden.

"We are still in a dynamic of distancing and conflict and not of reconstruction" of the relationship, he said. "Hopefully Biden's people have the diplomatic skills to convince the Mexican government that it's important to cooperate."

Mexico is a crucial player in the anti-narcotics effort; it is the top source of heroin and methamphetamines reaching the United States, as well as a major corridor for cocaine and fentanyl. López Obrador, a longtime leftist who took office in 2018, has been openly skeptical of the "war on drugs," but his government had maintained anti-narcotics efforts with Washington and extradited dozens of alleged traffickers.

The Cienfuegos case, however, has put a chill on cooperation.

Carl Pike, a former DEA agent who worked on Mexico issues for years, said criminals would be the beneficiaries.

"The biggest threat the cartels had, the biggest thing working against them, was the relationship the U.S. and Mexico had," he said.

The Mexican attorney general's office said in a statement that it concluded that Cienfuegos "never had any meeting" or contact with the H-2 cartel, and "never gave any order to help the crime group." There were also no signs that he had illegal earnings, the office said.

[Mexico] Mexico Accuses U.S. of Fabricating Drug-Trafficking Charges Against General (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:35 PM, José de Córdoba, Neutral]

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Friday accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating drug charges against Mexico's former defense minister, an allegation analysts said would further strain bilateral relations and security cooperation between both nations.

The Mexican leader defended the decision by his attorney general not to prosecute Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, who had been arrested by the U.S. in October and then sent back to Mexico a month later following a diplomatic uproar from Mexico, which complained it hadn't been informed of the probe and threatened to curb security cooperation with Washington.

Mexico had vowed to investigate the powerful former general upon his return, using evidence that U.S. officials handed over. The Mexican Attorney General's Office said Thursday it had investigated the general and found no connection to organized crime or any suspicious increase in his net worth.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said on Friday the evidence wasn't solid enough to arrest the general, much less convict him in a Mexican court.

Mr. López Obrador went further, saying the DEA concocted the case. He accused the agency of either "consciously or unconsciously" sabotaging the relationship with Mexico when it didn't inform the Mexican government of its investigation.

"You can't invent crimes, no one should act that way, whoever it is," Mr. López Obrador said at his daily press conference, referring to the DEA, which investigated a general who led Mexico's war on cartels as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

On Friday afternoon, Mr. López Obrador, after saying Mexico's prestige was at stake, released the 751-page file of evidence provided by the U.S. It consisted of a cover letter from DEA acting Administrator Timothy Shea, many copies of BlackBerry Messenger communications and a few photographs of guns, people and SUVs.

The DEA declined to comment. A U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman on Friday said "the United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the government of Mexico fails to do so." When they had returned Gen. Cienfuegos to Mexico, U.S. federal prosecutors said important foreign-policy considerations had outweighed the government's interest in pursuing his prosecution. Despite the general's return, Mr. Lopez Obrador's government passed a new law that restricts the activity of foreign agents, in particular the DEA, operating in Mexico. Among other things, the new law prevents Mexican

officials from speaking to DEA agents without informing the Mexican government.

Analysts said the accusations by the Mexican leader against the DEA would further damage ties already strained by the general's arrest.

Mr. López Obrador is deliberately sabotaging the bilateral relationship on security and the capacity of the U.S. to operate in Mexico, said Duncan Wood, a Mexico expert at the Wilson Center, a Washington-based think tank.

Mr. Wood said the move to exonerate the general is likely to raise further doubts in Mexico and the U.S. about the capacity and willingness of the Mexican government to tackle high-profile corruption, particularly among the armed forces that have become a key part of Mr. López Obrador's government. More than nine in 10 crimes in Mexico remain unpunished, an impunity that has driven widespread lawlessness and record homicide rates in recent years.

"He would prefer to have organized crime groups running roughshod over Mexico than having the U.S. operating there," Mr. Wood said.

More than any recent Mexican leader, Mr. López Obrador has relied on the army for much of his agenda, from building public-works projects like Mexico City's new airport to pursuing drug gangs to controlling illegal migration and distributing Covid-19 vaccines.

"The exoneration of Salvador Cienfuegos shows that the armed forces are untouchable, they are above the law," said Denise Dresser, a political analyst at ITAM University in Mexico City.

The exoneration is also the latest signal that Mr. López Obrador will take a more confrontational approach with the incoming Biden administration than he did with President Trump, some analysts said.

During his campaign and at the beginning of his term, Mr. Trump called Mexican migrants who cross the border illegally rapists and murderers. He said Mexico would pay for a border wall to stop migration, and threatened to implement tariffs on Mexican goods unless Mexico helped stop Central American migrants from reaching the U.S.

But the Mexican nationalist leader soon came to an accommodation with Mr. Trump. Mr. López Obrador deployed thousands of soldiers to stop migrants. In return Mr. Trump didn't press Mexico on a gamut of bilateral issues.

Both men, populist outsiders, struck up an unlikely political friendship marked by Mr. López Obrador's trip to Washington last summer in the middle of the U.S. presidential campaign.

But since the election, observers say that Mr. López Obrador has been notably cool to the incoming Biden administration. He was one of the last world leaders to congratulate Mr. Biden on his electoral victory, and has offered to grant asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. While the Mexican president withheld comment on the mob that attacked the Capitol in Washington last week, he agreed with Mr. Trump that canceling his Twitter account represented censorship.

A senior Mexican official said that Mr. López Obrador's administration wasn't aiming to pick a fight with the U.S., and wants to discuss an overhaul of bilateral ties with the incoming Biden administration that takes into account Mexico's requests to tackle cross-border money laundering and weapon smuggling.

[Mexico] U.S. Case Against Mexican General Was Baseless, AMLO Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/15/2021 12:27 PM, Maya Averbuch, 6400K, Neutral]

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said that evidence the U.S. government handed over to Mexico against its former defense minister has "no value," widening a rift on law enforcement policy between the two nations.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office opted not to bring charges against General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda on Thursday after saying it found no proof that he'd collaborated with a drug cartel. The U.S. had arrested Cienfuegos in October but dropped the drug case and turned the former minister and the investigation over to Mexico to avoid an international dispute. Mexico had blasted the U.S. for not informing it of the probe.

The U.S. Justice Department responded Friday that it reserves the right to resume prosecution of the general if Mexico fails to do so.

The president's latest criticism of U.S. law enforcement only deepens a rupture in what used to be close drug-enforcement cooperation between the two nations. Mexico recently passed legislation limiting foreign agent activity on its soil, which Lopez Obrador said was a direct result of the U.S. arrest of Cienfuegos. In another bold move on Friday, Mexico's government released the entire 751 pages of evidence the U.S. had sent to Mexico.

"The people who did this investigation did not act professionally," Lopez Obrador said at his press briefing Friday. "We have to know what is going on in our country, who is intervening here, under what conditions, and that our Constitution is not being violated," he said.

Once the top military official in the country, Cienfuegos was accused by the U.S. Department of Justice of collaborating with drug-traffickers and accepting bribes from them.

But U.S. agents misidentified Cienfuegos, daily Reforma reported, citing unnamed government officials. In the documents released on Friday, intercepted messages between two drug traffickers identify their military interlocutor as short and fat - a far cry from Cienfuegos' tall figure with an unmistakable pockmarked face.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office declined to comment when contacted by Bloomberg News.

The capture of Cienfuegos in Los Angeles had stunned Mexican government officials, who said that the secrecy about the investigation headed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration was a violation of the nation's sovereignty.

U.S. prosecutors had dropped their charges at the behest of Mexican officials, and Cienfuegos flew back to Mexico, where the public waited for weeks to see if the allegations

would lead to an arrest.

The evidence that U.S. prosecutors had provided was flimsy, said AMLO, as the president is known. The information from BlackBerry mobile phones that appeared in the documents will be released to the public, along with all of the other evidence provided by the U.S. authorities, he said.

[Mexico] Mexico publishes US evidence on ex-defense secretary (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 8:36 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Neutral]

Mexico on Friday published 751 pages of evidence it received from the United States against Mexico's former Defense Secretary, Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, whom U.S. prosecutors had charged with drug trafficking.

The unprecedented move came a day after Mexico announced it was dropping the case against Cienfuegos, whom the U.S. arrested in October and then handed over to Mexico a month later after dropping the charges under pressure from the Mexican government.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador dismissed the evidence against Cienfuegos Friday as circumstantial and accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating the accusations and displaying a lack of professionalism in their investigation.

It wasn't immediately clear if the newly released documents would affect other prosecutions in the U.S. or compromise the identity of witnesses.

The case file contains transcripts of Blackberry messenger exchanges purportedly between cartel figures and Cienfuegos, who U.S. prosecutors have said was identified alternately as "The Godfather," "Zepeda" and "Sepeda." All of the pages are marked: "Shared per court order, not for further distribution."

The U.S. Justice Department said Friday it reserved the right to resume the prosecution of Cienfuegos, who had been accused of accepting bribes in exchange for ensuring the military did not take action against the H-2 cartel while acting against its rivals. He was also accused of introducing cartel leaders to other corrupt Mexican officials.

The case file starts with text messages exchanged in December 2015 between Daniel Silva Garate, alias "el H-9," and Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez, "H-2," who were leading drug gang figures in Mexico's Pacific coast state of Nayarit. Both were killed two years later in shootouts with the Mexican Marines.

In the exchange, Silva Garate, a lieutenant to the Patrón Sanchez, describes attending a meeting with "The Godfather."

Silva Garate describes being picked up by men with short, military-style haircuts wearing berets. He says they were traveling in three SUVs with darkened windshields, "going like crazy," escorted by motorcycles.

At one point, Patrón Sanchez tells his underling, "He (The Godfather) is second to the president ... talk calmly to him." Silva Garate later describes having a meal with a pale-

skinned man — Cienfuegos has pale, pock-marked skin — and being taken to a house in the luxury Mexico City neighborhood of Las Lomas.

At one point, Silva-Garate tells his boss that the men — whose heads are also close-cut — are taking him to Defense Department headquarters in Mexico City.

Patron Sanchez tells Silva Garate, "Give him a hug and tell him it is an honor to meet him, and tell him that if we loved him before, now we would die for him, we will never hurt him."

Silva-Garate says the man was wearing a uniform. "Hey, this is the guy who appears on television," he writes in amazement, though he spells the name as Salvador Sinfuego Sepeda.

"He wants you to work so there is a crapload of money," Silva Garate texts his boss. "We have to do something from Colombia."

Silva Garate at one point says "The Godfather" is concerned about security and wants them to delete references to him, and the two agree to throw away their phones after the meeting is over.

"There's no way he won't be recognized," Patrón Sanchez jokes at another point.

Silva Garate tells his boss that the "The Godfather" told him: "Now we are going to do big things with you ... that what you have done is small-time."

After Patrón Sanchez reports that a boat leaving Colombia has apparently been caught while transporting drugs, probably 420 kilograms of cocaine, Silva Garate says the Godfather has told him "he has friends in Colombia that can help you,"

Silva Garate asks his boss what he wants from the Godfather, and Patrón Sanchez says he wants unmolested routes to ship drugs from Colombia. Silva Garate texts back, "He says that as long as he is here, you will be free ... that they will never carry out strong operations," or raids.

Silva Garate tells his boss the "The Godfather" told him that, "You can sleep peacefully, no operation will touch you."

Sanchez Patron texts back, "We are very grateful to him, tell him I don't know how to pay him for this help."

Sanchez Patron tells his subordinate to ask The Godfather "to help us with Mazatlan," the Pacific coast resort city then dominated by the Sinaloa cartel. "Tell him it's our dream ... to be back on our turf."

Sanchez Patrón writes "He has already done a lot for me, I owe him everything," and Silva Garate responds, "Look at how long it has been since there was a raid in your state (Nayarit)."

[Mexico] Mexico president backs dropping of drug case against ex-defense minister (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 7:51 PM, Laura Gottesdiener, Raul Cortes, Drazen Jorgic, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Negative]

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Friday backed the decision by his country's attorney general not to charge ex-Defense Minister General Salvador Cienfuegos with drug crimes, in a case that has roiled U.S.-Mexico diplomatic relations.

Cienfuegos, who was minister from 2012 to 2018 during the government of former President Enrique Pena Nieto, was arrested in October at Los Angeles airport on charges he worked with a powerful drug cartel. U.S. prosecutors later dropped the case and returned him to Mexico to be prosecuted, citing diplomatic sensitivities.

Mexico's government vowed to thoroughly investigate Cienfuegos' case but on Thursday, less than two months after his return from the United States, Mexico's attorney general office concluded that Cienfuegos had no contact with members of the criminal organization.

It also said it had found no evidence that Cienfuegos' wealth had increased in any untoward manner.

"It's a decision the attorney general's office makes, but one that the government I represent supports," said Lopez Obrador in his regular morning news conference.

On Lopez Obrador's instructions, Mexico's foreign ministry on Friday published a 751-page document showing the U.S. evidence against Cienfuegos, including detailed logs of alleged Blackberry communications.

The fallout from the case has soured relations with Washington ahead of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's swearing in next week. Lopez Obrador on Friday said the U.S. investigation had not been conducted with "professionalism."

A U.S. Department of Justice spokeswoman said the United States reserved the right to restart the prosecution of Cienfuegos if Mexico did not do so.

Mexico said the failure to alert officials before the arrest marked "a before and after" in bilateral ties. In December it created new rules governing how foreign agents, including the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, operate in the country.

A watered-down, final version of those rules was published hours before the decision to drop the Mexican case against the former general, in a sign that security cooperation between the neighboring countries will continue.

The manner in which the Cienfuegos case was handled by Mexican authorities sent a worrying signal about the rule of law and impunity within the armed forces, with whom Lopez Obrador has developed close ties, analysts said.

"This is not only giving them impunity but also allowing extended and deeper impunity," said Falko Ernst, a senior International Crisis Group analyst for Mexico.

"We are getting further away from the autonomous accountability and transparency mechanism that would be needed down the line to break high level corruption and collusion... between the state and crime groups," he added.

Cienfuegos' arrest in the United States followed a multi-year investigation that used wire taps to track a military figure who traffickers called 'El Padrino,' or 'The Godfather.'

The U.S. investigators said they concluded 'El Padrino' was Cienfuegos and that he had helped drug traffickers move tonnes of narcotics.

The U.S. investigation published by the Mexican government appeared to be almost entirely based on messages picked up from a Blackberry device. The alleged messages from Cienfuegos are littered with typographical errors and spelling mistakes.

One source with knowledge of the situation said the case failed to establish ownership of the Blackberry.

The DEA and DOJ declined to comment on specific details of the case. The Eastern District of New York did not respond to a request for comment.

Lopez Obrador said Mexico's attorney general's office had "acted because it considered that the evidence presented by the United States government...has no evidentiary value."

The president added that if evidence surfaces against others mentioned in the U.S. investigation of Cienfuegos, Mexico could pursue cases against them.

[Mexico] Mexico's president rips big tech flexing like 'all-powerful' gatekeepers of speech (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 1:00 PM, Douglas Ernst, 459K, Neutral]

President Trump has a strong ally in Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador when it comes to reining in the power and influence of Silicon Valley.

Mr. López Obrador blasted social media giants this week in the wake of Mr. Trump's bans on various platforms.

"I can tell you that at the first G20 meeting we have, I am going to make a proposal on this issue," he said Thursday.

At issue are the decisions made by Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and his industry peers to silence Mr. Trump after chaos at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

"I do not celebrate or feel pride in our having to ban @realDonaldTrump from Twitter, or how we got here," Mr. Dorsey wrote Wednesday. "After a clear warning we'd take this action, we made a decision with the best information we had based on threats to physical safety both on and off Twitter. Was this correct? I believe this was the right decision for Twitter."

Still, Mr. Dorsey acknowledged that banning high-profile figures like Mr. Trump "sets a

precedent I feel is dangerous: the power an individual or corporation has over a part of the global public conversation."

Mr. López Obrador, however, sees the move as an infringement on the spirit of free speech.

"Yes, social media should not be used to incite violence and all that, but this cannot be used as a pretext to suspend freedom of expression," he said. "How can a company act as if it was all-powerful, omnipotent, as a sort of Spanish Inquisition on what is expressed?"

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] UN peacekeeper killed in Central African Republic (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [1/15/2021 4:53 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

A Burundian peacekeeper was killed Friday during an ambush by rebels in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, the fifth soldier killed since a rebel offensive began.

The soldier died in an ambush by a coalition of rebels near Grimari, roughly 300 kilometres northeast of the capital Bangui, the UN said, during a security mission to the town with Burundian and Bangladeshi peacekeepers.

MINUSCA -- the UN peacekeeping force in the region -- also said that two Bangladeshi soldiers were lightly wounded.

In a statement from New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the attack and reiterated his "deep concern over the continued destabilisation efforts by armed groups throughout the country".

Guterres urged all parties to immediately stop the violence and resolve their differences through peaceful means.

The Security Council strongly condemned the attack on the troops in a separate statement.

In a declaration unanimously adopted by the council, it also condemned "all attacks, provocations and incitement to violence against MINUSCA by armed groups and other authors".

It follows a month-long rebellion after six of the most powerful armed groups, who have occupied roughly two-thirds of the country for eight years, united.

The coalition announced an offensive ahead of the December 27 presidential and legislative vote, aimed at preventing Faustin Archange Toudera's re-election.

Landlocked CAR is one of the world's poorest nations and has seen a string of coups and wars since it gained independence from France in 1960.

On Wednesday, the rebel forces mounted their closest attack yet to Bangui before being

pushed back with the loss of a peacekeeper, the UN said.

On January 4, President Touadera was declared the victor, although the political opposition cried foul.

[Congo] Dozens killed, some decapitated, in suspected rebel attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:56 PM, Gabrielle Nina Mitch and Eoin McSweeney, 7975K, Negative]

Forty-six people from the ethnic Pygmy group were killed -- some of them decapitated -- on Wednesday in a suspected militant attack in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo, according to an NGO official based in the central African country.

An armed group shot civilians and decapitated others with machetes in Ambedi, a village in Irumu territory in Ituri province, said Christophe Munyanderu, regional coordinator for the NGO Convention pour le respect de droit de l'homme, or Convention for the Respect of Human Rights.

A spokesman for the Armed Forces of the DRC in Ituri attributed the attack to the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group that operates in the region. Two of the assailants were arrested and are currently under interrogation, the spokesman said.

Most of the victims were women and children, said Rachel Taruwayo, the regional coordinator for the provincial government.

Munyanderu said that a Pygmy who was hunting during the attack determined the death toll. When he returned to the village, Munyanderu said, he found a female survivor with a gunshot wound and a two-year-old child whose hand had been chopped off.

On Thursday, they reached a police post about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the scene of the attack and were taken to a hospital. The woman and child are now out of danger, said

The ADF has intensified its attacks against civilians in the eastern provinces of the DRC in recent years, the United Nations said in July. These attacks have left more than 1,000 dead between January 2019 and June 2020 and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to the UN.

The group has battled governments in East Africa since the 1990s and has ties to several international jihadi groups.

[Nigeria] Nigeria's Big Oil-Refining Revamp Gets Off to a Slow Start (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Paul Burkhardt and Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, 6400K, Neutral]

A year after shutting down all of its dilapidated refineries to figure out how to fix them, Nigeria still can't say how much it will cost to do the work or where the money will come from.

Nigerian National Petroleum Corp. said it has finished the appraisal of its largest facility, but hasn't completed the process at two others. Refining experts said the extended halt means the plants are at risk of rotting away and unlikely to restart on time.

"Things haven't been looking good lately," with Nigeria's plants probably "completely out of action for some 18 months," said Elitsa Georgieva, executive director at Citac, a consultant that specializes in African refining.

The dysfunction of its domestic refineries has long put Africa's biggest oil producer in an ironic situation. It exports large volumes of crude to plants overseas, then pays a premium to import the fuels its customers produce.

Pledges to fix the facilities have been made and broken again and again over the years. For at least a decade, NNPC's 445,000 barrels a day of refining capacity barely processed 20% of that amount.

The latest effort to fix the refineries was supposed to be different to the failed attempts that came before. The company had totally shut all three plants down by January 2020 to do a comprehensive appraisal, and set the ambitious target of having them all back up and running at 90% of capacity by 2023.

"The refineries have been deliberately shut down to allow for a thorough diagnosis," said Kennie Obateru, an Abuja-based NNPC spokesman. "They can be fixed based on what the diagnosis reveals."

The appraisal of the 210,000-barrel-a day Port Harcourt refinery has been completed and NNPC has called for bids for the necessary repairs, Obateru said. The company hasn't determined how much the work will cost.

"It is when we close the bids, everything is analyzed and presented that we will know how much we need," he said.

The diagnosis is underway at the 125,000-barrel-a-day Warri facility and should be complete before the end of the year, he said. After that, the study of the 110,000-barrel-a-day Kaduna plant will commence.

One year into the process, refining analysts are skeptical that all this work can be done by 2023.

"I don't think anyone has a good understanding technically of what's wrong with those refineries," said Alan Gelder, vice president of refining, chemicals and oil markets at Wood Mackenzie Ltd. "They're probably corroding, which makes it a very difficult proposition."

NNPC reaffirmed its deadline and said there's no reason the refineries, which are at least 40 years old, can't be restored to full operation.

"There are refineries that are over a hundred years old still running, so age is not necessarily an impediment," Obateru said.

There are parallel efforts backed by private companies to add to Nigeria's capacity. Aliko Dangote, Africa's richest person, is building a state-of-the-art 650,000 barrel-a-day refinery, which Citac estimates will start production in 2023.

Bringing NNPC's Port Harcourt refinery to the same clean-fuel standards as Dangote's modern plant would cost about \$1.3 billion for the equipment, on top of whatever other repairs are required to get the facility running, Georgieva said.

NNPC is talking to oil-trading firms about \$1 billion of prepayment deals that could finance the repairs at Port Harcourt, Reuters reported last week. Obateru declined to comment on the report, but said "I don't envisage that we will have a problem getting people to invest."

[South Africa] Exhausted Nurses Toil on South African Wards Full of Virus Cases (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Janice Kew and Loni Prinsloo, 6400K, Neutral]

A few weeks ago, Ntombizandile Ntsodo received an alert from her Cape Town nursing agency that left her agitated: A local hospital was short of 46 caregivers for the upcoming 24-hour period, a result of the resurgent Covid-19 epidemic sweeping South Africa.

"I remember thinking where are the nurses? But you know it's because some of them have caught the virus and are on quarantine," the 26-year-old said by phone from Khayelitsha, a township on the outskirts of the city where she lives with her mother, sister and young niece.

"It puts a lot of pressure on those of us on the floor and we are fatigued, burnt-out, immune-compromised and many have lost family members to the very disease we are fighting," she said.

A shortage of key workers is just one reason South African hospitals are facing unprecedented pressure from the ongoing resurgence of coronavirus cases, driven by a new variant that appears more infectious than earlier strains. Admissions have far outstripped last year's peak and oxygen and critical-care beds are in short supply.

There were almost 16,900 people suffering from Covid-19 in the country's hospitals as of Jan. 14, according to data compiled by independent analyst Segan Naidoo, who has been tracking the course of the virus in South Africa since late April. That was about 25% higher than a week ago and compares to approximately 11,500 in mid-July, when the initial wave was at its zenith.

"I'm very worried there will be insufficient beds and in particular insufficient oxygen supplies to treat all the patients we'll see at the peak," said Jeremy Nel, head of infectious diseases at Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg. "Staff shortages are a major problem."

While South African President Cyril Ramaphosa moved quickly to shut down society when cases first started rising in March, predictions that the economy contracted the most in almost 90 years have made it tough for him to expand restrictions. The current coronavirus surge also began just as millions of people traveled around the country -- and across land borders -- for the festive season.

The most recent measures to contain the spread include a 9 p.m. curfew and a renewed ban on alcohol sales, in part to ease the pressure on hospital trauma wards from car accidents and drunken violence. On Monday night, Ramaphosa reassured the nation that

vaccines would be a "game changer" with 20 million doses on the way, though the government has only confirmed deals for 1.5 million.

That compares starkly with a rollout already underway in the U.K., which is also experiencing severe pressure on hospitals after an outbreak driven by a new coronavirus variant.

On many South African hospital wards, the shortfall of health workers means they are being spread too thinly, according to Ntsodo, who has been working as a nurse in both private and public hospitals around Cape Town since April.

"People are becoming ill quickly and we are going all out and are tired," she said. "The second wave has just been so rapid with patients deteriorating drastically in days."

"I am finding myself saying, this person is now a candidate to go over to intensified, critical care, but it's not available because there is no bed or no ventilator or high-flow oxygen machines have run out," Ntsodo said. "You have to get used to three lives lost on a 12-hour shift."

The supply of personal protective equipment for workers is more stable now than in the middle of last year, but remains inadequate in some areas and hospitals, according to Nel. "It was recently shown that some of the masks used to protect health workers offered inadequate protection when they were subjected to testing," he said.

Meanwhile, medical-grade oxygen use is surging, leaving suppliers struggling to keep pace with demand. "The oxygen delivery, supply and piping systems are far from reassuring in many hospitals and clinics currently," Nel said.

As with South Africa's initial experience with the virus, each major province is suffering waves of cases at different times. Eastern Cape was first to hit alarming rates late last year, followed by neighboring Western Cape, where Cape Town is situated. Last is Gauteng, encompassing the economic hub of Johannesburg, which is now seeing the largest increase of new hospitalizations and is expected to be some weeks off its peak.

"It's important to acknowledge what an amazing job the South African health force is doing," said Marc Mendelson, head of infectious diseases & HIV medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. "There is a lot of burnout, and mental health issues - health-care workers are under huge strain."

Network TV News Coverage

Troops in Afghanistan, Iraq Reach Pentagon's Drawdown Goal (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

The number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, about 2,500 in each country, reached the Pentagon's drawdown goal.

Nation's Capitol Braces for Violence Ahead of Inauguration Day (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/15/2021 7:34 PM, Staff]

Tonight, the nation's capital braced for violence. Checkpoints and barricades throughout the city and armed National Guard members patrolling Capitol Hill. With just four days before Joe Biden is sworn in, there are unprecedented shutdowns. As of this morning, the Secretary of the Interior officially closed the areas in the National Mall. An inaugural rehearsal that had been planned by the Biden team for Sunday has been postponed according to sources. Among the FBI's top concerns for Inauguration Day is the "substantial threat of improvised explosive devices" and the ongoing threat to members of Congress and political leaders. The Washington Post reported Vice President Pence was rushed from the Senate Chamber one minute before a group reached the second floor of the Capitol last week. The group was led away by Officer Eugene Goodman who acted as a decoy. Pence, his wife, and daughter were just 100 feet away. One of the first people to reach Pence's desk was Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon shaman. Prosecutors argue he should remain in custody after he left a note on Pence's desk saying, "It's only a matter of time. Justice is coming." 25,000 National Guard members are expected to be in the Capitol ahead of the inauguration.

CDC Warns of Highly Contagious Variant as Coronavirus Cases Surge, Vaccine Rollout Faces Issues (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/15/2021 8:41 PM, Staff]

The CDC is warning that a new highly contagious variant of coronavirus could lead to a sharp increase in cases. This comes as the US struggles to ramp up vaccine distribution. Here in the US, more than 12 million doses have been given, but many Americans now have to wait longer for theirs. Some of the problem is that some states only received a fraction of the doses they were promised. 20 million doses were promised by the end of December. Today, less than 13 million have actually been given. In a move meant to ease the backlog, Secretary of Health and Human Services announced on Tuesday that they will release the entire supply rather than holding second doses. Governors of Oregon and Colorado say that's not true. Pfizer in a statement to CBS News said that Operation Warp Speed has asked them to start shipping second doses only recently. Today, President-Elect Joe Biden detailed his plan to speed up vaccinations. He has been focused on his goal to vaccinate 100 million people in the first 100 days of his presidency. He plans to use FEMA to mobilize thousands of staff members to create more vaccination sites. He will also use the Defense Authorization Act to increase supplies. He will also train 100,000 new workers to administer shots.

[Russia] Russia Plans to Withdraw From Open Skies Treaty (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Staff]

Russia says it plans to withdraw from an international treaty known as Open Skies. It's an agreement that allows dozens of countries to launch surveillance flights over other countries' military facilities. The idea is to encourage transparency and help monitor arms control deals, but President Trump pulled the US out of Open Skies last year blaming Russian violations. Russia says the American departure seriously compromised the treaty.

[United Kingdom] Britain Makes Changes for Incoming Travelers Amid COVID Surge (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

Britain is making changes for travelers as cases of COVID-19 surge. Three days after the

US made a similar move, Britain is tightening coronavirus border controls. Prime Minister Boris Johnson says hospitals are struggling amid surging case numbers. "We're now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queuing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," said Johnson. From Monday, anyone arriving in the UK will need a negative COVID test. Johnson said he is concerned about potential new variants of the virus, which may be more infectious. Britain is already under a sweeping national lockdown.

[North Korea] North Korean Leader Unveils New Ballistic Missile Ahead of Washington Transition (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:19 PM, Staff]

Days before the United States inaugurates a new president, there is a new show of force from North Korea. A message from Pyongyang to a Washington in transition. In a military parade at the end of a special Congress of the ruling party, North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un revealed a huge new ballistic missile capable of being launched from submarines. That could bring North Korea's substantial nuclear threat close to US shores as well as land-based missiles easily rolled out that could hit US bases in the region. As Kim put it in a speech this week, "We must do everything we can to increase nuclear war deterrence and military capability." Some analysts say he held out a bit of an olive branch to the incoming administration by praising the 2018 Singapore summit he held with President Trump, saying it is sure the establishment of new North Korea-US relations.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

With Mall, bridges and streets closed in D.C., the nation prepares for a celebration of democracy mostly devoid of its citizens

Vaccine reserve was exhausted when Trump administration vowed to release it, dashing hopes of expanded access

How the rioters who stormed the Capitol came dangerously close to Pence

In Trump's final days, a spree of environmental rollbacks

State leaders say volatile mix of far-right, white supremacist groups could challenge law enforcement

The New York Times

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

New Warnings of Violence as Security Tightens for Inauguration

Biden Pledges Federal Vaccine Campaign to Beat a Surging Coronavirus

C.D.C. Warns the New Virus Variant Could Fuel Huge Spikes in Covid Cases

A Second Economic Crisis for Biden, but a Different First Response

The Wall Street Journal

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Outlines Plan for Bigger Federal Role in Covid-19 Vaccinations

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says

Covid-19 Vaccine Leaders Waited Months to Approve Distribution Plans

Joe Biden Vows to Unify America. That Job Has Become Dramatically Harder.

ABC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Beyond domestic terrorists, officials eye foreign influence, drones as threats to Biden inauguration

Governors angrily accuse Trump administration of misleading states on vaccine supply

Federal watchdogs open probe of response to Capitol riot

CBS News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

More arrests announced as inauguration security takes shape

Authorities say rioters aimed to "assassinate" elected officials

Coronavirus has now killed more than 2 million people worldwide: "A heart-wrenching milestone"

CNN

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Terrifying scope of Capitol attack becoming clearer as Washington locks down for Biden's inauguration

New, contagious coronavirus variant could worsen pandemic, CDC warns

States adding Covid-19 vaccination sites, but governors complain the feds need to give them more doses

Fox News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden inauguration plans prompt closing of National Mall

State Department says Wuhan lab researchers may have had COVID in the fall of 2019

Migrant caravan in Honduras on the move in uncertain times

NBC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden to deploy FEMA, National Guard as part of national vaccination plan

Federal official walks back allegation rioters intended to 'capture and assassinate'

CDC says U.K. coronavirus variant could become predominant strain in U.S. by March

{End of Report}

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STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

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Secretary of State

[China] U.S. Steps Up Claims Covid-19 May Have Escaped From Chinese Lab (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 8:50 PM, Bill Faries, 6400K, Negative]

The State Department on Friday said it had new information suggesting the Covid-19 pandemic could have emerged from a Chinese laboratory and not through contact with infected animals, the latest salvo in the Trump administration's efforts to pressure Beijing over the virus's origins.

Specifically, the U.S. said it had obtained new evidence that researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick in the fall of 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak in the surrounding city, with symptoms it said were consistent with either Covid-19 or common seasonal illnesses.

The department said China's lack of transparency about the pandemic's origin more than a year ago, as well as efforts to mask early shortcomings in the country's response to the outbreak, make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. But the brief, unsigned statement issued by the U.S. -- less than a week before the end of the Trump administration -- provided no data to back up its claims.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," according to the State Department. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection."

A State Department spokesperson declined to elaborate when asked for further comment.

China has repeatedly rejected charges that the virus might have emerged from a laboratory. The U.S. didn't say how it obtained the new information about illnesses at the lab.

The comments, in a State Department fact sheet, come as China faces criticism for initially preventing some members of a World Health Organization mission from entering China as part of an effort to trace the origin of Covid-19, saying they hadn't passed health screenings. While the experts were eventually granted clearance, China had already been criticized by the WHO for delaying the mission's plans to visit the country.

China has been under scrutiny since the outbreak exploded in and around Wuhan, but the

Trump administration also sought to pin more blame on authorities in Beijing after the pandemic took off in the U.S. and deaths soared. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo frequently refer to the illness as the "China virus", "China plague" and "Wuhan virus."

For its part, China is mounting a campaign to cast doubt the virus originated within its borders. State media have played up research suggesting that there were cases in Italy and the U.S. that pre-date those in Wuhan, and hinted that the pathogen could have entered the country via frozen food or packaging.

On Friday it was announced that 2 million people had died worldwide from the outbreak, with almost 400,000 deaths in the U.S.

[China] Pompeo: US 'has reason to believe' Wuhan lab staff caught COVID-19 months before pandemic (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 7:35 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

U.S. officials have "reason to believe" that Chinese researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology caught the novel coronavirus months before it developed into a pandemic, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

"The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses," Pompeo said in Friday evening announcement. "This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

World Health Organization investigators arrived in China on Thursday, but they remain in quarantine. Pompeo's statement amplifies U.S. suspicions that the contagion leaked out of a lab, a finding that would tend to reinforce the perception that the Chinese Communist government is to blame for the public health calamity.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," Pompeo added. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

In May, Pompeo declared that U.S. officials possessed "enormous evidence" that the pandemic originated in a Chinese laboratory, although he acknowledged this week that "we don't know for sure" that it did. Chinese officials suggested in the early months of the pandemic that the virus emerged from a "wet market" where wild animal meat was sold, but Beijing's envoys have also launched disinformation operations to blame the U.S. military or suggest that it began in another country.

The allocation of blame for the pandemic has driven major international controversies over the last year — a war of words between Chinese and American diplomats paralleled by Beijing's use of economic restrictions to punish Australia's call for an investigation. The pandemic triggered an ideological showdown between Washington and Beijing, as Pompeo pointed to Chinese Communist censorship of early warnings to undercut the regime's influence, while Chinese officials have cited their handling of the pandemic to tout their

system of governance.

"Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese side has maintained close communication and cooperation with WHO on global origin-tracing in an open, transparent and responsible manner," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said this week. "China will continue close cooperation with WHO and international experts and contribute our share to the global origin-tracing work."

Pompeo has rebuked China over the last year for failing to provide the early "virus samples" that researchers prize. Chinese officials acknowledged "destroying the samples" in May, a move justified as a way "to temporarily manage the pathogen." State Department officials made a point to emphasize that they are suggesting that the pandemic may have resulted from "an accident at a laboratory," as opposed to any intentional malign behavior.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," a State Department fact sheet released alongside Pompeo's statement observed. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection. Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure."

Chinese researchers have been studying a bat coronavirus that is "96.2% similar" to the virus that caused COVID-19, the State Department noted. "Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible 'gain of function' experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality," Pompeo said.

World Health Organization investigators have maintained a collegial public posture toward China, in their attempt to gain access to the country and begin the long-awaited probe. "I don't think we should be pointing fingers here," professor Marion Koopmans, a member of the team sent by the WHO, told Chinese state-run media recently.

President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the World Health Organization in July, citing outrage over the WHO's amplification of false information provided by Beijing. Pompeo, who has predicted a "completely whitewashed investigation," put pressure on the just-arrived investigators.

"The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report," he said. "Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world."

Department of State News

Trump gives award to Morocco's king in private ceremony (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump has awarded a top U.S. honor to King Mohammed VI of Morocco,

citing his decision to begin normalization of relations with Israel.

The Legion of Merit is a rarely awarded decoration that can only be bestowed by the president, and typically on heads of state or government of other countries.

The honor comes after the United States in December recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory, including disputed area between southern Morocco and Mauritania. Morocco, in turn, agreed to resume partial diplomatic ties with Israel in the near future, establish direct flights between the nations, and promote economic and technological cooperation.

Trump has sought to make bolstering regional support for Israel as a countermeasure to Iranian aggression a signature foreign policy legacy of his administration.

King Mohammed was not in Washington to accept the award. Morocco's ambassador to the U.S., Princess Lalla Joumala, accepted it on his behalf in a private ceremony, according to a White House statement.

Trump in his final days in office has spent time honoring friends and allies with the presidential awards.

Earlier this week, Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, one of his fiercest GOP allies, in a private ceremony at the White House. The White House also announced this week that Trump would be awarding New England coach Bill Belichick, a six-time Super Bowl winner, the Medal of Freedom. But Belichick declined to accept the award.

US calls Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners' (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:32 AM, Jon Gambrell, 13480K, Neutral]

The United States called Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates "major security partners" early Saturday, a previously unheard of designation for the two countries home to major American military operations.

A White House statement tied the designation to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates normalizing ties to Israel, saying it "reflects their extraordinary courage, determination and leadership." It also noted the two countries long have taken part in U.S. military exercises.

It's unclear what the designation means for Bahrain, an island kingdom off Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, and the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, while the UAE's Jebel Ali port is the busiest port of call for American warships outside of the U.S. Bahrain hosts some 5,000 American troops, while the UAE hosts 3,500, many at Al-Dhafra Air Base.

Already, the U.S. uses the designation of "major non-NATO ally" to describe its relationship with Kuwait, which hosts the forward command of U.S. Army Central. That designation grants a country special financial and military considerations for nations not part of NATO. Bahrain also is a non-NATO ally.

The U.S. military's Central Command and the Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The 5th Fleet referred queries to the State Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The White House designation comes in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration. Trump forged close ties to Gulf Arab countries during his time in office in part over his hard-line stance on Iran. That's sparked a series of escalating incidents between the countries after Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also comes after Bahrain and the UAE joined Egypt and Saudi Arabia in beginning to resolve a yearslong boycott of Qatar, another Gulf Arab nation home to Al-Udeid Air Base that hosts Central Command's forward operating base. That boycott began in the early days of Trump's time in office after he visited Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip.

UN hopes to take first step to elect next chief by Jan. 31 (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 4:50 PM, Edith M. Lederer, 13480K, Neutral]

The U.N. General Assembly and Security Council are expected to take the first step toward electing the next head of the global organization this month.

Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said Friday that he and Tunisia's U.N. Ambassador Tarek Ladeb, the current council president, hope to send a letter before Jan. 31 asking the U.N.'s 193 member nations to submit any candidates to challenge Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The former Portuguese prime minister and U.N. refugee chief, whose five-year term at the helm of the United Nations ends on Dec. 31, said in letters to Bozkir and Ladeb on Monday that he will seek a second term.

The General Assembly elects the secretary-general on the recommendation of the 15-member Security Council where the five permanent members have veto power, so their support is crucial. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson immediately announced his support for Guterres, but there has been no word yet from The United States, Russia, China and France.

A General Assembly resolution adopted in September 2015 asks the presidents of the assembly and Security Council to "start the process of soliciting candidates for the position of secretary-general through a joint letter addressed to all member states."

Bozkir said he met Tuesday with Ladeb and shared a draft letter to member states which the Tunisian ambassador then circulated to council members. "We are hoping that we will be able to sign this letter together before the end of the month," he said.

Bozkir told a news conference he will then ensure that any candidate appear before the General Assembly "to share their vision and explain what they're going to do during the five-term in office and there will be a question and answer part."

Legally, he said, there is no deadline for countries to submit candidates, but he expects "the first wave" — with one or more candidates — to appear before the General Assembly in April or the beginning of May.

Guterres was elected by the 193-member assembly to succeed Ban Ki-moon after a hotly contested and transparent race in October 2016 that initially included 13 candidates -- seven women and six men. He took office on Jan. 1, 2017.

Wikileaks asks reporters for help in desperate bid to score Julian Assange last-minute pardon (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:39 PM, Oliver Darcy, 7975K, Neutral]

In a last-minute bid to persuade President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange, Wikileaks has reached out to several high-profile reporters asking for help in its efforts to rescue its founder from potential life in prison.

The messages sent to reporters over Twitter direct message said that Assange's partner, Stella Moris, had directed Wikileaks to reach out for possible assistance.

"She was hoping that you may have ideas or contacts that could help convince Trump to pardon Assange," said one version of the message sent to multiple reporters.

Another version of the message characterized Assange as someone who faces prison "for journalistic activities."

"He is a free speech hero," the message added.

The messages were sent to reporters, including this one, at some of the nation's top news organizations.

Wikileaks did not respond to a request for comment, but Moris confirmed to CNN that she did ask the organization to "reach out to some of its most influential followers."

Moris said that some journalists, who she did not name, have responded by asking for interviews with Assange. She argued that Assange's case has "major Constitutional implications" and it could essentially "turn investigative reporting into a criminal enterprise."

Moris added that she hopes to make contact with someone in the White House about Assange's case, but so far has not been in contact with anyone.

"I am not in touch with anyone in the White House, hence the effort to ask people who might have contacts to speak to them themselves, and make the principled case for a pardon," Moris said.

Assange was arrested in April 2019 when British authorities entered the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he had been holed up for seven years, and took him into custody on a US extradition warrant.

The Wikileaks founder has been charged under the Espionage Act for his role in publishing classified military and diplomatic cables. He faces up to 175 years in prison.

A British judge last week denied Assange bail, saying that "there are substantial grounds for believing that if Mr. Assange is released today he would fail to surrender to court and face the appeal proceedings."

The judge in the case, however, has denied a request to extradite Assange to the US.

Trump has issued a number of controversial pardons as his days in office dwindle. In December, he pardoned longtime ally Roger Stone and former campaign manager Paul Manafort. He also pardoned four Blackwater guards convicted in an Iraq massacre.

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:51 PM, Arshad Mohammed, Humeyra Pamuk, Daphne Psaledakis, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States on Friday imposed sanctions on companies in Iran, China and the United Arab Emirates for doing business with the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines and on three Iranian entities over conventional arms proliferation.

They are the latest in a series of measures aimed at stepping up pressure on Tehran in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration, which ends on Wednesday.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington had sanctioned seven companies, including Chinese-based Jiangyin Mascot Special Steel Co and UAE-based Accenture Building Materials, and two people for shipping steel to or from Iran.

He said Iran's Marine Industries Organization, Aerospace Industries Organization and the Iran Aviation Industries Organization had also been blacklisted over conventional arms proliferation.

In a statement later on Friday, Pompeo said he was also increasing the scope of metals-related sanctions against Iran administered by the State Department.

Those who knowingly transfer 15 materials which the State Department says are used in connection with Iran's nuclear, military or ballistic missile programs, including certain types of aluminum and steel, would be subject to sanctions, he said.

During his four years in office, Trump has tried to force Tehran back into talks over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its activities in the Middle East. Saying the agreement did not go far enough, Trump in 2018 quit an Iran nuclear deal, which Tehran struck with world powers in 2015 to rein in its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, who will succeed Trump on Wednesday, has said he will return to the 2015 nuclear pact if Iran resumes strict compliance with it.

[Iran] US sanctions 7 entities, 2 persons over alleged ties to Iran shipping companies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 1:35 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The United States has designated seven entities and two individuals for allegedly flouting US sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Friday.

"In June 2020, the State Department sanctioned the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines

(IRISL) pursuant to Executive Order 13382 (WMD Proliferators and Their Supporters)," Pompeo said.

"We have warned the industry that those who do business with IRISL, its subsidiaries, and other Iranian shipping entities, risk sanctions. Today, we are sanctioning seven entities and two individuals for such conduct," he added.

[Iran] Will Biden lift sanctions on Iran? Crisis Group says it should (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 5:15 PM, Guy Taylor, 459K, Negative]

Iran has engaged in "worrying violations" of the 2015 nuclear deal, including uranium enrichment at "a level perilously close to weapons-grade," according to a prominent international think tank, which argues the incoming Biden administration should respond not by punishing Tehran, but by moving quickly to revive the accord.

The International Crisis Group, headed by a former Obama administration official who helped negotiate the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), said in a report Friday that the incoming administration "should swiftly re-enter the deal, if Iran reverses its JCPOA breaches."

The report, which is just as likely to be read closely by President-elect Joseph R. Biden's team as it is to be criticized by U.S. foreign policy hawks, was circulated against a backdrop of fresh provocations by Tehran.

Iranian military forces held exercises Friday involving ballistic missiles that U.S. officials have accused Tehran building up in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that undergirded the 2015 nuclear deal. The drills, reported by Iranian state media, followed recent threats by Tehran to expel United Nations nuclear inspectors from the country if the incoming Biden administration doesn't quickly remove sanctions that have been imposed on Tehran during the Trump era.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pleaded with the international community last week to unify against that threat amid uncertainty over the future U.S. policy under Mr. Biden. On Friday, with only a few days left before Mr. Biden replaces Mr. Trump in the White House, Mr. Pompeo announced fresh U.S. sanctions targeting several Iranian shipping companies and entities accused of facilitating Tehran's weapons procurement activities.

The announcement marked the latest in the so-called "maximum pressure" strategy Mr. Trump set in motion in 2018 when he withdrew the United States from the Obama-era nuclear deal. The strategy has featured the unilateral re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, as well as a U.S.-led push to crush Iran's economy by upholding a global embargo on Iranian crude oil.

Mr. Trump has argued the sanctions would coerce Iran into fresh negotiations with Washington that could result in a new deal addressing not only Tehran's nuclear activities, but also its ballistic missile programs and subversive backing of militants in other Mideast nations — two things that were not resolved by the 2015 deal.

The approach created a rift with other signatories to the deal, including Britain, France and Germany, who have sought, along with China and Russia, to keep the accord alive since

2018. The big question now is whether the incoming Biden administration will keep the re-imposed U.S. sanctions in place or lift them.

The International Crisis Group is calling for the latter, asserting in its report Friday that the Trump administration "insisted that its 'maximum pressure' strategy would deliver a superior nuclear agreement."

"Not only did the coercion fail, but it also reversed the significant non-proliferation gains the agreement had secured and prompted a more aggressive Iranian regional posture," the report's executive summary claimed.

Re-entering the deal on the condition that Iran roll back its enrichment activities and its threats to kick out U.N. inspectors, the summary argued, will be the "best way" for the Biden administration to "avoid a nuclear crisis early in its tenure, restore transatlantic cooperation, facilitate the financial dividends the agreement was meant to deliver to the Iranian people and provide a foundation for future negotiations on matters outside the JCPOA's nuclear portfolio."

The report argued the Trump administration was incorrect in thinking it could "squeeze greater concessions out of Iran on its nuclear program and also with regard to the other concerns."

"The economic toll on Iran has been severe — three years of recession in a row — and the deal's remaining participants have been unable to relieve the pain," the report's executive summary said. "But removing the central incentive for Iran's commitment to its JCPOA obligations led Tehran to slip those bonds, not to acquiesce in tighter ones."

"In early January, Iran announced the latest in a series of worrying violations, raising uranium enrichment rates to 20 percent, a level perilously close to weapons-grade, and threatening to severely curb international monitoring and verification, the accord's hallmarks," it said, adding that the "'maximum pressure' era has produced the worst of all worlds: economic stagnation for Iran, mounting international concern about its nuclear program and simmering regional tensions."

Critics of the original nuclear deal, including most Republicans, say that characterization is off the mark.

"The problem with the rush to reaffirm the old, flawed deal is that it would benefit only one country: Iran," according to James Carafano, a national security analyst with the Heritage Foundation, and Adam Milstein, the chairman emeritus of the Israeli-American Council.

"The cascading consequences of that decision could destabilize not just the Middle East, but trigger problems around the world," the two argued in a commentary published earlier this month by The Washington Times.

"The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the deal and slap Iran with severe sanctions has crippled the Iranian economy, decreased its oil production and caused a significant devaluation of the rial," they wrote. "Tehran is even more desperate now than it was in 2015. It would be a mistake to waste the gains of the outgoing administration."

The incoming administration is seen to be carefully weighing how to proceed.

International Crisis Group President Robert Malley, a critic of President Trump's overall foreign policy who served as White House coordinator for the Middle East under President Obama, has argued that if Mr. Biden desires, he should have no problem rejoining the nuclear deal and repealing the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration.

However, Mr. Malley and Philip Gordon, another former Obama administration official now with the Council on Foreign Relations, asserted in a November New York Times op-ed that the Trump administration "worked resolutely to build a so-called sanctions wall that would deter businesses from trading with Iran even if the United States rejoined the deal, repackaging nuclear-related sanctions as terrorism-related penalties to make it politically costlier for a Democratic administration to remove them."

"More broadly, the Trump administration seemed to be trying to erode any Iranian faith that an arrangement entered into with the United States would survive America's political vicissitudes."

[China] Minimise procurement of Chinese goods, Trump directs US government agencies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 7:26 PM, Staff, 4021K, Positive]

US President Donald Trump on Friday (local time) directed departments and agencies laws, regulations and policies to minimise the procurement of Chinese goods.

According to an official statement by Robert C O'Brien, National Security Advisor, "Today, President Donald J. Trump directed departments and agencies to review applicable laws, regulations, and policies and to propose regulatory and policy changes, including potential executive actions, to minimize the procurement of People's Republic of China (PRC) goods and services by the Federal Government."

He said that the PRC 2017 National Intelligence Law obligates individuals, organisations, and institutions to assist the PRC security and intelligence services in carrying out a wide variety of intelligence work.

"The PRC government, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, remains free to coerce and coopt PRC manufacturers and services providers to target the United States Government for espionage and information advantage. Some of this activity could further the goals of the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which calls for all Chinese civil institutions, both public and private, to aid in advancing the capabilities of the PRC military through the acquisition and application of critical and emerging technologies," he added.

Quoting the Director of National Intelligence report, O'Brien said, "The PRC poses the single greatest national security threat to America today. Beijing sees the United States as the main impediment to achieving its regional and global ambitions and consequentially invests significant resources in MCF and other strategies to gain relative advantage. The PRC targets the information systems of the United States Government for personnel records, military plans, and other exploitable data through cyber and other means."

[China] China's security chief optimistic about winning 'protracted war' with US (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

Chinese officials are optimistic about winning a geopolitical competition with the United States due to the perceived "decline of the West," according to the boasts of a top Chinese Communist security chief.

"The rise of the East and the decline of the West has become [a global] trend, and changes of the international landscape are in our favor," Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission chief Chen Yixin told colleagues, per a South China Morning Post translation. "The U.S. suppression [of us] is a major threat, but [our struggle with the US] is both a skirmish and a protracted war."

American and Chinese officials have moved into open rivalry in recent years after U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Beijing has been "waging ... a cold war" against the U.S. Those tensions have underpinned a yearlong controversy over China's censorship of information about the coronavirus pandemic, as well as disputes over Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong and high-stakes debates over whether American allies can rely on Chinese state-backed tech companies.

"The coronavirus pandemic is a major test, but [we should] rise to the challenge of this crisis and turn threats into opportunities," Chen said.

Success or failure in key arenas of the competition, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's campaign to thwart state-backed Huawei's bids to build fifth-generation wireless technology networks around the world, depends on European allies. Their confidence in the U.S. could be shaken by the attack on the U.S. Capitol and President Trump's success in convincing supporters that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, despite his failure to prove that case in courts across the country, according to a prominent Senate Democrat.

"The Republican Party will have something to say about this because European nations will sort of hedge their bets on getting in too deep with America, if they think that Donald Trump is coming back four years from now or Donald Trump Jr. is coming back four years from now," Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a member for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during an Atlantic Council event Friday.

Murphy, a Democrat, said that he has advised Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken to draft the Republican lawmakers who accepted the election results into a diplomatic initiative.

"I think he should deploy Republicans and Democrats in the Senate who voted to certify the elections, who have condemned those that tried to undermine democracy, and send us out around the world to try to tell the story of how we overcame this moment," he said. "This transition, as messy as it will be, will still be a transition, and that, in the end, is, again, still a miracle of American democracy."

Chinese officials, for their part, have pointed to the crisis at the U.S. Capitol to justify their crackdown on Hong Kong dissidents who protested Beijing's plans to undercut the rule of law in the former British colony.

"While the society is stable overall, there are still many risks, and hidden dangers ... intertwine, resulting in a wide range of public security risks," said Chen, the security chief. "Security is the cornerstone of development ... Without security, we cannot achieve anything."

[India] India's friction with U.S. rises over planned purchase of Russian S-400 defence systems (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 1:25 PM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has told India it is unlikely to get a waiver on its planned acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence systems, raising the risk of sanctions similar to those imposed on Turkey for buying that equipment, people aware of the matter said.

The Trump administration has been telling the Indians to drop the \$5.5 billion deal for five missile systems and avoid a diplomatic crisis, saying New Delhi did not have a wide waiver from a 2017 U.S. law aimed at deterring countries from buying Russian military hardware.

That position is unlikely to change under the Biden administration that takes over next week and that has promised an even tougher U.S. approach towards Russia, the people aware of the discussions told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

India says it needs the long-range surface-to-air missiles to counter the threat from China. India and China have been locked in a face-off on the disputed Himalayan border since April, the most serious in decades.

New Delhi has also affirmed its right to choose its defence supplies, potentially setting up an early point of friction with the new U.S. administration.

"India and the U.S. have a comprehensive global strategic partnership. India has a special and privileged strategic partnership with Russia," foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said about the proposed S-400 purchase.

"India has always pursued an independent foreign policy. This also applies to our defence acquisitions and supplies which are guided by our national security interests."

The United States imposed sanctions on Turkey last month for its acquisition of the Russian air defence systems under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)

A U.S. embassy spokesperson in Delhi said the United States was aware of reports of India's planned purchase of the S-400s, but noted there had been no deliveries yet.

"We urge all of our allies and partners to forgo transactions with Russia that risk triggering sanctions under the CAATSA. CAATSA does not have any blanket or country-specific waiver provision."

"We have not made any waiver determinations with respect to Indian transactions with Russia," the spokesperson told Reuters.

There was no immediate comment from Russian officials. Moscow has previously said that the sanctions imposed on Turkey were illegitimate and showed arrogance toward

international law.

INITIAL PAYMENT IN 2019

India made an initial payment of \$800 million in 2019 toward the Russian deal and the first set of missile batteries are expected towards the end of this year.

Russia has traditionally been India's main weapons supplier but in recent decades the Indian government has turned to the United States and Israel for new planes and drones.

U.S. officials believe there is still time for Delhi to reconsider, and that the punitive measures would only kick in if the deal with the Russians was "consummated."

Washington has told New Delhi that if India acquires the S-400 it would affect how its systems interact with U.S. military equipment that India now has and would jeopardise future arms transfers such as high-end fighter planes and armed drones, according to the people aware of the matter.

"There is a narrow chance India can avoid sanctions, presuming the S-400 purchase is completed. At the moment, it's a good bet that sanctions will be applied against India," Richard Rossow, a specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said.

But the outcome could depend on how India-U.S. defence cooperation progresses, he said, adding that India had been working with Washington on security in Asia more than ever before and this could be a mitigating factor.

Editorials and Op-eds

Donald Trump's Dismal Legacy in East Asia (The National Interest)

The National Interest [1/15/2021 1:15 PM, Paul Heer, 289K, Negative]

A few days ago, the White House released a declassified document from 2018 outlining the Trump administration's "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific." The document summarized the challenges the administration saw the United States facing in the region, the U.S. interests and "desired end states" it would pursue there, and the "lines of effort" it would follow toward those goals. In an accompanying statement, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the strategy document was released "to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners America's enduring commitment to this vital region." It seems more likely that it was issued one week before the end of the administration in an effort to frame the discourse on Donald Trump's legacy in policy toward East Asia, and probably also to box in the Biden administration's approach to the region. Trump's supporters have characterized his East Asia policy primarily as a strong and decisive pushback against the growing threat from China after what they characterize as decades of passive policies that allowed Beijing to extend its influence globally and resist pressure to democratize internally. They will probably characterize any divergence from the document by the Biden administration as a reversion to weakness and failure to fully recognize the China threat.

But what has the Trump administration actually accomplished in the Indo-Pacific region,

pursuant to its agenda? According to the strategy document, the key challenges were to:

"maintain US strategic primacy" in the region

"promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing a new, illiberal sphere of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity"

"advance US global economic leadership while promoting fair and reciprocal trade."

It's hard to see how any of these goals has been significantly advanced over the past four years. On the contrary, the United States is in a worse position in the Indo-Pacific region than it was four years ago.

Instead of maintaining U.S. strategic primacy there, the Trump administration has almost certainly confirmed that it is irretrievably lost. Through inattention, rhetoric largely devoid of strategy, and policies and behaviors that have eroded the confidence American allies and partners have in Washington's credibility and reliability, Trump has profoundly undermined the historical leadership role that the United States has played in the Indo-Pacific region during and since the Cold War. Two of the document's operating assumptions were that "loss of US prestige in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve US interests globally" and that "Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military influence will continue to increase in the near-term and challenge the US ability to achieve its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region." Both of those assumptions have been amply validated: the United States has lost prestige relative to China, thereby weakening its ability to achieve its interests.

In terms of countering Chinese influence and promoting the alternative of a "liberal economic order" and "fair and reciprocal trade," it is hard to give Trump high marks after his early withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which inevitably reinforced China's economic role and clout in the region. This was followed by Trump's protectionist trade policies, which did not spare U.S. allies and partners in Asia, and his administration's inadequate efforts to compete with China's infrastructure and investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Overall, Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, implicitly targeted at building a coalition to counterbalance Chinese power and influence, never yielded a coherent strategy or much substance—or sustained attention from Washington.

Perhaps the biggest setback has been to the vitality of the U.S. alliance network. The strategy document included among the Trump administration's "top interests" that of "enhanc[ing] the credibility and effectiveness of our alliances," and O'Brien's statement highlighted the goal of "strengthen[ing] our wide and diverse network of allies and partners." Instead, Trump's relative neglect of the allies, and especially his pressure on Tokyo and Seoul to increase their financial contributions to mutual defense or face a drawdown of the U.S. forward military presence, exasperated our closest friends in Northeast Asia. Trump's neglect extended to Southeast Asia, where he only intermittently showed interest in the multilateralism that is central to the identity of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations and its members' collaboration with Washington on regional economic and security issues. Overall, the Trump administration was relatively inattentive to the particular interests, priorities, and perspectives of U.S. partners in the region—often taking them for granted and pressuring them to choose Washington's side against Beijing while repeatedly denying that

it was doing so. The strategy document characterized its "desired end state" as one in which "most nations in the Indo-Pacific view the United States as their preferred partner." That preference remains, but regional confidence in and reliance on it has been severely diminished.

All this was reinforced by Trump's general disregard for human-rights issues, best exemplified by his reported statement to Chinese president Xi Jinping that Beijing's massive reeducation camps in Xinjiang—essentially aimed at brainwashing Muslims to abandon their faith—were "exactly the right thing to do." And Trump's increasingly blatant disregard for American democracy, which culminated in his claims of electoral fraud after his defeat in the November 2020 election and his instigation of the assault on the U.S. Capitol and U.S. Congress on Jan. 6, has deflated America's stature across the Indo-Pacific region as an exemplar of democratic values and constitutionalism.

Trump has trashed Americas most important alliance. The rift with Europe could take decades to repair (CNN)

CNN [1/16/2021 12:15 AM, Luke McGee, 7975K, Neutral]

The presidency of Donald Trump has left such a wretched stench in Europe that it's hard to see how, even in four years, Joe Biden could possibly get America's most important alliance back on track.

This week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled a final trip to meet with European and NATO leaders. While the State Department claimed the reason for his cancellation was so Pompeo could work on the Biden transition, European officials suspect that America's top diplomat realized he'd arranged a leaving party no one wanted to attend.

Throughout Trump's term, Europeans have been walking a tightrope, trying to balance outright condemnation of the President's most destructive behavior with not alienating the leader of the Western world.

Pompeo was unlikely to be received warmly on his farewell tour, even before the insurrection at the US Capitol last Wednesday. For many, Trump's incitement of rioters was the final straw.

The foreign minister of Luxembourg openly called Trump a "pyromaniac," while diplomats are privately saying they "blame Trump squarely for the chaos in America since the election, including the Capitol riot," as one did to CNN, reflecting the sentiments of others in the same role.

"It was clearly not going to be a congenial trip, as many European institutions and diplomats are happily turning their back on the Trump administration. It's no secret that Europe is very much looking forward to working with Biden," said Tyson Barker, a senior Europe analyst and former State Department official under Barack Obama.

This week's snub of Pompeo brings an ignominious end to four years of exacerbation with a White House that went out of its way to burn bridges with allies who were caught off guard by the election of Trump, then horrified at his administration's inability to rein in his worst instincts.

"From our perspective, Trump saw Europe as an enemy," a senior European diplomat told

CNN. "The lasting impact of 'America First' is the US having fewer friends in Europe."

A senior European Union official said the general view in Brussels was that Trump went out of his way to "gradually undo a lot of what the EU was working towards on the world stage," pointing specifically to the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accord.

While the assumption is that the transatlantic relationship will improve under Biden, four years of carnage has spooked the European political scene.

"The European relationship has changed and will now be shrouded in skepticism," said Cathryn Cluver Ashbrook, executive director of the Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship at the Harvard Kennedy School.

"The arrival of a Biden administration has yet to be embraced with the same fanfare as Obama as President-elect, because Trump has done more damage to the relationship than George W. Bush. Trump's outward aggression affected all aspects of European life, be it trade, defense or even the emotional shared ideas and cultural ties. All those things suddenly seem debased and of less value."

The repudiation of shared ideas and cultural ties Cluver describes are one prong of the fork that has punctured the alliance. According to Barker, officials in European capitals were agog at the types of people Trump employed to work as envoys overseas.

"Europeans have considered the last four years extremely distasteful. They've been bemused by Trump's envoys, like Richard Grenell in Germany, who have turned up and started behaving like Fox News anchors and insulting the country they were supposed to be building relations with," Barker said.

Another prong has been the practical implication of Trump's approach to foreign policy. "Trump's disengagement and hollowing out of the State Department meant that we were suddenly without our most important ally on projects in the Middle East and Africa," a senior German diplomat told CNN.

"When they did take big stances on things like China or Iran, they chose not to involve anyone, leaving Europeans scrambling for a response," the diplomat added.

Cluver says this has forced a structural change in the dynamics between allies. "Europeans have had to carry the can on things like the Iran deal and climate change. On one hand, this means that Biden can pick up where Obama left off with some serious American muscle. But he might have to accept that America's role in these relationships has changed."

Barker agreed, saying it would be "important to see how the new administration acknowledges the damage that has been done by Trump to America's reputation." And on top of the big picture issues like Iran and China, Barker said, "how can [Biden] send State Department officials to Ukraine to warn about corruption with any immediate credibility?"

This idea, that Europe has lost its trust in America, comes up time and again when speaking to European diplomats and EU officials. Cluver believes the combination of unpredictability from the White House and "US bureaucracy being dismantled from the inside to make it less effective worldwide" under Trump means we have crossed the Rubicon. "American

influence in European defense, security, and other global priorities has diminished. This has led to lots of countries having to think more seriously about their future with a less assertive US," she added.

Despite optimism that Biden will restore a more collaborative approach to shared priorities, European diplomats and officials are adamant that moves towards an independent defense policy and international "strategic autonomy" will not slow down.

"In some respects, it was a good thing Trump forced us to think more about diplomatic initiatives, NATO and withdrawal of US troops," said the German diplomat. "It might come as a shock to Biden, but the prospect of the US underpinning European security is not as attractive as it was when he and Obama left office."

A view many European officials share is that no matter how friendly Biden is, Trump happened once -- and could happen again. The President lost the election, but clearly there is still a lot of support for his politics. In 2024, Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr., Mike Pompeo, or any other of his allies could conceivably pick up the torch and win an election.

"We cannot afford to be naive. If you look at the number of votes that Trump got, he wields an influence on American voters. This anti-global, 'America First' undercurrent in American politics is still very much alive and we have to hedge our bets," said the EU diplomat. Cluver is equally convinced that Trump's supporters are going nowhere, not least because they are unlike traditional voters. "A lot of his followers have been radicalized by conspiracy theories spread by groups like QAnon," she said. "Even if Biden succeeds in his domestic agenda, it will be difficult to pull people away from Trump's movement. Worse, elected representatives who want to bank on their support in the midterms and might continue pandering to them."

If this all sounds a little gloomy, to some extent, it is. "Bush was supposed to be an aberration and Obama a restoration," said Barker. "This idea of a reset seems a much tougher sell, especially since Trump's used his lame-duck period to burn the house on the way out."

It will take more than four years for the fog to lift over the Atlantic, and there are fears the relationship between Europe and America will never go back to what it was. For Europeans, that's a reality they're determined to make the best of. For the US, it's unclear whether being downgraded as a diplomatic force is something that its citizens, who've lived through four introspective years of "America First," will even care about.

Regardless, the Trump era has left Europeans with little choice but to wait and see how much of a priority Biden places on reclaiming America's place on the world stage. And they will use the four years of relative quiet under Biden to build safeguards against the all too real possibility of another Euroskeptic firestarter winning the White House in 2024.

Doctor on Covid's first year: We made a lot of mistakes (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:04 PM, Kent Sepkowitz, 7975K, Neutral]

The first case of Covid-19 in the United States was reported a year ago, on January 20, 2020. The patient, a 35-year-old man who had recently returned from visiting his family in Wuhan, China, sought medical care because of a cough and fever. He was hospitalized and survived the infection.

Since that time, more than 23 million Americans (almost 7% of the population) have been diagnosed with the infection and at least 385,000 have died. In response, effective treatments, public health containment strategies and vaccines have been developed, but the pandemic continues to worsen, both in the US and in other parts of the world.

The one-year mark provides an opportunity to prepare for year two by examining the mistakes and accomplishments of the last 12 months. I will focus only on medical decisions and dilemmas of year one and leave to others the task of evaluating the mostly disastrous political decisions that were made -- though I will note without comment that the first anniversary of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention laboratory confirmation of the initial case falls on the exact day that the Trump presidency ends and the Biden administration commences.

Personally, the year has been extremely humbling. We infectious disease specialists have been wrong repeatedly -- a predictable problem with a once-in-a-century event, but still. We are long accustomed to dealing with talk of a devastating pandemic from SARS, MERS, influenza, Ebola and smallpox to name a few. To keep calm and carry on, we have adopted an "oh now, not so fast, let's just wait and see" tone better suited to the gentleman physicians who populated Victorian novels than 21st century global village realists.

And, for many years, our Mister Rogers tone was the right one. But not this time. During late January and early February 2020, perhaps because of misleading information from China, we soft peddled the threat. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, called the risk to most Americans "miniscule" and articulated more concern about seasonal flu than the new coronavirus. He advised people to wash their hands and stay away from crowded places but to not bother wearing a mask.

I and countless others echoed this advice which was based on a well-articulated medical literature on influenza -- which ultimately was proven to be incorrect. It is uncertain whether an "everyone must wear masks" decree would have influenced many people's behavior at that early moment in the pandemic, given the paucity of US cases, but it was and remains a glaring misjudgment.

It was not the only mistake. From mid-February on, scientists stumbled to develop and deliver a reliable and widely available diagnostic test. And then came the political dawdling and decision to let the states fight among themselves for PPE supplies and ventilators.

Even leaving aside the hydroxychloroquine debacle, therapies to treat Covid-19 patients have fallen short: We have a mediocre, very expensive drug, remdesivir, directed at the virus itself. It must be given intravenously. Its uncertain efficacy has led to its exclusion from the World Health Organization treatment guidelines. Another category of therapy aimed at improving the immune response to infection includes the expensive antibody infusions the President and his buddies received. Full scale, definitive trials are still pending but this approach clearly has a role for patients with risk for severe disease.

Thankfully, the cheap old standby, dexamethasone, a steroid typically used to treat inflammation and a handful of illnesses, has reduced mortality in just about every study to date. Plus medical care overall has also lowered the rate of death among those diagnosed.

These problems are sobering reminders of how difficult it can be to make decisions when incomplete information leads to incomplete understanding of an actively evolving situation.

On a much smaller scale, though, this is the challenge for any doctor taking care of a sick, unstable patient. The situation may change hourly as test results return and new bits of a patient's history are uncovered; yet decisions must be made immediately despite uncertainty. This means that some of the decisions will be wrong.

This weighs heavily on any doctor. But despite the emotions around an error, doctors and public health experts have to wake up the next day and make more decisions, most of them also relying on incomplete information. And today's decisions must not be colored by yesterday's mistakes. Learning from a mistake is crucial but over-reacting to a mistake can be paralyzing. Knowing how to balance the two opposing forces is the largest challenge of all.

This dynamic is the biggest risk to Covid-19 pandemic control as we head into year two. The "miniscule worry" and the "don't wear a mask" mistakes and the failed "20 million vaccine doses given by December" promise can cause further problems if they over-influence the countless complex decisions that lie ahead.

The looming issues -- vaccine availability and safety, variant strains of the virus, waning immunity, when to loosen public measures after a critical mass of vaccinations -- are fraught with uncertainty, incomplete information and enormous consequences.

But decisions must be made. Inevitably they will be imperfect and will draw criticism. Adjustments made as more evidence becomes available will be viewed as waffling; a change in course will be called incompetence; the need to reimpose restrictions would be labeled a colossal failure. But everyone must come to work the next day and make the best decisions they can. The buck must no longer be passed to states and counties and hospitals.

The Biden team surely is aware of what lies ahead. We can only hope that its decisions will rely on evidence, sound judgment and, most of all, the lonely humility of a doctor caring for a critically ill patient.

What WHO Won't Learn From China (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal {1/15/2021 5:08 PM, Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., Neutral}

After much wrangling to gain entry a World Health Organization visit to China is not going to solve the mystery of Covid-19's origins.

Its mission will consist of interviewing Chinese medical and research personnel to see if they tell stories at odds with Beijing's official version. They won't. An obvious reason for the long delay and politicking over WHO's invitation was to make sure word was dispatched down the bureaucracy to let local officials and medics know what they were supposed to say.

The real challenge now, which I doubt will enlist much Chinese cooperation, is to ransack China's inventory of patient and autopsy samples from before the Wuhan outbreak to find out where and when the new virus manifested itself without being recognized. Other countries have been willing to do this outside of China. We know the virus was present in

France in December 2019 before the Wuhan eruption. A woman with a characteristic Covid rash who turned up at a Milan hospital in November 2019 has been identified as Italy's possible Patient Zero; some blood samples suggest the virus may have been present since September 2019. In comments to the press, WHO officials have alluded to the assumption that China has collected such samples too and hasn't made the results public. Don't hold your breath. Chinese officials now delight in suggesting, based on such evidence, that the virus started elsewhere. China gets credit for alerting the world to its existence. Guess what? Anything is possible until we establish some pattern in unrecognized early cases.

What's happening in China today might be a more fruitful subject of WHO inquiry than what happened in Wuhan a year ago. In Hebei province this week, 22 million people have been commanded not to leave their homes, in response to what's described as a "handful" of cases. Such instances have repeatedly popped up across China with little analysis leaking into the outside world. A lockdown in the city of Kashgar was imposed after a single asymptomatic case led to 137 others, all asymptomatic. Is this a medical miracle or have China's citizens gotten the message that they should hide their sore throats and fevers from authorities? No Western society would stand for the costs China has asked its citizens to bear: enforced mass testing, enforced quarantining, the locking of symptomless or uninfected people in their homes.

China is not Taiwan, Singapore or even South Korea, a country with water on three sides and an impassible military border on the fourth.

Before the pandemic hit, China was the world's No. 4 international tourist destination with 60 million visitors a year. Business travelers kept investment and trade flowing. Losing these benefits is among the costs China's people have been forced to bear. What's harder to understand is that they did so to avoid costs Western countries didn't have to worry about.

By a count published in January 2020, China has 3.6 intensive-care beds for every 100,000 citizens—compared with 29.4 for the U.S. and 38.7 for Germany.

China has nine cities bigger than New York, 27 bigger than Los Angeles, and 40 bigger than Chicago. Now think of the virus raging through these cities the way it did New York in the spring or L.A. today, with one-tenth the hospital capacity. In case you're wondering, the median age in China is roughly the same as the U.S.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million, is 30% bigger than New York yet its hospital system broke down under a case and death load that, by official statistics, was less than a quarter of that experienced by New York several weeks later. In Wuhan, patients died not only in the hallways but in the streets.

Covid has been a rough experience for everybody. In threatening to land on China's large urban agglomerations, though, it might well have looked like the end of the road for the Communist Party.

I was happy to see a New York Times piece the other day that, instead of touting the superiority of its officials, acknowledged that Taiwan benefited from being an island that could shut off travel.

The U.S. has 328 ports of international entry. Even with tourism down 68%, even with the Mexican and Canadian borders closed to "nonessential" travel, more than 100,000 people cross our borders every day (not including illegal border crossers).

China may not be a model for any country that isn't China. We can still be grateful for its example. While others have accepted epidemics and focused on treating patients, its economy has helped the world stay upright. Its agricultural and industrial imports have surged. Its factories have been churning out, as the Journal put it, "medical equipment and work-from-home gear" in vast quantities to help other countries manage their own adaptations to Covid's arrival in the world.

[Switzerland] The End of Swiss Neutrality (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [1/15/2021 1:13 PM, Stéphanie Fillion, 722K, Neutral]

Late last October, Switzerland officially launched its first-ever election campaign for a temporary seat on the U.N. Security Council. As part of the virtual event, the Swiss mission in New York City sent goody bags to delegations from the other countries that will ultimately vote to decide if Switzerland should sit on the council. The centerpiece amid chocolate and Swiss cheese samples: a kit to make a Swiss culinary delicacy, a cheesy raclette.

Switzerland's cheese and chocolate diplomacy is in full swing at the United Nations ahead of the June 2022 vote, but it is actually running unopposed. There are two seats available for Western countries for the 2023-2024 period, and the only other country running is Malta. Nevertheless, the campaign—which was allocated some \$28 million by the government—has kicked up controversy. "It's a very interesting situation at the moment," said Angela Müller, the vice president of Switzerland's U.N. Association, "because we have this clean-slate situation with Malta, but the actual opposition is coming from inside."

For some in Switzerland, they believe that taking a seat on the world's highest security body—one that has the power to take military action to restore peace if it deems necessary—could harm the country's unique international reputation as a neutral power and the prized diplomatic role that comes with it.

One of those critics is Paul Widmer, a retired Swiss diplomat who was posted in Berlin, Amman, Zagreb, Washington, and at the U.N. in New York. "Our neutrality has become an international trademark," he said. "Through a constant policy of neutrality, Switzerland has acquired high credibility in foreign policy." Switzerland is regularly asked to represent countries where they do not have diplomatic relations, for example, between the United States and Iran and Russia and Georgia. The peak of such diplomacy was during World War II, when Switzerland had 200 mandates in about 35 countries. Indeed, as Widmer put it, the country's neutrality "is the reason why many states bestow Switzerland with international mandates—be it as a protecting power, be it as a go-between, or a mediator."

Switzerland's neutrality is in both the country's DNA and its legal system.

Internationally, it was enshrined in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and under the 1907 Law of Neutrality. Nationally, it is also mentioned in the Swiss Constitution. However, the specifics of the country's neutrality policy have evolved in the last few decades, especially after Switzerland became a full-fledged U.N. member state in the early 2000s. "We managed to stay out of two world wars," Pascale Baeriswyl, Switzerland's ambassador to the U.N., said in December. Because the country hasn't been involved in an armed conflict for nearly two

centuries, she continued, Swiss neutrality has become something of a nation myth. Moreover, "in a country as diverse as Switzerland, the popular support for neutrality is good for national cohesion. The concept is, however, understood in very different ways. So, when it comes to working in international organizations, we must take our cues from neutrality law—we can't rely on myths."

Even though Geneva is the European capital of the United Nations, it stayed away from U.N. membership until a 2002 popular vote. Since then, Switzerland has taken part in most of the U.N. body's activities, including the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and the Economic and Social Council. And although neutrality is still at the heart of Switzerland's decision-making, it does take a stance at the United Nations through votes, especially when it comes to human rights violations. Now, after almost 20 years at the U.N., Baeriswyl believes, the natural next step is a seat on the Security Council. "It has always been clear that if we wanted to be a member of the United Nations, we wanted to be a member in all the organs," she said.

Switzerland's seven-member Federal Council officially decided to run for a council seat in 2011, following consultation with the country's parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committees, which saw it as a natural follow-on to U.N. membership. Concerns over neutrality have been ripe for debate since then. In 2015, for example, the Federal Council even published a report on possible situations that could jeopardize Switzerland's neutrality, concluding that it could stay on the council and in the clear. After all, the report noted, other neutral countries—such as Austria, Sweden (to some extent), and Costa Rica—have successfully done so, in particular by abstaining from votes regarding the use of force. However, as one diplomat from another neutral country pointed out, each of these countries has its own definition of neutrality. For Costa Rica, for example, it means nonmilitarization. For Switzerland, its armed neutrality. Amnesty International has even criticized Switzerland for its ongoing arms sales to human rights violators such as Bangladesh, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

So far, Switzerland's campaign for a seat has survived every parliamentary motion to reverse the country's decision to run, and the race is pretty much a fait accompli. However, politically, the matter could become more complicated once Switzerland actually finds itself in the council chambers. Today's divisions in the Security Council remind some diplomats of the Cold War era, and navigating big powers while not taking a side could be more challenging than ever. "What would be the role of Switzerland if the Security Council is asked by the United States to strengthen the sanctions regime against Iran? Should it vote in favor (and displease Iran), should it vote against (and displease the U.S.), or should it abstain (and weaken the decision-making of the Security Council)?" Widmer asked.

Last summer, the Trump administration decided to attempt to unilaterally trigger a snapback mechanism that would restore U.N. sanctions against Iran that were in place prior to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The move left the council scrambling since Washington had already left the JCPOA. Washington's proposal was mostly either ignored by council members or rebutted through letters and statements, but it has added more tension to the relationship between Washington and its European allies. If Switzerland had been on the council at the time—even if it had attempted to stay neutral—Widmer argued, it would not have been exempt from a difficult political choice: displease Washington or lose its status as go-between for the United States and Iran.

Baeriswyl, though, is convinced that Switzerland could deal with similar matters on the council without hurting its relationship on one side or another. "Neutrality has never been neutral when it comes to law. It has never been neutral when we have made a commitment," she explained. "It is neutral in terms of we do not take sides in a conflict, except for humanitarian law and international law. That is also true when it comes to the JCPOA." When it came to the Security Council and the JCPOA, she said, "there was a huge unity, and I would expect Switzerland not to be an exception to that."

Even if Switzerland doesn't have much convincing to do with fellow member states because it is running unopposed, the public relations efforts continue. It may take more than raclette and chocolate to convince every canton in the diverse country, but despite some pushback, the "benefits [of being on the council] outweigh the risks," Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis concluded in June.

It is a rite of passage for any U.N. member state to sit on the council and indicates real engagement internationally. But only time will tell if the risks were worth the reward.

[China] One year in, was the China trade deal worth it? (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 4:49 PM, Daniel De Petris, 394K, Neutral]

Friday marks the one-year anniversary of one of President Trump's most significant agreements: the "phase one" trade deal with China.

Addressing a crowd of company executives, trade representatives, and lawmakers in the East Room of the White House on that day, Trump was as giddy as can be. "Today, we take a momentous step," Trump told the audience, "one that has never been taken before with China — toward a future of fair and reciprocal trade, as we sign phase one of the historic trade deal between the United States and China."

Twelve months removed from that signing ceremony, the trade deal with Beijing hasn't lived up to the administration's expectations.

While the Chinese have made some improvements on opening their market to U.S. financial firms and credit card companies, the additional tens of billions of dollars in goods that China promised to import from the U.S. has lagged.

The 91-page agreement may have been full of legalese, but the core was pretty straightforward: The U.S. would lessen the tariffs on certain Chinese products in exchange for Beijing purchasing more U.S. goods and introducing structural reforms into its economy. Over time, the concept went, U.S. and Chinese trade negotiators would return to the negotiating table to hammer out a more comprehensive agreement.

The results of the deal thus far have been a mixed bag. According to tracking from the Peterson Institute of International Economics, China agreed to purchase approximately \$159 billion in U.S. goods by the end of 2020. The Chinese, however, are nowhere near that goal, one the majority of trade officials and analysts largely wrote off as aspirational.

Back in the real world, China's total purchases were roughly half of what the U.S. hoped to see at this time. Total U.S. exports to China in 2020 added up to \$110 billion, only \$4 billion more than the previous year. While U.S. imports of Chinese goods were reduced by 12.8%

between 2019 and 2020, most of this can be chalked up to the coronavirus, which shocked global trade across the board. The overall U.S. trade deficit with China clocked in at just north of \$283.5 billion, and in July 2020, the monthly deficit reentered pre-deal levels.

While Chinese purchase levels aren't up to par, it would be unfair to overlook the benefits of the trade deal. U.S. credit card companies are finally beginning to enter the vast Chinese market after years of pushback from Beijing. Mastercard got the go-ahead from Chinese officials one month after the deal was inked. In June 2020, American Express was given approval to set up shop on Chinese soil.

The biggest achievement of the U.S.-China trade deal, however, may not have to do with trade at all. At a time when Washington and Beijing are increasingly drifting apart, and to the delight of the Peter Navarros of the world, the trade agreement is preserving some mode of communication between the world's two economic superpowers. U.S. and Chinese officials who negotiated the pact continue to hold periodic meetings about implementation, which points back to the days when the two nations still considered each other "frenemies" rather than opponents in a long, brutal, geopolitical boxing match.

With the U.S. and China slapping restrictions on one another's technology, poking each other in the eye over issues such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, and skipping meetings about subjects that should not be controversial (like preventing military de-escalation in the Pacific), the communication channels provided by the "phase one" deal have proven to be more important as time goes on.

Overall, the Trump administration was likely anticipating more economic dividends from its trade talks with the Chinese, but look on the bright side: It wasn't a total flop.

[North Korea] North Korea's theater-of-fear submarine nuclear weapon (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Tom Rogan, 2164K, Neutral]

North Korea on Friday unveiled what it says is the fifth iteration of its Pukguksong-class submarine-launched ballistic missile. Kim Jong Un hopes his display will pressure the Biden administration into early concessions.

Still, when we look beneath the surface of this performance, it becomes clear that Kim is playing a weaker hand than he presents.

The North Korean leader's first challenge is that his submarine-launched ballistic missile capability is still in its early infancy. The North Koreans have not yet successfully tested one under battle conditions. Moreover, most weapons system analysts believe that the Pukguksong-5 is unlikely to have a range of more than 2,500 kilometers. That might sound like a lot, but it's actually very low in comparison to the ones deployed with the U.S. and Russian navies, which have effective ranges of more than 10,000 kilometers.

Another problem for Kim is his lack of a submarine force capable of delivering the submarine-launched ballistic missiles against Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, or the U.S. West Coast. The nuclear submarine on which these missiles will be embarked isn't exactly a gem of technological advancement. Instead, it is an adaptation of the 1950s-era Soviet Romeo-class diesel-powered submarines. It will be extremely vulnerable to detection by U.S. sonar and other sensor systems that populate the western Pacific Ocean, the Yellow Sea, and the

Sea of Japan. The moment this submarine left port, it would be shadowed by U.S. nuclear attack submarines. Probably more than one. The North Koreans wouldn't know those submarines were there unless and until they rose to their launch depth, which is shallower than that of other ballistic submarines. Then, they would be destroyed. Even a launch close to North Korea toward a U.S. military base on Okinawa would be very difficult to pull off. Top line: If the United States can detect the Russian Borei and Khabarovsk submarines, and it can, it can detect Kim's submarine.

His soaring rhetoric aside, Kim is aware of these limitations.

The dictator might be rotund, but he is not stupid. In turn, this submarine-launched ballistic missile is ultimately designed not for war or strategic deterrence but for the same purpose as Kim's new multiwarhead ICBM: to spark American civilian fear. Kim wants Americans to be afraid and to pressure the Biden administration into making concessions. Equally important, he wants to put Xi Jinping in a position to leverage U.S. concessions in return for Beijing's influence on North Korea. In recent weeks, China has further relaxed its enforcement of sanctions against North Korea. Xi knows that the Biden administration will see the U.S. intelligence reporting to know what he is up to but will also hope that Biden chooses to appease Beijing in response.

The appropriate U.S. strategy to deal with Kim and Xi thus remains the familiar realist one. First, the offer of a deal that balances North Korea's ICBM disarmament to its retention of a limited number of nuclear warheads. Next, the dangling of new trade and sanctions against Pyongyang and Beijing in support of that objective.

[Mexico] Can Mexico force the US to vaccinate migrant workers against Covid-19? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:42 PM, Matt Rivers, 7975K, Neutral]

Mexico wants the US to vaccinate all Mexican migrant workers currently working in the United States — and it says Trump's own signature trade deal requires it.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Marcelo Ebrard told reporters this week that under the terms of the recently enacted United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), millions of migrant workers should receive Covid-19 vaccines.

"It is a responsibility of each of the two countries to guarantee that all workers, independent of their immigration status, receive the vaccine," said Ebrard, referring to both documented and undocumented immigrants.

The issue came front and center after remarks by Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts last week appeared to suggest that undocumented migrant workers in the state's myriad meatpacking plants, would not be eligible to receive the vaccine.

Ricketts came under fierce and immediate criticism for the remarks, with advocates saying that migrants both documented and undocumented are essential workers, and play an indispensable part in putting food on American tables.

Ricketts later backed away from the remarks, saying immigration status would not be checked prior to receiving a vaccine. His office did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

Migrant workers are a critical part of industries ranging from agriculture to construction. However, there remains no national US policy of vaccinating migrant workers, as each state sets its own rules.

As a result, Mexico has not dropped the issue, leading to Ebrard's comments this week where he argued two articles in the USMCA require the US to protect foreign workers from the coronavirus.

The first is Article 23.3, point 2, which reads in part, "Each Party shall adopt and maintain statutes and regulations, and practices thereunder, governing acceptable conditions of...occupational safety and health."

He also cited Article 23.8, which holds that all parties must ensure migrant workers are protected under labor laws---whether they are citizens or not.

The articles cited are vague, though, and experts say if the US doesn't want to do this, it doesn't have to.

"There is very little bite in terms of enforcement," said Monica de Bolle, a Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute of International Economics. "There isn't really any way the Mexicans use what's written in the agreement...to force the US to vaccinate migrant workers."

De Bolle says the USMCA has weaker dispute resolution provisions than its predecessor NAFTA. Taking such a dispute to the World Trade Organization is also highly unlikely and would be unprecedented.

Mexico could stop allowing its nationals to go to the US as migrant workers, potentially crippling numerous crucial supply chains. However, that is highly unlikely, given the significance of that foreign-earned income so many Mexican families struggling to stay afloat.

Despite Mexico's lack of recourse, though, Ebrard's claims could signal a short to medium-term strategy.

"Mexico know its current position is weak, but perhaps they are hoping the Biden administration will be much more open to that kind of demand than the Trump administration would be," said de Bolle.

Drawing a line in the sand now lets the incoming administration — which is already expected to be friendlier to immigrants — know that for Mexico, this is an important issue that should be addressed early on in the new term.

"In a country that is currently experiencing an epidemic that is completely out of control, from a labor protections perspective it makes absolute sense that Mexico would demand something like this," said de Bolle.

Coronavirus News

China Stonewalls WHO Investigators (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [1/15/2021 1:19 PM, Yuichiro Kakutani, 101K, Negative]

The Chinese government barred the entry of two investigators who are part of a World Health Organization team tasked with finding the origins of the coronavirus.

On Monday, Beijing granted permission to 15 WHO scientists to enter Wuhan—where the deadly virus first emerged—only to stonewall researchers upon their arrival. The regime barred entry to two of the scientists, claiming they tested positive for coronavirus antibodies, and required the rest of the team to quarantine for two weeks, according to a Thursday tweet by the WHO. The international organization said that all members had "multiple negative PCR and antibody tests for COVID-19 in their home countries prior to traveling."

The Chinese government has repeatedly stymied efforts by the WHO and other international observers to conduct independent investigations into the pandemic's origin in China. The country imposed economic sanctions on Australia after the country called for an international investigation and has refused to allow any foreign scientists to enter Wuhan for months.

The Chinese government has long tried to dismiss concrete evidence that the coronavirus pandemic started in Wuhan. Its top diplomats and propagandists have instead promoted a wide range of conspiracy theories, including a bizarre theory that the virus actually originated in a U.S. military lab.

"When did patient zero begin in [the United States]? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be the U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! [The United States] owe us an explanation," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted in March 2020.

Global immunisation: low-income countries rush to access Covid vaccine supply (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [1/15/2021 7:23 AM, Sarah Boseley, 4021K, Neutral]

There are triumphant scenes as lorries leave a vaccine plant in Pune, India, loaded with boxes that will prevent thousands of deaths. Adar Poonawalla, the owner and chief executive of the Serum Institute of India, poses on the tailgate of a truck, making the most of his company's "proud and historic" moment as the potential saviour of the nation – and even a large chunk of the world.

Poonawalla's factory, the largest vaccine manufacturing complex in the world, is the best hope for immunisation for people in Africa and some low-income countries elsewhere – which could save them from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. The Serum Institute has been contracted to supply the UN-backed Covax initiative, which subsidises low-income countries, with 200m doses of Covid-19 vaccines with an option on 900m more.

For a heart-stopping moment last week, it seemed that vaccine nationalism within India might slam the door. On 4 January, just after the Serum Institute got approval from the Indian regulator for the vaccine – made under licence from AstraZeneca – Poonawalla was reported as saying there was a condition attached, which was that only India could have the

vaccine for the time being.

The following day, he clarified the "confusion in the public domain" on Twitter, saying "exports of vaccines are permitted to all countries".

But the lorries are headed across India for now and the episode underlines the tension as every country with cash wades into the fight for vaccines, putting manufacturers under unprecedented pressure to deliver for them.

As affluent Europe and North America scramble to deploy the Covid vaccines they have pre-bought – amid accusations that immunisation programmes are too slow and the wrong people are getting the jabs – there has been not a single shot in the arm in many countries elsewhere.

Three vaccines have been approved in the west. Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are expensive and need long-term storage at -70C. Pfizer offered to sell the vaccine to South Africa at a 50% discounted price of \$10 a shot, but was told the cost was still prohibitive.

But Oxford/AstraZeneca's vaccine is stable at fridge temperatures of 2-8C and AstraZeneca has promised not to make a profit for the duration of the pandemic. It aims to provide 3bn doses this year, made in factories around the world under licence. It is the mainstay of the Covax initiative, which has now bought a total of 1.97bn doses of four different vaccines to distribute when they become available. The AstraZeneca vaccine accounts for most of it.

The Serum Institute has promised to make 100m doses for Covax of the AstraZeneca vaccine and a further 100m of the Novavax jab – if and when that is approved. Covax has an option on a further 900m doses of one or the other of those vaccines.

Deliveries could start as early as February, said a spokesperson for Gavi, the vaccine alliance which is a partner in Covax.

"We anticipate being able to provide each participating economy with the first tranche – enough to protect approximately 3% of the population – in the first half of 2021. This process could begin as early as February, pending favourable regulatory outcomes and the readiness of health systems and national regulatory systems in individual participating economies.

"In terms of which vaccines will be rolled out to which countries, as well as timeframes, we hope to be able to share more on that very soon."

Seven countries have now given emergency authorisation to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine or the Serum Institute version: the UK, India, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico and Morocco. The Carlos Slim Foundation in Mexico is licensed by AstraZeneca to supply 150m doses to Latin America. These countries could take delivery right away.

But other countries without a regulatory body will be waiting for the World Health Organization to give the green light, which is said to need data from the Serum Institute. In what sounded like a nudge, the director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said on 11 January it looked forward "to Serum Institute of India submitting full datasets for rapid

assessment so WHO can determine whether we can recommend their AstraZeneca vaccine for international use".

The AstraZeneca vaccine will also be manufactured by SKbioscience in Korea, BioKangtai in China, Siam BioScience and the local conglomerate SCG in Thailand and CSL Behring in Australia. The Fiocruz Institute in Brazil has signed a deal for 100m doses of the Serum Institute vaccine, which it will put into vials in a process known as "fill and finish".

In an attempt to queue-jump, the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, wrote to the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, on 9 January. "To enable the immediate implementation of our national immunisation programme, I would appreciate ... the supply to Brazil, with the possible urgency and without jeopardising the Indian vaccination programme, of 2m doses," Bolsonaro wrote.

Brazil is also now buying 10m doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine. It is late to the party. At the very end of last year, Argentina took delivery of 300,000 doses and has been immunising healthcare workers. The Russians claim it is 92% effective, but the data has not been published.

A few middle-income countries have started vaccination programmes using the Pfizer/BioNTech jab. Mexico took delivery of 3,000 doses in December. Chile and Costa Rica have also started using the vaccine. Mexican officials have been to talk to their counterparts in Argentina about buying Sputnik.

Chinese vaccines are also beginning to be used. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates both gave emergency approval to the vaccine made by Sinopharm in December, which the manufacturers say is 86% efficacious, although – as with the Russian vaccine – the full data has not been made public. Turkey has bought the Chinese vaccine, and Morocco, Egypt and Nigeria have all been in discussions.

There are other promising jabs on the way. Novavax aims to make 2bn doses for global use – but has not yet finished its trials. Covax has an option on 500m doses of the Janssen vaccine, which has the advantage of being one shot, but although results from phase 3 trials are expected within weeks, there are said to be manufacturing delays. It could be a major player, however.

"Johnson & Johnson aims to provide global access to Janssen's Covid-19 vaccine candidate, if proven to be safe and effective. We have committed to producing 1bn vaccine doses a year starting in 2021 and have expedited manufacturing scale-up to reach this goal," said a spokesperson. "We are leveraging a global supply base for our vaccine candidate, including facilities in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa."

David Salisbury, associate fellow of Chatham House's global health programme and director of immunisation at the Department of Health until 2013, said that even if the amount of vaccine distributed across the world increased, not all countries would be able to run vaccination programmes for everyone who needed it.

"There's a huge gap between a desire to have vaccine and political statements that your country will have vaccine – and actually having contracts either in place yourself or on your behalf and the ability to pay for it – and much more, the ability to implement it," he said.

The vaccination against Covid-19 is not like running childhood vaccination programmes, but more similar to the effort to immunise against the seasonal flu. Most low-income countries do not have enough clinics or databases to tell them how to access those at risk.

Countries that get enough vaccine for 20% of the population, which is what Covax hopes to provide eventually, will not be able to stop transmission. They will be in an "endless cycle", said Salisbury – vaccinating health workers and those most at risk of dying, with more people getting older and moving into the at-risk groups all the time.

The coronavirus is not going away, especially in low income countries. It could be argued the vaccines are just a temporary fix.

"Predicting the future for vaccine campaigns in all parts of the world is something many of us are already thinking about. Will this become institutionalised as an annual vaccination programme for industrialised countries? Unless this virus goes away I think the answer is yes," said Salisbury. "But what will the appetite be in low-income countries for resources that are already under huge pressure to be used for prevention of coronavirus?"

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:07 PM, Betsy McKay, Neutral]

A highly transmissible coronavirus variant that was first identified in the U.K. is spreading rapidly in the U.S. and likely to become the dominant strain circulating domestically in March unless steps are taken to slow it, federal health authorities said.

Health officials called Friday for increasing measures like wearing masks and social distancing to curb the spread of the more contagious variant. Otherwise, it will intensify the squeeze on already-overwhelmed hospitals.

A year after a new coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China, the pandemic it spawned has reached a perilous point. There are now vaccines to stop it, but their rollout in the U.S. has been slow and new, faster-spreading variants of the virus are now threatening surges in illness. The variant, known as B.1.1.7, had infected at least 76 people in 12 states as of Jan. 13 and threatens to worsen the pandemic in the U.S., the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report modeling the strain's potential impact.

"We expect these numbers to rise in the coming weeks," Jay Butler, the CDC's deputy director for infectious diseases, said in an interview.

The variant could fuel exponential growth in new cases, becoming the dominant strain by late March if more public-health measures aren't put in place to stop it, said Michael Johansson, a biologist and modeler for the CDC's Covid-19 response.

While the new variant doesn't appear to cause more severe illness, it is more contagious than the currently dominating strain of the coronavirus, the CDC said. That means it could lead to more hospitalizations and deaths by infecting more people overall, the agency said, exacerbating pressures on health-care systems that are already at or near capacity. U.S. hospitalizations totaled 128,947 as of Thursday, the lowest level since Jan. 4, according to the Covid Tracking Project. Intensive-care units, though, remain under stress, with 23,891

patients. The number of Covid-19 patients in ICUs across the country has surpassed 23,000 every day since Dec. 29, according to the Covid Tracking Project.

The U.S. daily death toll again surpassed 3,000 on Thursday, with more than 3,700 fatalities recorded, according to Johns Hopkins University. So far, more than 390,000 deaths in the U.S. have been attributed to Covid-19.

The U.S. reported more than 229,000 new coronavirus cases for Thursday, the 10th consecutive day the figure has topped 200,000, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The U.S. has a short window of time to step up measures such as social distancing and wearing masks to prevent B.1.1.7 from spreading widely, the CDC said. Such precautions would also buy time for vaccination campaigns to start having an effect on transmission rates, the agency said.

People should be wearing masks, keeping at least 6 feet apart from others, avoiding crowds, washing hands and getting vaccinated, the CDC said. While the new variant is believed to be 50% more transmissible than the currently dominant strain in the U.S., agency experts said they believe the existing prevention strategies work. "If you're not wearing a mask or if you're getting sort of lax about it because you're getting tired of wearing the mask, I really encourage you to wear the mask," Dr. Butler said.

He urged the same stamina in avoiding gatherings with people outside one's own household: "This is not the time to let up by any means."

"It doesn't mean that businesses need to be shut down or things like that, but it does mean that we have to take steps to be able to protect ourselves and limit our contacts with others," Dr. Butler said. The CDC also warned health-care systems to prepare for an even greater surge and said that people who don't have Covid-19 symptoms but are at risk of infection should be tested.

Covid-19 vaccines should work against the new variant, according to Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc., which make the two shots authorized for use in the U.S. Researchers are continuing to study that matter. However, the spread of the new variant means that about 80% of the population would need to be vaccinated to stop Covid-19, CDC scientists said. That is about 10 percentage points higher than some federal officials originally anticipated. Reported vaccinations appear to be picking up speed, with 11.1 million total doses administered as of Thursday morning, including 1.3 million second doses, according to the CDC.

At the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, intensive-care unit beds are filling up with Covid-19 patients. Richard Medford, associate chief medical informatics officer, said the university has just started sequencing Covid-19 samples to find out how widely the new variant is circulating in the Dallas area.

"I am worried that if you walk around you can see people aren't necessarily wearing their masks properly," Dr. Medford said. "The potential of this variant to take hold in our population is definitely concerning."

The CDC is monitoring for other new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus to appear in the U.S., Dr. Butler said. The agency recently issued an order requiring all international air passengers to the U.S. to test negative for Covid-19 within three days before their flights.

The CDC and other health entities are increasing genomic surveillance to better detect cases of the new variant. The agency established a new SARS-CoV-2 strain surveillance program in November and is working with other health agencies to boost monitoring efforts.

Laboratories are now sequencing about 6,000 positive SARS-CoV-2 samples a week in the U.S., said Gregory Armstrong, director of the CDC's advanced molecular detection program. More than 200,000 people are currently testing positive every day in the U.S.

"We think that's more than we need to pick up new and emerging variants, but we've got the capacity to increase that," Dr. Armstrong said.

Near East & North Africa

Abbas announces first Palestinian elections in 15 years (Axios)

Axios [1/15/2021 2:11 PM, Barak Ravid, 526K, Neutral]

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas published a decree on Friday announcing the dates for parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority.

Why it matters: This is the first time in 15 years that such a decree has been published. The last presidential elections took place in 2005, with Abbas winning, and the last parliamentary elections took place in 2006, with Hamas winning.

Driving the news: The parliamentary elections are scheduled for on May 22 and the presidential elections for July 31 — though those plans could still fall through.

Abbas met today with the chairman of the central election committee and instructed him to make preparations for elections in the West Bank, in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem.

Last week, the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, told Abbas in a letter that the movement would agree to hold elections as part of a national reconciliation process.

Flashback: After Hamas won the 2006 elections, the Palestinian Authority deteriorated into a deep political crisis between Hamas and Fatah, Abbas' party.

The U.S. and other world powers announced they would not cooperate with Hamas until it recognized Israel, denounced terrorism and committed to previous agreements with Israel.

Hamas refused to adhere to those conditions and continues to reject them to this day. The U.S., U.K., EU and other Western governments still boycott Hamas, and the U.S. designates the group as a terror organization.

In 2007, a civil war broke out in the Gaza Strip and Hamas took over the area by force.

The big picture: Abbas' announcement comes after numerous failed attempts at

reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and after several plans to hold elections fell through.

Abbas, who is 85 and in the 15th year of his four-year term, is not very popular. Recent public opinion polls indicate he could lose to a Hamas candidate.

What's next: Many analysts are skeptical about whether this election will actually take place.

One of the main stumbling blocs is East Jerusalem. If Israel doesn't allow voting there, the election could be canceled.

[Iran] Diary shows how quest for love landed Navy vet in Iran jail (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:52 AM, Eric Tucker, 2164K, Neutral]

Michael White's long-anticipated trip to Iran was already a disappointment. The love interest he'd gone to visit had stopped seeing him and he'd idled away hours in his hotel room by himself.

Then it got much worse.

On his final day, the car he and his tour guide were in was abruptly cut off by another vehicle with a passenger frantically waving his hands at them. He recalls three men getting out, one with a video camera, forcing him into their car and driving him to an office for questioning. From there, it was on to jail, where orange-tinted water spewed from the sink and shower and prison-issued dirty sandals proved useful in shoving sewer roaches in the bathroom into the toilet.

A handwritten journal he wrote behind bars — a copy of which was provided exclusively to The Associated Press — offers new details about his ordeal in Iran, which ended last June when the State Department secured the Navy veteran's release. In it, he catalogues physical abuse from his jailers and taunts from fellow inmates while held on dubious allegations. He writes tenderly of the woman he visited even while likening himself to a mouse lured into a trap. And he brands himself a "political hostage," held on pretextual charges to secure concessions from the U.S.

Seven months after his release, White is trying to reassemble his life in Mexico, unsure what comes next but eager to share his story.

"I don't want the government of Iran to think that, 'Oh, Mike White's out of here, he's going away, he's going to be quiet,'" he said in a recent interview. "That's not going to happen. Believe me, if only you understood the fear and anger inside of me as a result of what they did."

The peculiar saga began in July 2018 when White flew to Iran to visit a woman he'd met years earlier in a Yahoo chat room and with whom he hoped to rekindle an on-off relationship that included two prior visits to the country. But the bond turned sour on the most recent trip when the woman stopped seeing him and encouraged him to return home earlier than he'd planned.

His 156-page manuscript is told from his own perspective with details that are vivid though sometimes difficult to corroborate. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a

request for comment. But according to the document, the men who arrested him pulled him into their car and drove him, blindfolded and handcuffed, to a building for questioning. His interrogator asked about his relationship with the woman, seeming to know details of her family, and telling White, vaguely, that some in Iran were concerned about his intentions there.

He was taken to what he calls the "intel jail," where he says he was given no food for days, nor blanket or pillow even as the vent blew frigid air. The conditions were compounded, he says, by his cancer diagnosis that had resulted in chemotherapy treatment and hospital stays in the months before he left for Iran.

He was repeatedly interrogated over several months about why he'd come to Iran, as officials suspicious that he may be a spy handed him questionnaires focused on his military background and any intelligence service connections. At one point, he writes, he fabricated a tale about being tasked to gather intelligence by an acquaintance he said was with the National Security Agency, figuring that interrogators wanted to hear something like that before setting him free.

"I was just saying something out of desperation, doing whatever to hopefully get them to just cut me loose," he said in the interview. "It turned out it wasn't really helpful at all."

The truth was more mundane, he says, albeit more difficult to comprehend: He was a "dumb American" pursuing love.

White's decisions were undoubtedly risky: His Iran visits came despite that country's hostile relationship with the U.S. He says he and his girlfriend got together in 2014 in Iran's Kish Island, even though retired FBI agent Robert Levinson vanished from there years earlier.

But White, 48, who grew up in Southern California and was honorably discharged from the Navy, says he's long been drawn to Iran's culture and people and had felt safe there, connecting through social media to a network of acquaintances. He'd once thought of law school or entering politics, but at the time of a 2018 trip he hoped would recharge his life, he was working as a Job Corps resident adviser.

He struggles to reconcile his affection for the woman he perceived as his girlfriend — "Her voice melts me with its softness and tenderness. My heart flutters when I see her," he writes — with the suspicion that he was somehow set up during his visit. His Instagram page reflects that ambivalence, with photos posted this year of them together.

"Yet, sadly, I was lured into a trap, like a mouse trap. I was the mouse," he writes. "I followed my heart instead of my head and missed signs."

In jail, he writes, he was once awakened by a guard dumping a bucket of cold water on him. Another time, an interrogator snapped a whip on his toes as he completed a questionnaire. After White tossed water on a surveillance camera to get the guards' attention, they pummeled him in the ribs and threw him to the floor, he writes.

He was relocated to another prison where some inmates tauntingly referred to him as "The Great Satan." One placed a cockroach inside his pants pocket as a prank.

At the suggestion of a prisoner he befriended, he began a handwritten manuscript, writing it under the cover of playing Sudoku to hide it from the guards. He gave the pages to the prisoner who he says was able to smuggle it out through a cousin.

White ultimately faced various charges, including posting private images, collaborating with the U.S. against Iran and disrespecting Iran's supreme leader. He was sentenced to 10 years but calls the charges a pretext to "extort" concessions.

He insists he's not a spy and never posted any inappropriate photos of his girlfriend. He writes in his manuscript that he has indeed made social media posts about Iran but denies having disparaged Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An unexpected development came last spring as the coronavirus ravaged Iran. White, who was himself infected, was among thousands of prisoners released on medical furlough, permitted to live freely in Tehran in the Swiss Embassy's custody while required to remain in Iran.

The State Department, which has maintained that White was wrongfully detained, arranged for his release in June, flying him back to the U.S. as part of a deal that spared additional prison time for an American-Iranian doctor convicted in the U.S. of sanctions violations.

In August, he visited the White House with other freed hostages and detainees to record a Republican National Convention segment praising the Trump administration. He sat beside President Donald Trump in a three-piece suit in an experience he says made him feel like a celebrity, though he recalls Trump not shaking his hand.

"He was like, well, you know, if the media sees that, they're going to be flipping out of because of the corona(virus) thing," White said.

White isn't sure what comes next. He had contemplated opening a Persian restaurant, but isn't sure he'll do that now. He likens his life to the aftermath of a city-flattening hurricane.

"I'm just picking up the pieces, regrouping and trying to figure out how I'm going to move forward and stuff."

[Iraq] Iraq oil minister sees oil at \$60 a barrel in second quarter (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 4:29 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Iraqi Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar expects oil prices to reach around \$60 in the second quarter of 2021, he said in an interview with Iraq's Sharqiya TV on Friday.

The minister added that in past meetings he had asked OPEC members to allow Iraq to postpone compensating for earlier overproduction and this had helped to "bring back hope to Iraq's economy".

"Iraq will stay committed to OPEC decisions and compensate its overproduction", he said in the interview.

Abdul Jabbar said Saudi Arabia's voluntary output cut of 1 million bpd helped to prevent oil market from collapsing.

On Friday, Brent fell \$1.32, or 2.3%, to settle at \$55.10 a barrel and U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude CLc1 settled down \$1.21, or 2.3%, at \$52.36 a barrel.

[Iraq] Iraq says it will not negotiate with OPEC+ its overproduction cut share (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Ahmed Rasheed, 2164K, Neutral]

Iraq's oil minister affirmed Iraq's commitment to the OPEC+ reduction decision and the compensation of its overproduction share, he said in a statement on Saturday.

The minister added that Iraq has no intention to negotiate with OPEC+ members regarding its oil production share or compensation of overproduction.

Europe and Eurasia

Turkish leader eyes favorably Greek PM meet amid tensions (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 12:45 PM, Staff, 13480K, Neutral]

Turkey's president indicated on Friday that he would be open to easing tensions with neighboring Greece by floating the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with the Greek prime minister following months of saber-rattling over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters after prayers in Istanbul that he would "positively" consider a meeting that he said Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had requested.

Erdogan said the two countries' foreign ministers had met and bilateral talks were ongoing. "So we said we can take the steps for talks between our special representatives and then between the Prime Minister and myself could happen."

Relations between the neighbors and nominal NATO allies hit new lows over the summer due to a dispute over maritime borders and energy rights, bringing them to the brink of war.

Turkey dispatched a research vessel, escorted by warships, to search for hydrocarbon resources in disputed waters. Greece answered by sending its own frigates, claiming Turkey had violated its sovereign rights.

Earlier this week, both countries announced the resumption of exploratory talks on Jan. 25. The talks would be the latest in a long-running process of negotiations between Greece and Turkey that aim to improve their often testy relations.

A Greek government official said the Greek side viewed the possibility of a meeting between the two leaders as positive, if the current positive climate in relations continued. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the issue.

The official said the prime minister has repeatedly stated his desire for open channels of communication with Turkey at the highest level.

In December, the European Union gave the green light for the expansion of sanctions

against Turkey over its exploration of gas reserves in waters claimed by EU members Greece and Cyprus.

Though Ankara has repeatedly said sanctions would not deter Turkey from defending its energy rights, Erdogan has expressed a readiness to put frayed relations with the EU "back on track" and called on them display the same determination.

Erdogan spoke with Italian Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte Friday, thanking him for his support within the EU. "I believe Italy will direct the European Union to a prudent and just attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean," the Turkish president said.

[Germany] Do not break with Merkel, Bavarian leader warns before CDU leadership vote (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:45 PM, Paul Carrel, 11261K, Neutral]

Breaking with Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies is not the way to win Germany's federal election in September, the leader of her Bavarian sister party said as her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) prepares to elect a new leader on Saturday.

Merkel, who steps down after September's elections, is heading into the last months of her tenure with her conservative CDU squabbling over how to position the party following 15 years of rule marked by her instinct to compromise.

Markus Soeder, leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU's Bavarian sister party, said it would be a mistake to break with her popular brand of politics, which is consensus orientated and centrist.

"Anyone who thinks they can win the Bundestag elections by breaking with Angela Merkel is fundamentally mistaken," Soeder told the Funke media group in comments published on Friday. Her legacy must be preserved and combined with new ideas, he said.

Friedrich Merz, a former Merkel rival who is contesting the CDU leadership, wants to shift the party to the right.

Merz is running against Armin Laschet, premier of the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and Norbert Roettgen, a foreign policy expert. Both are more centrist than Merz.

Soeder has signalled his support for Laschet, but may take on the role of conservative candidate to succeed Merkel if the winner of Saturday's CDU vote flops.

A survey by pollster Forsa for news network RND published on Friday showed 29% of voters would back Roettgen for the CDU leadership, 21% Merz and 19% Laschet. The leader will be elected at Saturday's digital congress by 1,001 party delegates.

Roettgen has suggested that if elected CDU leader he could back Soeder, who leads among conservatives in voter opinion polls, to run as chancellor candidate for their CDU/CSU alliance, the Union.

On the chancellor candidacy, Soeder told the Funke group: "The CDU, as the bigger sister, has the right of initiative. In the end, however, we decide together."

[Germany] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 18,678 - RKI (Reuters)

Reuters [1/16/2021 12:16 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany increased by 18,678 to 2,019,636, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for infectious diseases showed on Saturday. The reported death toll rose by 980 to 45,974, the tally showed.

[Greece] Greece: Lockdown extended indefinitely but stores to reopen (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 5:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Greece's government has extended nationwide lockdown measures indefinitely but says retail stores and malls will reopen Monday with strict entrance limits.

Civil protection chief Nikos Hardalias said Friday that a nightly curfew, domestic travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders will all remain in effect after being first imposed in early November.

Retail stores, closed since Jan. 3, will reopen with limited entrance and for customers who have filled out permission notices to leave their homes that are usually made available by cellphone message.

The lockdown was imposed on Nov. 7 to fight a surge in cases and deaths that has eased in recent weeks.

Speaking in parliament ahead of Friday's announcement, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said each month of lockdown was costing the Greek economy more than 3 billion euros (\$3.6 billion).

"I want to be absolutely clear, every opening of economic activity harbors the danger of an increase in (COVID-19) cases," Mitsotakis said. "As long as this increase in cases is moderate and controlled and as long as it doesn't put pressure on the health system, it is something we can bear. These are the delicate balances we must find."

Primary schools and kindergartens reopened this week, but high school lessons are being held online only.

The seven-day rolling average of new deaths per 100,000 population in Greece was at 0.34 on Jan. 13, down from 0.94 in early December. The figure is currently at 0.77 in the European Union and 1.01 in the United States, according to data compiled from national health agencies.

[United Kingdom] England Isn't Listening to Johnson's Lockdown Orders Any More (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 1:00 AM, Emily Ashton, Neutral]

People across England are about to be hit with a deluge of new government adverts on television, radio and social media containing one blunt demand: Stay at home.

It's a familiar message -- and that may be why the public seems to be shrugging it off.

The data shows Britons are far more active during the current third national lockdown than when the first emergency "stay at home" order was given last spring. There's more traffic on

the roads, more people on trains and more shoppers making trips out.

Government officials worry too many are flouting the rules as Prime Minister Boris Johnson urges the public to try harder to avoid spreading coronavirus. With the National Health Service buckling under the weight of Covid-19 patients, the U.K. already has the highest death toll in Europe at more than 87,000. While there are early signs that infection rates are starting to fall in places like London, and one person in 20 has now been vaccinated, officials warn life still might not be back to normal by spring.

Images of a state health-care system collapsing would risk inflicting further huge damage to Johnson's standing, with public confidence in the government's handling of the crisis already severely dented since it began. "We are now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queuing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," Johnson said on Friday. "This is not the time for the slightest relaxation of our national resolve and our individual efforts."

Last week, schools and businesses were shut and people were told to stay home for work if they possibly could, and to avoid all journeys unless they were essential. Despite the crisis, traffic on U.K. roads was still running at 63% of pre-pandemic levels on Jan. 11, government figures showed. That's almost double the rate at the beginning of the first lockdown in early April, when traffic fell to 35% of normal levels.

Public transport use is also up, with four times the number of rail passengers this week than at the start of the spring lockdown. Despite the closure of non-essential stores, more people are out shopping this time, too, according to research firm Springboard.

Schools are open only for children of key workers but are reporting much higher attendance levels than in the spring. Latest government figures show that 14% of pupils in state-funded schools were in on Jan. 11, compared to an overall level of just 2% in April. Given the stark threat facing the country, why are people going out more than they did when the pandemic first hit? Is there more rule-breaking, is the public just bored, or are the rules themselves not tough enough? The picture is not unique to the U.K. Elsewhere in Europe, people have grown tired of wave after wave of restrictions. What makes England different is that even from the start, the messaging was mixed from a government that was reluctant to curb people's liberties.

In Spain and Italy, which imposed harsh lockdowns from the beginning, entire families became accustomed to living with life-altering restrictions. In Madrid and Milan, everyone wears a mask outside, and children must wear them at school. In London, face coverings outdoors are still optional.

Back at the beginning of the pandemic, England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty warned that citizens would "understandably get fatigued" with the restrictions. But in recent surveys people insist they are still following the rules. Stephen Reicher, a U.K. government adviser and professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews, dismissed the concept of lockdown "fatigue" as a way for the authorities to shift the blame onto the public.

"Some of the rules and the messaging around them may be the problem," he wrote in the British Medical Journal. For one thing, during the summer ministers encouraged people to go back to work and gave them discounts to eat in restaurants.

Some of the restrictions do appear to be more relaxed now compared to the start of the first lockdown: Nurseries are open to all children, there are childcare and support bubbles, and people can meet up with someone else for exercise. Restaurants are also open -- albeit only for takeaway meals. Susan Michie, a professor of health psychology at University College London and a government adviser, said "having more things open sends a mixed message" and makes people doubt that the country is "at crisis point." "On the one hand they are saying 'stay at home,' on the other hand they are allowing universities, nurseries, places of worship, non-essential businesses to stay open," she said.

But increased activity could also be down to a change in attitude toward the virus some 11 months into the pandemic. Robert Dingwall, professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, said people were understandably frightened in the spring but it's now become "normalized, a routine hazard." He said that for many people who hadn't fallen ill with the virus, there was "more and more discrepancy" between their everyday experiences and the government press conferences reporting countless deaths. The Cabinet Office said the government had "set out clear instructions to the public about what they need to do" to suppress the disease and the "public has made enormous sacrifices, to prevent our NHS from becoming overwhelmed and help save lives."

But senior government ministers have confused the picture by offering different versions of the rules. Home Secretary Priti Patel said Thursday that people should exercise alone, even though the rules allow activity with a friend. Johnson himself was criticized for cycling in the Olympic Park in east London, 7 miles away from his Westminster home, despite guidelines saying people should stay in their local areas. In the end, it all comes back to the prime minister. A libertarian at heart, he has struggled from the start with the idea of curbing freedoms. In December he declared it would be "frankly inhuman" to ban people from gathering over Christmas, before being forced to do just that as the virus surged days later. Even now, Johnson can't quite bring himself to be definitive in his messaging. In a Twitter video on Friday, he addressed people planning to leave their homes to go out this weekend. "Please," he said. "Really, think twice."

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus sparks exodus of foreign-born people from U.K. (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [1/15/2021 8:53 PM, Chris Giles 1825K, Neutral]

Coronavirus has sparked an exodus of immigrants from the U.K. in what is likely to be the largest fall in Britain's population since the second world war, according to a statistical analysis of official data.

A blog, published on Thursday by the government-funded Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence, estimated that up to 1.3 million people born abroad left the U.K. between the third quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2020.

In London alone, almost 700,000 foreign-born residents have probably moved out, the authors of the blog calculated, leading to a potential 8% drop in the capital's population last year.

The study drew a clear link between the departure of so many foreign-born nationals and the high number of job losses in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality, which has typically relied on overseas workers.

"It seems that much of the burden of job losses during the pandemic has fallen on non-U.K. workers and that has manifested itself in return migration, rather than unemployment," the authors concluded.

Large changes in regional populations would make it difficult for the National Health Service to distribute COVID-19 vaccines fairly around Britain and may raise questions over how business will fill jobs traditionally taken by European migrants.

The picture is further complicated by post-Brexit immigration rules. These mean that European Union nationals who left the U.K. in the past year will need work visas to return and work in Britain. Those with settled status would be able to return to fill jobs, but new migrants would not.

The ESCoE's calculations assume that official data, published by the Office for National Statistics, are flawed. The blog highlighted "hardly plausible" official statistics which showed employment of British-born people in London rising during the pandemic.

With officials unable to collect data in the usual way at airports and other transport hubs owing to the pandemic, the Office of National Statistics has faced severe difficulties in measuring migration numbers.

However, the agency has continued to measure employment trends during the pandemic through its labor force survey and has used this to form the basis of its regional population analysis.

Having found far fewer migrants to survey, especially in London, the ONS gave all the Londoners it surveyed much higher weights. This has resulted in the official figures showing the number of British-born employed Londoners rising sharply.

The blog by the ESCoE noted that the official figures show that the number of employed people in London and born in the U.K. grew by more than 250,000 in the year to the third quarter of 2020 with the total British-born population in the capital rising 440,000.

And yet the capital has been hit hardest by COVID-19 and has a high concentration of jobs in tourism, entertainment and hospitality, which have disappeared over the past year. The ONS figures showing a rise in British workers in London jobs did not remotely match other data such as benefit claimants in the capital or customs data from income tax records.

The authors of the study, Michael O'Connor and Jonathan Portes, said the only way to reconcile hard evidence of an employment crash in London with official figures suggesting a surge of U.K.-born employees was big problems in the ONS migration assumptions.

The ONS does not dispute the logic of the analysis and accepts anomalies being in its current estimates of employment and population. It blames these on difficulties of counting migration during the pandemic when its normal surveys have been suspended.

The agency added that it was working to transform its migration statistics and has promised an update early this year on its progress in improving them.

[United Kingdom] Johnson takes stand against 'cruel' Japanese whaling – The Telegraph (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 3:57 PM, Staff, Neutral]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is taking a stand against "cruel" Japanese whaling, The Telegraph newspaper said on Friday, after a minke whale became caught in fishing nets for 19 days before being killed by fishermen this week,

Drone footage of the trapped whale in the port of Taiji captured the world's attention and received flak from animal rights activists and environmentalists across the world.

"At a time when we are already seeing the tragic and irreversible destruction of our natural world, with the sea increasingly pumped full of plastics and climate change threatening entire ecosystems, it is more important than ever to take a stand against the cruel practice of whaling," Johnson told the newspaper.

The Foreign Office is also raising the issue with counterparts in Japan, the report added.

A Japanese fleet caught whales in 2019 in the country's first commercial hunt in more than three decades, a move that aroused global condemnation.

Taiji is known for its annual dolphin hunt.

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Two COVID-19 cases on Australian Open flight, one locally transmitted case (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 9:46 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

Two coronavirus infections were reported on Saturday on a flight to the Australian Open, as the country recorded a single locally transmitted case and said a cluster appeared to have been contained.

The positive cases were recorded after the charter flight from Los Angeles landed in Melbourne, carrying players and their entourage for the tennis grand slam, according to online posts from two players.

Players on the flight now face two weeks of hotel quarantine and must to train indoors, instead of being allowed out for five hours training per day, part of conditions that allowed the event to go ahead, the newspaper reported.

The inbound infections came as states began to relax travel bans on signs an outbreak in the northern state of Queensland has been contained.

"Unfortunately we have been informed by the health authorities that two people on your flight AR7493 from LAX that arrived at 5.15am on Friday 15 January have returned positive COVID-19 PCR tests on arrival in Melbourne," said a message posted on social media by Mexico's Santiago Gonzalez, who is ranked 48 on the doubles circuit.

"From having 5 hours of training in a bubble to this ... (strict quarantine x 15 days). I will be showing you my workouts x Instagram (inside the room)," Uruguayan world number 68

Pablo Cuevas said on Twitter.

The news was first reported by The Age.

Australia has agreed to accept around 1,200 players, officials and staff for the major sporting event that is due to begin next month. Tennis and Victorian health officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The local case, in western Sydney, is likely linked a known cluster in New South Wales, the most populous state, which recorded 11 cases in hotel quarantine, contact tracers say.

Australia has halved the number of returning travellers that it will accept, to lower the risk of highly infectious strains seeping into the community, as occurred at a site in Queensland two weeks ago.

Emirates Airline said Friday it would suspend flights between Dubai and Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane by early next week until further notice.

Queensland's chief health officer, Jeannette Young, told a news briefing there was "every chance we have contained this cluster" thanks to quick work, especially in the state capital Brisbane.

A two-week infection cycle has elapsed since a cleaner at a Brisbane hotel tested positive for the highly infectious coronavirus strain first detected in Britain, a sign health officials say suggests that efforts, including a three-day city wide lockdown, has stopped its spread.

As a result, Victoria and South Australia states will reopen borders to travellers from Brisbane within 24 hours, as long as they submit to coronavirus testing once they return.

Victoria may make a similar move in coming days with neighbouring New South Wales, given signals that it has also controlled an outbreak there that emerged before Christmas, said Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

Borders between Australia's two most populous states have been closed since Jan. 1.

Australia, which has logged 15 infections hotel quarantine, has been one of the world's most successful nations in managing the coronavirus spread, with about 28,700 infections and 909 deaths.

[China] China builds hospital in 5 days after surge in virus cases (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 2:20 AM, Joe McDonald, Neutral]

China on Saturday finished building a 1,500-room hospital for COVID-19 patients in five days to fight a surge in infections in a city south of Beijing, state media reported.

The hospital is one of six with a total of 6,500 rooms being built in Nangong in Hebei province, the Xinhua News Agency said. All are due to be completed within the next week.

China, which largely contained the spread of the coronavirus, has suffered hundreds of infections this month in Nangong and the Hebei provincial capital of Shijiazhuang, southwest of the Chinese capital.

A similar program of rapid hospital construction was launched by the ruling Communist Party at the start of the outbreak last year to set up isolation hospitals in Wuhan, the central city where the virus was first detected in late 2019. Nationwide, the National Health Commission reported 130 new confirmed cases — 90 of those in Hebei — in the 24 hours through midnight Friday.

There were 645 cases, two of them acquired abroad, being treated in Nangong and Shijiazhuang, according to Xinhua.

In Shijiazhuang, authorities have finished construction of one-third of the rooms in a planned 3,000-room coronavirus facility, state TV said Saturday.

More than 10 million people in Shijiazhuang underwent virus tests by late Friday, Xinhua said, citing a deputy mayor, Meng Xianghong. It said 247 locally transmitted cases were found.

Meanwhile, researchers sent by the World Health Organization are in Wuhan preparing to investigate the origins of the virus. The team, which arrived Thursday, was under a two-week quarantine but was due to talk with Chinese experts by video link.

The team's arrival was held up for months by diplomatic wrangling that prompted a rare public complaint by the head of the WHO.

That delay, and the secretive ruling party's orders to scientists not to talk publicly about the disease, have raised questions about whether Beijing might try to prevent discoveries that would hurt its self-proclaimed status as a leader in the anti-virus battle.

[China] China's Xi Looks to Take Advantage of a Strong Economic Hand (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 3:59 PM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

China arguably weathered the chaos of 2020 better than any other major power. In the months ahead, its leader, Xi Jinping, appears ready to press his advantage, taking on the new Biden administration and projecting a confident Communist Party in its centennial year. Mr. Xi and his lieutenants have struck a buoyant tone in recent weeks, trumpeting their professed success last year in containing the coronavirus and eliminating rural poverty. They have portrayed China as a responsible power, offering steady leadership amid a global economic pullback and rising geopolitical tensions that they blame on U.S. belligerence. Signs of a healthy recovery in the world's second-largest economy have given Mr. Xi a stronger hand in dealings with countries still struggling with the pandemic and its economic fallout.

While President-elect Joe Biden has signaled plans to rally multilateral efforts to check China on issues ranging from trade to human rights, Mr. Xi has sought to offset any U.S. pressure with his own diplomatic wins. Since Mr. Biden's electoral victory in November, China has anchored a new 15-nation Asia-Pacific trade pact and struck an investment deal with the European Union—overriding concerns from the incoming Biden administration. China nonetheless faces weighty challenges at home and abroad. Many nations are growing wary about the superpower's aggressive foreign policy. Its investment pact with Europe has yet to be ratified. And it must overcome the pandemic's long-term economic

fallout and widening doubts about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines that officials have hoped can win global hearts and minds.

Beijing has shown no sign of backing down. In a reflection of its confidence, Mr. Xi's administration has asserted control along his country's periphery, launching mass arrests of opposition figures in Hong Kong this month, while flying high-frequency warplane sorties near the island democracy of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

"I think we're going to see a more defiant China," says Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Stanford University and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "A China that is not only more aggressive, but also feels more and more justified in its aggression." At the same time, China has expressed hope that Mr. Biden can usher in a calmer phase in bilateral relations, which have frayed dramatically as the Trump administration jostled with Beijing on trade, technology, the Covid-19 pandemic and a range of other issues.

In a recent state-media interview, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the Biden administration to "restore normalcy to bilateral relations" and pledged to shape an international environment that's favorable to China's interests. "The year 2021 will be of historic significance to China's national rejuvenation," he said.

"China holds a relatively advantageous position," capable of fending off U.S. pressure while winning international support by providing economic support and vaccines, says Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University. In contrast, "Biden would be running a somewhat weak government. He must first tackle the domestic pandemic, manage an economic recovery and resolve racial tensions."

While rocky relations with the U.S. remain a risk for China, Mr. Biden would likely be more discerning in his efforts to pressure Beijing, compared with Mr. Trump, says Mr. Wu, reflecting a view commonly expressed within China's foreign-policy circles. "This year, Beijing has more self-confidence.... Biden has come back, but the U.S. can't make a comeback."

Some analysts say China's confidence could herald more forceful efforts to assert its interests, from suppressing anti-Communist Party dissent in restive areas to flexing its military muscle to assert territorial claims. In Hong Kong, authorities have conducted sweeping arrests of politicians, activists and lawyers linked to the city's pro-democracy movement—ignoring criticism from U.S. and European governments.

Mr. Xi has also tightened his grip on China's armed forces, following legislative changes last month that vested more decision-making powers in the military commission that Mr. Xi chairs, rather than the civilian government. In an annual order issued in early January, Mr. Xi reiterated demands that the military be ready to wage war "at any time."

Analysts say one potential flashpoint is Taiwan, which Beijing has vowed to assimilate, by force if necessary. The Chinese military has conducted an intensifying array of aerial sorties, naval maneuvers and invasion drills near the island over the past year.

Chinese warplanes flew 380 sorties into the island's southwestern air-defense identification zone in 2020, and more than a dozen have taken place so far this year, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. The frequency and intensity of such flights have increased

significantly over recent years, up from the 20 long-range flights that Chinese aircraft conducted near Taiwan in 2017, Taipei's Institute for National Defense and Security Research said in a December report.

Beijing wants to "make these types of operations routine" so that "everyone would just accept this increased presence," says Ms. Mastro, the Stanford fellow. Even so, Beijing still faces significant risks to its interests.

Mr. Xi's hard-nosed diplomacy "has created a de facto global coalition of concern with Chinese behavior," says Bilahari Kausikan, a retired senior Singaporean diplomat. "Nobody will ever shun China, but every major economy will deal with China with greater caution and reserve."

U.S.-China relations will remain a key concern for Beijing, with the Biden administration likely to bring a more orderly and methodical approach to dealing with China on issues spanning economics, security, technology and human rights, Mr. Kausikan says.

China's investment agreement with Europe still faces a ratification process across EU member governments and the European legislature. "Is this the time to be cutting deals with China? I think it shows geopolitical [naiveté] instead of geostrategic autonomy," Guy Verhofstadt, a member of the European Parliament and former Belgian prime minister, wrote on Twitter this month. "Thankfully, unlike China, the EU is a democracy & the [European Parliament] will have the final say!"

Diplomatic spats over perceived culpability for the Covid-19 pandemic, which first emerged in central China, appear likely to continue, especially after the World Health Organization criticized China this month for holding up the entry of investigators sent to probe the origins of the coronavirus. Beijing has since granted entry to a team of WHO experts, who arrived Thursday in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. Beijing's efforts to win goodwill by supplying or donating Chinese vaccines to developing countries would likely be hampered by a widening "credibility gap," particularly after new trial data showed that a vaccine developed by Chinese firm Sinovac was much less effective than previously believed, says Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

China also confronts a world that appears less receptive to its overtures. The Pew Research Center, in survey results published in October, found public perceptions of China souring significantly in the U.S. and 13 other developed economies over the previous year, largely due to Beijing's perceived mishandling of the initial Covid-19 outbreak.

Mr. Wu, the Fudan University professor, plays down these findings, pointing to Beijing's Asia-Pacific trade pact and EU investment deal. "We don't need to worry too much about public opinion," Mr. Wu says. "National interests are the most important factor."

[Fiji] Fiji Will Lead U.N. Rights Body, Over Russian and Chinese Opposition (New York Times)

New York Times [1/15/2021 2:58 PM, Nick Cumming-Bruce, 28290K, Neutral]

The Pacific island nation of Fiji won election on Friday as president of the United Nations' top human rights body, ending a shadowy proxy battle waged by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia seeking to strengthen their influence by installing a more compliant candidate.

Fiji won decisively, with support from 29 countries in a secret ballot of the Human Rights Council's 47 members, fending off a challenge from Bahrain, which garnered 14 votes, and Uzbekistan, which received four votes.

The result puts the small, remote island nation, which has a record of support for human rights initiatives, into a leadership position at a time of intensifying competition between states over holding rights abusers to account.

China and Russia will return as members of the council in 2021, giving voice to two powerful nations that have faced widespread criticism over human rights abuses. Human rights groups say the council has been effective at highlighting many of the worst crises, and hope the incoming U.S. administration of President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. will bolster that role by re-engaging with the body, which President Trump quit in 2018.

"Fiji's victory is a victory for those who believe the Human Rights Council should be used to defend human rights," said Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch. "That Fiji's candidacy was opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia reflects the determination of these and other autocratic governments to stymie the work of the Human Rights Council."

The council's president has significant influence over its priorities and the selection of independent experts to report on human rights abusers and their misdeeds. The president is also responsible for pushing back against states that seek to thwart the council's work by cracking down on people who cooperate with its investigations.

On Politics with Lisa Lerer: A guiding hand through the political news cycle, telling you what you really need to know.

Fiji announced its candidacy in July 2020, and, initially running unopposed, seemed a shoo-in for the job. Its ambassador, Nazhat Shameem Khan, a Cambridge-educated lawyer who went on to become Fiji's first female High Court Judge, is well respected in Geneva's diplomatic community and has been a vice-president of the council. In the Council, Fiji had backed investigations into reported abuses in Venezuela, the Philippines, Belarus, Syria and Yemen.

Those positions, fiercely opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, appear to have prompted Bahrain to make a late bid for the post, setting off weeks of maneuvering within the Asia-Pacific group of countries to try to pressure Fiji to step aside.

Human rights activists have assailed Bahrain for repressing critics at home and for its refusal to cooperate with United Nations human rights bodies, which critics said was disqualifying for its bid.

"It was quite ham-fisted, there was no pretense even of support for human rights," Mr. Roth said, describing Bahrain's bid as a brazen attempt to install a candidate that was "going to do Saudi Arabia's dirty work."

As the contest moved toward a vote in the council, where Fiji enjoyed strong support, China publicly played down its opposition, issuing statements saying it would be content to see any of the candidates elected, including Fiji.

But diplomats and human rights groups say the outcome gives Beijing grounds for concern. China faces intensifying scrutiny in the United Nations over its incarceration of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang and its harsh crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

President-elect Biden has promised a return to multilateral institutions like the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, which President Trump abandoned. Mr. Biden has also promised to emphasize human rights in his foreign policy, but he has yet to take a public position on returning to the council, which has influential critics in the United States, particularly among supporters of Israel.

Fiji's success "unquestionably makes it easier for Biden to bring the U.S. back into the council rather than having a country with a demonstrably poor human rights record in the job," said Marc Limon, director of the Geneva-based Universal Rights Group.

Beijing has so far avoided direct criticism by the Human Rights Council, although that may change, Mr. Roth said. A council resolution last year to investigate systemic racism in the United States and other countries set a precedent for action targeting global powers.

"If Biden really makes an effort to rally other governments to condemn China," Mr. Roth said, "it could tip the balance and for the first time we could see condemnatory resolutions on China coming out of the council."

[Malaysia] Malaysia takes WTO legal action against EU over palm biofuel curbs (Reuters)

Reuters [1/16/2021 12:35 AM, Liz Lee, 5304K, Neutral]

Malaysia is taking legal action at the global trade watchdog against the European Union and member states France and Lithuania for restricting palm oil-based biofuels, the government said.

The world's second largest palm oil producer, which has called a EU renewable-energy directive "discriminatory action," is seeking consultations under the World Trade Organization's Dispute Settlement Mechanism, the Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry said in a statement on Friday.

Minister Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali said the EU proceeded with implementing the directive without considering Malaysia's commitment and views, even after Malaysia gave feedback and sent economic and technical missions to Europe.

The EU directive "will mean the use of palm oil as biofuel in the EU cannot be taken into account in the calculation of renewable energy targets and in turn create undue trade restrictions to the country's palm oil industry," he said in the statement.

The ministry filed the WTO request with cooperation from the Attorney General's Chambers and the International Trade and Industry Ministry, taking action it had warned of in July against EU Renewable Energy Directive II.

Malaysia will act as a third party in a separate WTO case lodged by neighbouring Indonesia, the world's biggest palm oil producer, as a sign of solidarity and support, the ministry statement said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar police scuffle with nationalist monk's followers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 2:08 AM, Matthew Tostevin and William Mallard, Neutral]

Myanmar police scuffled on Saturday with dozens of followers of Buddhist nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu at a demonstration calling for him to be put on trial more than two months after he handed himself in to face sedition charges.

Protesters, many of them monks, gathered outside the Insein Prison in Myanmar's main city of Yangon, where Wirathu has been held since November last year.

Police said they had not set out to break the protest up but had been provoked and has arrested one protester. "We were trying to negotiate and that man talked back rudely and started fighting," Tin Latt, the head of Insein police station, told Reuters by phone.

The protest by about 50 people dispersed after the scuffle.

Wirathu is known for his rhetoric against minority Muslims, particularly the Rohingya community. But he has also been critical of the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi and supportive of Myanmar's powerful military. "Although he handed himself courageously and decisively to face trial, he was not brought to court or given a verdict," one monk at the protest told reporters. He said other prisoners in custody should also be brought to trial.

Wirathu faces trial under a law that prohibits bringing "hatred or contempt" or exciting disaffection toward the government. It carries a prison sentence of up to three years.

He denies wrongdoing. He handed himself in after more than a year on the run.

[South Korea] South Korea is cracking down on digital sex crimes. Has it done enough? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 7:09 PM, Yoonjung Seo and Julia Hollingsworth, 7975K, Negative]

Between the ages of 11 and 14, South Korean teenager Ji-o was threatened, stalked and pressured into taking sexually explicit photos of herself by men on the internet.

She joined Twitter in 2015 as a lonely 11-year-old elementary student, hoping to make friends, according to Choi Yunu, from non-governmental organization Mental Health Korea. As she interacted with people on the platform, she read about a way to make pocket money. People online would send her vouchers for snacks, and all she had to do was share pictures of her breasts.

But the exchange was a trick -- ultimately, those uploads were used to blackmail her into accepting an exploitative pattern of abuse. One man claiming to be a 36-year-old father threatened to tell Ji-o's parents what she was doing if she didn't take explicit pictures for him. Another man set up a rule that she needed to respond to his messages within two minutes or he would send men to beat her up, although it's unclear whether he knew where she lived and if so, how he had that information. Terrified of missing a notification, she slept with earphones in so that she would be woken by the buzz of an incoming message.

As a young girl, she lacked the maturity to rationalize what was happening to her. South Korea's culture of victim blaming -- even for people as young and vulnerable as Ji-o -- prevented her from seeking help.

Now 16, Ji-o -- not her real name -- is still dealing with the aftermath of the three-plus years she spent subjected to online abuse and threats. She says she switched her phone number eight times and moved away from her parents' home in rural South Korea to the capital Seoul, where she lives with her sister. She wants to change her name.

While digital sex crimes are a problem all over the world, they are a particular issue in South Korea, which has one of the world's highest rates of smartphone ownership. Inadequate laws, weak sentencing, and poor policing mean that such crimes are rarely treated seriously by the justice system -- and as a result, activists say victims feel discouraged from coming forward.

Last year, however, a digital sex crime case that bore some chilling similarities to Ji-o's situation appears to have sparked change. After an outpouring of disgust over the case, some laws have been tightened and, in November, the ringleader was handed an unusually long sentence.

But advocates say much more needs to be done to take the issue of digital sex crime seriously -- and keep young girls and women safe from dangers on the other side of the screen.

As he recovered from an operation to make his limbs longer, then-23-year-old Cho Joo-bin began trying to make money on the internet. He styled himself as a businessman in his 40s who had served prison time and had an amputated foot, and gave himself a nickname: Guru.

In September 2019, he founded a group chat called Guru's Room on the encrypted platform Telegram, where messages can be set to disappear after they have been read. That room would become the setting for the most notorious digital sex crime case in South Korea, where men spent thousands of dollars to witness -- and demand -- the abuse of young girls and women.

Cho and his collaborators had a simple playbook for recruiting victims online. They offered them jobs as part-time models, then solicited compromising photographs from them, before coercing them into making degrading material by threatening to release their personal information and images to other internet users. Cho told them to raise their pinky finger in pictures which he later admitted was a way of branding the content. Authorities say there were more than 100 victims, including 26 girls in their teens.

"Foolishly, I was confident I wouldn't be caught and I intended to make my own brand with my sexual content," Cho said in September at one of his collaborator's trials.

At the same time, he and his collaborators recruited members, offering teaser videos of sexually explicit content to try to lure them into paying for entry into one of the exclusive rooms where they had access to women and girls -- referred to by Cho as "slaves" -- who they could instruct to create sexually explicit material. These rooms were illegal -- South Korean law forbids producing any sexually explicit material.

He attracted thousands of members, some of them paid. One group member -- who is known only as Lee -- sent his personal information and 3.6 million won (\$3,300) to Cho as an entrance fee to get into the chat rooms, he testified in court, according to South Korean

non-governmental organization Tacteen Naeil. That seems to have been on the higher end for entry -- police said last year that buyers normally spent about \$1,200 to enter a room paying with bitcoin.

Lee also paid into a "slave funding account," which he believed was going to the victims as payment, but which he later found out went to Cho.

Another member, who paid Cho more than 1 million won (about \$920) and verified himself by taking a selfie holding his social security ID card, said that Cho often deleted and created new rooms. Entry fees to the different rooms were higher for those with victims considered to be better looking.

As paid users became involved in the criminal rooms, the information they had given at the start became incriminating. When Cho contacted Lee saying he was low on cash, Lee gave him 650,000 won (\$600) as he was afraid Cho might contact his wife. The other member -- who cannot be named for legal reasons -- said he remained a member as he was afraid of being threatened by Cho.

In 2019, two university journalism students alerted authorities to his illegal enterprise after joining the groups undercover using nicknames. In March 2020, authorities busted the network of chatrooms.

Dozens were arrested over their involvement in the Telegram ring. One alleged collaborator was only 16 years old. "He has been good with computers since he was in elementary school," his lawyer said in court. "Because of the lack of parents' protection or supervision, he consequently reached a trash island named 'Guru's Room' in the vast sea of the internet."

Guru's Room was hardly the only place on the South Korean internet where women and girls were victims of digital sex crimes.

Cho had been inspired by other Telegram groups, including one named Nth room, run by someone who called himself GodGod. The journalism students, who asked to use the pseudonyms Kwon and Ahn to protect their safety, said there were many operators running similar chats on Telegram -- and links to the groups could be found from a simple keyword search on Google.

A Telegram spokesperson told CNN that publicly available content which violates their terms of conditions is taken down. Already this month, more than 7,000 groups and channels related to child abuse have been banned, according to Telegram's Stop Child Abuse channel.

"Sexual violence and the abuse of minors are not welcome on our platform," Telegram's spokesperson said in a statement.

According to police, more than 2,500 people were detained last year for digital sex crimes in South Korea. Of those, 220 were arrested for alleged sex crimes on Telegram, Discord and so-called darknet sites which cannot be accessed by a regular browser.

The Telegram rooms were among the most egregious examples of South Korea's sex

crimes, and were difficult to track given the app's encryption. But Ji-o's case shows young girls are also vulnerable on widely used social media platforms.

Years before Guru's Room or Nth Room were even set up, Ji-o found herself trapped by her own personal information. When she refused to take degrading pictures for the man claiming to be a 36-year-old father, he spread her private details around the internet which others formatted into a graphic, a process known online as "taxidermy" because the victim's information is preserved forever. She still doesn't know how he got her personal details. After that, huge numbers of people contacted her. Some told her to take off all her clothes, others told her to take photos of herself in school uniform.

"Did you do everything I told you to do?" one man wrote to Ji-o, in direct messages on Twitter seen by CNN.

"Remember: You're not a human, but my toy."

Even as the demands from strangers grew online, Ji-o was afraid to tell anyone. She was scared that telling the police would land her in a juvenile protection facility -- under South Korean law at the time, minors seen as voluntary participants to digital sex crimes faced the prospect of mandatory attendance at such a center. And she was scared to tell her parents, worrying that they wouldn't understand.

In 2018, police asked to speak to her. They had begun investigating a man she had been talking to online, and found her conversation with him while inspecting his phone. They told her that what she had been doing was not good, and that she could end up in a juvenile facility for posting videos and pictures of herself as they violated child and youth protection laws.

Then, because she was underage, they called her parents. Her dad asked why she posted pictures of herself online when she already had everything she needed and hit her, she alleges. Her mother cried and fell silent. They have never talked with Ji-o about the digital sex crimes again.

"It was hell, I blamed myself a lot and I still do," she said, according to Mental Health Korea's Choi. "Most of all, I am disappointed in my parents."

The Telegram victims didn't alert police to what was happening. Nor did Ji-o.

In countries all over the world, stigma and the difficulty of going through the justice system prevent victims of digital sex crimes from talking to police. But in South Korea, the barriers are particularly pronounced.

Until the laws changed in 2020, South Korea assumed that some minors were willing participants in crimes perpetrated against them. Minors aged between 13 and 16 who were victims of sexual abuse or rape were viewed legally as consenting parties if they got some kind of benefit -- such as money -- from the perpetrator. These victims could also be sent to juvenile centers for education and protection.

Activist groups said the threat of these education centers seemed like punishment and deterred victims from telling police. The rules also meant that rapists didn't necessarily get

punished. In a well-known case in 2014, a 13-year-old girl with a mental disability who left home after breaking her mother's mobile phone screen -- as she was worried her mom would be upset -- was raped by six adults who took her into their care and gave her food. A court decided she had voluntarily prostituted herself to receive food and accommodation.

Even if victims told police, crimes were often not investigated. In the past, police found it "almost impossible" to investigate digital sex crimes as they don't have powers to adopt undercover investigation methods online, said Korean National Police Agency's commissioner general Kim Chang-yong. He wants to see police given new powers to investigate online and more importantly, to be able to stop crimes before abuse begins.

And even when cases were investigated, few resulted in a lengthy sentence. Between 2011 and 2015, only 5% of people indicted in South Korea for filming, distributing and selling porn were sent to prison, according to a 2018 paper by Korean Women's Development Institute, a government think tank.

Although producers of child exploitation images can receive a possible life sentence, the average sentence for people convicted of producing and distributing sexually exploitative material of minors was 2.6 years in 2018, according to the Korea Institute of Criminology. The United States also has high penalties for similar crimes, but unlike South Korea, these punishments are actually enforced -- the average sentence for distributing child exploitation images was 11 years and 8 months, according to a 2019 report into US federal sex offenses.

The various problems with South Korea's system all fed into one another, reinforcing the idea that digital sex crimes were not that serious and were not worth reporting, activists argued. Kim admitted police might not have seemed aggressive enough, but said few digital sex offenders were indicted -- and even fewer received jail terms. "That discouraged police from investigating," he said.

Despite that, research suggests such crimes may be widespread. According to a survey by Tacteen Naeil, 12% of middle school students and 4% of elementary school students have experienced a sexual approach online.

When the Guru's Room case was revealed, to many it felt like the last straw. It followed other high-profile crimes that had received weak penalties, including the South Korean mastermind behind the darknet's largest-known site of child exploitation videos, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail in 2019 for producing and distributing child pornography -- a charge that carries a possible 10-year jail term. South Korean authorities refused to extradite him to the US where he faced several charges, including advertising child pornography, which carries a possible 30-year sentence.

An online petition demanding a heavy punishment for Cho attracted more than 2 million signatures, well over the 200,000 needed to prompt an official response. The justice system needed to take action.

On a cold day in November last year, after a monthslong trial, Cho Joo-bin was sentenced to 40 years in prison for producing and distributing illegal sexual visual material, forced sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, recording sexually abusive behaviors, coercion, violation of private information protection, and fraud.

It was a stark contrast from the weak penalties digital sex offenders typically receive. After the sentencing, a dozen women gathered outside Seoul's Central District Court, holding a deep red banner that read: "This is just the beginning."

In the months leading up to the sentence, parliament overturned the law making minors subject to education after being the victim of a sex crime, meaning all children are now considered victims. South Korea raised the age of consent from 13 to 16, meaning any adults who have sex with anyone under 16 could be liable for charges of child sexual abuse or rape. In December, shortly after Cho's sentencing, Korea's top court finalized new sentencing guidelines, aimed at making the penalties for sexual crimes stronger.

Lawyer Cho Eun-ho, no relation of Cho Joo-bin, said the stronger punishments made people more aware of digital sex crimes and their seriousness -- and had only been implemented thanks to the victims who survived violence and reported crimes.

But many worry that even with those new measures, South Korea's handling of digital sex crimes still falls short.

Even with the new sentencing guidelines, penalties are below other international jurisdictions. The new base penalty for producing child sexual exploitation images is five years, still lower than in the US where there is a minimum of 15 years in prison under federal law. There are also legal gaps. Some countries -- including the United Kingdom -- have laws punishing online sexual grooming. South Korea does not have such a law.

And some are concerned that, when cases are not as high profile as the Telegram case, penalties may not be as severe. There also remains a lack of understanding about digital sex crimes within the justice and policing system.

Attorney Baek So-yoon analyzed more than 200 rulings from November 2018 to July 2020, where people had been found guilty of distributing sexual exploitation videos of children and juveniles. She found that judges tended to have little understanding of digital sex crimes and often did not comprehend the scale and impact of the crimes on victims. That meant perpetrators were given a lighter sentence.

And Choi Yunu, from Mental Health Korea, said victims remain afraid that, if they report crimes to police, their parents will find out. Police also need to be careful to avoid adding to the victim's trauma, she said.

"Please think of them as their own children, and understand how they're fighting on the battlefield, being chased by an invisible enemy," Choi said.

The prosecution of others involved in the Guru's Room is still going through the courts. One key player is due to be sentenced in late January.

But even once the court processes are done, victims fear the crimes are never truly over.

In the trial of another of Cho's collaborators, who cannot be named for legal reasons, the prosecutor said victims are struggling to recover from the trauma. Videos showing the abuse perpetrated against them have been spread throughout the internet.

"I'm so busy deleting videos distributed by Cho Joo-bin that my daily scars seem to be endless," said one victim through her lawyer Oh Sun-hee.

Shin Jin-hee, a lawyer representing 30 victims in the Telegram case, said they could not continue with their normal lives.

"As a lawyer, after the sentencing the case is over -- but the case isn't over for the victims," she said. "(They) continue to live their lives worrying if other people who saw or downloaded their materials would spread the videos or pictures.

"Some victims want to change their social security number or their names but many underaged victims have to get their parents involved in. Of course it's not easy for adults either. How do you explain to your friends or colleagues when you change your name?"

For Ji-o, the crimes ended in 2018, but in a lot of ways, her story isn't over. She has never made an official complaint to police about what happened to her. She remains afraid of the repercussions she could face if she tells them. That means no one has ever been held to account for what happened -- and her images and private information are still on the internet.

"(My information) is still out there, somewhere. Somebody might be watching. It could be in a year's time that it reappears again -- there is no end to it," she said.

[Thailand] Thailand's Failed Tourism Experiment (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 7:56 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

"There aren't enough tourist arrivals to save the industry that used to contribute to about 1/5 of Thailand's economy." Thailand's reopening experiment during Covid-19 hasn't gone to plan. Randy Thanthong-Knight explains from beach destination Phuket. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Vietnam] U.S. Won't Penalize Vietnam for Alleged Currency Manipulation (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 6:23 PM, Yuka Hayashi, Neutral]

The Trump administration said Vietnam's currency practices, including "excessive foreign exchange market interventions," hurt American businesses, but that it decided not to take any punitive action.

The decision to skip penalties in a new trade dispute came days before President-elect Joe Biden is to be sworn into office, and followed opposition during a recent hearing from U.S. companies doing business in Vietnam

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative had been investigating Vietnam's policies and practices related to currency valuation since October.

It was the first case in which the U.S. cited currency manipulation as a reason to investigate a trading partner under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, the same legal tool the Trump administration used to impose massive tariffs on imports from China. "Unfair acts, policies and practices that contribute to currency undervaluation harm U.S. workers and businesses,

and need to be addressed," U.S. Trade Representative Robert E. Lighthizer said in a statement Friday.

The USTR added while it wasn't taking any specific action at this time, it would continue to "evaluate all available options."

The Vietnamese Embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Imports from Vietnam have grown sharply in recent years, rising from \$14.9 billion a decade ago to \$66.6 billion in 2019, according to Commerce Department data. The Southeast Asian country has been a popular destination for investments by U.S. businesses avoiding China due to growing political tensions and rising costs there.

The announcement follows a decision last month by the Treasury Department to label Vietnam and Switzerland as currency manipulators, and USTR hearings in late December where representatives of American companies expressed concerns that tariffs prompted by the investigation would harm their businesses.

South and Central Asia

Nepal's 'COVID Rush' To India: Will Bilateral Ties Now Improve? (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [1/15/2021 5:50 AM, Akansha Shah, 4021K, Neutral]

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held talks with his Nepalese counterpart Pradeep Kumar Gyawali on Friday, 15 January, the first time since the border row. Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali reached New Delhi on Thursday, for a three-day visit, to participate in the sixth Indo-Nepal Joint Commission meeting which commenced on Friday.

This is the highest bilateral level mechanism between Nepal and India, mandated to discuss the entire gamut of bilateral relations, including the boundary dispute which only recently pushed India-Nepal relations to the back burner.

The Commission last met 17 months back when India's external affairs minister travelled to Kathmandu. Before leaving for Delhi, Gyawali told this author that his visit is aimed at restoring trust and confidence between the two neighbours.

"We want to have an open and friendly dialogue with India based on renewed trust and respect for each other's sovereignty." - Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali to Akanshya Shah for The Quint.

There existed a vacuum in the Indo-Nepal engagement after Nepal's parliament endorsed a new map in May 2020 incorporating three areas – Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura – also claimed by India since long.

Following the telephonic conversation between the prime ministers of the two countries on Indian Independence Day 2020, a series of visits came up that ultimately paved the way for the present Commission meeting.

Director of the Indian intelligence agency R&AW, Samanta Kumar Goel's visit to Nepal in October 2020 was followed by the Indian Army Chief General MM Naravane and Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visits to Nepal in quick succession in November 2020.

In between, there has also been a meeting of the joint technical committee to discuss some important bilateral issues. Meanwhile, BJP's foreign cell chair Vijay Chauthaiwale too went to Kathmandu in December 2020 on an informal visit — reportedly to bridge the gap between the political leadership of the two neighbours.

Gyawali's visit comes at a time when Nepal's domestic politics is witnessing a most delicate situation. PM K P Sharma Oli dissolved the House of Representatives on 20 December 2020, thereby pushing the country towards instability and inviting a constitutional crisis.

His move has been criticised by the opposition and the other faction of NCP (Nepal Communist Party) led by Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal, as 'undemocratic, unconstitutional and regressive'. PM Oli has been criticised for his autocratic way of functioning and dissolving the House in order to save his government just a few hours before the no-confidence motion was to be registered in the House. The matter is now at the Supreme Court of Nepal.

Gyawali's visit must be understood in this context. The good part of this visit is re-establishing and re-starting of bilateral engagements that can bridge the trust deficit.

Since this mechanism is all-encompassing, there could be renewed talks in every sector from connectivity to hydropower to tourism and trade. Most importantly, Nepal and India would discuss modalities to deal with the COVID-19 threat and assistance to Nepal in terms of medicines and vaccination.

There are said to be around 33 agendas already set for the meeting.

Many of the past problems were because of poor communication.

Oli's government had blamed India for lack of response over the boundary dispute before issuing the new map. This meeting will certainly open new windows for deeper and meaningful dialogues between the two countries. Any indication — even a deliberation — on the map row would be good signal for Oli government, which is now perceived to be cozying up to New Delhi.

However, in Nepal there are various groups which see Gyawali's visit as holding little significance. They argue that a 'caretaker government' cannot enter any new agreement or even negotiate with a foreign country. Talking to this author, former PM Baburam Bhattarai said:

"Oli's autocratic way of functioning is a threat to the Constitution. We would have liked to welcome the new engagement, but the timing is most inappropriate. How can a caretaker government deal with another country?" - Former Nepal PM Baburam Bhattarai to Akanshya Shah for The Quint

Civil society and some media in Nepal have also been equally critical of Gyawali's visit.

In reality, the joint commission meeting has been pending since pre-COVID times. The MEA had said that India would talk to Nepal at "an appropriate time" indicating that it would do so once the COVID threat subsides.

The Oli government too has been more than keen to talk to India's MEA

Moreover, this is also an emergency visit in terms of Nepal's urgent requirement for COVID vaccine. The Nepal government is under pressure to collect the right vaccine within a short time span.

The humanitarian perspective of the visit has unfortunately not been highlighted by Oli government. Third, from India's point of view, the present Oli government has not been labeled as 'caretaker', neither by Nepal's President nor the international community.

Thus within Nepal, there is no unified voice on the kind of approach to be adopted towards India, a country Nepal shares close relation with. At the heart of the problem is the present political turmoil in Nepal that could push the country towards instability and chaos.

Even when the two governments have opened dialogues, and is said that Gyawali is carrying a 'special message' from Oli to PM Modi (that could amount to the extension of an invitation to the latter to visit Nepal), it is difficult to ascertain whether the two countries have truly put past misunderstandings to rest. Given the fierce criticisms facing Oli government at home, it would be difficult for the two foreign ministers to enter into concrete agreements on various bilateral issues, especially on the controversial border dispute.

[India] India is launching one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns. But it's unclear if one of the vaccines works. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 9:32 PM, Joanna Slater and Niha Masih, 13480K, Neutral]

The boxes began arriving at airports across this vast nation earlier this week, escorted by police and stamped with a message of hope: "May all be free from disease."

India on Saturday is set to launch one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns with the aim of immunizing 300 million people by this summer.

The mammoth undertaking is a leap forward in the fight against the coronavirus in India, second only to the United States in its total number of cases.

The effort is being buoyed by two locally made vaccines and India's prior experience with large-scale immunization campaigns. But what might have been a triumph for the country's vaccine industry has been dogged by controversy.

The Indian government granted emergency approval to two vaccines — a locally manufactured version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and a vaccine called Covaxin developed by Bharat Biotech, an Indian pharmaceutical company.

Only the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has completed a Phase 3 clinical trial for safety and efficacy. Bharat Biotech has finished earlier-stage trials on its vaccine but has so far provided no data on whether it works. Yet both vaccines will be administered starting

Saturday, and people being immunized will not be able to choose which they receive.

Complicating matters further, Indian regulators have said that the Bharat Biotech vaccine will be used in "clinical trial mode," a phrase that left experts baffled. One of India's foremost vaccine experts, Gagandeep Kang, told an interviewer that she had "no clue" what it meant.

Unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, India is starting its vaccination campaign at a moment when the virus is in retreat. New cases have dropped drastically since peaking in September: India is recording about 14,000 cases a day and fewer than 200 deaths.

The massive vaccine push is expected to kick off at 3,000 sites across the country on Saturday, a number that authorities say will grow in the coming weeks.

To start, the Indian government has purchased 11 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, and 5.5 million doses of the Bharat Biotech vaccine. Both vaccines were sold at \$2.75 a dose (the Pfizer vaccine, by comparison, costs \$19.50). If targets are met, 300,000 people could receive doses on Saturday.

The first to receive vaccines will be approximately 30 million health-care workers, soldiers, paramilitary personnel and municipal employees dealing with sanitation. They'll receive it free of cost. Then the immunization drive will target 270 million people over the age of 50 as well as those below 50 who have co-morbidities.

The rollout of the vaccine program matters not just for India, but for the entire developing world. India is a vaccine powerhouse with a proven track record of low-cost manufacturing. The Serum Institute of India is the world's largest vaccine maker by volume.

The Serum Institute will be a major supplier to COVAX, a global initiative backed by the World Health Organization to distribute vaccines equitably to poorer countries. Several countries — including Brazil, Bangladesh and Nepal — are looking to purchase vaccines directly from Indian companies.

Adar Poonawalla, the chief executive officer of the Serum Institute, said that the company would start delivering doses to COVAX by the end of January. The company has also forged deals to supply the AstraZeneca vaccine to Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Morocco, he said.

In India, health officials have been preparing for weeks — registering recipients, training vaccinators and conducting dry runs. Neither the AstraZeneca vaccine nor the Bharat Biotech vaccine requires ultracold storage, a crucial plus in a country such as India.

Rajesh Bhaskar, the official in charge of covid-19 management in the state of Punjab, said he expected to be able to vaccinate 30,000 people Saturday and to complete the immunization of the state's health-care workers within 10 days.

"There is a sense of relief, big relief," Bhaskar said. "We hope this will suppress the pandemic and eventually we will get rid of it."

The distribution effort has already spread across the country. In Chandrapur, a

predominantly rural district in central India, an initial shipment of 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived by road in a government van earlier this week.

They were stored in an ice-lined refrigerator guarded by a private security firm specially hired for the occasion, said Rajukumar Gahlot, the district's health officer. Nearly 100 health-care personnel in the district have contracted covid-19, he said. Six of them died.

The AstraZeneca vaccine will represent the large majority of vaccines administered on Saturday, but Covaxin is also a key part of the launch, particularly in cities. There remains "a lot of conjecture" around how regulators reached the decision to grant emergency approval to the Bharat Biotech vaccine in the absence of efficacy data, said Anant Bhan, a public health and bioethics expert.

Bhan said that by granting approval to Bharat Biotech's vaccine in "clinical trial mode," regulators raised many unanswered questions. Critics of the government went further. "Indians are not guinea pigs," Manish Tewari, a spokesman for the opposition party, told Asian News International.

Bharat Biotech declined to respond to questions about concerns over the efficacy of its vaccine, but it has pointed to the results of early-stage studies showing an immune response as an indicator of future results.

Bharat Biotech's vaccine is "incredibly safe but I don't know if the d--- thing works," said one expert on India's vaccine industry, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to comment frankly. Both vaccines are "less than ideal," the expert added, noting that the data on the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine showed huge variations, partly as the result of a dosing mistake.

Some experts worry that the lack of transparency in the process of approving vaccines for emergency use could undermine confidence in them more broadly. That would represent a break from the past in India, a place where vaccine skepticism is low and immunization is seen as an essential tool in reducing mortality.

[India] India starts world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drive (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:44 AM, Aniruddha Ghosal, Sheikh Saaliq, 13480K, Neutral]

India started inoculating health workers Saturday in what is likely the world's largest COVID-19 vaccination campaign, joining the ranks of wealthier nations where the effort is already well underway.

The country is home to the world's largest vaccine makers and has one of the biggest immunization programs. But there is no playbook for the enormity of the challenge.

Indian authorities hope to give shots to 300 million people, roughly the population of the U.S and several times more than its existing program that targets 26 million infants. The recipients include 30 million doctors, nurses and other front-line workers to be followed by 270 million others, who are either aged over 50 or have illnesses that make them vulnerable to COVID-19.

The first dose of a vaccine was administered to a health worker at All India Institute of Medical Sciences in the capital New Delhi, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi kickstarted

the campaign with a nationally televised speech. Priority groups across the vast country, from the Himalayan mountains to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, began receiving it shortly after.

"We are launching the world's biggest vaccination drive and it shows the world our capability," Modi said in his address. He implored citizens to keep their guard up and not to believe any "rumors about the safety of the vaccines."

It was not clear if Modi, 70, has taken the vaccine himself like other world leaders as an example of the shot's safety. His government has said politicians will not be considered priority groups in the first phase of the rollout.

Health officials haven't specified what percentage of the nearly 1.4 billion people will be targeted by the campaign. But experts say it will almost certainly be the largest such drive globally.

The sheer scale has its obstacles. For instance, India plans to rely heavily on a digital platform to track the shipment and delivery of vaccines. But public health experts point out that the internet remains patchy in large parts of the country, and some remote villages are entirely unconnected.

Around 100 people will be vaccinated in each of the 3,006 centers across the country on the first day, the Health Ministry said this week.

India gave nod for emergency use of two vaccines, one developed by Oxford University and U.K.-based drugmaker AstraZeneca, and another by Indian company Bharat Biotech, on Jan. 4. Cargo planes flew 16.5 million shots to different Indian cities last week.

Health experts worry that the regulatory shortcut taken to approve the Bharat Biotech vaccine without waiting for concrete data that would show its efficacy in preventing illness from the coronavirus could amplify vaccine hesitancy. At least one state health minister has opposed its use.

India's Health Ministry has bristled at the criticism and says the vaccines are safe, but maintains that health workers will have no choice in deciding which vaccine they would get themselves.

According to Dr. S.P. Kalantri, the director of a rural hospital in Maharashtra, India's worst-hit state, such an approach was worrying because he said the regulatory approval was hasty and not backed by science.

"In a hurry to be populist, the government (is) taking decisions that might not be in the best interest of the common man," Kalantri said.

Against the backdrop of the rising global COVID-19 death toll — it topped 2 million on Friday — the clock is ticking to vaccinate as many people as possible. But the campaign has been uneven.

In wealthy countries including the United States, Britain, Israel, Canada and Germany, millions of citizens have already been given some measure of protection with at least one

dose of vaccine developed with revolutionary speed and quickly authorized for use.

But elsewhere, immunization drives have barely gotten off the ground. Many experts are predicting another year of loss and hardship in places like Iran, India, Mexico and Brazil, which together account for about a quarter of the world's deaths.

India is second to the U.S. with 10.5 million confirmed cases, and ranks third in the number of deaths, behind the U.S. and Brazil, with 152,000.

Over 35 million doses of various COVID-19 vaccines have been administered around the world, according to the University of Oxford.

While the majority of the COVID-19 vaccine doses have already been snapped up by wealthy countries, COVAX, a U.N.-backed project to supply shots to developing parts of the world, has found itself short of vaccine, money and logistical help.

As a result, the World Health Organization's chief scientist warned it is highly unlikely that herd immunity — which would require at least 70% of the globe to be vaccinated — will be achieved this year. As the disaster has demonstrated, it is not enough to snuff out the virus in a few places.

"Even if it happens in a couple of pockets, in a few countries, it's not going to protect people across the world," Dr. Soumya Swaminathan said this week.

[India] India's Modi kicks off vaccination campaign, among world's largest (Reuters)
Reuters [1/16/2021 12:21 AM, Krishna N. Das, Mayank Bhardwaj, 5304K, Neutral]
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched on Saturday one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns, as part of efforts by the populous nation to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control starting with two locally-manufactured shots.

Modi, who addressed healthcare workers through video conferencing, will not immediately take the vaccine himself as India is initially prioritizing nurses, doctors and others on the front line.

[India] 'India Has Taken Very Decisive Steps' in Managing Pandemic: IMF (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [1/15/2021 1:03 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The International Monetary Fund chief, Kristalina Georgieva on Thursday, 14 January gave accolades to India's "very decisive" steps in dealing with the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking at a global media roundtable she said, "India moved to more targeted restrictions and lockdowns. What we see is that that the transition, combined with policy support, seems to have worked well. Why? Because if you look at mobility indicators, we are almost where we were before COVID in India, meaning that economic activities have been revitalised quite significantly," quoted PTI.

The IMF chief added that India's update as part of the 26 January World Economic Update session would be, "Less bad, because the country has taken very decisive action." She

encouraged the country to "do more" since there is "still space to do more."

In October, IMF did a report where India was predicted to contract by 10.3 per cent in 2020, but bounce back by 8.8 per cent growth rate in 2021, stated PTI.

Appreciating the economic policies, and calling India's lockdown dramatic in consideration of the nation's population, Georgieva said, "What the government has done on the monetary policy and the fiscal policy side is commendable. It is actually slightly above the average for emerging markets."

She added that India is doing better than the average emerging markets GDP, which stands at six per cent.

The IMF chief recommended policymakers to support the "fast structural transformation and cushion the impact on those that are on the losing side of it" in order to support the economy in a "more targeted manner".

However, Georgieva brought forward issues of gender inequality, where job loss in the pandemic is affecting women the most. Speaking about aid not reaching women who are often frontline workers, she said,

"Women are front line workers. They are often in the informal economy, help cannot easily reach them, so they are hit. Once people start losing jobs, who is to lose jobs first? (Again) women are on the front line. Labour market participation in India for women has been low. It is shrinking," quoted PTI.

"I know the government is paying attention, it is moving in that (direction), but there is so much space to tap into the productive potential of women and the entrepreneurial potential of women," she added.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil airlifts emergency oxygen into pandemic-struck state, vaccine drive lags (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 5:48 PM, Bruno Kelly and Ricardo Brito, Neutral]

Brazil's Air Force delivered emergency oxygen supplies on Friday to the jungle state of Amazonas devastated by a resurgent pandemic and the government scrambled to organize a nationwide vaccine effort while President Jair Bolsonaro said he "should be at the beach."

Doctors in the northern Brazilian state were using their own vehicles to transport patients, as locals sought to buy oxygen tanks on the black market, according to media reports. Desperate relatives, protesting outside hospitals in the state capital of Manaus, said patients had been taken off ventilators as oxygen ran out.

Health authorities there said oxygen supplies had run out at some hospitals and intensive care wards were so full that scores of patients were being airlifted to other states.

The Air Force flew cylinders with 9,300 kilograms of oxygen in from Sao Paulo state with another cargo expected on Friday. It said a flight carried nine patients from Manaus to

Teresina in northeastern Brazil, and evacuations will continue with two planes taking patients to six cities.

Officials had planned to airlift 61 premature babies in incubators out of Manaus, but the relocation ultimately was not needed because emergency oxygen supplies were procured.

A government plan to start inoculating Brazilians against COVID-19 early next week was in disarray. Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro said a plane standing by since Friday to pick up 2 million doses of an AstraZeneca vaccine from India's Serum Institute would now depart in "two or three days."

Brazil's Health Ministry requested immediate delivery of 6 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by China's Sinovac and imported by Sao Paulo state's Butantan biomedical center, saying it needed them for its planned launch of immunizations next week.

Health regulator Anvisa was set to decide on authorizing emergency use of Sinovac's Coronavac as well as the AstraZeneca vaccine on Sunday.

Bolsonaro, who has denied the gravity of COVID-19 and has stated he will not be vaccinated, said in a television interview there was little he could do about the pandemic as a second wave of the new coronavirus tore through the country.

"I should be at the beach right now," he said on Band TV, adding that his health minister was doing an "exceptional job."

Critics of the president said the grim situation in Manaus was just the latest example of his poor handling of the world's second highest COVID-19 death toll after the United States.

Brazil is now dealing with a snowballing second wave and a new, potentially more contagious, coronavirus variant that originated in Amazonas and prompted Britain on Thursday to bar entry to Brazilians.

Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has opposed lockdowns to halt the pandemic's spread, said the government had already done what it could in Manaus.

The hoped-for 2 million AstraZeneca doses from the Serum Institute now face delays while India decides whether to loosen export regulations as it begins its own inoculation drive this weekend, a source briefed on the matter said.

India will be able to decide on exports of coronavirus vaccines within the next few weeks, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Reuters this week.

"The policy of course is we will start the rollout in India. We have our own challenges," Jaishankar said.

The worldwide coronavirus death toll surpassed 2 million on Friday, according to a Reuters tally.

In Amazonas, emergency services were pushed to a breaking point and Governor Nelson Lima announced a 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. statewide curfew to fight the spread of coronavirus.

[Brazil] Oxygen shortage forces evacuation of 60 premature babies from Amazon city (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 5:20 PM, Rodrigo Pedroso and Rob Picheta, 7975K, Negative]

Brazil's Amazonas State is airlifting 60 premature babies from hospitals in Manaus for emergency care in Sao Paulo, a distance of 3,875 kilometers (2,407 miles), because of a shortage of oxygen supplies in health facilities in the state.

The information, published by CNN Brasil, was confirmed on Friday by Sao Paulo's State Governor Joao Doria, who also criticized Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for his handling of the pandemic in Brazil.

"Sao Paulo will receive all babies that can be transported. This is the end of the world, not having oxygen for premature babies. What irresponsibility of the Bolsonaro government," said Doria.

Private hospitals in Manaus, a city of 2 million people, only have oxygen supplies for the next 36 hours, the general secretary of the Brazilian Federation of Hospitals, Aramacy Pinto, told CNN Brasil on Friday.

Pinto said the last delivery of oxygen cylinders to Manaus hospitals arrived early on Friday, and although the next delivery is scheduled to arrive in the next 24 hours, he fears it will be delayed due to high demand across the entire region.

Authorities have asked oxygen plants and local industries to produce as much supply for hospitals as they can. Home appliance firm Electrolux said it will hand over its oxygen supplies used in manufacturing air conditioners to public hospitals, according to CNN Brasil.

Since early Wednesday, hospitals and emergency rooms in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas State, have been facing an acute shortage of oxygen.

Although state and municipal authorities have not released official figures, health workers have told local news organizations that dozens of patients have died recently due to a lack of oxygen, vital in the treatment of the novel coronavirus.

On Wednesday, 1,454 new cases of Covid-19 were reported in Amazonas and 186 people were buried in Manaus, surpassing the previous record set on April 26 when 140 people were buried.

Bolsonaro said Friday that "all means" are being made available to help Amazonas tackle its outbreak, which has been complicated by a new variant of the virus.

His claim came a day after Brazilian Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello described the healthcare system in the Amazonas state capital, Manaus, as being in "collapse," and warned of a looming oxygen shortage.

Manaus, globally known as the gateway to the Amazon region, also suffered badly in the

first wave of the pandemic between April and May, when its public health and funeral systems collapsed.

[Brazil] Brazil reports more than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths for fourth consecutive day (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Anthony Boadle, 2164K, Neutral]

Brazil had 69,198 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,151 deaths from COVID-19, the fourth consecutive day with more than 1,000 fatalities, the Health Ministry said on Friday.

The ministry updated the data with 3,151 new cases and 113 deaths in the last 24 hours in the city of Manaus, which is running out of oxygen as a second wave surge in COVID-19 infections overwhelms its hospitals.

The South American country has now registered 8,390,341 cases since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 208,133, according to ministry data. It is the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil company requests emergency use approval for Russian vaccine (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:32 PM, Anthony Boadle, 5304K, Neutral]

Brazilian pharmaceutical company União Química said on Friday that, together with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), it has requested regulatory approval for emergency use of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V.

The request, filed with Brazilian health regulator Anvisa, seeks approval for the use of 10 million doses of Sputnik V in Brazil in the first quarter of 2021, the company said in a statement issued in Moscow. Anvisa officials said the Russian vaccine would have to be submitted to Phase III clinical trials in Brazil before its use can be authorized.

[Canada] Trudeau says Canada needs to 'buckle down' as cases surge, vaccines delayed (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:54 PM, Paula Newton, 7975K, Neutral]

Canada got a one-two punch Friday as public health officials said vaccine deliveries would be delayed and its Covid-19 measures still aren't working to control a resurging virus.

"We have to buckle down, this is our best way through in the coming weeks of winter," said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a news conference Friday in Ottawa. "We've seen the kinds of impossible choices hospitals in other countries have had to face when they become overwhelmed, deciding who gets an ICU bed and who doesn't. Well, that's not where we want to be."

The vast majority of Canadians have been dealing with weeks of stay-at-home orders and yet daily case counts have, at best, plateaued at a high levels.

More worrying, government officials say Covid-19 related deaths are steadily rising and may soon exceed levels seen during the first peak.

"We have yet to see the kind of widespread and sustained declines in daily case counts that

would indicate we're bringing the pandemic under control nationally," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer during a news briefing Friday.

Health officials released new modeling Friday that showed Covid-19 remains on a "rapid growth trajectory" in most of Canada.

Hospitalizations and daily case numbers have already surpassed those of the first peak in the spring. Earlier this week the province of Ontario warned one in four of its hospitals has run out of ICU beds.

Data released Friday shows Canada now has an average of more than 4,700 people being treated in hospital on any given day, with nearly 20% of those patients in ICUs.

All of this comes despite lockdowns already in place in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Taken together, that means more than 60% of Canadians are under stay-at-home orders, with most retail and restaurants closed for anything other than pickup or delivery.

Health officials pleaded with provincial leaders Friday to keep stringent measures in place with healthcare systems at a critical point and already overloaded.

"If we ease measures too soon, the epidemic will resurge even stronger, this is why measures need to be consistent and sustained long enough to sufficiently suppress epidemic growth to allow for lasting control," Tam said.

The grim forecast comes as Canada announced it would receive fewer Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines in the coming weeks. The company announced a temporary slowdown in its European manufacturing facilities.

"Pfizer believes that by the end of March we will be able to catch up, such that we will be on track with the total committed doses for Q1. This is unfortunate, however such delays and issues are to be expected when global supply chains are stretched well beyond their limit," said Anita Anand, Canada's procurement minister during a news conference Friday.

Canadian government data reveals little more than 1% of Canadians have been vaccinated so far. Given mounting problems with vaccine supply, health officials say the rollout will be too slow to have a significant impact on infection rates for months to come.

"This kind of issue is out of our hands," said Trudeau, adding, "I want to be very clear, this does not impact our goal to have enough vaccines available by September for every Canadian who wants one."

[Canada] Detained Huawei CFO enjoys private shopping and evenings at open-air theaters 'under the stars,' wants bail conditions eased (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 1:38 PM, Amanda Coletta, 13480K, Negative]

Meng Wanzhou, the Huawei executive wanted by the United States on fraud charges, spent Christmas dining in a Vancouver restaurant opened exclusively for her party of 14, in an apparent violation of coronavirus rules forbidding holiday gatherings with those living outside one's household.

Those assembled with Meng, who is out on bail and living in a seven-bedroom mansion

while she fights her extradition, included her husband and two children. Canadian officials had granted them an exemption from travel restrictions that have kept many families apart during the deadly pandemic.

Some 5,000 miles away, Michael Spavor, one of two Canadians detained by China in what is widely seen as retaliation for Meng's arrest, was in a prison near the North Korean border. When China let him call home over Christmas, it was the first time he'd heard a loved one's voice in more than two years.

New details about Meng's life of luxury while on bail — and its stark contrast with the conditions in which the two Canadians are being held — emerged this week in a two-day hearing in which the chief financial officer of Huawei argued that her bail conditions were too confining and should be relaxed.

Meng travels to designer stores in Vancouver where she can shop in private, a British Columbia court heard. She has spent time at an open-air theater "under the stars." She receives visitors at the larger of her two multimillion-dollar mansions where she lives. Among them: a masseuse and an art teacher.

Under her \$8 million bail terms, Meng must wear a GPS monitor and is kept under 24-hour surveillance by a court-appointed security firm. She has an 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew but is otherwise free to travel around a designated area of Vancouver while accompanied by security guards.

The guards are the problem. She wants to lose them.

Meng, 48, daughter of billionaire Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei, was arrested in Vancouver in December 2018 at the behest of U.S. authorities seeking her extradition, touching off a geopolitical dispute that has Canada caught in the middle between China and the United States.

The U.S. Justice Department alleges that Meng misled banks about the nature of Huawei's relationship with an Iranian-based subsidiary, effectively tricking them into clearing transactions that violated U.S. sanctions prohibiting business dealings with Iran. She denies wrongdoing.

Meng's arrest enraged China. Several days later, it detained the two Canadians — Spavor, a businessman, and former diplomat Michael Kovrig — and formally indicted them some 18 months later on espionage charges for which it has provided no evidence.

In this week's hearing, Liu Xiaozong, Meng's husband, told the court that the presence of the guards is difficult for their children, who fear that it risks identifying them to the public. He also said he worried that the changing roster of guards puts Meng, a cancer survivor, at increased risk of covid-19.

But Doug Maynard, president of the private security firm enforcing Meng's bail conditions, told the court that when it came to the coronavirus, he too had concerns. He said Meng and her entourage put his employees at risk by mixing social bubbles and drinking from the same coffee cup.

"I know I wouldn't want anyone to drink from my water bottle," Maynard said.

He also said he saw no reason to change her bail conditions. He said she had received about a half-dozen threatening letters in the mail last year, some including bullets, prompting Chinese officials to press Canada to immediately release her and return her to China.

John Gibb-Carsley, the crown prosecutor representing U.S. interests in the case, said Meng is a flight risk. He said a plane was chartered to take her back to China last May when a key ruling that could have ended her extradition case was released. The ruling did not go Meng's way.

Kovrig and Spavor are cut off from the world in separate prisons, where they have endured sleep deprivation and been barred from seeing their families. The International Crisis Group, Kovrig's employer, said he passes the time by walking 7,000 steps each day in a cramped jail cell.

China has sought to deny that the detention of the two men was tit-for-tat retaliation for Meng's arrest, but a Foreign Ministry spokesman said last June that releasing her "could open up space for resolution to the situation of the two Canadians."

Kovrig and Spavor were permitted a single call home over Christmas. For Spavor, it was the first call home since his detention. Kovrig had previously been granted a brief call to his sick father. For much of last year, they went without consular visits, ostensibly because of what China said were coronavirus rules.

Meng's extradition hearings are slated to resume March 1, when she is expected to argue that the case against her is political and that the proceedings should be stayed because of an "abuse of process." With appeals possible, it could be years before a final decision is made on her extradition.

The judge reserved a decision on her bail for Jan. 29.

Meng can have a bail hearing. But when a reporter asked Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, when the country would provide bail for the two Canadian men, he responded with what he said was a Chinese saying.

"The one who tied a knot should be the one that undoes it," he said, adding that it was up to the Canadian government to see whether it could "work out a way to undo this knot."

[Canada] Canada Faces Indigenous Push Back to Study of Pipeline Stake (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 3:54 PM, Robert Tuttle, 6400K, Neutral]

Efforts by Canada's government to hire a firm to do a financial analysis of its Trans Mountain pipeline and a facilitator to help Indigenous communities have rankled at least one group in British Columbia.

"It's a joke," Chief Mike LeBourdais, head of the B.C.-based Western Indigenous Pipeline Group, said in a phone interview about the contract. "They are going to advise the Indians on whether buying a pipeline is good or not."

The government issued a tender notice on Dec. 23 for a Department of Finance contract "to support participating Indigenous groups in making informed decisions about participating economically in Trans Mountain and participating in the Department's engagement process," according to the document, which was updated this week.

The government also seeks to hire an individual or group to bring Indigenous groups and government officials together in multilateral discussions, according to a notice issued Jan. 11.

At least three groups of Indigenous communities in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan have banded together to buy a stake in Trans Mountain from the government, which bought the Alberta-to-B.C. pipeline for \$3.5 billion in 2018. The pipeline was nationalized to keep alive a project to expand the line after original owner Kinder Morgan Inc. threatened to scrap it amid opposition in B.C.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has said it will sell its ownership once the expansion is completed and de-risked and is open to "Indigenous economic participation" in the line. Two years ago, the finance ministry started an engagement process with First Nations communities on economic participation and "nearly all" of the 60 Indigenous groups that participated indicated that additional financial information was needed as a precondition, according to the notice.

The Western Indigenous Pipeline Group is already working with bankers for its plans, LeBourdais said, adding that he sees little benefit in the government's proposal. "I have people working in the field drawing up cashflows," he said.

"The government is committed to engaging with Indigenous groups about economic participation in Trans Mountain," a Department of Finance official said Friday by email. "The government does not intend to be the long-term owner of Trans Mountain Corp."

The government said it seeks to build consensus on the form of economic participation preferred by the communities and to identify or support the formation of "counterparties" that could represent them in a future negotiation with Canada, according to the tender document.

Construction on the Trans Mountain expansion began last year after more than a decade of court battles and delays caused by opposition from groups including many First Nations in B.C., which see the line as a threat to the environment.

Alberta's oil-sands producers have struggled for years with a shortage of export pipelines and see the pipeline as crucial for getting their crude to markets in Asia. Some in the oil industry argue that indigenous ownership is a way to both lessen opposition to pipeline projects and provide financial help to those communities.

[Mexico] López Obrador lashes out at DEA after Mexico exonerates ex-minister on drug charges (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 5:32 PM, Mary Beth Sheridan, 13480K, Neutral]

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador lashed out at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on Friday, accusing it of fabricating a narcotics case against Mexico's former

defense secretary, in comments that underscored the fragile state of -relations with Washington as -President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office.

"Why did they do this investigation this way? Without substance, without evidence?" the president demanded at his daily news conference, referring to the DEA and its case against retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos.

Cienfuegos was arrested Oct. 15 at Los Angeles International Airport on charges of working with the H-2 cartel to ship thousands of kilos of heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines and marijuana to the United States. Facing the fury of the Mexican government, the U.S. Justice Department dropped the case the following month and sent Cienfuegos back home for investigation. On Thursday, the Mexican attorney general's office announced that it had found no grounds to charge the general, who served as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

Cienfuegos was the most senior Mexican official ever detained in the United States on drug charges. The arrest enraged the military, which has become a pillar of López Obrador's government — responsible for the anti-drug fight and a plethora of other activities, including building airports and railways. The Mexican government responded by rushing a law through Congress in December that limits the DEA's ability to work in Mexico.

López Obrador said Friday that he would make public the hundreds of pages of evidence the Justice Department sent to Mexico — even though it might anger the U.S. government. That evidence mainly consists of intercepted BlackBerry messages in which a mysterious figure known as "the Godfather" communicates with suspected traffickers. U.S. prosecutors had said Cienfuegos was the shadowy individual, a charge he has denied.

Outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau explained the U.S. decision to drop charges against Cienfuegos by telling Mexican journalists this week that U.S. prosecutors "don't necessarily understand all the repercussions of their decisions" when they charge a foreign dignitary, according to media reports.

Prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York have insisted that their case was strong. Mexican officials have argued otherwise.

The exoneration of Cienfuegos unleashed stinging criticism from Mexican analysts, who accused López Obrador of backpedaling on his campaign promises to attack corruption and impunity. The president denied that and sought to blame the episode on the DEA, hinting at conspiracy theories that the agency had a vendetta against Mexico's military.

"We believe that impunity must end, and of course corruption, but also that there can't be reprisals, vengeance, and you can't invent crimes," López Obrador said. He accused the DEA of having "little professionalism" and torpedoing the relationship between his government and the Trump administration.

The Justice Department, asked for reaction, said: "The United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the Government of Mexico fails to do so."

Analysts said López Obrador's comments were a message to Biden after an arrest that stunned senior Mexican officials and prompted concerns that they, too, were being

surveilled by U.S. agents. The president is asking Biden to "improve coordination and communication between the two countries in security," said Gustavo Mohar, a former top intelligence official.

Another former senior intelligence official, Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, said López Obrador's statements amounted to "a very complicated signal" to Biden.

"We are still in a dynamic of distancing and conflict and not of reconstruction" of the relationship, he said. "Hopefully Biden's people have the diplomatic skills to convince the Mexican government that it's important to cooperate."

Mexico is a crucial player in the anti-narcotics effort; it is the top source of heroin and methamphetamines reaching the United States, as well as a major corridor for cocaine and fentanyl. López Obrador, a longtime leftist who took office in 2018, has been openly skeptical of the "war on drugs," but his government had maintained anti-narcotics efforts with Washington and extradited dozens of alleged traffickers.

The Cienfuegos case, however, has put a chill on cooperation.

Carl Pike, a former DEA agent who worked on Mexico issues for years, said criminals would be the beneficiaries.

"The biggest threat the cartels had, the biggest thing working against them, was the relationship the U.S. and Mexico had," he said.

The Mexican attorney general's office said in a statement that it concluded that Cienfuegos "never had any meeting" or contact with the H-2 cartel, and "never gave any order to help the crime group." There were also no signs that he had illegal earnings, the office said.

[Mexico] Mexico Accuses U.S. of Fabricating Drug-Trafficking Charges Against General (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:35 PM, José de Córdoba, Neutral]

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Friday accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating drug charges against Mexico's former defense minister, an allegation analysts said would further strain bilateral relations and security cooperation between both nations.

The Mexican leader defended the decision by his attorney general not to prosecute Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, who had been arrested by the U.S. in October and then sent back to Mexico a month later following a diplomatic uproar from Mexico, which complained it hadn't been informed of the probe and threatened to curb security cooperation with Washington.

Mexico had vowed to investigate the powerful former general upon his return, using evidence that U.S. officials handed over. The Mexican Attorney General's Office said Thursday it had investigated the general and found no connection to organized crime or any suspicious increase in his net worth.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said on Friday the evidence wasn't solid enough to arrest the general, much less convict him in a Mexican court.

Mr. López Obrador went further, saying the DEA concocted the case. He accused the agency of either "consciously or unconsciously" sabotaging the relationship with Mexico when it didn't inform the Mexican government of its investigation.

"You can't invent crimes, no one should act that way, whoever it is," Mr. López Obrador said at his daily press conference, referring to the DEA, which investigated a general who led Mexico's war on cartels as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

On Friday afternoon, Mr. López Obrador, after saying Mexico's prestige was at stake, released the 751-page file of evidence provided by the U.S. It consisted of a cover letter from DEA acting Administrator Timothy Shea, many copies of BlackBerry Messenger communications and a few photographs of guns, people and SUVs.

The DEA declined to comment. A U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman on Friday said "the United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the government of Mexico fails to do so." When they had returned Gen. Cienfuegos to Mexico, U.S. federal prosecutors said important foreign-policy considerations had outweighed the government's interest in pursuing his prosecution. Despite the general's return, Mr. Lopez Obrador's government passed a new law that restricts the activity of foreign agents, in particular the DEA, operating in Mexico. Among other things, the new law prevents Mexican officials from speaking to DEA agents without informing the Mexican government.

Analysts said the accusations by the Mexican leader against the DEA would further damage ties already strained by the general's arrest.

Mr. López Obrador is deliberately sabotaging the bilateral relationship on security and the capacity of the U.S. to operate in Mexico, said Duncan Wood, a Mexico expert at the Wilson Center, a Washington-based think tank.

Mr. Wood said the move to exonerate the general is likely to raise further doubts in Mexico and the U.S. about the capacity and willingness of the Mexican government to tackle high-profile corruption, particularly among the armed forces that have become a key part of Mr. López Obrador's government. More than nine in 10 crimes in Mexico remain unpunished, an impunity that has driven widespread lawlessness and record homicide rates in recent years.

"He would prefer to have organized crime groups running roughshod over Mexico than having the U.S. operating there," Mr. Wood said.

More than any recent Mexican leader, Mr. López Obrador has relied on the army for much of his agenda, from building public-works projects like Mexico City's new airport to pursuing drug gangs to controlling illegal migration and distributing Covid-19 vaccines.

"The exoneration of Salvador Cienfuegos shows that the armed forces are untouchable, they are above the law," said Denise Dresser, a political analyst at ITAM University in Mexico City.

The exoneration is also the latest signal that Mr. López Obrador will take a more confrontational approach with the incoming Biden administration than he did with President Trump, some analysts said.

During his campaign and at the beginning of his term, Mr. Trump called Mexican migrants who cross the border illegally rapists and murderers. He said Mexico would pay for a border wall to stop migration, and threatened to implement tariffs on Mexican goods unless Mexico helped stop Central American migrants from reaching the U.S.

But the Mexican nationalist leader soon came to an accommodation with Mr. Trump. Mr. López Obrador deployed thousands of soldiers to stop migrants. In return Mr. Trump didn't press Mexico on a gamut of bilateral issues.

Both men, populist outsiders, struck up an unlikely political friendship marked by Mr. López Obrador's trip to Washington last summer in the middle of the U.S. presidential campaign.

But since the election, observers say that Mr. López Obrador has been notably cool to the incoming Biden administration. He was one of the last world leaders to congratulate Mr. Biden on his electoral victory, and has offered to grant asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. While the Mexican president withheld comment on the mob that attacked the Capitol in Washington last week, he agreed with Mr. Trump that canceling his Twitter account represented censorship.

A senior Mexican official said that Mr. López Obrador's administration wasn't aiming to pick a fight with the U.S., and wants to discuss an overhaul of bilateral ties with the incoming Biden administration that takes into account Mexico's requests to tackle cross-border money laundering and weapon smuggling.

[Mexico] U.S. Case Against Mexican General Was Baseless, AMLO Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/15/2021 12:27 PM, Maya Averbuch, 6400K, Neutral]

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said that evidence the U.S. government handed over to Mexico against its former defense minister has "no value," widening a rift on law enforcement policy between the two nations.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office opted not to bring charges against General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda on Thursday after saying it found no proof that he'd collaborated with a drug cartel. The U.S. had arrested Cienfuegos in October but dropped the drug case and turned the former minister and the investigation over to Mexico to avoid an international dispute. Mexico had blasted the U.S. for not informing it of the probe.

The U.S. Justice Department responded Friday that it reserves the right to resume prosecution of the general if Mexico fails to do so.

The president's latest criticism of U.S. law enforcement only deepens a rupture in what used to be close drug-enforcement cooperation between the two nations. Mexico recently passed legislation limiting foreign agent activity on its soil, which Lopez Obrador said was a direct result of the U.S. arrest of Cienfuegos. In another bold move on Friday, Mexico's government released the entire 751 pages of evidence the U.S. had sent to Mexico.

"The people who did this investigation did not act professionally," Lopez Obrador said at his press briefing Friday. "We have to know what is going on in our country, who is intervening here, under what conditions, and that our Constitution is not being violated," he said.

Once the top military official in the country, Cienfuegos was accused by the U.S. Department of Justice of collaborating with drug-traffickers and accepting bribes from them.

But U.S. agents misidentified Cienfuegos, daily Reforma reported, citing unnamed government officials. In the documents released on Friday, intercepted messages between two drug traffickers identify their military interlocutor as short and fat - a far cry from Cienfuegos' tall figure with an unmistakable pockmarked face.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office declined to comment when contacted by Bloomberg News.

The capture of Cienfuegos in Los Angeles had stunned Mexican government officials, who said that the secrecy about the investigation headed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration was a violation of the nation's sovereignty.

U.S. prosecutors had dropped their charges at the behest of Mexican officials, and Cienfuegos flew back to Mexico, where the public waited for weeks to see if the allegations would lead to an arrest.

The evidence that U.S. prosecutors had provided was flimsy, said AMLO, as the president is known. The information from BlackBerry mobile phones that appeared in the documents will be released to the public, along with all of the other evidence provided by the U.S. authorities, he said.

[Mexico] Mexico publishes US evidence on ex-defense secretary (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 8:36 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Neutral]

Mexico on Friday published 751 pages of evidence it received from the United States against Mexico's former Defense Secretary, Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, whom U.S. prosecutors had charged with drug trafficking.

The unprecedented move came a day after Mexico announced it was dropping the case against Cienfuegos, whom the U.S. arrested in October and then handed over to Mexico a month later after dropping the charges under pressure from the Mexican government.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador dismissed the evidence against Cienfuegos Friday as circumstantial and accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating the accusations and displaying a lack of professionalism in their investigation.

It wasn't immediately clear if the newly released documents would affect other prosecutions in the U.S. or compromise the identity of witnesses.

The case file contains transcripts of Blackberry messenger exchanges purportedly between cartel figures and Cienfuegos, who U.S. prosecutors have said was identified alternately as "The Godfather," "Zepeda" and "Sepeda." All of the pages are marked: "Shared per court order, not for further distribution."

The U.S. Justice Department said Friday it reserved the right to resume the prosecution of Cienfuegos, who had been accused of accepting bribes in exchange for ensuring the military did not take action against the H-2 cartel while acting against its rivals. He was also accused of introducing cartel leaders to other corrupt Mexican officials.

The case file starts with text messages exchanged in December 2015 between Daniel Silva Garate, alias "el H-9," and Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez, "H-2," who were leading drug gang figures in Mexico's Pacific coast state of Nayarit. Both were killed two years later in shootouts with the Mexican Marines.

In the exchange, Silva Garate, a lieutenant to the Patrón Sanchez, describes attending a meeting with "The Godfather."

Silva Garate describes being picked up by men with short, military-style haircuts wearing berets. He says they were traveling in three SUVs with darkened windshields, "going like crazy," escorted by motorcycles.

At one point, Patrón Sanchez tells his underling, "He (The Godfather) is second to the president ... talk calmly to him." Silva Garate later describes having a meal with a pale-skinned man — Cienfuegos has pale, pock-marked skin — and being taken to a house in the luxury Mexico City neighborhood of Las Lomas.

At one point, Silva-Garate tells his boss that the men — whose heads are also close-cut — are taking him to Defense Department headquarters in Mexico City.

Patron Sanchez tells Silva Garate, "Give him a hug and tell him it is an honor to meet him, and tell him that if we loved him before, now we would die for him, we will never hurt him."

Silva-Garate says the man was wearing a uniform. "Hey, this is the guy who appears on television," he writes in amazement, though he spells the name as Salvador Sinfuego Sepeda.

"He wants you to work so there is a crapload of money," Silva Garate texts his boss. "We have to do something from Colombia."

Silva Garate at one point says "The Godfather" is concerned about security and wants them to delete references to him, and the two agree to throw away their phones after the meeting is over.

"There's no way he won't be recognized," Patrón Sanchez jokes at another point.

Silva Garate tells his boss that the "The Godfather" told him: "Now we are going to do big things with you ... that what you have done is small-time."

After Patrón Sanchez reports that a boat leaving Colombia has apparently been caught while transporting drugs, probably 420 kilograms of cocaine, Silva Garate says the Godfather has told him "he has friends in Colombia that can help you,"

Silva Garate asks his boss what he wants from the Godfather, and Patrón Sanchez says he wants unmolested routes to ship drugs from Colombia. Silva Garate texts back, "He says that as long as he is here, you will be free ... that they will never carry out strong operations," or raids.

Silva Garate tells his boss the "The Godfather" told him that, "You can sleep peacefully, no

operation will touch you."

Sanchez Patron texts back, "We are very grateful to him, tell him I don't know how to pay him for this help."

Sanchez Patron tells his subordinate to ask The Godfather "to help us with Mazatlan," the Pacific coast resort city then dominated by the Sinaloa cartel. "Tell him it's our dream ... to be back on our turf."

Sanchez Patrón writes "He has already done a lot for me, I owe him everything," and Silva Garate responds, "Look at how long it has been since there was a raid in your state (Nayarit)."

[Mexico] Mexico president backs dropping of drug case against ex-defense minister (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 7:51 PM, Laura Gottesdiener, Raul Cortes, Drazen Jorgic, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Negative]

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Friday backed the decision by his country's attorney general not to charge ex-Defense Minister General Salvador Cienfuegos with drug crimes, in a case that has roiled U.S.-Mexico diplomatic relations.

Cienfuegos, who was minister from 2012 to 2018 during the government of former President Enrique Pena Nieto, was arrested in October at Los Angeles airport on charges he worked with a powerful drug cartel. U.S. prosecutors later dropped the case and returned him to Mexico to be prosecuted, citing diplomatic sensitivities.

Mexico's government vowed to thoroughly investigate Cienfuegos' case but on Thursday, less than two months after his return from the United States, Mexico's attorney general office concluded that Cienfuegos had no contact with members of the criminal organization.

It also said it had found no evidence that Cienfuegos' wealth had increased in any untoward manner.

"It's a decision the attorney general's office makes, but one that the government I represent supports," said Lopez Obrador in his regular morning news conference.

On Lopez Obrador's instructions, Mexico's foreign ministry on Friday published a 751-page document showing the U.S. evidence against Cienfuegos, including detailed logs of alleged BlackBerry communications.

The fallout from the case has soured relations with Washington ahead of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's swearing in next week. Lopez Obrador on Friday said the U.S. investigation had not been conducted with "professionalism."

A U.S. Department of Justice spokeswoman said the United States reserved the right to restart the prosecution of Cienfuegos if Mexico did not do so.

Mexico said the failure to alert officials before the arrest marked "a before and after" in bilateral ties. In December it created new rules governing how foreign agents, including the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, operate in the country.

A watered-down, final version of those rules was published hours before the decision to drop the Mexican case against the former general, in a sign that security cooperation between the neighboring countries will continue.

The manner in which the Cienfuegos case was handled by Mexican authorities sent a worrying signal about the rule of law and impunity within the armed forces, with whom Lopez Obrador has developed close ties, analysts said.

"This is not only giving them impunity but also allowing extended and deeper impunity," said Falko Ernst, a senior International Crisis Group analyst for Mexico.

"We are getting further away from the autonomous accountability and transparency mechanism that would be needed down the line to break high level corruption and collusion... between the state and crime groups," he added.

Cienfuegos' arrest in the United States followed a multi-year investigation that used wire taps to track a military figure who traffickers called 'El Padrino,' or 'The Godfather.'

The U.S. investigators said they concluded 'El Padrino' was Cienfuegos and that he had helped drug traffickers move tonnes of narcotics.

The U.S. investigation published by the Mexican government appeared to be almost entirely based on messages picked up from a Blackberry device. The alleged messages from Cienfuegos are littered with typographical errors and spelling mistakes.

One source with knowledge of the situation said the case failed to establish ownership of the Blackberry.

The DEA and DOJ declined to comment on specific details of the case. The Eastern District of New York did not respond to a request for comment.

Lopez Obrador said Mexico's attorney general's office had "acted because it considered that the evidence presented by the United States government...has no evidentiary value."

The president added that if evidence surfaces against others mentioned in the U.S. investigation of Cienfuegos, Mexico could pursue cases against them.

[Mexico] Mexico's president rips big tech flexing like 'all-powerful' gatekeepers of speech (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 1:00 PM, Douglas Ernst, 459K, Neutral]

President Trump has a strong ally in Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador when it comes to reining in the power and influence of Silicon Valley.

Mr. López Obrador blasted social media giants this week in the wake of Mr. Trump's bans on various platforms.

"I can tell you that at the first G20 meeting we have, I am going to make a proposal on this issue," he said Thursday.

At issue are the decisions made by Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and his industry peers to silence Mr. Trump after chaos at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

"I do not celebrate or feel pride in our having to ban @realDonaldTrump from Twitter, or how we got here," Mr. Dorsey wrote Wednesday. "After a clear warning we'd take this action, we made a decision with the best information we had based on threats to physical safety both on and off Twitter. Was this correct? I believe this was the right decision for Twitter."

Still, Mr. Dorsey acknowledged that banning high-profile figures like Mr. Trump "sets a precedent I feel is dangerous: the power an individual or corporation has over a part of the global public conversation."

Mr. López Obrador, however, sees the move as an infringement on the spirit of free speech.

"Yes, social media should not be used to incite violence and all that, but this cannot be used as a pretext to suspend freedom of expression," he said. "How can a company act as if it was all-powerful, omnipotent, as a sort of Spanish Inquisition on what is expressed?"

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] UN peacekeeper killed in Central African Republic (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [1/15/2021 4:53 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

A Burundian peacekeeper was killed Friday during an ambush by rebels in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, the fifth soldier killed since a rebel offensive began.

The soldier died in an ambush by a coalition of rebels near Grimari, roughly 300 kilometres northeast of the capital Bangui, the UN said, during a security mission to the town with Burundian and Bangladeshi peacekeepers.

MINUSCA -- the UN peacekeeping force in the region -- also said that two Bangladeshi soldiers were lightly wounded.

In a statement from New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the attack and reiterated his "deep concern over the continued destabilisation efforts by armed groups throughout the country".

Guterres urged all parties to immediately stop the violence and resolve their differences through peaceful means.

The Security Council strongly condemned the attack on the troops in a separate statement.

In a declaration unanimously adopted by the council, it also condemned "all attacks, provocations and incitement to violence against MINUSCA by armed groups and other authors".

It follows a month-long rebellion after six of the most powerful armed groups, who have

occupied roughly two-thirds of the country for eight years, united.

The coalition announced an offensive ahead of the December 27 presidential and legislative vote, aimed at preventing Faustin Archange Touadera's re-election.

Landlocked CAR is one of the world's poorest nations and has seen a string of coups and wars since it gained independence from France in 1960.

On Wednesday, the rebel forces mounted their closest attack yet to Bangui before being pushed back with the loss of a peacekeeper, the UN said.

On January 4, President Touadera was declared the victor, although the political opposition cried foul.

[Congo] Dozens killed, some decapitated, in suspected rebel attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:56 PM, Gabrielle Nina Mitch and Eoin McSweeney, 7975K, Negative] Forty-six people from the ethnic Pygmy group were killed -- some of them decapitated -- on Wednesday in a suspected militant attack in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo, according to an NGO official based in the central African country.

An armed group shot civilians and decapitated others with machetes in Ambedi, a village in Irumu territory in Ituri province, said Christophe Munyanderu, regional coordinator for the NGO Convention pour le respect de droit de l'homme, or Convention for the Respect of Human Rights.

A spokesman for the Armed Forces of the DRC in Ituri attributed the attack to the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group that operates in the region. Two of the assailants were arrested and are currently under interrogation, the spokesman said.

Most of the victims were women and children, said Rachel Taruwayo, the regional coordinator for the provincial government.

Munyanderu said that a Pygmy who was hunting during the attack determined the death toll. When he returned to the village, Munyanderu said, he found a female survivor with a gunshot wound and a two-year-old child whose hand had been chopped off.

On Thursday, they reached a police post about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the scene of the attack and were taken to a hospital. The woman and child are now out of danger, said

The ADF has intensified its attacks against civilians in the eastern provinces of the DRC in recent years, the United Nations said in July. These attacks have left more than 1,000 dead between January 2019 and June 2020 and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to the UN.

The group has battled governments in East Africa since the 1990s and has ties to several international jihadi groups.

[Nigeria] Nigeria's Big Oil-Refining Revamp Gets Off to a Slow Start (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Paul Burkhardt and Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, 6400K, Neutral] A year after shutting down all of its dilapidated refineries to figure out how to fix them, Nigeria still can't say how much it will cost to do the work or where the money will come from.

Nigerian National Petroleum Corp. said it has finished the appraisal of its largest facility, but hasn't completed the process at two others. Refining experts said the extended halt means the plants are at risk of rotting away and unlikely to restart on time.

"Things haven't been looking good lately," with Nigeria's plants probably "completely out of action for some 18 months," said Elitsa Georgieva, executive director at Citac, a consultant that specializes in African refining.

The dysfunction of its domestic refineries has long put Africa's biggest oil producer in an ironic situation. It exports large volumes of crude to plants overseas, then pays a premium to import the fuels its customers produce.

Pledges to fix the facilities have been made and broken again and again over the years. For at least a decade, NNPC's 445,000 barrels a day of refining capacity barely processed 20% of that amount.

The latest effort to fix the refineries was supposed to be different to the failed attempts that came before. The company had totally shut all three plants down by January 2020 to do a comprehensive appraisal, and set the ambitious target of having them all back up and running at 90% of capacity by 2023.

"The refineries have been deliberately shut down to allow for a thorough diagnosis," said Kennie Obateru, an Abuja-based NNPC spokesman. "They can be fixed based on what the diagnosis reveals."

The appraisal of the 210,000-barrel-a day Port Harcourt refinery has been completed and NNPC has called for bids for the necessary repairs, Obateru said. The company hasn't determined how much the work will cost.

"It is when we close the bids, everything is analyzed and presented that we will know how much we need," he said.

The diagnosis is underway at the 125,000-barrel-a-day Warri facility and should be complete before the end of the year, he said. After that, the study of the 110,000-barrel-a-day Kaduna plant will commence.

One year into the process, refining analysts are skeptical that all this work can be done by 2023.

"I don't think anyone has a good understanding technically of what's wrong with those refineries," said Alan Gelder, vice president of refining, chemicals and oil markets at Wood Mackenzie Ltd. "They're probably corroding, which makes it a very difficult proposition."

NNPC reaffirmed its deadline and said there's no reason the refineries, which are at least 40 years old, can't be restored to full operation.

"There are refineries that are over a hundred years old still running, so age is not necessarily an impediment," Obateru said.

There are parallel efforts backed by private companies to add to Nigeria's capacity. Aliko Dangote, Africa's richest person, is building a state-of-the-art 650,000 barrel-a-day refinery, which Citac estimates will start production in 2023.

Bringing NNPC's Port Harcourt refinery to the same clean-fuel standards as Dangote's modern plant would cost about \$1.3 billion for the equipment, on top of whatever other repairs are required to get the facility running, Georgieva said.

NNPC is talking to oil-trading firms about \$1 billion of prepayment deals that could finance the repairs at Port Harcourt, Reuters reported last week. Obateru declined to comment on the report, but said "I don't envisage that we will have a problem getting people to invest."

[South Africa] Exhausted Nurses Toil on South African Wards Full of Virus Cases (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Janice Kew and Loni Prinsloo, 6400K, Neutral]

A few weeks ago, Ntombizandile Ntsodo received an alert from her Cape Town nursing agency that left her agitated: A local hospital was short of 46 caregivers for the upcoming 24-hour period, a result of the resurgent Covid-19 epidemic sweeping South Africa.

"I remember thinking where are the nurses? But you know it's because some of them have caught the virus and are on quarantine," the 26-year-old said by phone from Khayelitsha, a township on the outskirts of the city where she lives with her mother, sister and young niece.

"It puts a lot of pressure on those of us on the floor and we are fatigued, burnt-out, immune-compromised and many have lost family members to the very disease we are fighting," she said.

A shortage of key workers is just one reason South African hospitals are facing unprecedented pressure from the ongoing resurgence of coronavirus cases, driven by a new variant that appears more infectious than earlier strains. Admissions have far outstripped last year's peak and oxygen and critical-care beds are in short supply.

There were almost 16,900 people suffering from Covid-19 in the country's hospitals as of Jan. 14, according to data compiled by independent analyst Sugaan Naidoo, who has been tracking the course of the virus in South Africa since late April. That was about 25% higher than a week ago and compares to approximately 11,500 in mid-July, when the initial wave was at its zenith.

"I'm very worried there will be insufficient beds and in particular insufficient oxygen supplies to treat all the patients we'll see at the peak," said Jeremy Nel, head of infectious diseases at Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg. "Staff shortages are a major problem."

While South African President Cyril Ramaphosa moved quickly to shut down society when cases first started rising in March, predictions that the economy contracted the most in almost 90 years have made it tough for him to expand restrictions. The current coronavirus

surge also began just as millions of people traveled around the country -- and across land borders -- for the festive season.

The most recent measures to contain the spread include a 9 p.m. curfew and a renewed ban on alcohol sales, in part to ease the pressure on hospital trauma wards from car accidents and drunken violence. On Monday night, Ramaphosa reassured the nation that vaccines would be a "game changer" with 20 million doses on the way, though the government has only confirmed deals for 1.5 million.

That compares starkly with a rollout already underway in the U.K., which is also experiencing severe pressure on hospitals after an outbreak driven by a new coronavirus variant.

On many South African hospital wards, the shortfall of health workers means they are being spread too thinly, according to Ntsodo, who has been working as a nurse in both private and public hospitals around Cape Town since April.

"People are becoming ill quickly and we are going all out and are tired," she said. "The second wave has just been so rapid with patients deteriorating drastically in days."

"I am finding myself saying, this person is now a candidate to go over to intensified, critical care, but it's not available because there is no bed or no ventilator or high-flow oxygen machines have run out," Ntsodo said. "You have to get used to three lives lost on a 12-hour shift."

The supply of personal protective equipment for workers is more stable now than in the middle of last year, but remains inadequate in some areas and hospitals, according to Nel. "It was recently shown that some of the masks used to protect health workers offered inadequate protection when they were subjected to testing," he said.

Meanwhile, medical-grade oxygen use is surging, leaving suppliers struggling to keep pace with demand. "The oxygen delivery, supply and piping systems are far from reassuring in many hospitals and clinics currently," Nel said.

As with South Africa's initial experience with the virus, each major province is suffering waves of cases at different times. Eastern Cape was first to hit alarming rates late last year, followed by neighboring Western Cape, where Cape Town is situated. Last is Gauteng, encompassing the economic hub of Johannesburg, which is now seeing the largest increase of new hospitalizations and is expected to be some weeks off its peak.

"It's important to acknowledge what an amazing job the South African health force is doing," said Marc Mendelson, head of infectious diseases & HIV medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. "There is a lot of burnout, and mental health issues - health-care workers are under huge strain."

Network TV News Coverage

Troops in Afghanistan, Iraq Reach Pentagon's Drawdown Goal (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

The number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, about 2,500 in each country, reached the Pentagon's drawdown goal.

Nation's Capitol Braces for Violence Ahead of Inauguration Day (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/15/2021 7:34 PM, Staff]

Tonight, the nation's capital braced for violence. Checkpoints and barricades throughout the city and armed National Guard members patrolling Capitol Hill. With just four days before Joe Biden is sworn in, there are unprecedented shutdowns. As of this morning, the Secretary of the Interior officially closed the areas in the National Mall. An inaugural rehearsal that had been planned by the Biden team for Sunday has been postponed according to sources. Among the FBI's top concerns for Inauguration Day is the "substantial threat of improvised explosive devices" and the ongoing threat to members of Congress and political leaders. The Washington Post reported Vice President Pence was rushed from the Senate Chamber one minute before a group reached the second floor of the Capitol last week. The group was led away by Officer Eugene Goodman who acted as a decoy. Pence, his wife, and daughter were just 100 feet away. One of the first people to reach Pence's desk was Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon shaman. Prosecutors argue he should remain in custody after he left a note on Pence's desk saying, "It's only a matter of time. Justice is coming." 25,000 National Guard members are expected to be in the Capitol ahead of the inauguration.

CDC Warns of Highly Contagious Variant as Coronavirus Cases Surge, Vaccine Rollout Faces Issues (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/15/2021 8:41 PM, Staff]

The CDC is warning that a new highly contagious variant of coronavirus could lead to a sharp increase in cases. This comes as the US struggles to ramp up vaccine distribution. Here in the US, more than 12 million doses have been given, but many Americans now have to wait longer for theirs. Some of the problem is that some states only received a fraction of the doses they were promised. 20 million doses were promised by the end of December. Today, less than 13 million have actually been given. In a move meant to ease the backlog, Secretary of Health and Human Services announced on Tuesday that they will release the entire supply rather than holding second doses. Governors of Oregon and Colorado say that's not true. Pfizer in a statement to CBS News said that Operation Warp Speed has asked them to start shipping second doses only recently. Today, President-Elect Joe Biden detailed his plan to speed up vaccinations. He has been focused on his goal to vaccinate 100 million people in the first 100 days of his presidency. He plans to use FEMA to mobilize thousands of staff members to create more vaccination sites. He will also use the Defense Authorization Act to increase supplies. He will also train 100,000 new workers to administer shots.

[Russia] Russia Plans to Withdraw From Open Skies Treaty (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Staff]

Russia says it plans to withdraw from an international treaty known as Open Skies. It's an agreement that allows dozens of countries to launch surveillance flights over other countries' military facilities. The idea is to encourage transparency and help monitor arms control deals, but President Trump pulled the US out of Open Skies last year blaming Russian violations. Russia says the American departure seriously compromised the treaty.

[United Kingdom] Britain Makes Changes for Incoming Travelers Amid COVID Surge (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

Britain is making changes for travelers as cases of COVID-19 surge. Three days after the US made a similar move, Britain is tightening coronavirus border controls. Prime Minister Boris Johnson says hospitals are struggling amid surging case numbers. "We're now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queueing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," said Johnson. From Monday, anyone arriving in the UK will need a negative COVID test. Johnson said he is concerned about potential new variants of the virus, which may be more infectious. Britain is already under a sweeping national lockdown.

[North Korea] North Korean Leader Unveils New Ballistic Missile Ahead of Washington Transition (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:19 PM, Staff]

Days before the United States inaugurates a new president, there is a new show of force from North Korea. A message from Pyongyang to a Washington in transition. In a military parade at the end of a special Congress of the ruling party, North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un revealed a huge new ballistic missile capable of being launched from submarines. That could bring North Korea's substantial nuclear threat close to US shores as well as land-based missiles easily rolled out that could hit US bases in the region. As Kim put it in a speech this week, "We must do everything we can to increase nuclear war deterrence and military capability." Some analysts say he held out a bit of an olive branch to the incoming administration by praising the 2018 Singapore summit he held with President Trump, saying it is sure the establishment of new North Korea-US relations.

Headlines**The Washington Post**

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

With Mall, bridges and streets closed in D.C., the nation prepares for a celebration of democracy mostly devoid of its citizens

Vaccine reserve was exhausted when Trump administration vowed to release it, dashing hopes of expanded access

How the rioters who stormed the Capitol came dangerously close to Pence

In Trump's final days, a spree of environmental rollbacks

State leaders say volatile mix of far-right, white supremacist groups could challenge law enforcement

The New York Times

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

New Warnings of Violence as Security Tightens for Inauguration

Biden Pledges Federal Vaccine Campaign to Beat a Surging Coronavirus

C.D.C. Warns the New Virus Variant Could Fuel Huge Spikes in Covid Cases

A Second Economic Crisis for Biden, but a Different First Response

The Wall Street Journal

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Outlines Plan for Bigger Federal Role in Covid-19 Vaccinations

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says
Covid-19 Vaccine Leaders Waited Months to Approve Distribution Plans
Joe Biden Vows to Unify America. That Job Has Become Dramatically Harder.

ABC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Beyond domestic terrorists, officials eye foreign influence, drones as threats to Biden inauguration
Governors angrily accuse Trump administration of misleading states on vaccine supply
Federal watchdogs open probe of response to Capitol riot

CBS News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

More arrests announced as inauguration security takes shape
Authorities say rioters aimed to "assassinate" elected officials
Coronavirus has now killed more than 2 million people worldwide: "A heart-wrenching milestone"

CNN

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Terrifying scope of Capitol attack becoming clearer as Washington locks down for Biden's inauguration
New, contagious coronavirus variant could worsen pandemic, CDC warns
States adding Covid-19 vaccination sites, but governors complain the feds need to give them more doses

Fox News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden inauguration plans prompt closing of National Mall
State Department says Wuhan lab researchers may have had COVID in the fall of 2019
Migrant caravan in Honduras on the move in uncertain times

NBC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden to deploy FEMA, National Guard as part of national vaccination plan
Federal official walks back allegation rioters intended to 'capture and assassinate'
CDC says U.K. coronavirus variant could become predominant strain in U.S. by March

{End of Report}



STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

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Secretary of State

[China] U.S. Steps Up Claims Covid-19 May Have Escaped From Chinese Lab (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 8:50 PM, Bill Faries, 6400K, Negative]

The State Department on Friday said it had new information suggesting the Covid-19 pandemic could have emerged from a Chinese laboratory and not through contact with infected animals, the latest salvo in the Trump administration's efforts to pressure Beijing over the virus's origins.

Specifically, the U.S. said it had obtained new evidence that researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick in the fall of 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak in the surrounding city, with symptoms it said were consistent with either Covid-19 or common seasonal illnesses.

The department said China's lack of transparency about the pandemic's origin more than a year ago, as well as efforts to mask early shortcomings in the country's response to the outbreak, make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. But the brief, unsigned statement issued by the U.S. -- less than a week before the end of the Trump administration -- provided no data to back up its claims.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," according to the State Department. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection."

A State Department spokesperson declined to elaborate when asked for further comment.

China has repeatedly rejected charges that the virus might have emerged from a laboratory. The U.S. didn't say how it obtained the new information about illnesses at the lab.

The comments, in a State Department fact sheet, come as China faces criticism for initially preventing some members of a World Health Organization mission from entering China as part of an effort to trace the origin of Covid-19, saying they hadn't passed health screenings. While the experts were eventually granted clearance, China had already been criticized by the WHO for delaying the mission's plans to visit the country.

China has been under scrutiny since the outbreak exploded in and around Wuhan, but the

Trump administration also sought to pin more blame on authorities in Beijing after the pandemic took off in the U.S. and deaths soared. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo frequently refer to the illness as the "China virus", "China plague" and "Wuhan virus."

For its part, China is mounting a campaign to cast doubt the virus originated within its borders. State media have played up research suggesting that there were cases in Italy and the U.S. that pre-date those in Wuhan, and hinted that the pathogen could have entered the country via frozen food or packaging.

On Friday it was announced that 2 million people had died worldwide from the outbreak, with almost 400,000 deaths in the U.S.

[China] Pompeo: US 'has reason to believe' Wuhan lab staff caught COVID-19 months before pandemic (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 7:35 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

U.S. officials have "reason to believe" that Chinese researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology caught the novel coronavirus months before it developed into a pandemic, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

"The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses," Pompeo said in Friday evening announcement. "This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was 'zero infection' among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses."

World Health Organization investigators arrived in China on Thursday, but they remain in quarantine. Pompeo's statement amplifies U.S. suspicions that the contagion leaked out of a lab, a finding that would tend to reinforce the perception that the Chinese Communist government is to blame for the public health calamity.

"Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military," Pompeo added. "The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017."

In May, Pompeo declared that U.S. officials possessed "enormous evidence" that the pandemic originated in a Chinese laboratory, although he acknowledged this week that "we don't know for sure" that it did. Chinese officials suggested in the early months of the pandemic that the virus emerged from a "wet market" where wild animal meat was sold, but Beijing's envoys have also launched disinformation operations to blame the U.S. military or suggest that it began in another country.

The allocation of blame for the pandemic has driven major international controversies over the last year — a war of words between Chinese and American diplomats paralleled by Beijing's use of economic restrictions to punish Australia's call for an investigation. The pandemic triggered an ideological showdown between Washington and Beijing, as Pompeo pointed to Chinese Communist censorship of early warnings to undercut the regime's influence, while Chinese officials have cited their handling of the pandemic to tout their

system of governance.

"Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese side has maintained close communication and cooperation with WHO on global origin-tracing in an open, transparent and responsible manner," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said this week. "China will continue close cooperation with WHO and international experts and contribute our share to the global origin-tracing work."

Pompeo has rebuked China over the last year for failing to provide the early "virus samples" that researchers prize. Chinese officials acknowledged "destroying the samples" in May, a move justified as a way "to temporarily manage the pathogen." State Department officials made a point to emphasize that they are suggesting that the pandemic may have resulted from "an accident at a laboratory," as opposed to any intentional malign behavior.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," a State Department fact sheet released alongside Pompeo's statement observed. "Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection. Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure."

Chinese researchers have been studying a bat coronavirus that is "96.2% similar" to the virus that caused COVID-19, the State Department noted. "Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible 'gain of function' experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality," Pompeo said.

World Health Organization investigators have maintained a collegial public posture toward China, in their attempt to gain access to the country and begin the long-awaited probe. "I don't think we should be pointing fingers here," professor Marion Koopmans, a member of the team sent by the WHO, told Chinese state-run media recently.

President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the World Health Organization in July, citing outrage over the WHO's amplification of false information provided by Beijing. Pompeo, who has predicted a "completely whitewashed investigation," put pressure on the just-arrived investigators.

"The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report," he said. "Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world."

Department of State News

Trump gives award to Morocco's king in private ceremony (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump has awarded a top U.S. honor to King Mohammed VI of Morocco,

citing his decision to begin normalization of relations with Israel.

The Legion of Merit is a rarely awarded decoration that can only be bestowed by the president, and typically on heads of state or government of other countries.

The honor comes after the United States in December recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory, including disputed area between southern Morocco and Mauritania. Morocco, in turn, agreed to resume partial diplomatic ties with Israel in the near future, establish direct flights between the nations, and promote economic and technological cooperation.

Trump has sought to make bolstering regional support for Israel as a countermeasure to Iranian aggression a signature foreign policy legacy of his administration.

King Mohammed was not in Washington to accept the award. Morocco's ambassador to the U.S., Princess Lalla Joumala, accepted it on his behalf in a private ceremony, according to a White House statement.

Trump in his final days in office has spent time honoring friends and allies with the presidential awards.

Earlier this week, Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, one of his fiercest GOP allies, in a private ceremony at the White House. The White House also announced this week that Trump would be awarding New England coach Bill Belichick, a six-time Super Bowl winner, the Medal of Freedom. But Belichick declined to accept the award.

US calls Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners' (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:32 AM, Jon Gambrell, 13480K, Neutral]

The United States called Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates "major security partners" early Saturday, a previously unheard of designation for the two countries home to major American military operations.

A White House statement tied the designation to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates normalizing ties to Israel, saying it "reflects their extraordinary courage, determination and leadership." It also noted the two countries long have taken part in U.S. military exercises.

It's unclear what the designation means for Bahrain, an island kingdom off Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, and the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, while the UAE's Jebel Ali port is the busiest port of call for American warships outside of the U.S. Bahrain hosts some 5,000 American troops, while the UAE hosts 3,500, many at Al-Dhafra Air Base.

Already, the U.S. uses the designation of "major non-NATO ally" to describe its relationship with Kuwait, which hosts the forward command of U.S. Army Central. That designation grants a country special financial and military considerations for nations not part of NATO. Bahrain also is a non-NATO ally.

The U.S. military's Central Command and the Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The 5th Fleet referred queries to the State Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The White House designation comes in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration. Trump forged close ties to Gulf Arab countries during his time in office in part over his hard-line stance on Iran. That's sparked a series of escalating incidents between the countries after Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also comes after Bahrain and the UAE joined Egypt and Saudi Arabia in beginning to resolve a yearslong boycott of Qatar, another Gulf Arab nation home to Al-Udeid Air Base that hosts Central Command's forward operating base. That boycott began in the early days of Trump's time in office after he visited Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip.

UN hopes to take first step to elect next chief by Jan. 31 (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 4:50 PM, Edith M. Lederer, 13480K, Neutral]

The U.N. General Assembly and Security Council are expected to take the first step toward electing the next head of the global organization this month.

Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said Friday that he and Tunisia's U.N. Ambassador Tarek Ladeb, the current council president, hope to send a letter before Jan. 31 asking the U.N.'s 193 member nations to submit any candidates to challenge Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The former Portuguese prime minister and U.N. refugee chief, whose five-year term at the helm of the United Nations ends on Dec. 31, said in letters to Bozkir and Ladeb on Monday that he will seek a second term.

The General Assembly elects the secretary-general on the recommendation of the 15-member Security Council where the five permanent members have veto power, so their support is crucial. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson immediately announced his support for Guterres, but there has been no word yet from The United States, Russia, China and France.

A General Assembly resolution adopted in September 2015 asks the presidents of the assembly and Security Council to "start the process of soliciting candidates for the position of secretary-general through a joint letter addressed to all member states."

Bozkir said he met Tuesday with Ladeb and shared a draft letter to member states which the Tunisian ambassador then circulated to council members. "We are hoping that we will be able to sign this letter together before the end of the month," he said.

Bozkir told a news conference he will then ensure that any candidate appear before the General Assembly "to share their vision and explain what they're going to do during the five-term in office and there will be a question and answer part."

Legally, he said, there is no deadline for countries to submit candidates, but he expects "the first wave" — with one or more candidates — to appear before the General Assembly in April or the beginning of May.

Guterres was elected by the 193-member assembly to succeed Ban Ki-moon after a hotly contested and transparent race in October 2016 that initially included 13 candidates -- seven women and six men. He took office on Jan. 1, 2017.

Wikileaks asks reporters for help in desperate bid to score Julian Assange last-minute pardon (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:39 PM, Oliver Darcy, 7975K, Neutral]

In a last-minute bid to persuade President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange, Wikileaks has reached out to several high-profile reporters asking for help in its efforts to rescue its founder from potential life in prison.

The messages sent to reporters over Twitter direct message said that Assange's partner, Stella Moris, had directed Wikileaks to reach out for possible assistance.

"She was hoping that you may have ideas or contacts that could help convince Trump to pardon Assange," said one version of the message sent to multiple reporters.

Another version of the message characterized Assange as someone who faces prison "for journalistic activities."

"He is a free speech hero," the message added.

The messages were sent to reporters, including this one, at some of the nation's top news organizations.

Wikileaks did not respond to a request for comment, but Moris confirmed to CNN that she did ask the organization to "reach out to some of its most influential followers."

Moris said that some journalists, who she did not name, have responded by asking for interviews with Assange. She argued that Assange's case has "major Constitutional implications" and it could essentially "turn investigative reporting into a criminal enterprise."

Moris added that she hopes to make contact with someone in the White House about Assange's case, but so far has not been in contact with anyone.

"I am not in touch with anyone in the White House, hence the effort to ask people who might have contacts to speak to them themselves, and make the principled case for a pardon," Moris said.

Assange was arrested in April 2019 when British authorities entered the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he had been holed up for seven years, and took him into custody on a US extradition warrant.

The Wikileaks founder has been charged under the Espionage Act for his role in publishing classified military and diplomatic cables. He faces up to 175 years in prison.

A British judge last week denied Assange bail, saying that "there are substantial grounds for believing that if Mr. Assange is released today he would fail to surrender to court and face the appeal proceedings."

The judge in the case, however, has denied a request to extradite Assange to the US.

Trump has issued a number of controversial pardons as his days in office dwindle. In December, he pardoned longtime ally Roger Stone and former campaign manager Paul Manafort. He also pardoned four Blackwater guards convicted in an Iraq massacre.

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:51 PM, Arshad Mohammed, Humeyra Pamuk, Daphne Psaledakis, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States on Friday imposed sanctions on companies in Iran, China and the United Arab Emirates for doing business with the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines and on three Iranian entities over conventional arms proliferation.

They are the latest in a series of measures aimed at stepping up pressure on Tehran in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration, which ends on Wednesday.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington had sanctioned seven companies, including Chinese-based Jiangyin Mascot Special Steel Co and UAE-based Accenture Building Materials, and two people for shipping steel to or from Iran.

He said Iran's Marine Industries Organization, Aerospace Industries Organization and the Iran Aviation Industries Organization had also been blacklisted over conventional arms proliferation.

In a statement later on Friday, Pompeo said he was also increasing the scope of metals-related sanctions against Iran administered by the State Department.

Those who knowingly transfer 15 materials which the State Department says are used in connection with Iran's nuclear, military or ballistic missile programs, including certain types of aluminum and steel, would be subject to sanctions, he said.

During his four years in office, Trump has tried to force Tehran back into talks over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its activities in the Middle East. Saying the agreement did not go far enough, Trump in 2018 quit an Iran nuclear deal, which Tehran struck with world powers in 2015 to rein in its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, who will succeed Trump on Wednesday, has said he will return to the 2015 nuclear pact if Iran resumes strict compliance with it.

[Iran] US sanctions 7 entities, 2 persons over alleged ties to Iran shipping companies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 1:35 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The United States has designated seven entities and two individuals for allegedly flouting US sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Friday.

"In June 2020, the State Department sanctioned the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines

(IRISL) pursuant to Executive Order 13382 (WMD Proliferators and Their Supporters)," Pompeo said.

"We have warned the industry that those who do business with IRISL, its subsidiaries, and other Iranian shipping entities, risk sanctions. Today, we are sanctioning seven entities and two individuals for such conduct," he added.

[Iran] Will Biden lift sanctions on Iran? Crisis Group says it should (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 5:15 PM, Guy Taylor, 459K, Negative]

Iran has engaged in "worrying violations" of the 2015 nuclear deal, including uranium enrichment at "a level perilously close to weapons-grade," according to a prominent international think tank, which argues the incoming Biden administration should respond not by punishing Tehran, but by moving quickly to revive the accord.

The International Crisis Group, headed by a former Obama administration official who helped negotiate the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), said in a report Friday that the incoming administration "should swiftly re-enter the deal, if Iran reverses its JCPOA breaches."

The report, which is just as likely to be read closely by President-elect Joseph R. Biden's team as it is to be criticized by U.S. foreign policy hawks, was circulated against a backdrop of fresh provocations by Tehran.

Iranian military forces held exercises Friday involving ballistic missiles that U.S. officials have accused Tehran building up in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that undergirded the 2015 nuclear deal. The drills, reported by Iranian state media, followed recent threats by Tehran to expel United Nations nuclear inspectors from the country if the incoming Biden administration doesn't quickly remove sanctions that have been imposed on Tehran during the Trump era.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pleaded with the international community last week to unify against that threat amid uncertainty over the future U.S. policy under Mr. Biden. On Friday, with only a few days left before Mr. Biden replaces Mr. Trump in the White House, Mr. Pompeo announced fresh U.S. sanctions targeting several Iranian shipping companies and entities accused of facilitating Tehran's weapons procurement activities.

The announcement marked the latest in the so-called "maximum pressure" strategy Mr. Trump set in motion in 2018 when he withdrew the United States from the Obama-era nuclear deal. The strategy has featured the unilateral re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, as well as a U.S.-led push to crush Iran's economy by upholding a global embargo on Iranian crude oil.

Mr. Trump has argued the sanctions would coerce Iran into fresh negotiations with Washington that could result in a new deal addressing not only Tehran's nuclear activities, but also its ballistic missile programs and subversive backing of militants in other Mideast nations — two things that were not resolved by the 2015 deal.

The approach created a rift with other signatories to the deal, including Britain, France and Germany, who have sought, along with China and Russia, to keep the accord alive since

2018. The big question now is whether the incoming Biden administration will keep the re-imposed U.S. sanctions in place or lift them.

The International Crisis Group is calling for the latter, asserting in its report Friday that the Trump administration "insisted that its 'maximum pressure' strategy would deliver a superior nuclear agreement."

"Not only did the coercion fail, but it also reversed the significant non-proliferation gains the agreement had secured and prompted a more aggressive Iranian regional posture," the report's executive summary claimed.

Re-entering the deal on the condition that Iran roll back its enrichment activities and its threats to kick out U.N. inspectors, the summary argued, will be the "best way" for the Biden administration to "avoid a nuclear crisis early in its tenure, restore transatlantic cooperation, facilitate the financial dividends the agreement was meant to deliver to the Iranian people and provide a foundation for future negotiations on matters outside the JCPOA's nuclear portfolio."

The report argued the Trump administration was incorrect in thinking it could "squeeze greater concessions out of Iran on its nuclear program and also with regard to the other concerns."

"The economic toll on Iran has been severe — three years of recession in a row — and the deal's remaining participants have been unable to relieve the pain," the report's executive summary said. "But removing the central incentive for Iran's commitment to its JCPOA obligations led Tehran to slip those bonds, not to acquiesce in tighter ones."

"In early January, Iran announced the latest in a series of worrying violations, raising uranium enrichment rates to 20 percent, a level perilously close to weapons-grade, and threatening to severely curb international monitoring and verification, the accord's hallmarks," it said, adding that the "'maximum pressure' era has produced the worst of all worlds: economic stagnation for Iran, mounting international concern about its nuclear program and simmering regional tensions."

Critics of the original nuclear deal, including most Republicans, say that characterization is off the mark.

"The problem with the rush to reaffirm the old, flawed deal is that it would benefit only one country: Iran," according to James Carafano, a national security analyst with the Heritage Foundation, and Adam Milstein, the chairman emeritus of the Israeli-American Council.

"The cascading consequences of that decision could destabilize not just the Middle East, but trigger problems around the world," the two argued in a commentary published earlier this month by The Washington Times.

"The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the deal and slap Iran with severe sanctions has crippled the Iranian economy, decreased its oil production and caused a significant devaluation of the rial," they wrote. "Tehran is even more desperate now than it was in 2015. It would be a mistake to waste the gains of the outgoing administration."

The incoming administration is seen to be carefully weighing how to proceed.

International Crisis Group President Robert Malley, a critic of President Trump's overall foreign policy who served as White House coordinator for the Middle East under President Obama, has argued that if Mr. Biden desires, he should have no problem rejoining the nuclear deal and repealing the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration.

However, Mr. Malley and Philip Gordon, another former Obama administration official now with the Council on Foreign Relations, asserted in a November New York Times op-ed that the Trump administration "worked resolutely to build a so-called sanctions wall that would deter businesses from trading with Iran even if the United States rejoined the deal, repackaging nuclear-related sanctions as terrorism-related penalties to make it politically costlier for a Democratic administration to remove them."

"More broadly, the Trump administration seemed to be trying to erode any Iranian faith that an arrangement entered into with the United States would survive America's political vicissitudes."

[China] Minimise procurement of Chinese goods, Trump directs US government agencies (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [1/15/2021 7:26 PM, Staff, 4021K, Positive]

US President Donald Trump on Friday (local time) directed departments and agencies laws, regulations and policies to minimise the procurement of Chinese goods.

According to an official statement by Robert C O'Brien, National Security Advisor, "Today, President Donald J. Trump directed departments and agencies to review applicable laws, regulations, and policies and to propose regulatory and policy changes, including potential executive actions, to minimize the procurement of People's Republic of China (PRC) goods and services by the Federal Government."

He said that the PRC 2017 National Intelligence Law obligates individuals, organisations, and institutions to assist the PRC security and intelligence services in carrying out a wide variety of intelligence work.

"The PRC government, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, remains free to coerce and coopt PRC manufacturers and services providers to target the United States Government for espionage and information advantage. Some of this activity could further the goals of the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which calls for all Chinese civil institutions, both public and private, to aid in advancing the capabilities of the PRC military through the acquisition and application of critical and emerging technologies," he added.

Quoting the Director of National Intelligence report, O'Brien said, "The PRC poses the single greatest national security threat to America today. Beijing sees the United States as the main impediment to achieving its regional and global ambitions and consequentially invests significant resources in MCF and other strategies to gain relative advantage. The PRC targets the information systems of the United States Government for personnel records, military plans, and other exploitable data through cyber and other means."

[China] China's security chief optimistic about winning 'protracted war' with US (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Joel Gehrke, 394K, Neutral]

Chinese officials are optimistic about winning a geopolitical competition with the United States due to the perceived "decline of the West," according to the boasts of a top Chinese Communist security chief.

"The rise of the East and the decline of the West has become [a global] trend, and changes of the international landscape are in our favor," Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission chief Chen Yixin told colleagues, per a South China Morning Post translation. "The U.S. suppression [of us] is a major threat, but [our struggle with the US] is both a skirmish and a protracted war."

American and Chinese officials have moved into open rivalry in recent years after U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Beijing has been "waging ... a cold war" against the U.S. Those tensions have underpinned a yearlong controversy over China's censorship of information about the coronavirus pandemic, as well as disputes over Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong and high-stakes debates over whether American allies can rely on Chinese state-backed tech companies.

"The coronavirus pandemic is a major test, but [we should] rise to the challenge of this crisis and turn threats into opportunities," Chen said.

Success or failure in key arenas of the competition, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's campaign to thwart state-backed Huawei's bids to build fifth-generation wireless technology networks around the world, depends on European allies. Their confidence in the U.S. could be shaken by the attack on the U.S. Capitol and President Trump's success in convincing supporters that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, despite his failure to prove that case in courts across the country, according to a prominent Senate Democrat.

"The Republican Party will have something to say about this because European nations will sort of hedge their bets on getting in too deep with America, if they think that Donald Trump is coming back four years from now or Donald Trump Jr. is coming back four years from now," Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a member for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during an Atlantic Council event Friday.

Murphy, a Democrat, said that he has advised Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken to draft the Republican lawmakers who accepted the election results into a diplomatic initiative.

"I think he should deploy Republicans and Democrats in the Senate who voted to certify the elections, who have condemned those that tried to undermine democracy, and send us out around the world to try to tell the story of how we overcame this moment," he said. "This transition, as messy as it will be, will still be a transition, and that, in the end, is, again, still a miracle of American democracy."

Chinese officials, for their part, have pointed to the crisis at the U.S. Capitol to justify their crackdown on Hong Kong dissidents who protested Beijing's plans to undercut the rule of law in the former British colony.

"While the society is stable overall, there are still many risks, and hidden dangers ... intertwine, resulting in a wide range of public security risks," said Chen, the security chief. "Security is the cornerstone of development ... Without security, we cannot achieve anything."

[India] India's friction with U.S. rises over planned purchase of Russian S-400 defence systems (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 1:25 PM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has told India it is unlikely to get a waiver on its planned acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence systems, raising the risk of sanctions similar to those imposed on Turkey for buying that equipment, people aware of the matter said.

The Trump administration has been telling the Indians to drop the \$5.5 billion deal for five missile systems and avoid a diplomatic crisis, saying New Delhi did not have a wide waiver from a 2017 U.S. law aimed at deterring countries from buying Russian military hardware.

That position is unlikely to change under the Biden administration that takes over next week and that has promised an even tougher U.S. approach towards Russia, the people aware of the discussions told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

India says it needs the long-range surface-to-air missiles to counter the threat from China. India and China have been locked in a face-off on the disputed Himalayan border since April, the most serious in decades.

New Delhi has also affirmed its right to choose its defence supplies, potentially setting up an early point of friction with the new U.S. administration.

"India and the U.S. have a comprehensive global strategic partnership. India has a special and privileged strategic partnership with Russia," foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said about the proposed S-400 purchase.

"India has always pursued an independent foreign policy. This also applies to our defence acquisitions and supplies which are guided by our national security interests."

The United States imposed sanctions on Turkey last month for its acquisition of the Russian air defence systems under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)

A U.S. embassy spokesperson in Delhi said the United States was aware of reports of India's planned purchase of the S-400s, but noted there had been no deliveries yet.

"We urge all of our allies and partners to forgo transactions with Russia that risk triggering sanctions under the CAATSA. CAATSA does not have any blanket or country-specific waiver provision."

"We have not made any waiver determinations with respect to Indian transactions with Russia," the spokesperson told Reuters.

There was no immediate comment from Russian officials. Moscow has previously said that the sanctions imposed on Turkey were illegitimate and showed arrogance toward

international law.

INITIAL PAYMENT IN 2019

India made an initial payment of \$800 million in 2019 toward the Russian deal and the first set of missile batteries are expected towards the end of this year.

Russia has traditionally been India's main weapons supplier but in recent decades the Indian government has turned to the United States and Israel for new planes and drones.

U.S. officials believe there is still time for Delhi to reconsider, and that the punitive measures would only kick in if the deal with the Russians was "consummated."

Washington has told New Delhi that if India acquires the S-400 it would affect how its systems interact with U.S. military equipment that India now has and would jeopardise future arms transfers such as high-end fighter planes and armed drones, according to the people aware of the matter.

"There is a narrow chance India can avoid sanctions, presuming the S-400 purchase is completed. At the moment, it's a good bet that sanctions will be applied against India," Richard Rossow, a specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said.

But the outcome could depend on how India-U.S. defence cooperation progresses, he said, adding that India had been working with Washington on security in Asia more than ever before and this could be a mitigating factor.

Editorials and Op-eds

Donald Trump's Dismal Legacy in East Asia (The National Interest)

The National Interest [1/15/2021 1:15 PM, Paul Heer, 289K, Negative]

A few days ago, the White House released a declassified document from 2018 outlining the Trump administration's "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific." The document summarized the challenges the administration saw the United States facing in the region, the U.S. interests and "desired end states" it would pursue there, and the "lines of effort" it would follow toward those goals. In an accompanying statement, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the strategy document was released "to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners America's enduring commitment to this vital region." It seems more likely that it was issued one week before the end of the administration in an effort to frame the discourse on Donald Trump's legacy in policy toward East Asia, and probably also to box in the Biden administration's approach to the region. Trump's supporters have characterized his East Asia policy primarily as a strong and decisive pushback against the growing threat from China after what they characterize as decades of passive policies that allowed Beijing to extend its influence globally and resist pressure to democratize internally. They will probably characterize any divergence from the document by the Biden administration as a reversion to weakness and failure to fully recognize the China threat.

But what has the Trump administration actually accomplished in the Indo-Pacific region,

pursuant to its agenda? According to the strategy document, the key challenges were to:

"maintain US strategic primacy" in the region

"promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing a new, illiberal sphere of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity"

"advance US global economic leadership while promoting fair and reciprocal trade."

It's hard to see how any of these goals has been significantly advanced over the past four years. On the contrary, the United States is in a worse position in the Indo-Pacific region than it was four years ago.

Instead of maintaining U.S. strategic primacy there, the Trump administration has almost certainly confirmed that it is irretrievably lost. Through inattention, rhetoric largely devoid of strategy, and policies and behaviors that have eroded the confidence American allies and partners have in Washington's credibility and reliability, Trump has profoundly undermined the historical leadership role that the United States has played in the Indo-Pacific region during and since the Cold War. Two of the document's operating assumptions were that "loss of US prestige in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve US interests globally" and that "Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military influence will continue to increase in the near-term and challenge the US ability to achieve its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region." Both of those assumptions have been amply validated: the United States has lost prestige relative to China, thereby weakening its ability to achieve its interests.

In terms of countering Chinese influence and promoting the alternative of a "liberal economic order" and "fair and reciprocal trade," it is hard to give Trump high marks after his early withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which inevitably reinforced China's economic role and clout in the region. This was followed by Trump's protectionist trade policies, which did not spare U.S. allies and partners in Asia, and his administration's inadequate efforts to compete with China's infrastructure and investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Overall, Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, implicitly targeted at building a coalition to counterbalance Chinese power and influence, never yielded a coherent strategy or much substance—or sustained attention from Washington.

Perhaps the biggest setback has been to the vitality of the U.S. alliance network. The strategy document included among the Trump administration's "top interests" that of "enhanc[ing] the credibility and effectiveness of our alliances," and O'Brien's statement highlighted the goal of "strengthen[ing] our wide and diverse network of allies and partners." Instead, Trump's relative neglect of the allies, and especially his pressure on Tokyo and Seoul to increase their financial contributions to mutual defense or face a drawdown of the U.S. forward military presence, exasperated our closest friends in Northeast Asia. Trump's neglect extended to Southeast Asia, where he only intermittently showed interest in the multilateralism that is central to the identity of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations and its members' collaboration with Washington on regional economic and security issues. Overall, the Trump administration was relatively inattentive to the particular interests, priorities, and perspectives of U.S. partners in the region—often taking them for granted and pressuring them to choose Washington's side against Beijing while repeatedly denying that

it was doing so. The strategy document characterized its “desired end state” as one in which “most nations in the Indo-Pacific view the United States as their preferred partner.” That preference remains, but regional confidence in and reliance on it has been severely diminished.

All this was reinforced by Trump’s general disregard for human-rights issues, best exemplified by his reported statement to Chinese president Xi Jinping that Beijing’s massive reeducation camps in Xinjiang—essentially aimed at brainwashing Muslims to abandon their faith—were “exactly the right thing to do.” And Trump’s increasingly blatant disregard for American democracy, which culminated in his claims of electoral fraud after his defeat in the November 2020 election and his instigation of the assault on the U.S. Capitol and U.S. Congress on Jan. 6, has deflated America’s stature across the Indo-Pacific region as an exemplar of democratic values and constitutionalism.

Trump has trashed Americas most important alliance. The rift with Europe could take decades to repair (CNN)

CNN [1/16/2021 12:15 AM, Luke McGee, 7975K, Neutral]

The presidency of Donald Trump has left such a wretched stench in Europe that it’s hard to see how, even in four years, Joe Biden could possibly get America’s most important alliance back on track.

This week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled a final trip to meet with European and NATO leaders. While the State Department claimed the reason for his cancellation was so Pompeo could work on the Biden transition, European officials suspect that America’s top diplomat realized he’d arranged a leaving party no one wanted to attend.

Throughout Trump’s term, Europeans have been walking a tightrope, trying to balance outright condemnation of the President’s most destructive behavior with not alienating the leader of the Western world.

Pompeo was unlikely to be received warmly on his farewell tour, even before the insurrection at the US Capitol last Wednesday. For many, Trump’s incitement of rioters was the final straw.

The foreign minister of Luxembourg openly called Trump a “pyromaniac,” while diplomats are privately saying they “blame Trump squarely for the chaos in America since the election, including the Capitol riot,” as one did to CNN, reflecting the sentiments of others in the same role.

“It was clearly not going to be a congenial trip, as many European institutions and diplomats are happily turning their back on the Trump administration. It’s no secret that Europe is very much looking forward to working with Biden,” said Tyson Barker, a senior Europe analyst and former State Department official under Barack Obama.

This week’s snub of Pompeo brings an ignominious end to four years of exacerbation with a White House that went out of its way to burn bridges with allies who were caught off guard by the election of Trump, then horrified at his administration’s inability to rein in his worst instincts.

“From our perspective, Trump saw Europe as an enemy,” a senior European diplomat told

CNN. "The lasting impact of 'America First' is the US having fewer friends in Europe."

A senior European Union official said the general view in Brussels was that Trump went out of his way to "gradually undo a lot of what the EU was working towards on the world stage," pointing specifically to the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accord.

While the assumption is that the transatlantic relationship will improve under Biden, four years of carnage has spooked the European political scene.

"The European relationship has changed and will now be shrouded in skepticism," said Cathryn Cluver Ashbrook, executive director of the Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship at the Harvard Kennedy School.

"The arrival of a Biden administration has yet to be embraced with the same fanfare as Obama as President-elect, because Trump has done more damage to the relationship than George W. Bush. Trump's outward aggression affected all aspects of European life, be it trade, defense or even the emotional shared ideas and cultural ties. All those things suddenly seem debased and of less value."

The repudiation of shared ideas and cultural ties Cluver describes are one prong of the fork that has punctured the alliance. According to Barker, officials in European capitals were agog at the types of people Trump employed to work as envoys overseas.

"Europeans have considered the last four years extremely distasteful. They've been bemused by Trump's envoys, like Richard Grenell in Germany, who have turned up and started behaving like Fox News anchors and insulting the country they were supposed to be building relations with," Barker said.

Another prong has been the practical implication of Trump's approach to foreign policy. "Trump's disengagement and hollowing out of the State Department meant that we were suddenly without our most important ally on projects in the Middle East and Africa," a senior German diplomat told CNN.

"When they did take big stances on things like China or Iran, they chose not to involve anyone, leaving Europeans scrambling for a response," the diplomat added.

Cluver says this has forced a structural change in the dynamics between allies. "Europeans have had to carry the can on things like the Iran deal and climate change. On one hand, this means that Biden can pick up where Obama left off with some serious American muscle. But he might have to accept that America's role in these relationships has changed."

Barker agreed, saying it would be "important to see how the new administration acknowledges the damage that has been done by Trump to America's reputation." And on top of the big picture issues like Iran and China, Barker said, "how can [Biden] send State Department officials to Ukraine to warn about corruption with any immediate credibility?"

This idea, that Europe has lost its trust in America, comes up time and again when speaking to European diplomats and EU officials. Cluver believes the combination of unpredictability from the White House and "US bureaucracy being dismantled from the inside to make it less effective worldwide" under Trump means we have crossed the Rubicon. "American

influence in European defense, security, and other global priorities has diminished. This has led to lots of countries having to think more seriously about their future with a less assertive US," she added.

Despite optimism that Biden will restore a more collaborative approach to shared priorities, European diplomats and officials are adamant that moves towards an independent defense policy and international "strategic autonomy" will not slow down.

"In some respects, it was a good thing Trump forced us to think more about diplomatic initiatives, NATO and withdrawal of US troops," said the German diplomat. "It might come as a shock to Biden, but the prospect of the US underpinning European security is not as attractive as it was when he and Obama left office."

A view many European officials share is that no matter how friendly Biden is, Trump happened once -- and could happen again. The President lost the election, but clearly there is still a lot of support for his politics. In 2024, Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr., Mike Pompeo, or any other of his allies could conceivably pick up the torch and win an election.

"We cannot afford to be naive. If you look at the number of votes that Trump got, he wields an influence on American voters. This anti-global, 'America First' undercurrent in American politics is still very much alive and we have to hedge our bets," said the EU diplomat. Cluver is equally convinced that Trump's supporters are going nowhere, not least because they are unlike traditional voters. "A lot of his followers have been radicalized by conspiracy theories spread by groups like QAnon," she said. "Even if Biden succeeds in his domestic agenda, it will be difficult to pull people away from Trump's movement. Worse, elected representatives who want to bank on their support in the midterms and might continue pandering to them."

If this all sounds a little gloomy, to some extent, it is. "Bush was supposed to be an aberration and Obama a restoration," said Barker. "This idea of a reset seems a much tougher sell, especially since Trump's used his lame-duck period to burn the house on the way out."

It will take more than four years for the fog to lift over the Atlantic, and there are fears the relationship between Europe and America will never go back to what it was. For Europeans, that's a reality they're determined to make the best of. For the US, it's unclear whether being downgraded as a diplomatic force is something that its citizens, who've lived through four introspective years of "America First," will even care about.

Regardless, the Trump era has left Europeans with little choice but to wait and see how much of a priority Biden places on reclaiming America's place on the world stage. And they will use the four years of relative quiet under Biden to build safeguards against the all too real possibility of another Euroskeptic firestarter winning the White House in 2024.

Doctor on Covid's first year: We made a lot of mistakes (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:04 PM, Kent Sepkowitz, 7975K, Neutral]

The first case of Covid-19 in the United States was reported a year ago, on January 20, 2020. The patient, a 35-year-old man who had recently returned from visiting his family in Wuhan, China, sought medical care because of a cough and fever. He was hospitalized and survived the infection.

Since that time, more than 23 million Americans (almost 7% of the population) have been diagnosed with the infection and at least 385,000 have died. In response, effective treatments, public health containment strategies and vaccines have been developed, but the pandemic continues to worsen, both in the US and in other parts of the world.

The one-year mark provides an opportunity to prepare for year two by examining the mistakes and accomplishments of the last 12 months. I will focus only on medical decisions and dilemmas of year one and leave to others the task of evaluating the mostly disastrous political decisions that were made -- though I will note without comment that the first anniversary of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention laboratory confirmation of the initial case falls on the exact day that the Trump presidency ends and the Biden administration commences.

Personally, the year has been extremely humbling. We infectious disease specialists have been wrong repeatedly -- a predictable problem with a once-in-a-century event, but still. We are long accustomed to dealing with talk of a devastating pandemic from SARS, MERS, influenza, Ebola and smallpox to name a few. To keep calm and carry on, we have adopted an "oh now, not so fast, let's just wait and see" tone better suited to the gentleman physicians who populated Victorian novels than 21st century global village realists.

And, for many years, our Mister Rogers tone was the right one. But not this time. During late January and early February 2020, perhaps because of misleading information from China, we soft peddled the threat. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, called the risk to most Americans "miniscule" and articulated more concern about seasonal flu than the new coronavirus. He advised people to wash their hands and stay away from crowded places but to not bother wearing a mask.

I and countless others echoed this advice which was based on a well-articulated medical literature on influenza -- which ultimately was proven to be incorrect. It is uncertain whether an "everyone must wear masks" decree would have influenced many people's behavior at that early moment in the pandemic, given the paucity of US cases, but it was and remains a glaring misjudgment.

It was not the only mistake. From mid-February on, scientists stumbled to develop and deliver a reliable and widely available diagnostic test. And then came the political dawdling and decision to let the states fight among themselves for PPE supplies and ventilators.

Even leaving aside the hydroxychloroquine debacle, therapies to treat Covid-19 patients have fallen short: We have a mediocre, very expensive drug, remdesivir, directed at the virus itself. It must be given intravenously. Its uncertain efficacy has led to its exclusion from the World Health Organization treatment guidelines. Another category of therapy aimed at improving the immune response to infection includes the expensive antibody infusions the President and his buddies received. Full scale, definitive trials are still pending but this approach clearly has a role for patients with risk for severe disease.

Thankfully, the cheap old standby, dexamethasone, a steroid typically used to treat inflammation and a handful of illnesses, has reduced mortality in just about every study to date. Plus medical care overall has also lowered the rate of death among those diagnosed.

These problems are sobering reminders of how difficult it can be to make decisions when incomplete information leads to incomplete understanding of an actively evolving situation.

On a much smaller scale, though, this is the challenge for any doctor taking care of a sick, unstable patient. The situation may change hourly as test results return and new bits of a patient's history are uncovered; yet decisions must be made immediately despite uncertainty. This means that some of the decisions will be wrong.

This weighs heavily on any doctor. But despite the emotions around an error, doctors and public health experts have to wake up the next day and make more decisions, most of them also relying on incomplete information. And today's decisions must not be colored by yesterday's mistakes. Learning from a mistake is crucial but over-reacting to a mistake can be paralyzing. Knowing how to balance the two opposing forces is the largest challenge of all.

This dynamic is the biggest risk to Covid-19 pandemic control as we head into year two. The "miniscule worry" and the "don't wear a mask" mistakes and the failed "20 million vaccine doses given by December" promise can cause further problems if they over-influence the countless complex decisions that lie ahead.

The looming issues -- vaccine availability and safety, variant strains of the virus, waning immunity, when to loosen public measures after a critical mass of vaccinations -- are fraught with uncertainty, incomplete information and enormous consequences.

But decisions must be made. Inevitably they will be imperfect and will draw criticism. Adjustments made as more evidence becomes available will be viewed as waffling; a change in course will be called incompetence; the need to reimpose restrictions would be labeled a colossal failure. But everyone must come to work the next day and make the best decisions they can. The buck must no longer be passed to states and counties and hospitals.

The Biden team surely is aware of what lies ahead. We can only hope that its decisions will rely on evidence, sound judgment and, most of all, the lonely humility of a doctor caring for a critically ill patient.

What WHO Won't Learn From China (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:08 PM, Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., Neutral]

After much wrangling to gain entry a World Health Organization visit to China is not going to solve the mystery of Covid-19's origins.

Its mission will consist of interviewing Chinese medical and research personnel to see if they tell stories at odds with Beijing's official version. They won't. An obvious reason for the long delay and politicking over WHO's invitation was to make sure word was dispatched down the bureaucracy to let local officials and medics know what they were supposed to say.

The real challenge now, which I doubt will enlist much Chinese cooperation, is to ransack China's inventory of patient and autopsy samples from before the Wuhan outbreak to find out where and when the new virus manifested itself without being recognized. Other countries have been willing to do this outside of China. We know the virus was present in

France in December 2019 before the Wuhan eruption. A woman with a characteristic Covid rash who turned up at a Milan hospital in November 2019 has been identified as Italy's possible Patient Zero; some blood samples suggest the virus may have been present since September 2019. In comments to the press, WHO officials have alluded to the assumption that China has collected such samples too and hasn't made the results public. Don't hold your breath. Chinese officials now delight in suggesting, based on such evidence, that the virus started elsewhere. China gets credit for alerting the world to its existence. Guess what? Anything is possible until we establish some pattern in unrecognized early cases.

What's happening in China today might be a more fruitful subject of WHO inquiry than what happened in Wuhan a year ago. In Hebei province this week, 22 million people have been commanded not to leave their homes, in response to what's described as a "handful" of cases. Such instances have repeatedly popped up across China with little analysis leaking into the outside world. A lockdown in the city of Kashgar was imposed after a single asymptomatic case led to 137 others, all asymptomatic. Is this a medical miracle or have China's citizens gotten the message that they should hide their sore throats and fevers from authorities? No Western society would stand for the costs China has asked its citizens to bear: enforced mass testing, enforced quarantining, the locking of symptomless or uninfected people in their homes.

China is not Taiwan, Singapore or even South Korea, a country with water on three sides and an impassible military border on the fourth.

Before the pandemic hit, China was the world's No. 4 international tourist destination with 60 million visitors a year. Business travelers kept investment and trade flowing. Losing these benefits is among the costs China's people have been forced to bear. What's harder to understand is that they did so to avoid costs Western countries didn't have to worry about.

By a count published in January 2020, China has 3.6 intensive-care beds for every 100,000 citizens—compared with 29.4 for the U.S. and 38.7 for Germany.

China has nine cities bigger than New York, 27 bigger than Los Angeles, and 40 bigger than Chicago. Now think of the virus raging through these cities the way it did New York in the spring or L.A. today, with one-tenth the hospital capacity. In case you're wondering, the median age in China is roughly the same as the U.S.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million, is 30% bigger than New York yet its hospital system broke down under a case and death load that, by official statistics, was less than a quarter of that experienced by New York several weeks later. In Wuhan, patients died not only in the hallways but in the streets.

Covid has been a rough experience for everybody. In threatening to land on China's large urban agglomerations, though, it might well have looked like the end of the road for the Communist Party.

I was happy to see a New York Times piece the other day that, instead of touting the superiority of its officials, acknowledged that Taiwan benefited from being an island that could shut off travel.

The U.S. has 328 ports of international entry. Even with tourism down 68%, even with the Mexican and Canadian borders closed to “nonessential” travel, more than 100,000 people cross our borders every day (not including illegal border crossers).

China may not be a model for any country that isn’t China. We can still be grateful for its example. While others have accepted epidemics and focused on treating patients, its economy has helped the world stay upright. Its agricultural and industrial imports have surged. Its factories have been churning out, as the Journal put it, “medical equipment and work-from-home gear” in vast quantities to help other countries manage their own adaptations to Covid’s arrival in the world.

[Switzerland] The End of Swiss Neutrality (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [1/15/2021 1:13 PM, Stéphanie Fillion, 722K, Neutral]

Late last October, Switzerland officially launched its first-ever election campaign for a temporary seat on the U.N. Security Council. As part of the virtual event, the Swiss mission in New York City sent goody bags to delegations from the other countries that will ultimately vote to decide if Switzerland should sit on the council. The centerpiece amid chocolate and Swiss cheese samples: a kit to make a Swiss culinary delicacy, a cheesy raclette.

Switzerland’s cheese and chocolate diplomacy is in full swing at the United Nations ahead of the June 2022 vote, but it is actually running unopposed. There are two seats available for Western countries for the 2023-2024 period, and the only other country running is Malta. Nevertheless, the campaign—which was allocated some \$28 million by the government—has kicked up controversy. “It’s a very interesting situation at the moment,” said Angela Müller, the vice president of Switzerland’s U.N. Association, “because we have this clean-slate situation with Malta, but the actual opposition is coming from inside.”

For some in Switzerland, they believe that taking a seat on the world’s highest security body—one that has the power to take military action to restore peace if it deems necessary—could harm the country’s unique international reputation as a neutral power and the prized diplomatic role that comes with it.

One of those critics is Paul Widmer, a retired Swiss diplomat who was posted in Berlin, Amman, Zagreb, Washington, and at the U.N. in New York. “Our neutrality has become an international trademark,” he said. “Through a constant policy of neutrality, Switzerland has acquired high credibility in foreign policy.” Switzerland is regularly asked to represent countries where they do not have diplomatic relations, for example, between the United States and Iran and Russia and Georgia. The peak of such diplomacy was during World War II, when Switzerland had 200 mandates in about 35 countries. Indeed, as Widmer put it, the country’s neutrality “is the reason why many states bestow Switzerland with international mandates—be it as a protecting power, be it as a go-between, or a mediator.”

Switzerland’s neutrality is in both the country’s DNA and its legal system.

Internationally, it was enshrined in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and under the 1907 Law of Neutrality. Nationally, it is also mentioned in the Swiss Constitution. However, the specifics of the country’s neutrality policy have evolved in the last few decades, especially after Switzerland became a full-fledged U.N. member state in the early 2000s. “We managed to stay out of two world wars,” Pascale Baeriswyl, Switzerland’s ambassador to the U.N., said in December. Because the country hasn’t been involved in an armed conflict for nearly two

centuries, she continued, Swiss neutrality has become something of a nation myth. Moreover, "in a country as diverse as Switzerland, the popular support for neutrality is good for national cohesion. The concept is, however, understood in very different ways. So, when it comes to working in international organizations, we must take our cues from neutrality law—we can't rely on myths."

Even though Geneva is the European capital of the United Nations, it stayed away from U.N. membership until a 2002 popular vote. Since then, Switzerland has taken part in most of the U.N. body's activities, including the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and the Economic and Social Council. And although neutrality is still at the heart of Switzerland's decision-making, it does take a stance at the United Nations through votes, especially when it comes to human rights violations. Now, after almost 20 years at the U.N., Baeriswyl believes, the natural next step is a seat on the Security Council. "It has always been clear that if we wanted to be a member of the United Nations, we wanted to be a member in all the organs," she said.

Switzerland's seven-member Federal Council officially decided to run for a council seat in 2011, following consultation with the country's parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committees, which saw it as a natural follow-on to U.N. membership. Concerns over neutrality have been ripe for debate since then. In 2015, for example, the Federal Council even published a report on possible situations that could jeopardize Switzerland's neutrality, concluding that it could stay on the council and in the clear. After all, the report noted, other neutral countries—such as Austria, Sweden (to some extent), and Costa Rica—have successfully done so, in particular by abstaining from votes regarding the use of force. However, as one diplomat from another neutral country pointed out, each of these countries has its own definition of neutrality. For Costa Rica, for example, it means nonmilitarization. For Switzerland, its armed neutrality. Amnesty International has even criticized Switzerland for its ongoing arms sales to human rights violators such as Bangladesh, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

So far, Switzerland's campaign for a seat has survived every parliamentary motion to reverse the country's decision to run, and the race is pretty much a fait accompli. However, politically, the matter could become more complicated once Switzerland actually finds itself in the council chambers. Today's divisions in the Security Council remind some diplomats of the Cold War era, and navigating big powers while not taking a side could be more challenging than ever. "What would be the role of Switzerland if the Security Council is asked by the United States to strengthen the sanctions regime against Iran? Should it vote in favor (and displease Iran), should it vote against (and displease the U.S.), or should it abstain (and weaken the decision-making of the Security Council)?" Widmer asked.

Last summer, the Trump administration decided to attempt to unilaterally trigger a snapback mechanism that would restore U.N. sanctions against Iran that were in place prior to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The move left the council scrambling since Washington had already left the JCPOA. Washington's proposal was mostly either ignored by council members or rebutted through letters and statements, but it has added more tension to the relationship between Washington and its European allies. If Switzerland had been on the council at the time—even if it had attempted to stay neutral—Widmer argued, it would not have been exempt from a difficult political choice: displease Washington or lose its status as go-between for the United States and Iran.

Baeriswyl, though, is convinced that Switzerland could deal with similar matters on the council without hurting its relationship on one side or another. "Neutrality has never been neutral when it comes to law. It has never been neutral when we have made a commitment," she explained. "It is neutral in terms of we do not take sides in a conflict, except for humanitarian law and international law. That is also true when it comes to the JCPOA." When it came to the Security Council and the JCPOA, she said, "there was a huge unity, and I would expect Switzerland not to be an exception to that."

Even if Switzerland doesn't have much convincing to do with fellow member states because it is running unopposed, the public relations efforts continue. It may take more than raclette and chocolate to convince every canton in the diverse country, but despite some pushback, the "benefits [of being on the council] outweigh the risks," Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis concluded in June.

It is a rite of passage for any U.N. member state to sit on the council and indicates real engagement internationally. But only time will tell if the risks were worth the reward.

[China] One year in, was the China trade deal worth it? (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 4:49 PM, Daniel De Petris, 394K, Neutral]

Friday marks the one-year anniversary of one of President Trump's most significant agreements: the "phase one" trade deal with China.

Addressing a crowd of company executives, trade representatives, and lawmakers in the East Room of the White House on that day, Trump was as giddy as can be. "Today, we take a momentous step," Trump told the audience, "one that has never been taken before with China — toward a future of fair and reciprocal trade, as we sign phase one of the historic trade deal between the United States and China."

Twelve months removed from that signing ceremony, the trade deal with Beijing hasn't lived up to the administration's expectations.

While the Chinese have made some improvements on opening their market to U.S. financial firms and credit card companies, the additional tens of billions of dollars in goods that China promised to import from the U.S. has lagged.

The 91-page agreement may have been full of legalese, but the core was pretty straightforward: The U.S. would lessen the tariffs on certain Chinese products in exchange for Beijing purchasing more U.S. goods and introducing structural reforms into its economy. Over time, the concept went, U.S. and Chinese trade negotiators would return to the negotiating table to hammer out a more comprehensive agreement.

The results of the deal thus far have been a mixed bag. According to tracking from the Peterson Institute of International Economics, China agreed to purchase approximately \$159 billion in U.S. goods by the end of 2020. The Chinese, however, are nowhere near that goal, one the majority of trade officials and analysts largely wrote off as aspirational.

Back in the real world, China's total purchases were roughly half of what the U.S. hoped to see at this time. Total U.S. exports to China in 2020 added up to \$110 billion, only \$4 billion more than the previous year. While U.S. imports of Chinese goods were reduced by 12.8%

between 2019 and 2020, most of this can be chalked up to the coronavirus, which shocked global trade across the board. The overall U.S. trade deficit with China clocked in at just north of \$283.5 billion, and in July 2020, the monthly deficit reentered pre-deal levels.

While Chinese purchase levels aren't up to par, it would be unfair to overlook the benefits of the trade deal. U.S. credit card companies are finally beginning to enter the vast Chinese market after years of pushback from Beijing. Mastercard got the go-ahead from Chinese officials one month after the deal was inked. In June 2020, American Express was given approval to set up shop on Chinese soil.

The biggest achievement of the U.S.-China trade deal, however, may not have to do with trade at all. At a time when Washington and Beijing are increasingly drifting apart, and to the delight of the Peter Navarros of the world, the trade agreement is preserving some mode of communication between the world's two economic superpowers. U.S. and Chinese officials who negotiated the pact continue to hold periodic meetings about implementation, which points back to the days when the two nations still considered each other "frenemies" rather than opponents in a long, brutal, geopolitical boxing match.

With the U.S. and China slapping restrictions on one another's technology, poking each other in the eye over issues such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, and skipping meetings about subjects that should not be controversial (like preventing military de-escalation in the Pacific), the communication channels provided by the "phase one" deal have proven to be more important as time goes on.

Overall, the Trump administration was likely anticipating more economic dividends from its trade talks with the Chinese, but look on the bright side: It wasn't a total flop.

[North Korea] North Korea's theater-of-fear submarine nuclear weapon (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Tom Rogan, 2164K, Neutral]

North Korea on Friday unveiled what it says is the fifth iteration of its Pukguksong-class submarine-launched ballistic missile. Kim Jong Un hopes his display will pressure the Biden administration into early concessions.

Still, when we look beneath the surface of this performance, it becomes clear that Kim is playing a weaker hand than he presents.

The North Korean leader's first challenge is that his submarine-launched ballistic missile capability is still in its early infancy. The North Koreans have not yet successfully tested one under battle conditions. Moreover, most weapons system analysts believe that the Pukguksong-5 is unlikely to have a range of more than 2,500 kilometers. That might sound like a lot, but it's actually very low in comparison to the ones deployed with the U.S. and Russian navies, which have effective ranges of more than 10,000 kilometers.

Another problem for Kim is his lack of a submarine force capable of delivering the submarine-launched ballistic missiles against Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, or the U.S. West Coast. The nuclear submarine on which these missiles will be embarked isn't exactly a gem of technological advancement. Instead, it is an adaptation of the 1950s-era Soviet Romeo-class diesel-powered submarines. It will be extremely vulnerable to detection by U.S. sonar and other sensor systems that populate the western Pacific Ocean, the Yellow Sea, and the

Sea of Japan. The moment this submarine left port, it would be shadowed by U.S. nuclear attack submarines. Probably more than one. The North Koreans wouldn't know those submarines were there unless and until they rose to their launch depth, which is shallower than that of other ballistic submarines. Then, they would be destroyed. Even a launch close to North Korea toward a U.S. military base on Okinawa would be very difficult to pull off. Top line: If the United States can detect the Russian Borei and Khabarovsk submarines, and it can, it can detect Kim's submarine.

His soaring rhetoric aside, Kim is aware of these limitations.

The dictator might be rotund, but he is not stupid. In turn, this submarine-launched ballistic missile is ultimately designed not for war or strategic deterrence but for the same purpose as Kim's new multiwarhead ICBM: to spark American civilian fear. Kim wants Americans to be afraid and to pressure the Biden administration into making concessions. Equally important, he wants to put Xi Jinping in a position to leverage U.S. concessions in return for Beijing's influence on North Korea. In recent weeks, China has further relaxed its enforcement of sanctions against North Korea. Xi knows that the Biden administration will see the U.S. intelligence reporting to know what he is up to but will also hope that Biden chooses to appease Beijing in response.

The appropriate U.S. strategy to deal with Kim and Xi thus remains the familiar realist one. First, the offer of a deal that balances North Korea's ICBM disarmament to its retention of a limited number of nuclear warheads. Next, the dangling of new trade and sanctions against Pyongyang and Beijing in support of that objective.

[Mexico] Can Mexico force the US to vaccinate migrant workers against Covid-19? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 3:42 PM, Matt Rivers, 7975K, Neutral]

Mexico wants the US to vaccinate all Mexican migrant workers currently working in the United States — and it says Trump's own signature trade deal requires it.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Marcelo Ebrard told reporters this week that under the terms of the recently enacted United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), millions of migrant workers should receive Covid-19 vaccines.

"It is a responsibility of each of the two countries to guarantee that all workers, independent of their immigration status, receive the vaccine," said Ebrard, referring to both documented and undocumented immigrants.

The issue came front and center after remarks by Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts last week appeared to suggest that undocumented migrant workers in the state's myriad meatpacking plants, would not be eligible to receive the vaccine.

Ricketts came under fierce and immediate criticism for the remarks, with advocates saying that migrants both documented and undocumented are essential workers, and play an indispensable part in putting food on American tables.

Ricketts later backed away from the remarks, saying immigration status would not be checked prior to receiving a vaccine. His office did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

Migrant workers are a critical part of industries ranging from agriculture to construction. However, there remains no national US policy of vaccinating migrant workers, as each state sets its own rules.

As a result, Mexico has not dropped the issue, leading to Ebrard's comments this week where he argued two articles in the USMCA require the US to protect foreign workers from the coronavirus.

The first is Article 23.3, point 2, which reads in part, "Each Party shall adopt and maintain statutes and regulations, and practices thereunder, governing acceptable conditions of...occupational safety and health."

He also cited Article 23.8, which holds that all parties must ensure migrant workers are protected under labor laws---whether they are citizens or not.

The articles cited are vague, though, and experts say if the US doesn't want to do this, it doesn't have to.

"There is very little bite in terms of enforcement," said Monica de Bolle, a Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute of International Economics. "There isn't really any way the Mexicans use what's written in the agreement...to force the US to vaccinate migrant workers."

De Bolle says the USMCA has weaker dispute resolution provisions than its predecessor NAFTA. Taking such a dispute to the World Trade Organization is also highly unlikely and would be unprecedented.

Mexico could stop allowing its nationals to go to the US as migrant workers, potentially crippling numerous crucial supply chains. However, that is highly unlikely, given the significance of that foreign-earned income so many Mexican families struggling to stay afloat.

Despite Mexico's lack of recourse, though, Ebrard's claims could signal a short to medium-term strategy.

"Mexico know its current position is weak, but perhaps they are hoping the Biden administration will be much more open to that kind of demand than the Trump administration would be," said de Bolle.

Drawing a line in the sand now lets the incoming administration — which is already expected to be friendlier to immigrants — know that for Mexico, this is an important issue that should be addressed early on in the new term.

"In a country that is currently experiencing an epidemic that is completely out of control, from a labor protections perspective it makes absolute sense that Mexico would demand something like this," said de Bolle.

Coronavirus News

China Stonewalls WHO Investigators (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [1/15/2021 1:19 PM, Yuichiro Kakutani, 101K, Negative]

The Chinese government barred the entry of two investigators who are part of a World Health Organization team tasked with finding the origins of the coronavirus.

On Monday, Beijing granted permission to 15 WHO scientists to enter Wuhan—where the deadly virus first emerged—only to stonewall researchers upon their arrival. The regime barred entry to two of the scientists, claiming they tested positive for coronavirus antibodies, and required the rest of the team to quarantine for two weeks, according to a Thursday tweet by the WHO. The international organization said that all members had "multiple negative PCR and antibody tests for COVID-19 in their home countries prior to traveling."

The Chinese government has repeatedly stymied efforts by the WHO and other international observers to conduct independent investigations into the pandemic's origin in China. The country imposed economic sanctions on Australia after the country called for an international investigation and has refused to allow any foreign scientists to enter Wuhan for months.

The Chinese government has long tried to dismiss concrete evidence that the coronavirus pandemic started in Wuhan. Its top diplomats and propagandists have instead promoted a wide range of conspiracy theories, including a bizarre theory that the virus actually originated in a U.S. military lab.

"When did patient zero begin in [the United States]? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be the U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! [The United States] owe us an explanation," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted in March 2020.

Global immunisation: low-income countries rush to access Covid vaccine supply (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [1/15/2021 7:23 AM, Sarah Boseley, 4021K, Neutral]

There are triumphant scenes as lorries leave a vaccine plant in Pune, India, loaded with boxes that will prevent thousands of deaths. Adar Poonawalla, the owner and chief executive of the Serum Institute of India, poses on the tailgate of a truck, making the most of his company's "proud and historic" moment as the potential saviour of the nation – and even a large chunk of the world.

Poonawalla's factory, the largest vaccine manufacturing complex in the world, is the best hope for immunisation for people in Africa and some low-income countries elsewhere – which could save them from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. The Serum Institute has been contracted to supply the UN-backed Covax initiative, which subsidises low-income countries, with 200m doses of Covid-19 vaccines with an option on 900m more.

For a heart-stopping moment last week, it seemed that vaccine nationalism within India might slam the door. On 4 January, just after the Serum Institute got approval from the Indian regulator for the vaccine – made under licence from AstraZeneca – Poonawalla was reported as saying there was a condition attached, which was that only India could have the

vaccine for the time being.

The following day, he clarified the "confusion in the public domain" on Twitter, saying "exports of vaccines are permitted to all countries".

But the lorries are headed across India for now and the episode underlines the tension as every country with cash wades into the fight for vaccines, putting manufacturers under unprecedented pressure to deliver for them.

As affluent Europe and North America scramble to deploy the Covid vaccines they have pre-bought – amid accusations that immunisation programmes are too slow and the wrong people are getting the jabs – there has been not a single shot in the arm in many countries elsewhere.

Three vaccines have been approved in the west. Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are expensive and need long-term storage at -70C. Pfizer offered to sell the vaccine to South Africa at a 50% discounted price of \$10 a shot, but was told the cost was still prohibitive.

But Oxford/AstraZeneca's vaccine is stable at fridge temperatures of 2-8C and AstraZeneca has promised not to make a profit for the duration of the pandemic. It aims to provide 3bn doses this year, made in factories around the world under licence. It is the mainstay of the Covax initiative, which has now bought a total of 1.97bn doses of four different vaccines to distribute when they become available. The AstraZeneca vaccine accounts for most of it.

The Serum Institute has promised to make 100m doses for Covax of the AstraZeneca vaccine and a further 100m of the Novavax jab – if and when that is approved. Covax has an option on a further 900m doses of one or the other of those vaccines.

Deliveries could start as early as February, said a spokesperson for Gavi, the vaccine alliance which is a partner in Covax.

"We anticipate being able to provide each participating economy with the first tranche – enough to protect approximately 3% of the population – in the first half of 2021. This process could begin as early as February, pending favourable regulatory outcomes and the readiness of health systems and national regulatory systems in individual participating economies.

"In terms of which vaccines will be rolled out to which countries, as well as timeframes, we hope to be able to share more on that very soon."

Seven countries have now given emergency authorisation to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine or the Serum Institute version: the UK, India, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico and Morocco. The Carlos Slim Foundation in Mexico is licensed by AstraZeneca to supply 150m doses to Latin America. These countries could take delivery right away.

But other countries without a regulatory body will be waiting for the World Health Organization to give the green light, which is said to need data from the Serum Institute. In what sounded like a nudge, the director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said on 11 January it looked forward "to Serum Institute of India submitting full datasets for rapid

assessment so WHO can determine whether we can recommend their AstraZeneca vaccine for international use".

The AstraZeneca vaccine will also be manufactured by SKbioscience in Korea, BioKangtai in China, Siam BioScience and the local conglomerate SCG in Thailand and CSL Behring in Australia. The Fiocruz Institute in Brazil has signed a deal for 100m doses of the Serum Institute vaccine, which it will put into vials in a process known as "fill and finish".

In an attempt to queue-jump, the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, wrote to the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, on 9 January. "To enable the immediate implementation of our national immunisation programme, I would appreciate ... the supply to Brazil, with the possible urgency and without jeopardising the Indian vaccination programme, of 2m doses," Bolsonaro wrote.

Brazil is also now buying 10m doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine. It is late to the party. At the very end of last year, Argentina took delivery of 300,000 doses and has been immunising healthcare workers. The Russians claim it is 92% effective, but the data has not been published.

A few middle-income countries have started vaccination programmes using the Pfizer/BioNTech jab. Mexico took delivery of 3,000 doses in December. Chile and Costa Rica have also started using the vaccine. Mexican officials have been to talk to their counterparts in Argentina about buying Sputnik.

Chinese vaccines are also beginning to be used. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates both gave emergency approval to the vaccine made by Sinopharm in December, which the manufacturers say is 86% efficacious, although – as with the Russian vaccine – the full data has not been made public. Turkey has bought the Chinese vaccine, and Morocco, Egypt and Nigeria have all been in discussions.

There are other promising jabs on the way. Novavax aims to make 2bn doses for global use – but has not yet finished its trials. Covax has an option on 500m doses of the Janssen vaccine, which has the advantage of being one shot, but although results from phase 3 trials are expected within weeks, there are said to be manufacturing delays. It could be a major player, however.

"Johnson & Johnson aims to provide global access to Janssen's Covid-19 vaccine candidate, if proven to be safe and effective. We have committed to producing 1bn vaccine doses a year starting in 2021 and have expedited manufacturing scale-up to reach this goal," said a spokesperson. "We are leveraging a global supply base for our vaccine candidate, including facilities in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa."

David Salisbury, associate fellow of Chatham House's global health programme and director of immunisation at the Department of Health until 2013, said that even if the amount of vaccine distributed across the world increased, not all countries would be able to run vaccination programmes for everyone who needed it.

"There's a huge gap between a desire to have vaccine and political statements that your country will have vaccine – and actually having contracts either in place yourself or on your behalf and the ability to pay for it – and much more, the ability to implement it," he said.

The vaccination against Covid-19 is not like running childhood vaccination programmes, but more similar to the effort to immunise against the seasonal flu. Most low-income countries do not have enough clinics or databases to tell them how to access those at risk.

Countries that get enough vaccine for 20% of the population, which is what Covax hopes to provide eventually, will not be able to stop transmission. They will be in an "endless cycle", said Salisbury – vaccinating health workers and those most at risk of dying, with more people getting older and moving into the at-risk groups all the time.

The coronavirus is not going away, especially in low income countries. It could be argued the vaccines are just a temporary fix.

"Predicting the future for vaccine campaigns in all parts of the world is something many of us are already thinking about. Will this become institutionalised as an annual vaccination programme for industrialised countries? Unless this virus goes away I think the answer is yes," said Salisbury. "But what will the appetite be in low-income countries for resources that are already under huge pressure to be used for prevention of coronavirus?"

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:07 PM, Betsy McKay, Neutral]

A highly transmissible coronavirus variant that was first identified in the U.K. is spreading rapidly in the U.S. and likely to become the dominant strain circulating domestically in March unless steps are taken to slow it, federal health authorities said.

Health officials called Friday for increasing measures like wearing masks and social distancing to curb the spread of the more contagious variant. Otherwise, it will intensify the squeeze on already-overwhelmed hospitals.

A year after a new coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China, the pandemic it spawned has reached a perilous point. There are now vaccines to stop it, but their rollout in the U.S. has been slow and new, faster-spreading variants of the virus are now threatening surges in illness. The variant, known as B.1.1.7, had infected at least 76 people in 12 states as of Jan. 13 and threatens to worsen the pandemic in the U.S., the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report modeling the strain's potential impact.

"We expect these numbers to rise in the coming weeks," Jay Butler, the CDC's deputy director for infectious diseases, said in an interview.

The variant could fuel exponential growth in new cases, becoming the dominant strain by late March if more public-health measures aren't put in place to stop it, said Michael Johansson, a biologist and modeler for the CDC's Covid-19 response.

While the new variant doesn't appear to cause more severe illness, it is more contagious than the currently dominating strain of the coronavirus, the CDC said. That means it could lead to more hospitalizations and deaths by infecting more people overall, the agency said, exacerbating pressures on health-care systems that are already at or near capacity. U.S. hospitalizations totaled 128,947 as of Thursday, the lowest level since Jan. 4, according to the Covid Tracking Project. Intensive-care units, though, remain under stress, with 23,891

patients. The number of Covid-19 patients in ICUs across the country has surpassed 23,000 every day since Dec. 29, according to the Covid Tracking Project.

The U.S. daily death toll again surpassed 3,000 on Thursday, with more than 3,700 fatalities recorded, according to Johns Hopkins University. So far, more than 390,000 deaths in the U.S. have been attributed to Covid-19.

The U.S. reported more than 229,000 new coronavirus cases for Thursday, the 10th consecutive day the figure has topped 200,000, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The U.S. has a short window of time to step up measures such as social distancing and wearing masks to prevent B.1.1.7 from spreading widely, the CDC said. Such precautions would also buy time for vaccination campaigns to start having an effect on transmission rates, the agency said.

People should be wearing masks, keeping at least 6 feet apart from others, avoiding crowds, washing hands and getting vaccinated, the CDC said. While the new variant is believed to be 50% more transmissible than the currently dominant strain in the U.S., agency experts said they believe the existing prevention strategies work. "If you're not wearing a mask or if you're getting sort of lax about it because you're getting tired of wearing the mask, I really encourage you to wear the mask," Dr. Butler said.

He urged the same stamina in avoiding gatherings with people outside one's own household: "This is not the time to let up by any means."

"It doesn't mean that businesses need to be shut down or things like that, but it does mean that we have to take steps to be able to protect ourselves and limit our contacts with others," Dr. Butler said. The CDC also warned health-care systems to prepare for an even greater surge and said that people who don't have Covid-19 symptoms but are at risk of infection should be tested.

Covid-19 vaccines should work against the new variant, according to Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc., which make the two shots authorized for use in the U.S. Researchers are continuing to study that matter. However, the spread of the new variant means that about 80% of the population would need to be vaccinated to stop Covid-19, CDC scientists said. That is about 10 percentage points higher than some federal officials originally anticipated. Reported vaccinations appear to be picking up speed, with 11.1 million total doses administered as of Thursday morning, including 1.3 million second doses, according to the CDC.

At the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, intensive-care unit beds are filling up with Covid-19 patients. Richard Medford, associate chief medical informatics officer, said the university has just started sequencing Covid-19 samples to find out how widely the new variant is circulating in the Dallas area.

"I am worried that if you walk around you can see people aren't necessarily wearing their masks properly," Dr. Medford said. "The potential of this variant to take hold in our population is definitely concerning."

The CDC is monitoring for other new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus to appear in the U.S., Dr. Butler said. The agency recently issued an order requiring all international air passengers to the U.S. to test negative for Covid-19 within three days before their flights.

The CDC and other health entities are increasing genomic surveillance to better detect cases of the new variant. The agency established a new SARS-CoV-2 strain surveillance program in November and is working with other health agencies to boost monitoring efforts.

Laboratories are now sequencing about 6,000 positive SARS-CoV-2 samples a week in the U.S., said Gregory Armstrong, director of the CDC's advanced molecular detection program. More than 200,000 people are currently testing positive every day in the U.S.

"We think that's more than we need to pick up new and emerging variants, but we've got the capacity to increase that," Dr. Armstrong said.

Near East & North Africa

Abbas announces first Palestinian elections in 15 years (Axios)

Axios [1/15/2021 2:11 PM, Barak Ravid, 526K, Neutral]

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas published a decree on Friday announcing the dates for parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority.

Why it matters: This is the first time in 15 years that such a decree has been published. The last presidential elections took place in 2005, with Abbas winning, and the last parliamentary elections took place in 2006, with Hamas winning.

Driving the news: The parliamentary elections are scheduled for on May 22 and the presidential elections for July 31 — though those plans could still fall through.

Abbas met today with the chairman of the central election committee and instructed him to make preparations for elections in the West Bank, in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem.

Last week, the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, told Abbas in a letter that the movement would agree to hold elections as part of a national reconciliation process.

Flashback: After Hamas won the 2006 elections, the Palestinian Authority deteriorated into a deep political crisis between Hamas and Fatah, Abbas' party.

The U.S. and other world powers announced they would not cooperate with Hamas until it recognized Israel, denounced terrorism and committed to previous agreements with Israel.

Hamas refused to adhere to those conditions and continues to reject them to this day. The U.S., U.K., EU and other Western governments still boycott Hamas, and the U.S. designates the group as a terror organization.

In 2007, a civil war broke out in the Gaza Strip and Hamas took over the area by force.

The big picture: Abbas' announcement comes after numerous failed attempts at

reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and after several plans to hold elections fell through.

Abbas, who is 85 and in the 15th year of his four-year term, is not very popular. Recent public opinion polls indicate he could lose to a Hamas candidate.

What's next: Many analysts are skeptical about whether this election will actually take place.

One of the main stumbling blocs is East Jerusalem. If Israel doesn't allow voting there, the election could be canceled.

[Iran] Diary shows how quest for love landed Navy vet in Iran jail (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:52 AM, Eric Tucker, 2164K, Neutral]

Michael White's long-anticipated trip to Iran was already a disappointment. The love interest he'd gone to visit had stopped seeing him and he'd idled away hours in his hotel room by himself.

Then it got much worse.

On his final day, the car he and his tour guide were in was abruptly cut off by another vehicle with a passenger frantically waving his hands at them. He recalls three men getting out, one with a video camera, forcing him into their car and driving him to an office for questioning. From there, it was on to jail, where orange-tinted water spewed from the sink and shower and prison-issued dirty sandals proved useful in shoving sewer roaches in the bathroom into the toilet.

A handwritten journal he wrote behind bars — a copy of which was provided exclusively to The Associated Press — offers new details about his ordeal in Iran, which ended last June when the State Department secured the Navy veteran's release. In it, he catalogues physical abuse from his jailers and taunts from fellow inmates while held on dubious allegations. He writes tenderly of the woman he visited even while likening himself to a mouse lured into a trap. And he brands himself a "political hostage," held on pretextual charges to secure concessions from the U.S.

Seven months after his release, White is trying to reassemble his life in Mexico, unsure what comes next but eager to share his story.

"I don't want the government of Iran to think that, 'Oh, Mike White's out of here, he's going away, he's going to be quiet,'" he said in a recent interview. "That's not going to happen. Believe me, if only you understood the fear and anger inside of me as a result of what they did."

The peculiar saga began in July 2018 when White flew to Iran to visit a woman he'd met years earlier in a Yahoo chat room and with whom he hoped to rekindle an on-off relationship that included two prior visits to the country. But the bond turned sour on the most recent trip when the woman stopped seeing him and encouraged him to return home earlier than he'd planned.

His 156-page manuscript is told from his own perspective with details that are vivid though sometimes difficult to corroborate. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a

request for comment. But according to the document, the men who arrested him pulled him into their car and drove him, blindfolded and handcuffed, to a building for questioning. His interrogator asked about his relationship with the woman, seeming to know details of her family, and telling White, vaguely, that some in Iran were concerned about his intentions there.

He was taken to what he calls the "intel jail," where he says he was given no food for days, nor blanket or pillow even as the vent blew frigid air. The conditions were compounded, he says, by his cancer diagnosis that had resulted in chemotherapy treatment and hospital stays in the months before he left for Iran.

He was repeatedly interrogated over several months about why he'd come to Iran, as officials suspicious that he may be a spy handed him questionnaires focused on his military background and any intelligence service connections. At one point, he writes, he fabricated a tale about being tasked to gather intelligence by an acquaintance he said was with the National Security Agency, figuring that interrogators wanted to hear something like that before setting him free.

"I was just saying something out of desperation, doing whatever to hopefully get them to just cut me loose," he said in the interview. "It turned out it wasn't really helpful at all."

The truth was more mundane, he says, albeit more difficult to comprehend: He was a "dumb American" pursuing love.

White's decisions were undoubtedly risky: His Iran visits came despite that country's hostile relationship with the U.S. He says he and his girlfriend got together in 2014 in Iran's Kish Island, even though retired FBI agent Robert Levinson vanished from there years earlier.

But White, 48, who grew up in Southern California and was honorably discharged from the Navy, says he's long been drawn to Iran's culture and people and had felt safe there, connecting through social media to a network of acquaintances. He'd once thought of law school or entering politics, but at the time of a 2018 trip he hoped would recharge his life, he was working as a Job Corps resident adviser.

He struggles to reconcile his affection for the woman he perceived as his girlfriend — "Her voice melts me with its softness and tenderness. My heart flutters when I see her," he writes — with the suspicion that he was somehow set up during his visit. His Instagram page reflects that ambivalence, with photos posted this year of them together.

"Yet, sadly, I was lured into a trap, like a mouse trap. I was the mouse," he writes. "I followed my heart instead of my head and missed signs."

In jail, he writes, he was once awakened by a guard dumping a bucket of cold water on him. Another time, an interrogator snapped a whip on his toes as he completed a questionnaire. After White tossed water on a surveillance camera to get the guards' attention, they pummeled him in the ribs and threw him to the floor, he writes.

He was relocated to another prison where some inmates tauntingly referred to him as "The Great Satan." One placed a cockroach inside his pants pocket as a prank.

At the suggestion of a prisoner he befriended, he began a handwritten manuscript, writing it under the cover of playing Sudoku to hide it from the guards. He gave the pages to the prisoner who he says was able to smuggle it out through a cousin.

White ultimately faced various charges, including posting private images, collaborating with the U.S. against Iran and disrespecting Iran's supreme leader. He was sentenced to 10 years but calls the charges a pretext to "extort" concessions.

He insists he's not a spy and never posted any inappropriate photos of his girlfriend. He writes in his manuscript that he has indeed made social media posts about Iran but denies having disparaged Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An unexpected development came last spring as the coronavirus ravaged Iran. White, who was himself infected, was among thousands of prisoners released on medical furlough, permitted to live freely in Tehran in the Swiss Embassy's custody while required to remain in Iran.

The State Department, which has maintained that White was wrongfully detained, arranged for his release in June, flying him back to the U.S. as part of a deal that spared additional prison time for an American-Iranian doctor convicted in the U.S. of sanctions violations.

In August, he visited the White House with other freed hostages and detainees to record a Republican National Convention segment praising the Trump administration. He sat beside President Donald Trump in a three-piece suit in an experience he says made him feel like a celebrity, though he recalls Trump not shaking his hand.

"He was like, well, you know, if the media sees that, they're going to be flipping out of because of the corona(virus) thing," White said.

White isn't sure what comes next. He had contemplated opening a Persian restaurant, but isn't sure he'll do that now. He likens his life to the aftermath of a city-flattening hurricane.

"I'm just picking up the pieces, regrouping and trying to figure out how I'm going to move forward and stuff."

[Iraq] Iraq oil minister sees oil at \$60 a barrel in second quarter (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 4:29 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Iraqi Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar expects oil prices to reach around \$60 in the second quarter of 2021, he said in an interview with Iraq's Sharqiya TV on Friday.

The minister added that in past meetings he had asked OPEC members to allow Iraq to postpone compensating for earlier overproduction and this had helped to "bring back hope to Iraq's economy".

"Iraq will stay committed to OPEC decisions and compensate its overproduction", he said in the interview.

Abdul Jabbar said Saudi Arabia's voluntary output cut of 1 million bpd helped to prevent oil market from collapsing.

On Friday, Brent fell \$1.32, or 2.3%, to settle at \$55.10 a barrel and U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude CLc1 settled down \$1.21, or 2.3%, at \$52.36 a barrel.

[Iraq] Iraq says it will not negotiate with OPEC+ its overproduction cut share (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Ahmed Rasheed, 2164K, Neutral]

Iraq's oil minister affirmed Iraq's commitment to the OPEC+ reduction decision and the compensation of its overproduction share, he said in a statement on Saturday.

The minister added that Iraq has no intention to negotiate with OPEC+ members regarding its oil production share or compensation of overproduction.

Europe and Eurasia

Turkish leader eyes favorably Greek PM meet amid tensions (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 12:45 PM, Staff, 13480K, Neutral]

Turkey's president indicated on Friday that he would be open to easing tensions with neighboring Greece by floating the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with the Greek prime minister following months of saber-rattling over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters after prayers in Istanbul that he would "positively" consider a meeting that he said Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had requested.

Erdogan said the two countries' foreign ministers had met and bilateral talks were ongoing. "So we said we can take the steps for talks between our special representatives and then between the Prime Minister and myself could happen."

Relations between the neighbors and nominal NATO allies hit new lows over the summer due to a dispute over maritime borders and energy rights, bringing them to the brink of war.

Turkey dispatched a research vessel, escorted by warships, to search for hydrocarbon resources in disputed waters. Greece answered by sending its own frigates, claiming Turkey had violated its sovereign rights.

Earlier this week, both countries announced the resumption of exploratory talks on Jan. 25. The talks would be the latest in a long-running process of negotiations between Greece and Turkey that aim to improve their often testy relations.

A Greek government official said the Greek side viewed the possibility of a meeting between the two leaders as positive, if the current positive climate in relations continued. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the issue.

The official said the prime minister has repeatedly stated his desire for open channels of communication with Turkey at the highest level.

In December, the European Union gave the green light for the expansion of sanctions

against Turkey over its exploration of gas reserves in waters claimed by EU members Greece and Cyprus.

Though Ankara has repeatedly said sanctions would not deter Turkey from defending its energy rights, Erdogan has expressed a readiness to put frayed relations with the EU "back on track" and called on them display the same determination.

Erdogan spoke with Italian Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte Friday, thanking him for his support within the EU. "I believe Italy will direct the European Union to a prudent and just attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean," the Turkish president said.

[Germany] Do not break with Merkel, Bavarian leader warns before CDU leadership vote (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:45 PM, Paul Carrel, 11261K, Neutral]

Breaking with Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies is not the way to win Germany's federal election in September, the leader of her Bavarian sister party said as her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) prepares to elect a new leader on Saturday.

Merkel, who steps down after September's elections, is heading into the last months of her tenure with her conservative CDU squabbling over how to position the party following 15 years of rule marked by her instinct to compromise.

Markus Soeder, leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU's Bavarian sister party, said it would be a mistake to break with her popular brand of politics, which is consensus orientated and centrist.

"Anyone who thinks they can win the Bundestag elections by breaking with Angela Merkel is fundamentally mistaken," Soeder told the Funke media group in comments published on Friday. Her legacy must be preserved and combined with new ideas, he said.

Friedrich Merz, a former Merkel rival who is contesting the CDU leadership, wants to shift the party to the right.

Merz is running against Armin Laschet, premier of the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and Norbert Roettgen, a foreign policy expert. Both are more centrist than Merz.

Soeder has signalled his support for Laschet, but may take on the role of conservative candidate to succeed Merkel if the winner of Saturday's CDU vote flops.

A survey by pollster Forsa for news network RND published on Friday showed 29% of voters would back Roettgen for the CDU leadership, 21% Merz and 19% Laschet. The leader will be elected at Saturday's digital congress by 1,001 party delegates.

Roettgen has suggested that if elected CDU leader he could back Soeder, who leads among conservatives in voter opinion polls, to run as chancellor candidate for their CDU/CSU alliance, the Union.

On the chancellor candidacy, Soeder told the Funke group: "The CDU, as the bigger sister, has the right of initiative. In the end, however, we decide together."

[Germany] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 18,678 - RKI (Reuters)

Reuters [1/16/2021 12:16 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany increased by 18,678 to 2,019,636, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for infectious diseases showed on Saturday. The reported death toll rose by 980 to 45,974, the tally showed.

[Greece] Greece: Lockdown extended indefinitely but stores to reopen (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 5:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Greece's government has extended nationwide lockdown measures indefinitely but says retail stores and malls will reopen Monday with strict entrance limits.

Civil protection chief Nikos Hardalias said Friday that a nightly curfew, domestic travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders will all remain in effect after being first imposed in early November.

Retail stores, closed since Jan. 3, will reopen with limited entrance and for customers who have filled out permission notices to leave their homes that are usually made available by cellphone message.

The lockdown was imposed on Nov. 7 to fight a surge in cases and deaths that has eased in recent weeks.

Speaking in parliament ahead of Friday's announcement, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said each month of lockdown was costing the Greek economy more than 3 billion euros (\$3.6 billion).

"I want to be absolutely clear, every opening of economic activity harbors the danger of an increase in (COVID-19) cases," Mitsotakis said. "As long as this increase in cases is moderate and controlled and as long as it doesn't put pressure on the health system, it is something we can bear. These are the delicate balances we must find."

Primary schools and kindergartens reopened this week, but high school lessons are being held online only.

The seven-day rolling average of new deaths per 100,000 population in Greece was at 0.34 on Jan. 13, down from 0.94 in early December. The figure is currently at 0.77 in the European Union and 1.01 in the United States, according to data compiled from national health agencies.

[United Kingdom] England Isn't Listening to Johnson's Lockdown Orders Any More (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 1:00 AM, Emily Ashton, Neutral]

People across England are about to be hit with a deluge of new government adverts on television, radio and social media containing one blunt demand: Stay at home.

It's a familiar message -- and that may be why the public seems to be shrugging it off.

The data shows Britons are far more active during the current third national lockdown than when the first emergency "stay at home" order was given last spring. There's more traffic on

the roads, more people on trains and more shoppers making trips out.

Government officials worry too many are flouting the rules as Prime Minister Boris Johnson urges the public to try harder to avoid spreading coronavirus. With the National Health Service buckling under the weight of Covid-19 patients, the U.K. already has the highest death toll in Europe at more than 87,000. While there are early signs that infection rates are starting to fall in places like London, and one person in 20 has now been vaccinated, officials warn life still might not be back to normal by spring.

Images of a state health-care system collapsing would risk inflicting further huge damage to Johnson's standing, with public confidence in the government's handling of the crisis already severely dented since it began. "We are now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queuing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," Johnson said on Friday. "This is not the time for the slightest relaxation of our national resolve and our individual efforts."

Last week, schools and businesses were shut and people were told to stay home for work if they possibly could, and to avoid all journeys unless they were essential. Despite the crisis, traffic on U.K. roads was still running at 63% of pre-pandemic levels on Jan. 11, government figures showed. That's almost double the rate at the beginning of the first lockdown in early April, when traffic fell to 35% of normal levels.

Public transport use is also up, with four times the number of rail passengers this week than at the start of the spring lockdown. Despite the closure of non-essential stores, more people are out shopping this time, too, according to research firm Springboard.

Schools are open only for children of key workers but are reporting much higher attendance levels than in the spring. Latest government figures show that 14% of pupils in state-funded schools were in on Jan. 11, compared to an overall level of just 2% in April. Given the stark threat facing the country, why are people going out more than they did when the pandemic first hit? Is there more rule-breaking, is the public just bored, or are the rules themselves not tough enough? The picture is not unique to the U.K. Elsewhere in Europe, people have grown tired of wave after wave of restrictions. What makes England different is that even from the start, the messaging was mixed from a government that was reluctant to curb people's liberties.

In Spain and Italy, which imposed harsh lockdowns from the beginning, entire families became accustomed to living with life-altering restrictions. In Madrid and Milan, everyone wears a mask outside, and children must wear them at school. In London, face coverings outdoors are still optional.

Back at the beginning of the pandemic, England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty warned that citizens would "understandably get fatigued" with the restrictions. But in recent surveys people insist they are still following the rules. Stephen Reicher, a U.K. government adviser and professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews, dismissed the concept of lockdown "fatigue" as a way for the authorities to shift the blame onto the public.

"Some of the rules and the messaging around them may be the problem," he wrote in the British Medical Journal. For one thing, during the summer ministers encouraged people to go back to work and gave them discounts to eat in restaurants.

Some of the restrictions do appear to be more relaxed now compared to the start of the first lockdown: Nurseries are open to all children, there are childcare and support bubbles, and people can meet up with someone else for exercise. Restaurants are also open -- albeit only for takeaway meals. Susan Michie, a professor of health psychology at University College London and a government adviser, said "having more things open sends a mixed message" and makes people doubt that the country is "at crisis point." "On the one hand they are saying 'stay at home,' on the other hand they are allowing universities, nurseries, places of worship, non-essential businesses to stay open," she said.

But increased activity could also be down to a change in attitude toward the virus some 11 months into the pandemic. Robert Dingwall, professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, said people were understandably frightened in the spring but it's now become "normalized, a routine hazard." He said that for many people who hadn't fallen ill with the virus, there was "more and more discrepancy" between their everyday experiences and the government press conferences reporting countless deaths. The Cabinet Office said the government had "set out clear instructions to the public about what they need to do" to suppress the disease and the "public has made enormous sacrifices, to prevent our NHS from becoming overwhelmed and help save lives."

But senior government ministers have confused the picture by offering different versions of the rules. Home Secretary Priti Patel said Thursday that people should exercise alone, even though the rules allow activity with a friend. Johnson himself was criticized for cycling in the Olympic Park in east London, 7 miles away from his Westminster home, despite guidelines saying people should stay in their local areas. In the end, it all comes back to the prime minister. A libertarian at heart, he has struggled from the start with the idea of curbing freedoms. In December he declared it would be "frankly inhuman" to ban people from gathering over Christmas, before being forced to do just that as the virus surged days later. Even now, Johnson can't quite bring himself to be definitive in his messaging. In a Twitter video on Friday, he addressed people planning to leave their homes to go out this weekend. "Please," he said. "Really, think twice."

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus sparks exodus of foreign-born people from U.K. (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [1/15/2021 8:53 PM, Chris Giles 1825K, Neutral]

Coronavirus has sparked an exodus of immigrants from the U.K. in what is likely to be the largest fall in Britain's population since the second world war, according to a statistical analysis of official data.

A blog, published on Thursday by the government-funded Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence, estimated that up to 1.3 million people born abroad left the U.K. between the third quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2020.

In London alone, almost 700,000 foreign-born residents have probably moved out, the authors of the blog calculated, leading to a potential 8% drop in the capital's population last year.

The study drew a clear link between the departure of so many foreign-born nationals and the high number of job losses in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality, which has typically relied on overseas workers.

"It seems that much of the burden of job losses during the pandemic has fallen on non-U.K. workers and that has manifested itself in return migration, rather than unemployment," the authors concluded.

Large changes in regional populations would make it difficult for the National Health Service to distribute COVID-19 vaccines fairly around Britain and may raise questions over how business will fill jobs traditionally taken by European migrants.

The picture is further complicated by post-Brexit immigration rules. These mean that European Union nationals who left the U.K. in the past year will need work visas to return and work in Britain. Those with settled status would be able to return to fill jobs, but new migrants would not.

The ESCoE's calculations assume that official data, published by the Office for National Statistics, are flawed. The blog highlighted "hardly plausible" official statistics which showed employment of British-born people in London rising during the pandemic.

With officials unable to collect data in the usual way at airports and other transport hubs owing to the pandemic, the Office of National Statistics has faced severe difficulties in measuring migration numbers.

However, the agency has continued to measure employment trends during the pandemic through its labor force survey and has used this to form the basis of its regional population analysis.

Having found far fewer migrants to survey, especially in London, the ONS gave all the Londoners it surveyed much higher weights. This has resulted in the official figures showing the number of British-born employed Londoners rising sharply.

The blog by the ESCoE noted that the official figures show that the number of employed people in London and born in the U.K. grew by more than 250,000 in the year to the third quarter of 2020 with the total British-born population in the capital rising 440,000.

And yet the capital has been hit hardest by COVID-19 and has a high concentration of jobs in tourism, entertainment and hospitality, which have disappeared over the past year. The ONS figures showing a rise in British workers in London jobs did not remotely match other data such as benefit claimants in the capital or customs data from income tax records.

The authors of the study, Michael O'Connor and Jonathan Portes, said the only way to reconcile hard evidence of an employment crash in London with official figures suggesting a surge of U.K.-born employees was big problems in the ONS migration assumptions.

The ONS does not dispute the logic of the analysis and accepts anomalies being in its current estimates of employment and population. It blames these on difficulties of counting migration during the pandemic when its normal surveys have been suspended.

The agency added that it was working to transform its migration statistics and has promised an update early this year on its progress in improving them.

[United Kingdom] Johnson takes stand against 'cruel' Japanese whaling – The Telegraph (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 3:57 PM, Staff, Neutral]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is taking a stand against "cruel" Japanese whaling, The Telegraph newspaper said on Friday, after a minke whale became caught in fishing nets for 19 days before being killed by fishermen this week,

Drone footage of the trapped whale in the port of Taiji captured the world's attention and received flak from animal rights activists and environmentalists across the world.

"At a time when we are already seeing the tragic and irreversible destruction of our natural world, with the sea increasingly pumped full of plastics and climate change threatening entire ecosystems, it is more important than ever to take a stand against the cruel practice of whaling," Johnson told the newspaper.

The Foreign Office is also raising the issue with counterparts in Japan, the report added.

A Japanese fleet caught whales in 2019 in the country's first commercial hunt in more than three decades, a move that aroused global condemnation.

Taiji is known for its annual dolphin hunt.

East Asia and Pacific**[Australia] Two COVID-19 cases on Australian Open flight, one locally transmitted case (Reuters)**

Reuters [1/15/2021 9:46 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

Two coronavirus infections were reported on Saturday on a flight to the Australian Open, as the country recorded a single locally transmitted case and said a cluster appeared to have been contained.

The positive cases were recorded after the charter flight from Los Angeles landed in Melbourne, carrying players and their entourage for the tennis grand slam, according to online posts from two players.

Players on the flight now face two weeks of hotel quarantine and must to train indoors, instead of being allowed out for five hours training per day, part of conditions that allowed the event to go ahead, the newspaper reported.

The inbound infections came as states began to relax travel bans on signs an outbreak in the northern state of Queensland has been contained.

"Unfortunately we have been informed by the health authorities that two people on your flight AR7493 from LAX that arrived at 5.15am on Friday 15 January have returned positive COVID-19 PCR tests on arrival in Melbourne," said a message posted on social media by Mexico's Santiago Gonzalez, who is ranked 48 on the doubles circuit.

"From having 5 hours of training in a bubble to this ... (strict quarantine x 15 days). I will be showing you my workouts x Instagram (inside the room)," Uruguayan world number 68

Pablo Cuevas said on Twitter.

The news was first reported by The Age.

Australia has agreed to accept around 1,200 players, officials and staff for the major sporting event that is due to begin next month. Tennis and Victorian health officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The local case, in western Sydney, is likely linked a known cluster in New South Wales, the most populous state, which recorded 11 cases in hotel quarantine, contact tracers say.

Australia has halved the number of returning travellers that it will accept, to lower the risk of highly infectious strains seeping into the community, as occurred at a site in Queensland two weeks ago.

Emirates Airline said Friday it would suspend flights between Dubai and Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane by early next week until further notice.

Queensland's chief health officer, Jeannette Young, told a news briefing there was "every chance we have contained this cluster" thanks to quick work, especially in the state capital Brisbane.

A two-week infection cycle has elapsed since a cleaner at a Brisbane hotel tested positive for the highly infectious coronavirus strain first detected in Britain, a sign health officials say suggests that efforts, including a three-day city wide lockdown, has stopped its spread.

As a result, Victoria and South Australia states will reopen borders to travellers from Brisbane within 24 hours, as long as they submit to coronavirus testing once they return.

Victoria may make a similar move in coming days with neighbouring New South Wales, given signals that it has also controlled an outbreak there that emerged before Christmas, said Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

Borders between Australia's two most populous states have been closed since Jan. 1.

Australia, which has logged 15 infections hotel quarantine, has been one of the world's most successful nations in managing the coronavirus spread, with about 28,700 infections and 909 deaths.

[China] China builds hospital in 5 days after surge in virus cases (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 2:20 AM, Joe McDonald, Neutral]

China on Saturday finished building a 1,500-room hospital for COVID-19 patients in five days to fight a surge in infections in a city south of Beijing, state media reported.

The hospital is one of six with a total of 6,500 rooms being built in Nangong in Hebei province, the Xinhua News Agency said. All are due to be completed within the next week.

China, which largely contained the spread of the coronavirus, has suffered hundreds of infections this month in Nangong and the Hebei provincial capital of Shijiazhuang, southwest of the Chinese capital.

A similar program of rapid hospital construction was launched by the ruling Communist Party at the start of the outbreak last year to set up isolation hospitals in Wuhan, the central city where the virus was first detected in late 2019. Nationwide, the National Health Commission reported 130 new confirmed cases — 90 of those in Hebei — in the 24 hours through midnight Friday.

There were 645 cases, two of them acquired abroad, being treated in Nangong and Shijiazhuang, according to Xinhua.

In Shijiazhuang, authorities have finished construction of one-third of the rooms in a planned 3,000-room coronavirus facility, state TV said Saturday.

More than 10 million people in Shijiazhuang underwent virus tests by late Friday, Xinhua said, citing a deputy mayor, Meng Xianghong. It said 247 locally transmitted cases were found.

Meanwhile, researchers sent by the World Health Organization are in Wuhan preparing to investigate the origins of the virus. The team, which arrived Thursday, was under a two-week quarantine but was due to talk with Chinese experts by video link.

The team's arrival was held up for months by diplomatic wrangling that prompted a rare public complaint by the head of the WHO.

That delay, and the secretive ruling party's orders to scientists not to talk publicly about the disease, have raised questions about whether Beijing might try to prevent discoveries that would hurt its self-proclaimed status as a leader in the anti-virus battle.

[China] China's Xi Looks to Take Advantage of a Strong Economic Hand (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 3:59 PM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

China arguably weathered the chaos of 2020 better than any other major power. In the months ahead, its leader, Xi Jinping, appears ready to press his advantage, taking on the new Biden administration and projecting a confident Communist Party in its centennial year. Mr. Xi and his lieutenants have struck a buoyant tone in recent weeks, trumpeting their professed success last year in containing the coronavirus and eliminating rural poverty. They have portrayed China as a responsible power, offering steady leadership amid a global economic pullback and rising geopolitical tensions that they blame on U.S. belligerence. Signs of a healthy recovery in the world's second-largest economy have given Mr. Xi a stronger hand in dealings with countries still struggling with the pandemic and its economic fallout.

While President-elect Joe Biden has signaled plans to rally multilateral efforts to check China on issues ranging from trade to human rights, Mr. Xi has sought to offset any U.S. pressure with his own diplomatic wins. Since Mr. Biden's electoral victory in November, China has anchored a new 15-nation Asia-Pacific trade pact and struck an investment deal with the European Union—overriding concerns from the incoming Biden administration. China nonetheless faces weighty challenges at home and abroad. Many nations are growing wary about the superpower's aggressive foreign policy. Its investment pact with Europe has yet to be ratified. And it must overcome the pandemic's long-term economic

fallout and widening doubts about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines that officials have hoped can win global hearts and minds.

Beijing has shown no sign of backing down. In a reflection of its confidence, Mr. Xi's administration has asserted control along his country's periphery, launching mass arrests of opposition figures in Hong Kong this month, while flying high-frequency warplane sorties near the island democracy of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

"I think we're going to see a more defiant China," says Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Stanford University and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "A China that is not only more aggressive, but also feels more and more justified in its aggression." At the same time, China has expressed hope that Mr. Biden can usher in a calmer phase in bilateral relations, which have frayed dramatically as the Trump administration jostled with Beijing on trade, technology, the Covid-19 pandemic and a range of other issues.

In a recent state-media interview, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the Biden administration to "restore normalcy to bilateral relations" and pledged to shape an international environment that's favorable to China's interests. "The year 2021 will be of historic significance to China's national rejuvenation," he said.

"China holds a relatively advantageous position," capable of fending off U.S. pressure while winning international support by providing economic support and vaccines, says Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University. In contrast, "Biden would be running a somewhat weak government. He must first tackle the domestic pandemic, manage an economic recovery and resolve racial tensions."

While rocky relations with the U.S. remain a risk for China, Mr. Biden would likely be more discerning in his efforts to pressure Beijing, compared with Mr. Trump, says Mr. Wu, reflecting a view commonly expressed within China's foreign-policy circles. "This year, Beijing has more self-confidence.... Biden has come back, but the U.S. can't make a comeback."

Some analysts say China's confidence could herald more forceful efforts to assert its interests, from suppressing anti-Communist Party dissent in restive areas to flexing its military muscle to assert territorial claims. In Hong Kong, authorities have conducted sweeping arrests of politicians, activists and lawyers linked to the city's pro-democracy movement—ignoring criticism from U.S. and European governments.

Mr. Xi has also tightened his grip on China's armed forces, following legislative changes last month that vested more decision-making powers in the military commission that Mr. Xi chairs, rather than the civilian government. In an annual order issued in early January, Mr. Xi reiterated demands that the military be ready to wage war "at any time."

Analysts say one potential flashpoint is Taiwan, which Beijing has vowed to assimilate, by force if necessary. The Chinese military has conducted an intensifying array of aerial sorties, naval maneuvers and invasion drills near the island over the past year.

Chinese warplanes flew 380 sorties into the island's southwestern air-defense identification zone in 2020, and more than a dozen have taken place so far this year, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. The frequency and intensity of such flights have increased

significantly over recent years, up from the 20 long-range flights that Chinese aircraft conducted near Taiwan in 2017, Taipei's Institute for National Defense and Security Research said in a December report.

Beijing wants to "make these types of operations routine" so that "everyone would just accept this increased presence," says Ms. Mastro, the Stanford fellow. Even so, Beijing still faces significant risks to its interests.

Mr. Xi's hard-nosed diplomacy "has created a de facto global coalition of concern with Chinese behavior," says Bilahari Kausikan, a retired senior Singaporean diplomat. "Nobody will ever shun China, but every major economy will deal with China with greater caution and reserve."

U.S.-China relations will remain a key concern for Beijing, with the Biden administration likely to bring a more orderly and methodical approach to dealing with China on issues spanning economics, security, technology and human rights, Mr. Kausikan says.

China's investment agreement with Europe still faces a ratification process across EU member governments and the European legislature. "Is this the time to be cutting deals with China? I think it shows geopolitical [naiveté] instead of geostrategic autonomy," Guy Verhofstadt, a member of the European Parliament and former Belgian prime minister, wrote on Twitter this month. "Thankfully, unlike China, the EU is a democracy & the [European Parliament] will have the final say!"

Diplomatic spats over perceived culpability for the Covid-19 pandemic, which first emerged in central China, appear likely to continue, especially after the World Health Organization criticized China this month for holding up the entry of investigators sent to probe the origins of the coronavirus. Beijing has since granted entry to a team of WHO experts, who arrived Thursday in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. Beijing's efforts to win goodwill by supplying or donating Chinese vaccines to developing countries would likely be hampered by a widening "credibility gap," particularly after new trial data showed that a vaccine developed by Chinese firm Sinovac was much less effective than previously believed, says Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

China also confronts a world that appears less receptive to its overtures. The Pew Research Center, in survey results published in October, found public perceptions of China souring significantly in the U.S. and 13 other developed economies over the previous year, largely due to Beijing's perceived mishandling of the initial Covid-19 outbreak.

Mr. Wu, the Fudan University professor, plays down these findings, pointing to Beijing's Asia-Pacific trade pact and EU investment deal. "We don't need to worry too much about public opinion," Mr. Wu says. "National interests are the most important factor."

[Fiji] Fiji Will Lead U.N. Rights Body, Over Russian and Chinese Opposition (New York Times)

New York Times [1/15/2021 2:58 PM, Nick Cumming-Bruce, 28290K, Neutral]

The Pacific island nation of Fiji won election on Friday as president of the United Nations' top human rights body, ending a shadowy proxy battle waged by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia seeking to strengthen their influence by installing a more compliant candidate.

Fiji won decisively, with support from 29 countries in a secret ballot of the Human Rights Council's 47 members, fending off a challenge from Bahrain, which garnered 14 votes, and Uzbekistan, which received four votes.

The result puts the small, remote island nation, which has a record of support for human rights initiatives, into a leadership position at a time of intensifying competition between states over holding rights abusers to account.

China and Russia will return as members of the council in 2021, giving voice to two powerful nations that have faced widespread criticism over human rights abuses. Human rights groups say the council has been effective at highlighting many of the worst crises, and hope the incoming U.S. administration of President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. will bolster that role by re-engaging with the body, which President Trump quit in 2018.

"Fiji's victory is a victory for those who believe the Human Rights Council should be used to defend human rights," said Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch. "That Fiji's candidacy was opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia reflects the determination of these and other autocratic governments to stymie the work of the Human Rights Council."

The council's president has significant influence over its priorities and the selection of independent experts to report on human rights abusers and their misdeeds. The president is also responsible for pushing back against states that seek to thwart the council's work by cracking down on people who cooperate with its investigations.

On Politics with Lisa Lerer: A guiding hand through the political news cycle, telling you what you really need to know.

Fiji announced its candidacy in July 2020, and, initially running unopposed, seemed a shoo-in for the job. Its ambassador, Nazhat Shameem Khan, a Cambridge-educated lawyer who went on to become Fiji's first female High Court Judge, is well respected in Geneva's diplomatic community and has been a vice-president of the council. In the Council, Fiji had backed investigations into reported abuses in Venezuela, the Philippines, Belarus, Syria and Yemen.

Those positions, fiercely opposed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, appear to have prompted Bahrain to make a late bid for the post, setting off weeks of maneuvering within the Asia-Pacific group of countries to try to pressure Fiji to step aside.

Human rights activists have assailed Bahrain for repressing critics at home and for its refusal to cooperate with United Nations human rights bodies, which critics said was disqualifying for its bid.

"It was quite ham-fisted, there was no pretense even of support for human rights," Mr. Roth said, describing Bahrain's bid as a brazen attempt to install a candidate that was "going to do Saudi Arabia's dirty work."

As the contest moved toward a vote in the council, where Fiji enjoyed strong support, China publicly played down its opposition, issuing statements saying it would be content to see any of the candidates elected, including Fiji.

But diplomats and human rights groups say the outcome gives Beijing grounds for concern. China faces intensifying scrutiny in the United Nations over its incarceration of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang and its harsh crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

President-elect Biden has promised a return to multilateral institutions like the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, which President Trump abandoned. Mr. Biden has also promised to emphasize human rights in his foreign policy, but he has yet to take a public position on returning to the council, which has influential critics in the United States, particularly among supporters of Israel.

Fiji's success "unquestionably makes it easier for Biden to bring the U.S. back into the council rather than having a country with a demonstrably poor human rights record in the job," said Marc Limon, director of the Geneva-based Universal Rights Group.

Beijing has so far avoided direct criticism by the Human Rights Council, although that may change, Mr. Roth said. A council resolution last year to investigate systemic racism in the United States and other countries set a precedent for action targeting global powers.

"If Biden really makes an effort to rally other governments to condemn China," Mr. Roth said, "it could tip the balance and for the first time we could see condemnatory resolutions on China coming out of the council."

[Malaysia] Malaysia takes WTO legal action against EU over palm biofuel curbs (Reuters)

Reuters [1/16/2021 12:35 AM, Liz Lee, 5304K, Neutral]

Malaysia is taking legal action at the global trade watchdog against the European Union and member states France and Lithuania for restricting palm oil-based biofuels, the government said.

The world's second largest palm oil producer, which has called a EU renewable-energy directive "discriminatory action," is seeking consultations under the World Trade Organization's Dispute Settlement Mechanism, the Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry said in a statement on Friday.

Minister Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali said the EU proceeded with implementing the directive without considering Malaysia's commitment and views, even after Malaysia gave feedback and sent economic and technical missions to Europe.

The EU directive "will mean the use of palm oil as biofuel in the EU cannot be taken into account in the calculation of renewable energy targets and in turn create undue trade restrictions to the country's palm oil industry," he said in the statement.

The ministry filed the **WTO** request with cooperation from the Attorney General's Chambers and the International Trade and Industry Ministry, taking action it had warned of in July against EU Renewable Energy Directive II.

Malaysia will act as a third party in a separate WTO case lodged by neighbouring Indonesia, the world's biggest palm oil producer, as a sign of solidarity and support, the ministry statement said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar police scuffle with nationalist monk's followers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 2:08 AM, Matthew Tostevin and William Mallard, Neutral]

Myanmar police scuffled on Saturday with dozens of followers of Buddhist nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu at a demonstration calling for him to be put on trial more than two months after he handed himself in to face sedition charges.

Protesters, many of them monks, gathered outside the Insein Prison in Myanmar's main city of Yangon, where Wirathu has been held since November last year.

Police said they had not set out to break the protest up but had been provoked and has arrested one protester. "We were trying to negotiate and that man talked back rudely and started fighting," Tin Latt, the head of Insein police station, told Reuters by phone.

The protest by about 50 people dispersed after the scuffle.

Wirathu is known for his rhetoric against minority Muslims, particularly the Rohingya community. But he has also been critical of the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi and supportive of Myanmar's powerful military. "Although he handed himself courageously and decisively to face trial, he was not brought to court or given a verdict," one monk at the protest told reporters. He said other prisoners in custody should also be brought to trial.

Wirathu faces trial under a law that prohibits bringing "hatred or contempt" or exciting disaffection toward the government. It carries a prison sentence of up to three years.

He denies wrongdoing. He handed himself in after more than a year on the run.

[South Korea] South Korea is cracking down on digital sex crimes. Has it done enough? (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 7:09 PM, Yoonjung Seo and Julia Hollingsworth, 7975K, Negative]

Between the ages of 11 and 14, South Korean teenager Ji-o was threatened, stalked and pressured into taking sexually explicit photos of herself by men on the internet.

She joined Twitter in 2015 as a lonely 11-year-old elementary student, hoping to make friends, according to Choi Yunu, from non-governmental organization Mental Health Korea. As she interacted with people on the platform, she read about a way to make pocket money. People online would send her vouchers for snacks, and all she had to do was share pictures of her breasts.

But the exchange was a trick -- ultimately, those uploads were used to blackmail her into accepting an exploitative pattern of abuse. One man claiming to be a 36-year-old father threatened to tell Ji-o's parents what she was doing if she didn't take explicit pictures for him. Another man set up a rule that she needed to respond to his messages within two minutes or he would send men to beat her up, although it's unclear whether he knew where she lived and if so, how he had that information. Terrified of missing a notification, she slept with earphones in so that she would be woken by the buzz of an incoming message.

As a young girl, she lacked the maturity to rationalize what was happening to her. South Korea's culture of victim blaming -- even for people as young and vulnerable as Ji-o -- prevented her from seeking help.

Now 16, Ji-o -- not her real name -- is still dealing with the aftermath of the three-plus years she spent subjected to online abuse and threats. She says she switched her phone number eight times and moved away from her parents' home in rural South Korea to the capital Seoul, where she lives with her sister. She wants to change her name.

While digital sex crimes are a problem all over the world, they are a particular issue in South Korea, which has one of the world's highest rates of smartphone ownership. Inadequate laws, weak sentencing, and poor policing mean that such crimes are rarely treated seriously by the justice system -- and as a result, activists say victims feel discouraged from coming forward.

Last year, however, a digital sex crime case that bore some chilling similarities to Ji-o's situation appears to have sparked change. After an outpouring of disgust over the case, some laws have been tightened and, in November, the ringleader was handed an unusually long sentence.

But advocates say much more needs to be done to take the issue of digital sex crime seriously -- and keep young girls and women safe from dangers on the other side of the screen.

As he recovered from an operation to make his limbs longer, then-23-year-old Cho Joo-bin began trying to make money on the internet. He styled himself as a businessman in his 40s who had served prison time and had an amputated foot, and gave himself a nickname: Guru.

In September 2019, he founded a group chat called Guru's Room on the encrypted platform Telegram, where messages can be set to disappear after they have been read. That room would become the setting for the most notorious digital sex crime case in South Korea, where men spent thousands of dollars to witness -- and demand -- the abuse of young girls and women.

Cho and his collaborators had a simple playbook for recruiting victims online. They offered them jobs as part-time models, then solicited compromising photographs from them, before coercing them into making degrading material by threatening to release their personal information and images to other internet users. Cho told them to raise their pinky finger in pictures which he later admitted was a way of branding the content. Authorities say there were more than 100 victims, including 26 girls in their teens.

"Foolishly, I was confident I wouldn't be caught and I intended to make my own brand with my sexual content," Cho said in September at one of his collaborator's trials.

At the same time, he and his collaborators recruited members, offering teaser videos of sexually explicit content to try to lure them into paying for entry into one of the exclusive rooms where they had access to women and girls -- referred to by Cho as "slaves" -- who they could instruct to create sexually explicit material. These rooms were illegal -- South Korean law forbids producing any sexually explicit material.

He attracted thousands of members, some of them paid. One group member -- who is known only as Lee -- sent his personal information and 3.6 million won (\$3,300) to Cho as an entrance fee to get into the chat rooms, he testified in court, according to South Korean

non-governmental organization Tacteen Naeil. That seems to have been on the higher end for entry -- police said last year that buyers normally spent about \$1,200 to enter a room paying with bitcoin.

Lee also paid into a "slave funding account," which he believed was going to the victims as payment, but which he later found out went to Cho.

Another member, who paid Cho more than 1 million won (about \$920) and verified himself by taking a selfie holding his social security ID card, said that Cho often deleted and created new rooms. Entry fees to the different rooms were higher for those with victims considered to be better looking.

As paid users became involved in the criminal rooms, the information they had given at the start became incriminating. When Cho contacted Lee saying he was low on cash, Lee gave him 650,000 won (\$600) as he was afraid Cho might contact his wife. The other member -- who cannot be named for legal reasons -- said he remained a member as he was afraid of being threatened by Cho.

In 2019, two university journalism students alerted authorities to his illegal enterprise after joining the groups undercover using nicknames. In March 2020, authorities busted the network of chatrooms.

Dozens were arrested over their involvement in the Telegram ring. One alleged collaborator was only 16 years old. "He has been good with computers since he was in elementary school," his lawyer said in court. "Because of the lack of parents' protection or supervision, he consequently reached a trash island named 'Guru's Room' in the vast sea of the internet."

Guru's Room was hardly the only place on the South Korean internet where women and girls were victims of digital sex crimes.

Cho had been inspired by other Telegram groups, including one named Nth room, run by someone who called himself GodGod. The journalism students, who asked to use the pseudonyms Kwon and Ahn to protect their safety, said there were many operators running similar chats on Telegram -- and links to the groups could be found from a simple keyword search on Google.

A Telegram spokesperson told CNN that publicly available content which violates their terms of conditions is taken down. Already this month, more than 7,000 groups and channels related to child abuse have been banned, according to Telegram's Stop Child Abuse channel.

"Sexual violence and the abuse of minors are not welcome on our platform," Telegram's spokesperson said in a statement.

According to police, more than 2,500 people were detained last year for digital sex crimes in South Korea. Of those, 220 were arrested for alleged sex crimes on Telegram, Discord and so-called darknet sites which cannot be accessed by a regular browser.

The Telegram rooms were among the most egregious examples of South Korea's sex

crimes, and were difficult to track given the app's encryption. But Ji-o's case shows young girls are also vulnerable on widely used social media platforms.

Years before Guru's Room or Nth Room were even set up, Ji-o found herself trapped by her own personal information. When she refused to take degrading pictures for the man claiming to be a 36-year-old father, he spread her private details around the internet which others formatted into a graphic, a process known online as "taxidermy" because the victim's information is preserved forever. She still doesn't know how he got her personal details. After that, huge numbers of people contacted her. Some told her to take off all her clothes, others told her to take photos of herself in school uniform.

"Did you do everything I told you to do?" one man wrote to Ji-o, in direct messages on Twitter seen by CNN.

"Remember: You're not a human, but my toy."

Even as the demands from strangers grew online, Ji-o was afraid to tell anyone. She was scared that telling the police would land her in a juvenile protection facility -- under South Korean law at the time, minors seen as voluntary participants to digital sex crimes faced the prospect of mandatory attendance at such a center. And she was scared to tell her parents, worrying that they wouldn't understand.

In 2018, police asked to speak to her. They had begun investigating a man she had been talking to online, and found her conversation with him while inspecting his phone. They told her that what she had been doing was not good, and that she could end up in a juvenile facility for posting videos and pictures of herself as they violated child and youth protection laws.

Then, because she was underage, they called her parents. Her dad asked why she posted pictures of herself online when she already had everything she needed and hit her, she alleges. Her mother cried and fell silent. They have never talked with Ji-o about the digital sex crimes again.

"It was hell, I blamed myself a lot and I still do," she said, according to Mental Health Korea's Choi. "Most of all, I am disappointed in my parents."

The Telegram victims didn't alert police to what was happening. Nor did Ji-o.

In countries all over the world, stigma and the difficulty of going through the justice system prevent victims of digital sex crimes from talking to police. But in South Korea, the barriers are particularly pronounced.

Until the laws changed in 2020, South Korea assumed that some minors were willing participants in crimes perpetrated against them. Minors aged between 13 and 16 who were victims of sexual abuse or rape were viewed legally as consenting parties if they got some kind of benefit -- such as money -- from the perpetrator. These victims could also be sent to juvenile centers for education and protection.

Activist groups said the threat of these education centers seemed like punishment and deterred victims from telling police. The rules also meant that rapists didn't necessarily get

punished. In a well-known case in 2014, a 13-year-old girl with a mental disability who left home after breaking her mother's mobile phone screen -- as she was worried her mom would be upset -- was raped by six adults who took her into their care and gave her food. A court decided she had voluntarily prostituted herself to receive food and accommodation.

Even if victims told police, crimes were often not investigated. In the past, police found it "almost impossible" to investigate digital sex crimes as they don't have powers to adopt undercover investigation methods online, said Korean National Police Agency's commissioner general Kim Chang-yong. He wants to see police given new powers to investigate online and more importantly, to be able to stop crimes before abuse begins.

And even when cases were investigated, few resulted in a lengthy sentence. Between 2011 and 2015, only 5% of people indicted in South Korea for filming, distributing and selling porn were sent to prison, according to a 2018 paper by Korean Women's Development Institute, a government think tank.

Although producers of child exploitation images can receive a possible life sentence, the average sentence for people convicted of producing and distributing sexually exploitative material of minors was 2.6 years in 2018, according to the Korea Institute of Criminology. The United States also has high penalties for similar crimes, but unlike South Korea, these punishments are actually enforced -- the average sentence for distributing child exploitation images was 11 years and 8 months, according to a 2019 report into US federal sex offenses.

The various problems with South Korea's system all fed into one another, reinforcing the idea that digital sex crimes were not that serious and were not worth reporting, activists argued. Kim admitted police might not have seemed aggressive enough, but said few digital sex offenders were indicted -- and even fewer received jail terms. "That discouraged police from investigating," he said.

Despite that, research suggests such crimes may be widespread. According to a survey by Tacteen Naeil, 12% of middle school students and 4% of elementary school students have experienced a sexual approach online.

When the Guru's Room case was revealed, to many it felt like the last straw. It followed other high-profile crimes that had received weak penalties, including the South Korean mastermind behind the darknet's largest-known site of child exploitation videos, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail in 2019 for producing and distributing child pornography -- a charge that carries a possible 10-year jail term. South Korean authorities refused to extradite him to the US where he faced several charges, including advertising child pornography, which carries a possible 30-year sentence.

An online petition demanding a heavy punishment for Cho attracted more than 2 million signatures, well over the 200,000 needed to prompt an official response. The justice system needed to take action.

On a cold day in November last year, after a monthslong trial, Cho Joo-bin was sentenced to 40 years in prison for producing and distributing illegal sexual visual material, forced sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, recording sexually abusive behaviors, coercion, violation of private information protection, and fraud.

It was a stark contrast from the weak penalties digital sex offenders typically receive. After the sentencing, a dozen women gathered outside Seoul's Central District Court, holding a deep red banner that read: "This is just the beginning."

In the months leading up to the sentence, parliament overturned the law making minors subject to education after being the victim of a sex crime, meaning all children are now considered victims. South Korea raised the age of consent from 13 to 16, meaning any adults who have sex with anyone under 16 could be liable for charges of child sexual abuse or rape. In December, shortly after Cho's sentencing, Korea's top court finalized new sentencing guidelines, aimed at making the penalties for sexual crimes stronger.

Lawyer Cho Eun-ho, no relation of Cho Joo-bin, said the stronger punishments made people more aware of digital sex crimes and their seriousness -- and had only been implemented thanks to the victims who survived violence and reported crimes.

But many worry that even with those new measures, South Korea's handling of digital sex crimes still falls short.

Even with the new sentencing guidelines, penalties are below other international jurisdictions. The new base penalty for producing child sexual exploitation images is five years, still lower than in the US where there is a minimum of 15 years in prison under federal law. There are also legal gaps. Some countries -- including the United Kingdom -- have laws punishing online sexual grooming. South Korea does not have such a law.

And some are concerned that, when cases are not as high profile as the Telegram case, penalties may not be as severe. There also remains a lack of understanding about digital sex crimes within the justice and policing system.

Attorney Baek So-yoon analyzed more than 200 rulings from November 2018 to July 2020, where people had been found guilty of distributing sexual exploitation videos of children and juveniles. She found that judges tended to have little understanding of digital sex crimes and often did not comprehend the scale and impact of the crimes on victims. That meant perpetrators were given a lighter sentence.

And Choi Yunu, from Mental Health Korea, said victims remain afraid that, if they report crimes to police, their parents will find out. Police also need to be careful to avoid adding to the victim's trauma, she said.

"Please think of them as their own children, and understand how they're fighting on the battlefield, being chased by an invisible enemy," Choi said.

The prosecution of others involved in the Guru's Room is still going through the courts. One key player is due to be sentenced in late January.

But even once the court processes are done, victims fear the crimes are never truly over.

In the trial of another of Cho's collaborators, who cannot be named for legal reasons, the prosecutor said victims are struggling to recover from the trauma. Videos showing the abuse perpetrated against them have been spread throughout the internet.

"I'm so busy deleting videos distributed by Cho Joo-bin that my daily scars seem to be endless," said one victim through her lawyer Oh Sun-hee.

Shin Jin-hee, a lawyer representing 30 victims in the Telegram case, said they could not continue with their normal lives.

"As a lawyer, after the sentencing the case is over -- but the case isn't over for the victims," she said. "(They) continue to live their lives worrying if other people who saw or downloaded their materials would spread the videos or pictures.

"Some victims want to change their social security number or their names but many underaged victims have to get their parents involved in. Of course it's not easy for adults either. How do you explain to your friends or colleagues when you change your name?"

For Ji-o, the crimes ended in 2018, but in a lot of ways, her story isn't over. She has never made an official complaint to police about what happened to her. She remains afraid of the repercussions she could face if she tells them. That means no one has ever been held to account for what happened -- and her images and private information are still on the internet.

"(My information) is still out there, somewhere. Somebody might be watching. It could be in a year's time that it reappears again -- there is no end to it," she said.

[Thailand] Thailand's Failed Tourism Experiment (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 7:56 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

"There aren't enough tourist arrivals to save the industry that used to contribute to about 1/5 of Thailand's economy." Thailand's reopening experiment during Covid-19 hasn't gone to plan. Randy Thanthong-Knight explains from beach destination Phuket. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Vietnam] U.S. Won't Penalize Vietnam for Alleged Currency Manipulation (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 6:23 PM, Yuka Hayashi, Neutral]

The Trump administration said Vietnam's currency practices, including "excessive foreign exchange market interventions," hurt American businesses, but that it decided not to take any punitive action.

The decision to skip penalties in a new trade dispute came days before President-elect Joe Biden is to be sworn into office, and followed opposition during a recent hearing from U.S. companies doing business in Vietnam

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative had been investigating Vietnam's policies and practices related to currency valuation since October.

It was the first case in which the U.S. cited currency manipulation as a reason to investigate a trading partner under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, the same legal tool the Trump administration used to impose massive tariffs on imports from China. "Unfair acts, policies and practices that contribute to currency undervaluation harm U.S. workers and businesses,

and need to be addressed," U.S. Trade Representative Robert E. Lighthizer said in a statement Friday.

The USTR added while it wasn't taking any specific action at this time, it would continue to "evaluate all available options."

The Vietnamese Embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Imports from Vietnam have grown sharply in recent years, rising from \$14.9 billion a decade ago to \$66.6 billion in 2019, according to Commerce Department data. The Southeast Asian country has been a popular destination for investments by U.S. businesses avoiding China due to growing political tensions and rising costs there.

The announcement follows a decision last month by the Treasury Department to label Vietnam and Switzerland as currency manipulators, and USTR hearings in late December where representatives of American companies expressed concerns that tariffs prompted by the investigation would harm their businesses.

South and Central Asia

Nepal's 'COVID Rush' To India: Will Bilateral Ties Now Improve? (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [1/15/2021 5:50 AM, Akansha Shah, 4021K, Neutral]

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held talks with his Nepalese counterpart Pradeep Kumar Gyawali on Friday, 15 January, the first time since the border row. Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali reached New Delhi on Thursday, for a three-day visit, to participate in the sixth Indo-Nepal Joint Commission meeting which commenced on Friday.

This is the highest bilateral level mechanism between Nepal and India, mandated to discuss the entire gamut of bilateral relations, including the boundary dispute which only recently pushed India-Nepal relations to the back burner.

The Commission last met 17 months back when India's external affairs minister travelled to Kathmandu. Before leaving for Delhi, Gyawali told this author that his visit is aimed at restoring trust and confidence between the two neighbours.

"We want to have an open and friendly dialogue with India based on renewed trust and respect for each other's sovereignty." - Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali to Akanshya Shah for The Quint.

There existed a vacuum in the Indo-Nepal engagement after Nepal's parliament endorsed a new map in May 2020 incorporating three areas – Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura – also claimed by India since long.

Following the telephonic conversation between the prime ministers of the two countries on Indian Independence Day 2020, a series of visits came up that ultimately paved the way for the present Commission meeting.

Director of the Indian intelligence agency R&AW, Samanta Kumar Goel's visit to Nepal in October 2020 was followed by the Indian Army Chief General MM Naravane and Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visits to Nepal in quick succession in November 2020.

In between, there has also been a meeting of the joint technical committee to discuss some important bilateral issues. Meanwhile, BJP's foreign cell chair Vijay Chauthaiwale too went to Kathmandu in December 2020 on an informal visit — reportedly to bridge the gap between the political leadership of the two neighbours.

Gyawali's visit comes at a time when Nepal's domestic politics is witnessing a most delicate situation. PM K P Sharma Oli dissolved the House of Representatives on 20 December 2020, thereby pushing the country towards instability and inviting a constitutional crisis.

His move has been criticised by the opposition and the other faction of NCP (Nepal Communist Party) led by Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal, as 'undemocratic, unconstitutional and regressive'. PM Oli has been criticised for his autocratic way of functioning and dissolving the House in order to save his government just a few hours before the no-confidence motion was to be registered in the House. The matter is now at the Supreme Court of Nepal.

Gyawali's visit must be understood in this context. The good part of this visit is re-establishing and re-starting of bilateral engagements that can bridge the trust deficit.

Since this mechanism is all-encompassing, there could be renewed talks in every sector from connectivity to hydropower to tourism and trade. Most importantly, Nepal and India would discuss modalities to deal with the COVID-19 threat and assistance to Nepal in terms of medicines and vaccination.

There are said to be around 33 agendas already set for the meeting.

Many of the past problems were because of poor communication.

Oli's government had blamed India for lack of response over the boundary dispute before issuing the new map. This meeting will certainly open new windows for deeper and meaningful dialogues between the two countries. Any indication — even a deliberation — on the map row would be good signal for Oli government, which is now perceived to be cozying up to New Delhi.

However, in Nepal there are various groups which see Gyawali's visit as holding little significance. They argue that a 'caretaker government' cannot enter any new agreement or even negotiate with a foreign country. Talking to this author, former PM Baburam Bhattarai said:

""Oli's autocratic way of functioning is a threat to the Constitution. We would have liked to welcome the new engagement, but the timing is most inappropriate. How can a caretaker government deal with another country?"" - Former Nepal PM Baburam Bhattarai to Akanshya Shah for The Quint

Civil society and some media in Nepal have also been equally critical of Gyawali's visit.

In reality, the joint commission meeting has been pending since pre-COVID times. The MEA had said that India would talk to Nepal at "an appropriate time" indicating that it would do so once the COVID threat subsides.

The Oli government too has been more than keen to talk to India's MEA

Moreover, this is also an emergency visit in terms of Nepal's urgent requirement for COVID vaccine. The Nepal government is under pressure to collect the right vaccine within a short time span.

The humanitarian perspective of the visit has unfortunately not been highlighted by Oli government. Third, from India's point of view, the present Oli government has not been labeled as 'caretaker', neither by Nepal's President nor the international community.

Thus within Nepal, there is no unified voice on the kind of approach to be adopted towards India, a country Nepal shares close relation with. At the heart of the problem is the present political turmoil in Nepal that could push the country towards instability and chaos.

Even when the two governments have opened dialogues, and is said that Gyawali is carrying a 'special message' from Oli to PM Modi (that could amount to the extension of an invitation to the latter to visit Nepal), it is difficult to ascertain whether the two countries have truly put past misunderstandings to rest. Given the fierce criticisms facing Oli government at home, it would be difficult for the two foreign ministers to enter into concrete agreements on various bilateral issues, especially on the controversial border dispute.

[India] India is launching one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns. But it's unclear if one of the vaccines works. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 9:32 PM, Joanna Slater and Niha Masih, 13480K, Neutral]

The boxes began arriving at airports across this vast nation earlier this week, escorted by police and stamped with a message of hope: "May all be free from disease."

India on Saturday is set to launch one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns with the aim of immunizing 300 million people by this summer.

The mammoth undertaking is a leap forward in the fight against the coronavirus in India, second only to the United States in its total number of cases.

The effort is being buoyed by two locally made vaccines and India's prior experience with large-scale immunization campaigns. But what might have been a triumph for the country's vaccine industry has been dogged by controversy.

The Indian government granted emergency approval to two vaccines — a locally manufactured version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and a vaccine called Covaxin developed by Bharat Biotech, an Indian pharmaceutical company.

Only the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has completed a Phase 3 clinical trial for safety and efficacy. Bharat Biotech has finished earlier-stage trials on its vaccine but has so far provided no data on whether it works. Yet both vaccines will be administered starting

Saturday, and people being immunized will not be able to choose which they receive.

Complicating matters further, Indian regulators have said that the Bharat Biotech vaccine will be used in "clinical trial mode," a phrase that left experts baffled. One of India's foremost vaccine experts, Gagandeep Kang, told an interviewer that she had "no clue" what it meant.

Unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, India is starting its vaccination campaign at a moment when the virus is in retreat. New cases have dropped drastically since peaking in September: India is recording about 14,000 cases a day and fewer than 200 deaths.

The massive vaccine push is expected to kick off at 3,000 sites across the country on Saturday, a number that authorities say will grow in the coming weeks.

To start, the Indian government has purchased 11 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, and 5.5 million doses of the Bharat Biotech vaccine. Both vaccines were sold at \$2.75 a dose (the Pfizer vaccine, by comparison, costs \$19.50). If targets are met, 300,000 people could receive doses on Saturday.

The first to receive vaccines will be approximately 30 million health-care workers, soldiers, paramilitary personnel and municipal employees dealing with sanitation. They'll receive it free of cost. Then the immunization drive will target 270 million people over the age of 50 as well as those below 50 who have co-morbidities.

The rollout of the vaccine program matters not just for India, but for the entire developing world. India is a vaccine powerhouse with a proven track record of low-cost manufacturing. The Serum Institute of India is the world's largest vaccine maker by volume.

The Serum Institute will be a major supplier to COVAX, a global initiative backed by the World Health Organization to distribute vaccines equitably to poorer countries. Several countries — including Brazil, Bangladesh and Nepal — are looking to purchase vaccines directly from Indian companies.

Adar Poonawalla, the chief executive officer of the Serum Institute, said that the company would start delivering doses to COVAX by the end of January. The company has also forged deals to supply the AstraZeneca vaccine to Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Morocco, he said.

In India, health officials have been preparing for weeks — registering recipients, training vaccinators and conducting dry runs. Neither the AstraZeneca vaccine nor the Bharat Biotech vaccine requires ultracold storage, a crucial plus in a country such as India.

Rajesh Bhaskar, the official in charge of covid-19 management in the state of Punjab, said he expected to be able to vaccinate 30,000 people Saturday and to complete the immunization of the state's health-care workers within 10 days.

"There is a sense of relief, big relief," Bhaskar said. "We hope this will suppress the pandemic and eventually we will get rid of it."

The distribution effort has already spread across the country. In Chandrapur, a

predominantly rural district in central India, an initial shipment of 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived by road in a government van earlier this week.

They were stored in an ice-lined refrigerator guarded by a private security firm specially hired for the occasion, said Rajukumar Gahlot, the district's health officer. Nearly 100 health-care personnel in the district have contracted covid-19, he said. Six of them died.

The AstraZeneca vaccine will represent the large majority of vaccines administered on Saturday, but Covaxin is also a key part of the launch, particularly in cities. There remains "a lot of conjecture" around how regulators reached the decision to grant emergency approval to the Bharat Biotech vaccine in the absence of efficacy data, said Anant Bhan, a public health and bioethics expert.

Bhan said that by granting approval to Bharat Biotech's vaccine in "clinical trial mode," regulators raised many unanswered questions. Critics of the government went further. "Indians are not guinea pigs," Manish Tewari, a spokesman for the opposition party, told Asian News International.

Bharat Biotech declined to respond to questions about concerns over the efficacy of its vaccine, but it has pointed to the results of early-stage studies showing an immune response as an indicator of future results.

Bharat Biotech's vaccine is "incredibly safe but I don't know if the d--- thing works," said one expert on India's vaccine industry, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to comment frankly. Both vaccines are "less than ideal," the expert added, noting that the data on the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine showed huge variations, partly as the result of a dosing mistake.

Some experts worry that the lack of transparency in the process of approving vaccines for emergency use could undermine confidence in them more broadly. That would represent a break from the past in India, a place where vaccine skepticism is low and immunization is seen as an essential tool in reducing mortality.

[India] India starts world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drive (AP)

AP [1/16/2021 12:44 AM, Aniruddha Ghosal, Sheikh Saaliq, 13480K, Neutral]

India started inoculating health workers Saturday in what is likely the world's largest COVID-19 vaccination campaign, joining the ranks of wealthier nations where the effort is already well underway.

The country is home to the world's largest vaccine makers and has one of the biggest immunization programs. But there is no playbook for the enormity of the challenge.

Indian authorities hope to give shots to 300 million people, roughly the population of the U.S and several times more than its existing program that targets 26 million infants. The recipients include 30 million doctors, nurses and other front-line workers to be followed by 270 million others, who are either aged over 50 or have illnesses that make them vulnerable to COVID-19.

The first dose of a vaccine was administered to a health worker at All India Institute of Medical Sciences in the capital New Delhi, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi kickstarted

the campaign with a nationally televised speech. Priority groups across the vast country, from the Himalayan mountains to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, began receiving it shortly after.

"We are launching the world's biggest vaccination drive and it shows the world our capability," Modi said in his address. He implored citizens to keep their guard up and not to believe any "rumors about the safety of the vaccines."

It was not clear if Modi, 70, has taken the vaccine himself like other world leaders as an example of the shot's safety. His government has said politicians will not be considered priority groups in the first phase of the rollout.

Health officials haven't specified what percentage of the nearly 1.4 billion people will be targeted by the campaign. But experts say it will almost certainly be the largest such drive globally.

The sheer scale has its obstacles. For instance, India plans to rely heavily on a digital platform to track the shipment and delivery of vaccines. But public health experts point out that the internet remains patchy in large parts of the country, and some remote villages are entirely unconnected.

Around 100 people will be vaccinated in each of the 3,006 centers across the country on the first day, the Health Ministry said this week.

India gave nod for emergency use of two vaccines, one developed by Oxford University and U.K.-based drugmaker AstraZeneca, and another by Indian company Bharat Biotech, on Jan. 4. Cargo planes flew 16.5 million shots to different Indian cities last week.

Health experts worry that the regulatory shortcut taken to approve the Bharat Biotech vaccine without waiting for concrete data that would show its efficacy in preventing illness from the coronavirus could amplify vaccine hesitancy. At least one state health minister has opposed its use.

India's Health Ministry has bristled at the criticism and says the vaccines are safe, but maintains that health workers will have no choice in deciding which vaccine they would get themselves.

According to Dr. S.P. Kalantri, the director of a rural hospital in Maharashtra, India's worst-hit state, such an approach was worrying because he said the regulatory approval was hasty and not backed by science.

"In a hurry to be populist, the government (is) taking decisions that might not be in the best interest of the common man," Kalantri said.

Against the backdrop of the rising global COVID-19 death toll — it topped 2 million on Friday — the clock is ticking to vaccinate as many people as possible. But the campaign has been uneven.

In wealthy countries including the United States, Britain, Israel, Canada and Germany, millions of citizens have already been given some measure of protection with at least one

dose of vaccine developed with revolutionary speed and quickly authorized for use.

But elsewhere, immunization drives have barely gotten off the ground. Many experts are predicting another year of loss and hardship in places like Iran, India, Mexico and Brazil, which together account for about a quarter of the world's deaths.

India is second to the U.S. with 10.5 million confirmed cases, and ranks third in the number of deaths, behind the U.S. and Brazil, with 152,000.

Over 35 million doses of various COVID-19 vaccines have been administered around the world, according to the University of Oxford.

While the majority of the COVID-19 vaccine doses have already been snapped up by wealthy countries, COVAX, a U.N.-backed project to supply shots to developing parts of the world, has found itself short of vaccine, money and logistical help.

As a result, the World Health Organization's chief scientist warned it is highly unlikely that herd immunity — which would require at least 70% of the globe to be vaccinated — will be achieved this year. As the disaster has demonstrated, it is not enough to snuff out the virus in a few places.

"Even if it happens in a couple of pockets, in a few countries, it's not going to protect people across the world," Dr. Soumya Swaminathan said this week.

[India] India's Modi kicks off vaccination campaign, among world's largest (Reuters)
Reuters [1/16/2021 12:21 AM, Krishna N. Das, Mayank Bhardwaj, 5304K, Neutral]
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched on Saturday one of the world's largest vaccination campaigns, as part of efforts by the populous nation to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control starting with two locally-manufactured shots.

Modi, who addressed healthcare workers through video conferencing, will not immediately take the vaccine himself as India is initially prioritizing nurses, doctors and others on the front line.

[India] 'India Has Taken Very Decisive Steps' in Managing Pandemic: IMF (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [1/15/2021 1:03 PM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The International Monetary Fund chief, Kristalina Georgieva on Thursday, 14 January gave accolades to India's "very decisive" steps in dealing with the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking at a global media roundtable she said, "India moved to more targeted restrictions and lockdowns. What we see is that that the transition, combined with policy support, seems to have worked well. Why? Because if you look at mobility indicators, we are almost where we were before COVID in India, meaning that economic activities have been revitalised quite significantly," quoted PTI.

The IMF chief added that India's update as part of the 26 January World Economic Update session would be, "Less bad, because the country has taken very decisive action." She

encouraged the country to "do more" since there is "still space to do more."

In October, IMF did a report where India was predicted to contract by 10.3 per cent in 2020, but bounce back by 8.8 per cent growth rate in 2021, stated PTI.

Appreciating the economic policies, and calling India's lockdown dramatic in consideration of the nation's population, Georgieva said, "What the government has done on the monetary policy and the fiscal policy side is commendable. It is actually slightly above the average for emerging markets."

She added that India is doing better than the average emerging markets GDP, which stands at six per cent.

The IMF chief recommended policymakers to support the "fast structural transformation and cushion the impact on those that are on the losing side of it" in order to support the economy in a "more targeted manner".

However, Georgieva brought forward issues of gender inequality, where job loss in the pandemic is affecting women the most. Speaking about aid not reaching women who are often frontline workers, she said,

"Women are front line workers. They are often in the informal economy, help cannot easily reach them, so they are hit. Once people start losing jobs, who is to lose jobs first? (Again) women are on the front line. Labour market participation in India for women has been low. It is shrinking," quoted PTI.

"I know the government is paying attention, it is moving in that (direction), but there is so much space to tap into the productive potential of women and the entrepreneurial potential of women," she added.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil airlifts emergency oxygen into pandemic-struck state, vaccine drive lags (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 5:48 PM, Bruno Kelly and Ricardo Brito, Neutral]

Brazil's Air Force delivered emergency oxygen supplies on Friday to the jungle state of Amazonas devastated by a resurgent pandemic and the government scrambled to organize a nationwide vaccine effort while President Jair Bolsonaro said he "should be at the beach."

Doctors in the northern Brazilian state were using their own vehicles to transport patients, as locals sought to buy oxygen tanks on the black market, according to media reports. Desperate relatives, protesting outside hospitals in the state capital of Manaus, said patients had been taken off ventilators as oxygen ran out.

Health authorities there said oxygen supplies had run out at some hospitals and intensive care wards were so full that scores of patients were being airlifted to other states.

The Air Force flew cylinders with 9,300 kilograms of oxygen in from Sao Paulo state with another cargo expected on Friday. It said a flight carried nine patients from Manaus to

Teresina in northeastern Brazil, and evacuations will continue with two planes taking patients to six cities.

Officials had planned to airlift 61 premature babies in incubators out of Manaus, but the relocation ultimately was not needed because emergency oxygen supplies were procured.

A government plan to start inoculating Brazilians against COVID-19 early next week was in disarray. Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro said a plane standing by since Friday to pick up 2 million doses of an AstraZeneca vaccine from India's Serum Institute would now depart in "two or three days."

Brazil's Health Ministry requested immediate delivery of 6 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by China's Sinovac and imported by Sao Paulo state's Butantan biomedical center, saying it needed them for its planned launch of immunizations next week.

Health regulator Anvisa was set to decide on authorizing emergency use of Sinovac's Coronavac as well as the AstraZeneca vaccine on Sunday.

Bolsonaro, who has denied the gravity of COVID-19 and has stated he will not be vaccinated, said in a television interview there was little he could do about the pandemic as a second wave of the new coronavirus tore through the country.

"I should be at the beach right now," he said on Band TV, adding that his health minister was doing an "exceptional job."

Critics of the president said the grim situation in Manaus was just the latest example of his poor handling of the world's second highest COVID-19 death toll after the United States.

Brazil is now dealing with a snowballing second wave and a new, potentially more contagious, coronavirus variant that originated in Amazonas and prompted Britain on Thursday to bar entry to Brazilians.

Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has opposed lockdowns to halt the pandemic's spread, said the government had already done what it could in Manaus.

The hoped-for 2 million AstraZeneca doses from the Serum Institute now face delays while India decides whether to loosen export regulations as it begins its own inoculation drive this weekend, a source briefed on the matter said.

India will be able to decide on exports of coronavirus vaccines within the next few weeks, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Reuters this week.

"The policy of course is we will start the rollout in India. We have our own challenges," Jaishankar said.

The worldwide coronavirus death toll surpassed 2 million on Friday, according to a Reuters tally.

In Amazonas, emergency services were pushed to a breaking point and Governor Nelson Lima announced a 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. statewide curfew to fight the spread of coronavirus.

[Brazil] Oxygen shortage forces evacuation of 60 premature babies from Amazon city (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 5:20 PM, Rodrigo Pedroso and Rob Picheta, 7975K, Negative]

Brazil's Amazonas State is airlifting 60 premature babies from hospitals in Manaus for emergency care in Sao Paulo, a distance of 3,875 kilometers (2,407 miles), because of a shortage of oxygen supplies in health facilities in the state.

The information, published by CNN Brasil, was confirmed on Friday by Sao Paulo's State Governor Joao Doria, who also criticized Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for his handling of the pandemic in Brazil.

"Sao Paulo will receive all babies that can be transported. This is the end of the world, not having oxygen for premature babies. What irresponsibility of the Bolsonaro government," said Doria.

Private hospitals in Manaus, a city of 2 million people, only have oxygen supplies for the next 36 hours, the general secretary of the Brazilian Federation of Hospitals, Aramacy Pinto, told CNN Brasil on Friday.

Pinto said the last delivery of oxygen cylinders to Manaus hospitals arrived early on Friday, and although the next delivery is scheduled to arrive in the next 24 hours, he fears it will be delayed due to high demand across the entire region.

Authorities have asked oxygen plants and local industries to produce as much supply for hospitals as they can. Home appliance firm Electrolux said it will hand over its oxygen supplies used in manufacturing air conditioners to public hospitals, according to CNN Brasil.

Since early Wednesday, hospitals and emergency rooms in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas State, have been facing an acute shortage of oxygen.

Although state and municipal authorities have not released official figures, health workers have told local news organizations that dozens of patients have died recently due to a lack of oxygen, vital in the treatment of the novel coronavirus.

On Wednesday, 1,454 new cases of Covid-19 were reported in Amazonas and 186 people were buried in Manaus, surpassing the previous record set on April 26 when 140 people were buried.

Bolsonaro said Friday that "all means" are being made available to help Amazonas tackle its outbreak, which has been complicated by a new variant of the virus.

His claim came a day after Brazilian Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello described the healthcare system in the Amazonas state capital, Manaus, as being in "collapse," and warned of a looming oxygen shortage.

Manaus, globally known as the gateway to the Amazon region, also suffered badly in the

first wave of the pandemic between April and May, when its public health and funeral systems collapsed.

[Brazil] Brazil reports more than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths for fourth consecutive day (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 6:46 PM, Anthony Boadle, 2164K, Neutral]

Brazil had 69,198 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus reported in the past 24 hours, and 1,151 deaths from COVID-19, the fourth consecutive day with more than 1,000 fatalities, the Health Ministry said on Friday.

The ministry updated the data with 3,151 new cases and 113 deaths in the last 24 hours in the city of Manaus, which is running out of oxygen as a second wave surge in COVID-19 infections overwhelms its hospitals.

The South American country has now registered 8,390,341 cases since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 208,133, according to ministry data. It is the world's third worst outbreak outside the United States and India.

[Brazil] Brazil company requests emergency use approval for Russian vaccine (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 8:32 PM, Anthony Boadle, 5304K, Neutral]

Brazilian pharmaceutical company União Química said on Friday that, together with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), it has requested regulatory approval for emergency use of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V.

The request, filed with Brazilian health regulator Anvisa, seeks approval for the use of 10 million doses of Sputnik V in Brazil in the first quarter of 2021, the company said in a statement issued in Moscow. Anvisa officials said the Russian vaccine would have to be submitted to Phase III clinical trials in Brazil before its use can be authorized.

[Canada] Trudeau says Canada needs to 'buckle down' as cases surge, vaccines delayed (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:54 PM, Paula Newton, 7975K, Neutral]

Canada got a one-two punch Friday as public health officials said vaccine deliveries would be delayed and its Covid-19 measures still aren't working to control a resurging virus.

"We have to buckle down, this is our best way through in the coming weeks of winter," said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a news conference Friday in Ottawa. "We've seen the kinds of impossible choices hospitals in other countries have had to face when they become overwhelmed, deciding who gets an ICU bed and who doesn't. Well, that's not where we want to be."

The vast majority of Canadians have been dealing with weeks of stay-at-home orders and yet daily case counts have, at best, plateaued at a high levels.

More worrying, government officials say Covid-19 related deaths are steadily rising and may soon exceed levels seen during the first peak.

"We have yet to see the kind of widespread and sustained declines in daily case counts that

would indicate we're bringing the pandemic under control nationally," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer during a news briefing Friday.

Health officials released new modeling Friday that showed Covid-19 remains on a "rapid growth trajectory" in most of Canada.

Hospitalizations and daily case numbers have already surpassed those of the first peak in the spring. Earlier this week the province of Ontario warned one in four of its hospitals has run out of ICU beds.

Data released Friday shows Canada now has an average of more than 4,700 people being treated in hospital on any given day, with nearly 20% of those patients in ICUs.

All of this comes despite lockdowns already in place in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Taken together, that means more than 60% of Canadians are under stay-at-home orders, with most retail and restaurants closed for anything other than pickup or delivery.

Health officials pleaded with provincial leaders Friday to keep stringent measures in place with healthcare systems at a critical point and already overloaded.

"If we ease measures too soon, the epidemic will resurge even stronger, this is why measures need to be consistent and sustained long enough to sufficiently suppress epidemic growth to allow for lasting control," Tam said.

The grim forecast comes as Canada announced it would receive fewer Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines in the coming weeks. The company announced a temporary slowdown in its European manufacturing facilities.

"Pfizer believes that by the end of March we will be able to catch up, such that we will be on track with the total committed doses for Q1. This is unfortunate, however such delays and issues are to be expected when global supply chains are stretched well beyond their limit," said Anita Anand, Canada's procurement minister during a news conference Friday.

Canadian government data reveals little more than 1% of Canadians have been vaccinated so far. Given mounting problems with vaccine supply, health officials say the rollout will be too slow to have a significant impact on infection rates for months to come.

"This kind of issue is out of our hands," said Trudeau, adding, "I want to be very clear, this does not impact our goal to have enough vaccines available by September for every Canadian who wants one."

[Canada] Detained Huawei CFO enjoys private shopping and evenings at open-air theaters 'under the stars,' wants bail conditions eased (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 1:38 PM, Amanda Coletta, 13480K, Negative]

Meng Wanzhou, the Huawei executive wanted by the United States on fraud charges, spent Christmas dining in a Vancouver restaurant opened exclusively for her party of 14, in an apparent violation of coronavirus rules forbidding holiday gatherings with those living outside one's household.

Those assembled with Meng, who is out on bail and living in a seven-bedroom mansion

while she fights her extradition, included her husband and two children. Canadian officials had granted them an exemption from travel restrictions that have kept many families apart during the deadly pandemic.

Some 5,000 miles away, Michael Spavor, one of two Canadians detained by China in what is widely seen as retaliation for Meng's arrest, was in a prison near the North Korean border. When China let him call home over Christmas, it was the first time he'd heard a loved one's voice in more than two years.

New details about Meng's life of luxury while on bail — and its stark contrast with the conditions in which the two Canadians are being held — emerged this week in a two-day hearing in which the chief financial officer of Huawei argued that her bail conditions were too confining and should be relaxed.

Meng travels to designer stores in Vancouver where she can shop in private, a British Columbia court heard. She has spent time at an open-air theater "under the stars." She receives visitors at the larger of her two multimillion-dollar mansions where she lives. Among them: a masseuse and an art teacher.

Under her \$8 million bail terms, Meng must wear a GPS monitor and is kept under 24-hour surveillance by a court-appointed security firm. She has an 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew but is otherwise free to travel around a designated area of Vancouver while accompanied by security guards.

The guards are the problem. She wants to lose them.

Meng, 48, daughter of billionaire Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei, was arrested in Vancouver in December 2018 at the behest of U.S. authorities seeking her extradition, touching off a geopolitical dispute that has Canada caught in the middle between China and the United States.

The U.S. Justice Department alleges that Meng misled banks about the nature of Huawei's relationship with an Iranian-based subsidiary, effectively tricking them into clearing transactions that violated U.S. sanctions prohibiting business dealings with Iran. She denies wrongdoing.

Meng's arrest enraged China. Several days later, it detained the two Canadians — Spavor, a businessman, and former diplomat Michael Kovrig — and formally indicted them some 18 months later on espionage charges for which it has provided no evidence.

In this week's hearing, Liu Xiaozong, Meng's husband, told the court that the presence of the guards is difficult for their children, who fear that it risks identifying them to the public. He also said he worried that the changing roster of guards puts Meng, a cancer survivor, at increased risk of covid-19.

But Doug Maynard, president of the private security firm enforcing Meng's bail conditions, told the court that when it came to the coronavirus, he too had concerns. He said Meng and her entourage put his employees at risk by mixing social bubbles and drinking from the same coffee cup.

"I know I wouldn't want anyone to drink from my water bottle," Maynard said.

He also said he saw no reason to change her bail conditions. He said she had received about a half-dozen threatening letters in the mail last year, some including bullets, prompting Chinese officials to press Canada to immediately release her and return her to China.

John Gibb-Carsley, the crown prosecutor representing U.S. interests in the case, said Meng is a flight risk. He said a plane was chartered to take her back to China last May when a key ruling that could have ended her extradition case was released. The ruling did not go Meng's way.

Kovrig and Spavor are cut off from the world in separate prisons, where they have endured sleep deprivation and been barred from seeing their families. The International Crisis Group, Kovrig's employer, said he passes the time by walking 7,000 steps each day in a cramped jail cell.

China has sought to deny that the detention of the two men was tit-for-tat retaliation for Meng's arrest, but a Foreign Ministry spokesman said last June that releasing her "could open up space for resolution to the situation of the two Canadians."

Kovrig and Spavor were permitted a single call home over Christmas. For Spavor, it was the first call home since his detention. Kovrig had previously been granted a brief call to his sick father. For much of last year, they went without consular visits, ostensibly because of what China said were coronavirus rules.

Meng's extradition hearings are slated to resume March 1, when she is expected to argue that the case against her is political and that the proceedings should be stayed because of an "abuse of process." With appeals possible, it could be years before a final decision is made on her extradition.

The judge reserved a decision on her bail for Jan. 29.

Meng can have a bail hearing. But when a reporter asked Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, when the country would provide bail for the two Canadian men, he responded with what he said was a Chinese saying.

"The one who tied a knot should be the one that undoes it," he said, adding that it was up to the Canadian government to see whether it could "work out a way to undo this knot."

[Canada] Canada Faces Indigenous Push Back to Study of Pipeline Stake (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/15/2021 3:54 PM, Robert Tuttle, 6400K, Neutral]

Efforts by Canada's government to hire a firm to do a financial analysis of its Trans Mountain pipeline and a facilitator to help Indigenous communities have rankled at least one group in British Columbia.

"It's a joke," Chief Mike LeBourdais, head of the B.C.-based Western Indigenous Pipeline Group, said in a phone interview about the contract. "They are going to advise the Indians on whether buying a pipeline is good or not."

The government issued a tender notice on Dec. 23 for a Department of Finance contract "to support participating Indigenous groups in making informed decisions about participating economically in Trans Mountain and participating in the Department's engagement process," according to the document, which was updated this week.

The government also seeks to hire an individual or group to bring Indigenous groups and government officials together in multilateral discussions, according to a notice issued Jan. 11.

At least three groups of Indigenous communities in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan have banded together to buy a stake in Trans Mountain from the government, which bought the Alberta-to-B.C. pipeline for \$3.5 billion in 2018. The pipeline was nationalized to keep alive a project to expand the line after original owner Kinder Morgan Inc. threatened to scrap it amid opposition in B.C.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has said it will sell its ownership once the expansion is completed and de-risked and is open to "Indigenous economic participation" in the line. Two years ago, the finance ministry started an engagement process with First Nations communities on economic participation and "nearly all" of the 60 Indigenous groups that participated indicated that additional financial information was needed as a precondition, according to the notice.

The Western Indigenous Pipeline Group is already working with bankers for its plans, LeBourdais said, adding that he sees little benefit in the government's proposal. "I have people working in the field drawing up cashflows," he said.

"The government is committed to engaging with Indigenous groups about economic participation in Trans Mountain," a Department of Finance official said Friday by email. "The government does not intend to be the long-term owner of Trans Mountain Corp."

The government said it seeks to build consensus on the form of economic participation preferred by the communities and to identify or support the formation of "counterparties" that could represent them in a future negotiation with Canada, according to the tender document.

Construction on the Trans Mountain expansion began last year after more than a decade of court battles and delays caused by opposition from groups including many First Nations in B.C., which see the line as a threat to the environment.

Alberta's oil-sands producers have struggled for years with a shortage of export pipelines and see the pipeline as crucial for getting their crude to markets in Asia. Some in the oil industry argue that indigenous ownership is a way to both lessen opposition to pipeline projects and provide financial help to those communities.

[Mexico] López Obrador lashes out at DEA after Mexico exonerates ex-minister on drug charges (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/15/2021 5:32 PM, Mary Beth Sheridan, 13480K, Neutral]

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador lashed out at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on Friday, accusing it of fabricating a narcotics case against Mexico's former

defense secretary, in comments that underscored the fragile state of -relations with Washington as -President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office.

"Why did they do this investigation this way? Without substance, without evidence?" the president demanded at his daily news conference, referring to the DEA and its case against retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos.

Cienfuegos was arrested Oct. 15 at Los Angeles International Airport on charges of working with the H-2 cartel to ship thousands of kilos of heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines and marijuana to the United States. Facing the fury of the Mexican government, the U.S. Justice Department dropped the case the following month and sent Cienfuegos back home for investigation. On Thursday, the Mexican attorney general's office announced that it had found no grounds to charge the general, who served as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

Cienfuegos was the most senior Mexican official ever detained in the United States on drug charges. The arrest enraged the military, which has become a pillar of López Obrador's government — responsible for the anti-drug fight and a plethora of other activities, including building airports and railways. The Mexican government responded by rushing a law through Congress in December that limits the DEA's ability to work in Mexico.

López Obrador said Friday that he would make public the hundreds of pages of evidence the Justice Department sent to Mexico — even though it might anger the U.S. government. That evidence mainly consists of intercepted BlackBerry messages in which a mysterious figure known as "the Godfather" communicates with suspected traffickers. U.S. prosecutors had said Cienfuegos was the shadowy individual, a charge he has denied.

Outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau explained the U.S. decision to drop charges against Cienfuegos by telling Mexican journalists this week that U.S. prosecutors "don't necessarily understand all the repercussions of their decisions" when they charge a foreign dignitary, according to media reports.

Prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York have insisted that their case was strong. Mexican officials have argued otherwise.

The exoneration of Cienfuegos unleashed stinging criticism from Mexican analysts, who accused López Obrador of backpedaling on his campaign promises to attack corruption and impunity. The president denied that and sought to blame the episode on the DEA, hinting at conspiracy theories that the agency had a vendetta against Mexico's military.

"We believe that impunity must end, and of course corruption, but also that there can't be reprisals, vengeance, and you can't invent crimes," López Obrador said. He accused the DEA of having "little professionalism" and torpedoing the relationship between his government and the Trump administration.

The Justice Department, asked for reaction, said: "The United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the Government of Mexico fails to do so."

Analysts said López Obrador's comments were a message to Biden after an arrest that stunned senior Mexican officials and prompted concerns that they, too, were being

surveilled by U.S. agents. The president is asking Biden to "improve coordination and communication between the two countries in security," said Gustavo Mohar, a former top intelligence official.

Another former senior intelligence official, Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, said López Obrador's statements amounted to "a very complicated signal" to Biden.

"We are still in a dynamic of distancing and conflict and not of reconstruction" of the relationship, he said. "Hopefully Biden's people have the diplomatic skills to convince the Mexican government that it's important to cooperate."

Mexico is a crucial player in the anti-narcotics effort; it is the top source of heroin and methamphetamines reaching the United States, as well as a major corridor for cocaine and fentanyl. López Obrador, a longtime leftist who took office in 2018, has been openly skeptical of the "war on drugs," but his government had maintained anti-narcotics efforts with Washington and extradited dozens of alleged traffickers.

The Cienfuegos case, however, has put a chill on cooperation.

Carl Pike, a former DEA agent who worked on Mexico issues for years, said criminals would be the beneficiaries.

"The biggest threat the cartels had, the biggest thing working against them, was the relationship the U.S. and Mexico had," he said.

The Mexican attorney general's office said in a statement that it concluded that Cienfuegos "never had any meeting" or contact with the H-2 cartel, and "never gave any order to help the crime group." There were also no signs that he had illegal earnings, the office said.

[Mexico] Mexico Accuses U.S. of Fabricating Drug-Trafficking Charges Against General (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/15/2021 5:35 PM, José de Córdoba, Neutral]

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Friday accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating drug charges against Mexico's former defense minister, an allegation analysts said would further strain bilateral relations and security cooperation between both nations.

The Mexican leader defended the decision by his attorney general not to prosecute Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, who had been arrested by the U.S. in October and then sent back to Mexico a month later following a diplomatic uproar from Mexico, which complained it hadn't been informed of the probe and threatened to curb security cooperation with Washington.

Mexico had vowed to investigate the powerful former general upon his return, using evidence that U.S. officials handed over. The Mexican Attorney General's Office said Thursday it had investigated the general and found no connection to organized crime or any suspicious increase in his net worth.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said on Friday the evidence wasn't solid enough to arrest the general, much less convict him in a Mexican court.

Mr. López Obrador went further, saying the DEA concocted the case. He accused the agency of either "consciously or unconsciously" sabotaging the relationship with Mexico when it didn't inform the Mexican government of its investigation.

"You can't invent crimes, no one should act that way, whoever it is," Mr. López Obrador said at his daily press conference, referring to the DEA, which investigated a general who led Mexico's war on cartels as defense minister from 2012 to 2018.

On Friday afternoon, Mr. López Obrador, after saying Mexico's prestige was at stake, released the 751-page file of evidence provided by the U.S. It consisted of a cover letter from DEA acting Administrator Timothy Shea, many copies of BlackBerry Messenger communications and a few photographs of guns, people and SUVs.

The DEA declined to comment. A U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman on Friday said "the United States reserves the right to recommence its prosecution of Cienfuegos if the government of Mexico fails to do so." When they had returned Gen. Cienfuegos to Mexico, U.S. federal prosecutors said important foreign-policy considerations had outweighed the government's interest in pursuing his prosecution. Despite the general's return, Mr. Lopez Obrador's government passed a new law that restricts the activity of foreign agents, in particular the DEA, operating in Mexico. Among other things, the new law prevents Mexican officials from speaking to DEA agents without informing the Mexican government.

Analysts said the accusations by the Mexican leader against the DEA would further damage ties already strained by the general's arrest.

Mr. López Obrador is deliberately sabotaging the bilateral relationship on security and the capacity of the U.S. to operate in Mexico, said Duncan Wood, a Mexico expert at the Wilson Center, a Washington-based think tank.

Mr. Wood said the move to exonerate the general is likely to raise further doubts in Mexico and the U.S. about the capacity and willingness of the Mexican government to tackle high-profile corruption, particularly among the armed forces that have become a key part of Mr. López Obrador's government. More than nine in 10 crimes in Mexico remain unpunished, an impunity that has driven widespread lawlessness and record homicide rates in recent years.

"He would prefer to have organized crime groups running roughshod over Mexico than having the U.S. operating there," Mr. Wood said.

More than any recent Mexican leader, Mr. López Obrador has relied on the army for much of his agenda, from building public-works projects like Mexico City's new airport to pursuing drug gangs to controlling illegal migration and distributing Covid-19 vaccines.

"The exoneration of Salvador Cienfuegos shows that the armed forces are untouchable, they are above the law," said Denise Dresser, a political analyst at ITAM University in Mexico City.

The exoneration is also the latest signal that Mr. López Obrador will take a more confrontational approach with the incoming Biden administration than he did with President Trump, some analysts said.

During his campaign and at the beginning of his term, Mr. Trump called Mexican migrants who cross the border illegally rapists and murderers. He said Mexico would pay for a border wall to stop migration, and threatened to implement tariffs on Mexican goods unless Mexico helped stop Central American migrants from reaching the U.S.

But the Mexican nationalist leader soon came to an accommodation with Mr. Trump. Mr. López Obrador deployed thousands of soldiers to stop migrants. In return Mr. Trump didn't press Mexico on a gamut of bilateral issues.

Both men, populist outsiders, struck up an unlikely political friendship marked by Mr. López Obrador's trip to Washington last summer in the middle of the U.S. presidential campaign.

But since the election, observers say that Mr. López Obrador has been notably cool to the incoming Biden administration. He was one of the last world leaders to congratulate Mr. Biden on his electoral victory, and has offered to grant asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. While the Mexican president withheld comment on the mob that attacked the Capitol in Washington last week, he agreed with Mr. Trump that canceling his Twitter account represented censorship.

A senior Mexican official said that Mr. López Obrador's administration wasn't aiming to pick a fight with the U.S., and wants to discuss an overhaul of bilateral ties with the incoming Biden administration that takes into account Mexico's requests to tackle cross-border money laundering and weapon smuggling.

[Mexico] U.S. Case Against Mexican General Was Baseless, AMLO Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [1/15/2021 12:27 PM, Maya Averbuch, 6400K, Neutral]

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said that evidence the U.S. government handed over to Mexico against its former defense minister has "no value," widening a rift on law enforcement policy between the two nations.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office opted not to bring charges against General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda on Thursday after saying it found no proof that he'd collaborated with a drug cartel. The U.S. had arrested Cienfuegos in October but dropped the drug case and turned the former minister and the investigation over to Mexico to avoid an international dispute. Mexico had blasted the U.S. for not informing it of the probe.

The U.S. Justice Department responded Friday that it reserves the right to resume prosecution of the general if Mexico fails to do so.

The president's latest criticism of U.S. law enforcement only deepens a rupture in what used to be close drug-enforcement cooperation between the two nations. Mexico recently passed legislation limiting foreign agent activity on its soil, which Lopez Obrador said was a direct result of the U.S. arrest of Cienfuegos. In another bold move on Friday, Mexico's government released the entire 751 pages of evidence the U.S. had sent to Mexico.

"The people who did this investigation did not act professionally," Lopez Obrador said at his press briefing Friday. "We have to know what is going on in our country, who is intervening here, under what conditions, and that our Constitution is not being violated," he said.

Once the top military official in the country, Cienfuegos was accused by the U.S. Department of Justice of collaborating with drug-traffickers and accepting bribes from them.

But U.S. agents misidentified Cienfuegos, daily Reforma reported, citing unnamed government officials. In the documents released on Friday, intercepted messages between two drug traffickers identify their military interlocutor as short and fat - a far cry from Cienfuegos' tall figure with an unmistakable pockmarked face.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office declined to comment when contacted by Bloomberg News.

The capture of Cienfuegos in Los Angeles had stunned Mexican government officials, who said that the secrecy about the investigation headed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration was a violation of the nation's sovereignty.

U.S. prosecutors had dropped their charges at the behest of Mexican officials, and Cienfuegos flew back to Mexico, where the public waited for weeks to see if the allegations would lead to an arrest.

The evidence that U.S. prosecutors had provided was flimsy, said AMLO, as the president is known. The information from BlackBerry mobile phones that appeared in the documents will be released to the public, along with all of the other evidence provided by the U.S. authorities, he said.

[Mexico] Mexico publishes US evidence on ex-defense secretary (AP)

AP [1/15/2021 8:36 PM, Mark Stevenson, 2164K, Neutral]

Mexico on Friday published 751 pages of evidence it received from the United States against Mexico's former Defense Secretary, Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, whom U.S. prosecutors had charged with drug trafficking.

The unprecedented move came a day after Mexico announced it was dropping the case against Cienfuegos, whom the U.S. arrested in October and then handed over to Mexico a month later after dropping the charges under pressure from the Mexican government.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador dismissed the evidence against Cienfuegos Friday as circumstantial and accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of fabricating the accusations and displaying a lack of professionalism in their investigation.

It wasn't immediately clear if the newly released documents would affect other prosecutions in the U.S. or compromise the identity of witnesses.

The case file contains transcripts of BlackBerry messenger exchanges purportedly between cartel figures and Cienfuegos, who U.S. prosecutors have said was identified alternately as "The Godfather," "Zepeda" and "Sepeda." All of the pages are marked: "Shared per court order, not for further distribution."

The U.S. Justice Department said Friday it reserved the right to resume the prosecution of Cienfuegos, who had been accused of accepting bribes in exchange for ensuring the military did not take action against the H-2 cartel while acting against its rivals. He was also accused of introducing cartel leaders to other corrupt Mexican officials.

The case file starts with text messages exchanged in December 2015 between Daniel Silva Garate, alias "el H-9," and Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez, "H-2," who were leading drug gang figures in Mexico's Pacific coast state of Nayarit. Both were killed two years later in shootouts with the Mexican Marines.

In the exchange, Silva Garate, a lieutenant to the Patrón Sanchez, describes attending a meeting with "The Godfather."

Silva Garate describes being picked up by men with short, military-style haircuts wearing berets. He says they were traveling in three SUVs with darkened windshields, "going like crazy," escorted by motorcycles.

At one point, Patrón Sanchez tells his underling, "He (The Godfather) is second to the president ... talk calmly to him." Silva Garate later describes having a meal with a pale-skinned man — Cienfuegos has pale, pock-marked skin — and being taken to a house in the luxury Mexico City neighborhood of Las Lomas.

At one point, Silva-Garate tells his boss that the men — whose heads are also close-cut — are taking him to Defense Department headquarters in Mexico City.

Patron Sanchez tells Silva Garate, "Give him a hug and tell him it is an honor to meet him, and tell him that if we loved him before, now we would die for him, we will never hurt him."

Silva-Garate says the man was wearing a uniform. "Hey, this is the guy who appears on television," he writes in amazement, though he spells the name as Salvador Sinfuego Sepeda.

"He wants you to work so there is a crapload of money," Silva Garate texts his boss. "We have to do something from Colombia."

Silva Garate at one point says "The Godfather" is concerned about security and wants them to delete references to him, and the two agree to throw away their phones after the meeting is over.

"There's no way he won't be recognized," Patrón Sanchez jokes at another point.

Silva Garate tells his boss that the "The Godfather" told him: "Now we are going to do big things with you ... that what you have done is small-time."

After Patrón Sanchez reports that a boat leaving Colombia has apparently been caught while transporting drugs, probably 420 kilograms of cocaine, Silva Garate says the Godfather has told him "he has friends in Colombia that can help you,"

Silva Garate asks his boss what he wants from the Godfather, and Patrón Sanchez says he wants unmolested routes to ship drugs from Colombia. Silva Garate texts back, "He says that as long as he is here, you will be free ... that they will never carry out strong operations," or raids.

Silva Garate tells his boss the "The Godfather" told him that, "You can sleep peacefully, no

operation will touch you."

Sanchez Patron texts back, "We are very grateful to him, tell him I don't know how to pay him for this help."

Sanchez Patron tells his subordinate to ask The Godfather "to help us with Mazatlan," the Pacific coast resort city then dominated by the Sinaloa cartel. "Tell him it's our dream ... to be back on our turf."

Sanchez Patrón writes "He has already done a lot for me, I owe him everything," and Silva Garate responds, "Look at how long it has been since there was a raid in your state (Nayarit)."

[Mexico] Mexico president backs dropping of drug case against ex-defense minister (Reuters)

Reuters [1/15/2021 7:51 PM, Laura Gottesdiener, Raul Cortes, Drazen Jorgic, Frank Jack Daniel, 5304K, Negative]

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Friday backed the decision by his country's attorney general not to charge ex-Defense Minister General Salvador Cienfuegos with drug crimes, in a case that has roiled U.S.-Mexico diplomatic relations.

Cienfuegos, who was minister from 2012 to 2018 during the government of former President Enrique Pena Nieto, was arrested in October at Los Angeles airport on charges he worked with a powerful drug cartel. U.S. prosecutors later dropped the case and returned him to Mexico to be prosecuted, citing diplomatic sensitivities.

Mexico's government vowed to thoroughly investigate Cienfuegos' case but on Thursday, less than two months after his return from the United States, Mexico's attorney general office concluded that Cienfuegos had no contact with members of the criminal organization.

It also said it had found no evidence that Cienfuegos' wealth had increased in any untoward manner.

"It's a decision the attorney general's office makes, but one that the government I represent supports," said Lopez Obrador in his regular morning news conference.

On Lopez Obrador's instructions, Mexico's foreign ministry on Friday published a 751-page document showing the U.S. evidence against Cienfuegos, including detailed logs of alleged Blackberry communications.

The fallout from the case has soured relations with Washington ahead of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's swearing in next week. Lopez Obrador on Friday said the U.S. investigation had not been conducted with "professionalism."

A U.S. Department of Justice spokeswoman said the United States reserved the right to restart the prosecution of Cienfuegos if Mexico did not do so.

Mexico said the failure to alert officials before the arrest marked "a before and after" in bilateral ties. In December it created new rules governing how foreign agents, including the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, operate in the country.

A watered-down, final version of those rules was published hours before the decision to drop the Mexican case against the former general, in a sign that security cooperation between the neighboring countries will continue.

The manner in which the Cienfuegos case was handled by Mexican authorities sent a worrying signal about the rule of law and impunity within the armed forces, with whom Lopez Obrador has developed close ties, analysts said.

"This is not only giving them impunity but also allowing extended and deeper impunity," said Falko Ernst, a senior International Crisis Group analyst for Mexico.

"We are getting further away from the autonomous accountability and transparency mechanism that would be needed down the line to break high level corruption and collusion... between the state and crime groups," he added.

Cienfuegos' arrest in the United States followed a multi-year investigation that used wire taps to track a military figure who traffickers called 'El Padrino,' or 'The Godfather.'

The U.S. investigators said they concluded 'El Padrino' was Cienfuegos and that he had helped drug traffickers move tonnes of narcotics.

The U.S. investigation published by the Mexican government appeared to be almost entirely based on messages picked up from a Blackberry device. The alleged messages from Cienfuegos are littered with typographical errors and spelling mistakes.

One source with knowledge of the situation said the case failed to establish ownership of the Blackberry.

The DEA and DOJ declined to comment on specific details of the case. The Eastern District of New York did not respond to a request for comment.

Lopez Obrador said Mexico's attorney general's office had "acted because it considered that the evidence presented by the United States government...has no evidentiary value."

The president added that if evidence surfaces against others mentioned in the U.S. investigation of Cienfuegos, Mexico could pursue cases against them.

[Mexico] Mexico's president rips big tech flexing like 'all-powerful' gatekeepers of speech (Washington Times)

Washington Times [1/15/2021 1:00 PM, Douglas Ernst, 459K, Neutral]

President Trump has a strong ally in Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador when it comes to reining in the power and influence of Silicon Valley.

Mr. López Obrador blasted social media giants this week in the wake of Mr. Trump's bans on various platforms.

"I can tell you that at the first G20 meeting we have, I am going to make a proposal on this issue," he said Thursday.

At issue are the decisions made by Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and his industry peers to silence Mr. Trump after chaos at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

"I do not celebrate or feel pride in our having to ban @realDonaldTrump from Twitter, or how we got here," Mr. Dorsey wrote Wednesday. "After a clear warning we'd take this action, we made a decision with the best information we had based on threats to physical safety both on and off Twitter. Was this correct? I believe this was the right decision for Twitter."

Still, Mr. Dorsey acknowledged that banning high-profile figures like Mr. Trump "sets a precedent I feel is dangerous: the power an individual or corporation has over a part of the global public conversation."

Mr. López Obrador, however, sees the move as an infringement on the spirit of free speech.

"Yes, social media should not be used to incite violence and all that, but this cannot be used as a pretext to suspend freedom of expression," he said. "How can a company act as if it was all-powerful, omnipotent, as a sort of Spanish Inquisition on what is expressed?"

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Central African Republic] UN peacekeeper killed in Central African Republic (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [1/15/2021 4:53 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

A Burundian peacekeeper was killed Friday during an ambush by rebels in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, the fifth soldier killed since a rebel offensive began.

The soldier died in an ambush by a coalition of rebels near Grimari, roughly 300 kilometres northeast of the capital Bangui, the UN said, during a security mission to the town with Burundian and Bangladeshi peacekeepers.

MINUSCA -- the UN peacekeeping force in the region -- also said that two Bangladeshi soldiers were lightly wounded.

In a statement from New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the attack and reiterated his "deep concern over the continued destabilisation efforts by armed groups throughout the country".

Guterres urged all parties to immediately stop the violence and resolve their differences through peaceful means.

The Security Council strongly condemned the attack on the troops in a separate statement.

In a declaration unanimously adopted by the council, it also condemned "all attacks, provocations and incitement to violence against MINUSCA by armed groups and other authors".

It follows a month-long rebellion after six of the most powerful armed groups, who have

occupied roughly two-thirds of the country for eight years, united.

The coalition announced an offensive ahead of the December 27 presidential and legislative vote, aimed at preventing Faustin Archange Touadera's re-election.

Landlocked CAR is one of the world's poorest nations and has seen a string of coups and wars since it gained independence from France in 1960.

On Wednesday, the rebel forces mounted their closest attack yet to Bangui before being pushed back with the loss of a peacekeeper, the UN said.

On January 4, President Touadera was declared the victor, although the political opposition cried foul.

[Congo] Dozens killed, some decapitated, in suspected rebel attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (CNN)

CNN [1/15/2021 2:56 PM, Gabrielle Nina Mitch and Eoin McSweeney, 7975K, Negative] Forty-six people from the ethnic Pygmy group were killed -- some of them decapitated -- on Wednesday in a suspected militant attack in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo, according to an NGO official based in the central African country.

An armed group shot civilians and decapitated others with machetes in Ambedi, a village in Irumu territory in Ituri province, said Christophe Munyanderu, regional coordinator for the NGO Convention pour le respect de droit de l'homme, or Convention for the Respect of Human Rights.

A spokesman for the Armed Forces of the DRC in Ituri attributed the attack to the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group that operates in the region. Two of the assailants were arrested and are currently under interrogation, the spokesman said.

Most of the victims were women and children, said Rachel Taruwayo, the regional coordinator for the provincial government.

Munyanderu said that a Pygmy who was hunting during the attack determined the death toll. When he returned to the village, Munyanderu said, he found a female survivor with a gunshot wound and a two-year-old child whose hand had been chopped off. On Thursday, they reached a police post about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the scene of the attack and were taken to a hospital. The woman and child are now out of danger, said

The ADF has intensified its attacks against civilians in the eastern provinces of the DRC in recent years, the United Nations said in July. These attacks have left more than 1,000 dead between January 2019 and June 2020 and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to the UN.

The group has battled governments in East Africa since the 1990s and has ties to several international jihadi groups.

[Nigeria] Nigeria's Big Oil-Refining Revamp Gets Off to a Slow Start (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Paul Burkhardt and Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, 6400K, Neutral] A year after shutting down all of its dilapidated refineries to figure out how to fix them, Nigeria still can't say how much it will cost to do the work or where the money will come from.

Nigerian National Petroleum Corp. said it has finished the appraisal of its largest facility, but hasn't completed the process at two others. Refining experts said the extended halt means the plants are at risk of rotting away and unlikely to restart on time.

"Things haven't been looking good lately," with Nigeria's plants probably "completely out of action for some 18 months," said Elitsa Georgieva, executive director at Citac, a consultant that specializes in African refining.

The dysfunction of its domestic refineries has long put Africa's biggest oil producer in an ironic situation. It exports large volumes of crude to plants overseas, then pays a premium to import the fuels its customers produce.

Pledges to fix the facilities have been made and broken again and again over the years. For at least a decade, NNPC's 445,000 barrels a day of refining capacity barely processed 20% of that amount.

The latest effort to fix the refineries was supposed to be different to the failed attempts that came before. The company had totally shut all three plants down by January 2020 to do a comprehensive appraisal, and set the ambitious target of having them all back up and running at 90% of capacity by 2023.

"The refineries have been deliberately shut down to allow for a thorough diagnosis," said Kennie Obateru, an Abuja-based NNPC spokesman. "They can be fixed based on what the diagnosis reveals."

The appraisal of the 210,000-barrel-a day Port Harcourt refinery has been completed and NNPC has called for bids for the necessary repairs, Obateru said. The company hasn't determined how much the work will cost.

"It is when we close the bids, everything is analyzed and presented that we will know how much we need," he said.

The diagnosis is underway at the 125,000-barrel-a-day Warri facility and should be complete before the end of the year, he said. After that, the study of the 110,000-barrel-a-day Kaduna plant will commence.

One year into the process, refining analysts are skeptical that all this work can be done by 2023.

"I don't think anyone has a good understanding technically of what's wrong with those refineries," said Alan Gelder, vice president of refining, chemicals and oil markets at Wood Mackenzie Ltd. "They're probably corroding, which makes it a very difficult proposition."

NNPC reaffirmed its deadline and said there's no reason the refineries, which are at least 40 years old, can't be restored to full operation.

"There are refineries that are over a hundred years old still running, so age is not necessarily an impediment," Obateru said.

There are parallel efforts backed by private companies to add to Nigeria's capacity. Aliko Dangote, Africa's richest person, is building a state-of-the-art 650,000 barrel-a-day refinery, which Citac estimates will start production in 2023.

Bringing NNPC's Port Harcourt refinery to the same clean-fuel standards as Dangote's modern plant would cost about \$1.3 billion for the equipment, on top of whatever other repairs are required to get the facility running, Georgieva said.

NNPC is talking to oil-trading firms about \$1 billion of prepayment deals that could finance the repairs at Port Harcourt, Reuters reported last week. Obateru declined to comment on the report, but said "I don't envisage that we will have a problem getting people to invest."

[South Africa] Exhausted Nurses Toil on South African Wards Full of Virus Cases (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/16/2021 12:00 AM, Janice Kew and Loni Prinsloo, 6400K, Neutral]

A few weeks ago, Ntombizandile Ntsodo received an alert from her Cape Town nursing agency that left her agitated: A local hospital was short of 46 caregivers for the upcoming 24-hour period, a result of the resurgent Covid-19 epidemic sweeping South Africa.

"I remember thinking where are the nurses? But you know it's because some of them have caught the virus and are on quarantine," the 26-year-old said by phone from Khayelitsha, a township on the outskirts of the city where she lives with her mother, sister and young niece.

"It puts a lot of pressure on those of us on the floor and we are fatigued, burnt-out, immune-compromised and many have lost family members to the very disease we are fighting," she said.

A shortage of key workers is just one reason South African hospitals are facing unprecedented pressure from the ongoing resurgence of coronavirus cases, driven by a new variant that appears more infectious than earlier strains. Admissions have far outstripped last year's peak and oxygen and critical-care beds are in short supply.

There were almost 16,900 people suffering from Covid-19 in the country's hospitals as of Jan. 14, according to data compiled by independent analyst Sugan Naidoo, who has been tracking the course of the virus in South Africa since late April. That was about 25% higher than a week ago and compares to approximately 11,500 in mid-July, when the initial wave was at its zenith.

"I'm very worried there will be insufficient beds and in particular insufficient oxygen supplies to treat all the patients we'll see at the peak," said Jeremy Nel, head of infectious diseases at Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg. "Staff shortages are a major problem."

While South African President Cyril Ramaphosa moved quickly to shut down society when cases first started rising in March, predictions that the economy contracted the most in almost 90 years have made it tough for him to expand restrictions. The current coronavirus

surge also began just as millions of people traveled around the country -- and across land borders -- for the festive season.

The most recent measures to contain the spread include a 9 p.m. curfew and a renewed ban on alcohol sales, in part to ease the pressure on hospital trauma wards from car accidents and drunken violence. On Monday night, Ramaphosa reassured the nation that vaccines would be a "game changer" with 20 million doses on the way, though the government has only confirmed deals for 1.5 million.

That compares starkly with a rollout already underway in the U.K., which is also experiencing severe pressure on hospitals after an outbreak driven by a new coronavirus variant.

On many South African hospital wards, the shortfall of health workers means they are being spread too thinly, according to Ntsodo, who has been working as a nurse in both private and public hospitals around Cape Town since April.

"People are becoming ill quickly and we are going all out and are tired," she said. "The second wave has just been so rapid with patients deteriorating drastically in days."

"I am finding myself saying, this person is now a candidate to go over to intensified, critical care, but it's not available because there is no bed or no ventilator or high-flow oxygen machines have run out," Ntsodo said. "You have to get used to three lives lost on a 12-hour shift."

The supply of personal protective equipment for workers is more stable now than in the middle of last year, but remains inadequate in some areas and hospitals, according to Nel. "It was recently shown that some of the masks used to protect health workers offered inadequate protection when they were subjected to testing," he said.

Meanwhile, medical-grade oxygen use is surging, leaving suppliers struggling to keep pace with demand. "The oxygen delivery, supply and piping systems are far from reassuring in many hospitals and clinics currently," Nel said.

As with South Africa's initial experience with the virus, each major province is suffering waves of cases at different times. Eastern Cape was first to hit alarming rates late last year, followed by neighboring Western Cape, where Cape Town is situated. Last is Gauteng, encompassing the economic hub of Johannesburg, which is now seeing the largest increase of new hospitalizations and is expected to be some weeks off its peak.

"It's important to acknowledge what an amazing job the South African health force is doing," said Marc Mendelson, head of infectious diseases & HIV medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. "There is a lot of burnout, and mental health issues - health-care workers are under huge strain."

Network TV News Coverage

Troops in Afghanistan, Iraq Reach Pentagon's Drawdown Goal (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

The number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, about 2,500 in each country, reached the Pentagon's drawdown goal.

Nation's Capitol Braces for Violence Ahead of Inauguration Day (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [1/15/2021 7:34 PM, Staff]

Tonight, the nation's capital braced for violence. Checkpoints and barricades throughout the city and armed National Guard members patrolling Capitol Hill. With just four days before Joe Biden is sworn in, there are unprecedented shutdowns. As of this morning, the Secretary of the Interior officially closed the areas in the National Mall. An inaugural rehearsal that had been planned by the Biden team for Sunday has been postponed according to sources. Among the FBI's top concerns for Inauguration Day is the "substantial threat of improvised explosive devices" and the ongoing threat to members of Congress and political leaders. The Washington Post reported Vice President Pence was rushed from the Senate Chamber one minute before a group reached the second floor of the Capitol last week. The group was led away by Officer Eugene Goodman who acted as a decoy. Pence, his wife, and daughter were just 100 feet away. One of the first people to reach Pence's desk was Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon shaman. Prosecutors argue he should remain in custody after he left a note on Pence's desk saying, "It's only a matter of time. Justice is coming." 25,000 National Guard members are expected to be in the Capitol ahead of the inauguration.

CDC Warns of Highly Contagious Variant as Coronavirus Cases Surge, Vaccine Rollout Faces Issues (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/15/2021 8:41 PM, Staff]

The CDC is warning that a new highly contagious variant of coronavirus could lead to a sharp increase in cases. This comes as the US struggles to ramp up vaccine distribution. Here in the US, more than 12 million doses have been given, but many Americans now have to wait longer for theirs. Some of the problem is that some states only received a fraction of the doses they were promised. 20 million doses were promised by the end of December. Today, less than 13 million have actually been given. In a move meant to ease the backlog, Secretary of Health and Human Services announced on Tuesday that they will release the entire supply rather than holding second doses. Governors of Oregon and Colorado say that's not true. Pfizer in a statement to CBS News said that Operation Warp Speed has asked them to start shipping second doses only recently. Today, President-Elect Joe Biden detailed his plan to speed up vaccinations. He has been focused on his goal to vaccinate 100 million people in the first 100 days of his presidency. He plans to use FEMA to mobilize thousands of staff members to create more vaccination sites. He will also use the Defense Authorization Act to increase supplies. He will also train 100,000 new workers to administer shots.

[Russia] Russia Plans to Withdraw From Open Skies Treaty (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:20 PM, Staff]

Russia says it plans to withdraw from an international treaty known as Open Skies. It's an agreement that allows dozens of countries to launch surveillance flights over other countries' military facilities. The idea is to encourage transparency and help monitor arms control deals, but President Trump pulled the US out of Open Skies last year blaming Russian violations. Russia says the American departure seriously compromised the treaty.

[United Kingdom] Britain Makes Changes for Incoming Travelers Amid COVID Surge (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 11:04 PM, Staff]

Britain is making changes for travelers as cases of COVID-19 surge. Three days after the US made a similar move, Britain is tightening coronavirus border controls. Prime Minister Boris Johnson says hospitals are struggling amid surging case numbers. "We're now seeing cancer treatments sadly postponed, ambulances queueing, and intensive care units spilling over into adjacent wards," said Johnson. From Monday, anyone arriving in the UK will need a negative COVID test. Johnson said he is concerned about potential new variants of the virus, which may be more infectious. Britain is already under a sweeping national lockdown.

[North Korea] North Korean Leader Unveils New Ballistic Missile Ahead of Washington Transition (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/15/2021 6:19 PM, Staff]

Days before the United States inaugurates a new president, there is a new show of force from North Korea. A message from Pyongyang to a Washington in transition. In a military parade at the end of a special Congress of the ruling party, North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un revealed a huge new ballistic missile capable of being launched from submarines. That could bring North Korea's substantial nuclear threat close to US shores as well as land-based missiles easily rolled out that could hit US bases in the region. As Kim put it in a speech this week, "We must do everything we can to increase nuclear war deterrence and military capability." Some analysts say he held out a bit of an olive branch to the incoming administration by praising the 2018 Singapore summit he held with President Trump, saying it is sure the establishment of new North Korea-US relations.

Headlines**The Washington Post**

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

With Mall, bridges and streets closed in D.C., the nation prepares for a celebration of democracy mostly devoid of its citizens

Vaccine reserve was exhausted when Trump administration vowed to release it, dashing hopes of expanded access

How the rioters who stormed the Capitol came dangerously close to Pence

In Trump's final days, a spree of environmental rollbacks

State leaders say volatile mix of far-right, white supremacist groups could challenge law enforcement

The New York Times

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

New Warnings of Violence as Security Tightens for Inauguration

Biden Pledges Federal Vaccine Campaign to Beat a Surging Coronavirus

C.D.C. Warns the New Virus Variant Could Fuel Huge Spikes in Covid Cases

A Second Economic Crisis for Biden, but a Different First Response

The Wall Street Journal

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden Outlines Plan for Bigger Federal Role in Covid-19 Vaccinations

Covid-19 Strain Found in U.K. Likely to Become Dominant in U.S. in March, CDC Says
Covid-19 Vaccine Leaders Waited Months to Approve Distribution Plans
Joe Biden Vows to Unify America. That Job Has Become Dramatically Harder.

ABC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Beyond domestic terrorists, officials eye foreign influence, drones as threats to Biden inauguration
Governors angrily accuse Trump administration of misleading states on vaccine supply
Federal watchdogs open probe of response to Capitol riot

CBS News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

More arrests announced as inauguration security takes shape
Authorities say rioters aimed to "assassinate" elected officials
Coronavirus has now killed more than 2 million people worldwide: "A heart-wrenching milestone"

CNN

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Terrifying scope of Capitol attack becoming clearer as Washington locks down for Biden's inauguration
New, contagious coronavirus variant could worsen pandemic, CDC warns
States adding Covid-19 vaccination sites, but governors complain the feds need to give them more doses

Fox News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden inauguration plans prompt closing of National Mall
State Department says Wuhan lab researchers may have had COVID in the fall of 2019
Migrant caravan in Honduras on the move in uncertain times

NBC News

(1/16/2021 6:00 AM)

Biden to deploy FEMA, National Guard as part of national vaccination plan
Federal official walks back allegation rioters intended to 'capture and assassinate'
CDC says U.K. coronavirus variant could become predominant strain in U.S. by March

{End of Report}

From: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>
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Subject: State Department News Clips (1-12-21 - 9 PM ET)
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STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
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TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Tuesday, January 12, 2021 9:00 PM ET

Secretary of State

Pompeo cancels final trip abroad amid tumultuous transition (Washington Post)
Secretary Pompeo Cancels End-of-Term Trip to Belgium (Bloomberg)
Pompeo and Diplomats Scrap Travel in Turmoil After Capitol Riot (Bloomberg)
Pompeo cancels last trip abroad as concerns of violence grow (AP)
U.S. State Department says Pompeo's trip to Brussels this week canceled (Reuters)
Exclusive: Luxembourg, EU snub Pompeo in final Europe trip, diplomats say (Reuters)
Pompeo cancels last diplomatic trip after European officials reportedly snub him in wake of Trump riot (CNBC)
Holding Fast to Trump, Pompeo Angers Diplomats, Foreign and Domestic (New York Times)
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Secretary of State

Pompeo cancels final trip abroad amid tumultuous transition (Washington Post)

[Washington Post \[1/12/2021 2:15 PM, John Hudson, Neutral\]](#)

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled his final trip abroad as the nation's top diplomat on Tuesday, citing the need to ensure a "smooth and orderly transition process" over the next eight days.

Pompeo had planned to travel to Brussels for meetings with Belgian officials and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, but his spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, said the department is canceling "all planned travel this week" as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to name the career officials who will lead the department until a new Cabinet is confirmed.

The abrupt cancellation — Pompeo phoned Stoltenberg about the decision around noon on Tuesday while some of his aides were already on the ground in Belgium — comes at a perilous time in U.S. politics.

Some of the officials Pompeo planned to meet with have issued public statements of concern about the violence at the Capitol incited by President Trump as Pompeo has tried to castigate those impugning the health of America's democracy as committing "slander."

Pompeo, who often boasts of America's status in the world when traveling abroad, would be arriving in Brussels amid turmoil at home, including FBI warnings of armed protests in all 50 states, thousands of National Guard troops preparing to deploy to the nation's capital, a fresh impeachment push against the president by House Democrats and record deaths and infections in the United States related to the novel coronavirus.

The State Department said Pompeo's trip was designed to "to reaffirm the deep and enduring partnership between the United States and Belgium and the unwavering U.S. support for NATO." Besides Stoltenberg, he was also set to meet Belgium's deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

Pompeo reportedly planned to stop in Luxembourg on Thursday, but the meeting fell through after the country's foreign minister called Trump a "political pyromaniac" and a "criminal" for inciting the rioters at the Capitol.

Secretary Pompeo Cancels End-of-Term Trip to Belgium (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 12:54 PM, Jennifer Jacobs and Nick Wadhams, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo canceled a brief trip to Belgium set for Wednesday, according to two people familiar with the matter.

The trip, in the works for several weeks, was scrapped Tuesday, a day after it was announced by the State Department, said the people, who asked not to be identified discussing private deliberations. Pompeo had tweeted about his planned travel earlier Tuesday.

The cancellation of the visit, expected to be the last travel of Pompeo's term, comes as Washington is in turmoil over the assault on the Capitol by a crowd urged to action by President Donald Trump. Pompeo has criticized the attack but not Trump. Pompeo had planned to visit Belgium on Wednesday and return the next day, according to an announcement. The trip was planned to reaffirm the U.S.-Belgium partnership and underscore U.S. support for the NATO alliance. It would likely have been his last trip as secretary of state.

Pompeo and Diplomats Scrap Travel in Turmoil After Capitol Riot (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 1:20 PM, Nick Wadhams and Jennifer Jacobs, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo scrapped an 11th-hour trip to Belgium and directed senior diplomats including United Nations Ambassador Kelly Craft to cancel overseas travel amid concern about leaving the country after last week's invasion of the Capitol by a pro-Trump mob.

Pompeo had planned to go to Belgium on Wednesday for a night and Craft had planned to visit Taiwan but all travel has now been canceled, State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said in a statement. She cited the transition to the administration of President-elect Joe Biden and the need to complete planning.

"We are expecting shortly a plan from the incoming administration identifying the career officials who will remain in positions of responsibility on an acting basis until the Senate

confirmation process is complete for incoming officials," Ortagus said. "As a result, we are canceling all planned travel this week, including the Secretary's trip to Europe."

While planning any transition is a big task, other secretaries have traveled overseas in the waning weeks of an administration. One person familiar with the matter said there was another issue at play: The secretary didn't want to leave the country given the continued turmoil in the days since President Donald Trump's supporters invaded the Capitol building in a bid to halt Congress from certifying Biden's victory.

There's also been growing criticism from overseas about Trump's role in inciting the rioters and unease about associating with the outgoing administration. Pompeo had originally planned to travel to Luxembourg as part of his Europe trip this week but that was also canceled. The State Department didn't say why, but Luxembourg's leaders were outspoken in their condemnation of Trump.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin cut short a seven-country trip to the Middle East and North Africa and returned to the U.S. earlier this week. Mnuchin's return was to ensure continuity of leadership during a time of upheaval in the U.S., said a person familiar with his plans.

Pompeo cancels last trip abroad as concerns of violence grow (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Matthew Lee, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has canceled what would have been his final official trip abroad as concerns grow over potential violence at next week's presidential inauguration, the State Department said Tuesday.

Less than 18 hours after announcing that Pompeo would be traveling to Brussels this week to close out his tenure as America's top diplomat, the department said it had pulled down all senior-level overseas travel, including the secretary's. Pompeo was to have met with NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg and Belgium's foreign minister while in Brussels. Initial plans for a stop in Luxembourg had been already been scrapped due to the coronavirus pandemic, officials said.

Spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said the decision had been made to assist in the transition to the incoming Biden administration, which will assume office on Jan. 20. Since last week's deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol by rioters encouraged by President Donald Trump, concerns have been raised about the security of Biden's inauguration. Officials said the cancellation of Pompeo's trip was intended to support the transition and was not related to fears of violence.

"The Department of State is well along in its transition efforts with President-elect Biden's team," Ortagus said in a statement. "We are fully committed to the completion of a smooth and orderly transition process to be finalized over the next 8 days. Both the department and the President-elect's team have been fully engaged for several weeks toward this end, and we are pleased with the level of cooperation and professionalism that has been displayed."

Pompeo, who was criticized for not immediately recognizing Biden's victory over Trump in November's election, met last week with his designated successor, Antony Blinken, in what

a State Department official described as a cordial meeting.

"We are expecting shortly a plan from the incoming administration identifying the career officials who will remain in positions of responsibility on an acting basis until the Senate confirmation process is complete for incoming officials," Ortagus said in the statement. "As a result, we are cancelling all planned travel this week, including the secretary's trip to Europe."

The department's most senior career diplomat, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale, who is No. 3 in the hierarchy, is expected to serve as acting secretary of state from noon on Jan. 20 until Blinken is confirmed by the Senate.

The department had announced late Monday that Pompeo would be visiting Brussels on his final trip abroad.

U.S. State Department says Pompeo's trip to Brussels this week canceled (Reuters)
Reuters [1/12/2021 12:48 PM, Humeysa Pamuk and Susan Heavey, Neutral]

The U.S. State Department said on Tuesday that all travel including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's trip to Brussels has been canceled, as the agency carried out the transition work for the incoming administration of President-elect Biden.

"We are expecting shortly a plan from the incoming administration identifying the career officials who will remain in positions of responsibility on an acting basis until the Senate confirmation process is complete for incoming officials. As a result, we are cancelling all planned travel this week, including the Secretary's trip to Europe," the State Department said in a statement.

Exclusive: Luxembourg, EU snub Pompeo in final Europe trip, diplomats say (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Robin Emmott and Humeysa Pamuk, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cancelled his Europe trip at the last minute on Tuesday after Luxembourg's foreign minister and top European Union officials declined to meet him, European diplomats and other people familiar with the matter said.

The Europeans snubbed Washington's top envoy days after the storming of the U.S. Capitol by thousands of supporters of President Donald Trump, an unprecedented attack on American democracy that stunned many world leaders and U.S. allies.

Pompeo, a close ally of Trump, had sought to meet Jean Asselborn in Luxembourg, a small but wealthy NATO ally, before meeting EU leaders and the bloc's top diplomat in Brussels, three people close to the planning told Reuters.

Pompeo had originally planned to go to Luxembourg, but that leg of the trip was scrapped, one diplomatic source said, after officials there showed reluctance to grant him appointments. The Brussels leg was still on until the last minute.

But Pompeo's final visit schedule in Brussels was not going to involve any meetings with the EU or any public events at NATO. A third diplomatic source said allies were "embarrassed"

by Pompeo after the violence in Washington last Wednesday.

Trump encouraged his supporters at a rally to march on the building that houses the Senate and the House of Representatives while lawmakers were certifying Democrat President-elect Joe Biden's Nov. 3 election victory. Republican Trump claims, without providing evidence, that the election was stolen from him.

Pompeo condemned the violence but made no reference to the role Trump's baseless claims played in galvanizing the march on the Capitol.

Appalled by the violence, Luxembourg's Asselborn had called Trump a "criminal" and a "political pyromaniac" on RTL Radio the next day.

Luxembourg's foreign ministry confirmed the previously planned stop there was cancelled, but declined to give further details. The EU declined to comment.

The U.S. State Department, in a statement, attributed the cancellation to transition work before Biden takes office on Jan. 20, even if until recently Pompeo had been reluctant to unequivocally recognise Biden's win. The State Department declined further comment on European officials' rejection of meetings with Pompeo.

In Brussels, Pompeo was due to have a private dinner with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Wednesday evening at Stoltenberg's private residence, before meeting Belgian Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmes, whose country is a NATO ally.

The cold shoulder was a contrast with Pompeo's previous visits to Brussels, which is home to NATO and EU headquarters, over the past three years, where he has given key-note speeches on U.S. policy and met the EU's chief executive, even as Europe balked at Trump's foreign policy.

In 2018, Pompeo said in Brussels that Trump's 'America First' policy was reshaping the post-World War Two system on the basis of sovereign states, not institutions such as the EU.

EU officials, who say they were exhausted by Trump's unpredictability, are eager to build fresh ties with Biden.

It was not immediately clear why Pompeo sought to go to Brussels so near to the end of Trump's term.

One source, while explaining why Pompeo chose to remain in Washington, cited his eagerness to roll out planned foreign policy tasks until the end of the term and help keep the continuity of government.

For nearly three years, Pompeo, an evangelical Christian, proved a loyal executor of Trump's unconventional style.

His tenure did not include obvious successes in such long-standing U.S. foreign policy challenges as reining in the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, ending the U.S.

war in Afghanistan or containing an increasingly assertive China.

Nevertheless on Jan. 1, Pompeo kicked off a daily Twitter thread, saying the United States was "much safer" today than four years ago thanks to what he saw as the foreign policy accomplishments of the Trump administration.

He said he would showcase the results. "Over the coming days, I'm going to lay out the mission set, the huge wins, personal stories, and a lot more. Just me, Mike," he said.

The tweets have been largely seen as part of his bid to lay the groundwork for his much-anticipated 2024 run for the Republican nomination for president. So have been some of his foreign visits.

Pompeo cancels last diplomatic trip after European officials reportedly snub him in wake of Trump riot (CNBC)

CNBC [1/12/2021 3:08 PM, Amanda Macias, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo abruptly canceled a trip to Europe during his final week in office as the nation's top diplomat.

The cancellation came after several European officials refused to meet with Pompeo, people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

The snub from European officials comes one week after thousands of President Donald Trump's supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol, sending shockwaves around the world.

Pompeo, in his last diplomatic mission, was slated to travel to Belgium on Wednesday to meet with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Belgian deputy prime minister Sophie Wilmes. Stoltenberg and Wilmes, along with a slew of world leaders, publicly described the deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol as "shocking."

The trip later this week also reportedly included a stop in Luxembourg, according to Reuters.

The State department did not immediately respond to CNBC's request for comment.

State spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said in a Tuesday statement that the decision to cancel the trip was made in order to continue working with President-elect Joe Biden's team on a "smooth and orderly transition process."

"We are fully committed to the completion of a smooth and orderly transition process to be finalized over the next 8 days. Both the Department and the President-elect's team have been fully engaged for several weeks toward this end, and we are pleased with the level of cooperation and professionalism that has been displayed," Ortagus wrote.

Antony Blinken, Biden's pick to lead the State department, is expected to provide Pompeo's team with a list of career officials that will temporarily remain in acting positions until the Senate confirmation process is complete.

Last week, Pompeo confirmed in a tweet that he met with Blinken and called the meeting "very productive."

It was not immediately clear if the two discussed the deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol, which occurred just two days prior.

Holding Fast to Trump, Pompeo Angers Diplomats, Foreign and Domestic (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 1:51 AM, David E. Sanger and Lara Jakes, 28290K, Neutral] Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took his job nearly three years ago promising to restore "swagger" to American diplomacy.

He is leaving the State Department with many of its diplomats and staff expressing outrage at his behavior, accusing Mr. Pompeo of failing to acknowledge, much less protest, President Trump's role in inciting the rioters who laid siege to the Capitol last week. Just weeks before, Mr. Pompeo had suggested that Mr. Trump won an election that he lost.

And now, in Mr. Pompeo's last week in office, United States allies, who have long bristled at his threats and lectures, are making clear that they believe that he and Mr. Trump presided over the most far-reaching damage in decades to America's traditional role as a exemplar of democracy.

For Mr. Pompeo, who left his post as C.I.A. director to take on a job whose first occupant was Thomas Jefferson, it is the culmination of a tense relationship with the professionals inside what Mr. Trump once referred to as the "Deep State Department."

In private conversations, some of the country's top diplomats have described a wait-him-out strategy at the Harry S. Truman Building, as they tried — mostly unsuccessfully — to slow Mr. Pompeo's drive to enact major policy shifts in his final days in office. Those have included easing restrictions on Taiwan to spite China, declaring Houthi rebels in Yemen a foreign terrorist organization over the objections of diplomats and humanitarian aid workers, and putting Cuba back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In a few State Department offices, the occupants are keeping discreet electronic countdown clocks, ticking off the minutes until the Trump administration ends.

Mr. Pompeo, for his part, has complained about how often diplomats speak to reporters, even arguing it is inappropriate for them to talk at all — although communicating to a global audience is the role of diplomats around the world. Representatives for the State Department did not respond Monday to requests for comment.

The critiques of Mr. Pompeo's recent actions have been harshest in the State Department's famous "dissent" channel, which gives diplomats and civil servants a safe way to express their disagreement with policy — without fear of retribution. So far, there have been two such dissent cables, one signed by over 100 diplomats and civil servants, another by over 170 lawyers who work for the department.

Though different in wording, the dissents criticized Mr. Pompeo's refusal to separate himself

from the president for his efforts to whip up the crowd on Wednesday that ultimately headed to the Capitol.

"Failing to publicly hold the president to account would further damage our democracy and our ability to effectively accomplish our foreign policy goals abroad," one read.

The other dissent cable, which circulated Thursday and Friday and was signed by more than 100 State Department employees, called for Mr. Trump to be explicitly linked to the violence in public statements issued by the agency.

"Just as we routinely denounce foreign leaders who use violence and intimidation to interfere in peaceful democratic processes and override the will of their voters, the department's public statements about this episode should also mention President Trump by name," it said. "It is critical that we communicate to the world that in our system, no one — not even the president — is above the law or immune from public criticism."

Doing so, the cable concluded, "would allow the beacon of democracy to shine on despite this dark episode. It would also send a strong message to our friends and adversaries that the Department of State applies an ethos of integrity and objective standards when it condemns assaults on democracy at home or abroad."

One of the dissent cables asked Mr. Pompeo to throw his influence behind an effort to invoke the 25th Amendment to remove Mr. Trump from office. The secretary denounced the violence at the Capitol, but never mentioned Mr. Trump's role.

In recent days, the State Department deleted a page on its website on which an official description of Mr. Trump had been changed to say that his term had ended effective Monday. Officials blamed a rogue staffer for the unauthorized editing.

For his part, Mr. Pompeo focused his complaints last week on Twitter and Facebook for banning Mr. Trump, and at journalists for comparing the effort to manipulate the election results to a "banana republic."

"The slander reveals a faulty understanding of banana republics and of democracy in America," Mr. Pompeo wrote.

He also tweeted a photograph of himself, the national security adviser, Robert C. O'Brien, and the director of national intelligence, John Ratcliffe, meeting together. The message appeared to be clear: The three loyalists are not going anywhere until the end of the administration, and have no intention of breaking the bonds with the president.

And top leaders at Voice of America ordered the reassignment of one of its White House reporters, Patsy Widakuswara, on Monday, hours after she tried to ask questions of Mr. Pompeo during his appearance at the federally funded news outlet, according to two individuals familiar with the events. The action was reported earlier by The Washington Post.

But it was not only Mr. Pompeo's department raising protests. So did the allies.

The secretary canceled on Tuesday what would have been his last foreign trip. The itinerary already had been shortened, with an initial cancellation of a planned stop in Luxembourg after its foreign minister, Jean Asselborn, called Mr. Trump a "criminal" and a "political pyromaniac" in an interview for feeding the rioting at the Capitol.

The State Department had then said he still was traveling to Brussels "to reaffirm the deep and enduring partnership between the United States and Belgium and the unwavering U.S. support for NATO." But that stop, too, was canceled.

Instead, what most North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies will remember about the Trump presidency was the president's episodic threats to pull out of the alliance.

Since becoming secretary of state in April 2018, Mr. Pompeo has become Mr. Trump's most steadfast and outwardly loyal national security official. Until Friday, when he met for the first time with Antony J. Blinken, Mr. Biden's choice as the next secretary of state, Mr. Pompeo had mostly avoided directly discussing the election results.

At one point, just days after the vote, he cast doubt on the results and predicted "a smooth transition to a second Trump administration." It was not clear if he was joking.

Mr. Pompeo came late to his alliance with Mr. Trump: In March 2016 he warned that Mr. Trump, then a candidate, would become "an authoritarian president who ignored our Constitution." But his shift to Mr. Trump was total, a reflection, many believe, of his hopes to inherit the Trump base if Mr. Pompeo, a Californian who moved to Kansas, runs for president in 2024.

Mr. Pompeo's allies reject the criticisms from the State Department officials, noting that he called for the prosecution of people who participated in the violent protest. "America is better than what we saw today at a place where I served as a member of Congress and saw firsthand democracy at its best," Mr. Pompeo said.

But Mr. Pompeo's unwillingness to acknowledge that Mr. Trump was trying to overturn an election in which there was no evidence of widespread fraud sealed the view about the administration around the world — as one that protests election manipulation everywhere but home.

"Trump inherited a set of relationships, alliances and institutions that, however imperfect, had for 75 years created a context in which great-power conflict had been avoided, democracy expanded, and wealth and living standards increased," wrote Richard N. Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a member of the internationalist wing of the Republican Party that Mr. Pompeo dismissed.

"Embracing a blend of 'America first' nationalism, unilateralism and isolationism, Trump did what he could to disrupt many of these relationships and arrangements without putting anything better in their place," Mr. Haass wrote.

"It will be difficult — if not impossible — to repair this damage anytime soon," he concluded.

Others think repair is possible.

"Can our soft power recover from these blows?" Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor who served as the head of the National Intelligence Council and as a senior defense official, wrote in recent days. "We have done so before. Our country has serious problems, but it also has a capacity for resilience and reform that has rescued us in the past."

Pompeo Says History Will Reflect Trump's 'Good Work' (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 8:48 AM, Jordan Fabian, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo predicted that President Donald Trump's legacy will not be defined by the deadly riots at the U.S. Capitol incited by the president in a bid to overturn his loss in the November election.

"History will reflect on the good work that this president and our administration has done," Pompeo said Tuesday in an interview on the conservative Hugh Hewitt Show. "Those actions – the actual things that happened – will be reflected in a way that shows there was good work done on behalf of the American people."

Trump's role in instigating a mob of his supporters to march on the Capitol triggered a major backlash from Republicans and Democrats in Congress as well as major corporations. Two cabinet secretaries resigned, citing the violence at the Capitol. But Pompeo and other top national security officials intend to remain in their jobs for the final week of Trump's term.

"Look, what happened Wednesday was terrible. And I have said repeatedly that those folks who engaged in this activity need to be identified, prosecuted and they are criminals and ought to be treated as such," Pompeo said.

Pompeo did not criticize Trump for his role in encouraging his supporters to march on the Capitol.

VOA reporter demoted after asking Pompeo if he regrets saying Trump would have a second term (The Hill)

The Hill [1/12/2021 10:35 AM, Lexi Lonas, Neutral]

Voice of America's (VOA) White House reporter has been reassigned after asking Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday if he regretted saying President Trump would begin a second term in January.

Pompeo ignored questions from VOA reporter Patsy Widakuswara after his speech criticizing the government-funded outlet's reporting on the state of America. Widakuswara asked Pompeo about what he was doing to help fix the country's reputation and if he regretted saying Trump would have a second term after the election was called for President-elect Joe Biden in November.

Widakuswara was later taken off the White House beat by VOA Director Robert Reilly, The Washington Post reported.

The move sparked backlash among fellow journalists.

"VOA's reassignment of Patsy Widakuswara for doing her job, asking questions, is an

affront to the very ideals Secretary of State Pompeo discussed in his speech Monday," said Zeke Miller, president of the White House Correspondents' Association, on behalf of the association's board.

Miller said Widakuswara was supposed to be a member of Tuesday's travel pool on Air Force One before she was reassigned.

In Pompeo's first public speech since last week's deadly attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters, he touted American exceptionalism and said the VOA was "demeaning America."

On Nov. 10, after the election was called by The Associated Press and all major news networks, Pompeo was asked whether the State Department was prepared to engage with Biden's transition team.

"There will be a smooth transition to a second Trump administration," Pompeo replied.

VOA employees filed a whistleblower complaint ahead of Pompeo's speech on Monday, saying he would use it to "disseminate political propaganda in the waning days of the Trump administration."

"I read that some VOA employees didn't want me to speak here today. I'm sure it was only a handful," Pompeo said in response to the whistleblower complaint.

The speech was broadcast on VOA's 47 foreign language channels and video streams. Pompeo talked in front of just a few VOA employees due to COVID-19 restrictions.

This isn't the first time the VOA and its parent organization, the U.S. Agency for Global Media, have come under public scrutiny. The appointment of Michael Pack to head the VOA parent organization sparked bipartisan criticism due to the conservative filmmaker's decision to ignore a subpoena and decline to testify before Congress about controversies such as stopping the funding of the U.S. Open Technology Fund.

Voice of America reporter reassigned for Pompeo questions (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 4:31 PM, David Bauder, Neutral]

The White House reporter for Voice of America was abruptly pulled from her beat after trying to question Secretary of State Mike Pompeo following a speech he gave at the government agency this week.

Pompeo's speech and the demotion of Patsy Widakuswara led to an angry phone meeting between journalists and managers Tuesday that typified some of the tensions at the agency during President Donald Trump's administration.

Founded during World War II and run by the U.S. Agency for Global Media, Voice of America broadcasts news from the United States to countries around the world. The administration has sought to have VOA better reflect its messages, while journalists there have taken pride in their independence.

In his speech on Monday, Pompeo said that "it's not fake news for you to broadcast that this is the greatest nation in the history of the world." He said he backed their role as journalists, but said the agency was not "Voice of America" and that its broadcasts had too often demeaned the country.

After speaking, he engaged in a brief question and answer session with VOA's new director, Robert Reilly.

Apparently unsatisfied with the questions put to Pompeo, Widikuswara shouted her own as he was leaving. "Mr. Secretary, what are you doing to repair the United States' reputation around the world?" she asked, in reference to last week's riot at the U.S. Capitol, according to a tape of the encounter she later tweeted.

When he didn't answer, she asked, "Mr. Secretary, do you regret saying there will be a second Trump administration?"

Pompeo walked away without acknowledging her.

"It is my job," Widikuswara tweeted. She declined comment when reached by The Associated Press.

The Pompeo meeting itself was the subject of controversy among journalists there, particularly during the pandemic, and because they weren't allowed to ask questions, although some were submitted to Reilly in writing.

After Pompeo left, Widikuswara asked Reilly why he didn't ask "any of the questions that we want to know about," according to a recording of the encounter.

Reilly asked who Widikuswara was and her job, and told her, "you obviously don't know how to behave."

After she told him she was paid to ask questions, Reilly said that she was "out of order."

Later Monday evening, Widikuswara informed the White House Correspondents Association that she was no longer able to go on President Donald Trump's trip to Texas, where she was supposed to be the radio pool reporter.

Through a spokeswoman, the U.S. Agency for Global Media said Tuesday that it did not comment on personnel matters.

The White House Correspondents Association, in a statement by its president, Zeke Miller, accused the Trump administration of committing an assault on the First Amendment.

"The move, mere hours before Widikuswara was to fly with the president as a member of the travel pool on Air Force One, harms the interests of all Americans who depend on the free press to learn about the actions of the government and gives comfort to efforts to restrict press freedom around the world," Miller said.

During a morning editorial meeting on Tuesday, some VOA journalists confronted

management about whether Reilly and his boss, Agency for Global Media head Michael Pack, had let Pompeo undermine their independence as reporters, according to a person who listened to the call and spoke under condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to speak to the press.

Voice of America reporter reassigned after asking Pompeo about Capitol riot (NBC News)

NBC News [1/12/2021 9:44 AM, Dan De Luce, 4998K, Neutral]

A Voice of America reporter has been reassigned and taken off the White House beat after she tried to ask questions of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at an event at VOA headquarters, according to two fellow journalists at the organization.

Patsy Widakuswara, who has covered the White House for VOA since 2018, shouted questions at Pompeo after he gave a speech Monday and sat for a question and answer session carried out by VOA director Robert Reilly.

Reilly, a former VOA director and conservative commentator, was named last month to lead the broadcaster by Michael Pack, the head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media that oversees VOA and other government-funded media outlets. Pack has presided over an upheaval at the agency, marked by firings of senior managers, court battles and bipartisan criticism from Congress and condemnation by press freedom groups.

Widakuswara could be heard trying to ask a question at the end of the live broadcast of Pompeo's appearance, and she again tried to ask him questions as he left the VOA building in Washington.

In a video posted on her Twitter account, Widakuswara can be heard asking Pompeo what he is doing to repair the U.S. reputation after last week's storming of the Capitol by a pro-Trump mob and if he regrets saying after the election that there would be a second Trump term.

Pompeo did not answer her questions as he walked out, according to the video.

Widakuswara was removed from her White House assignment later on Monday and was supposed to be the radio pool reporter on Air Force One for a scheduled trip Tuesday. VOA ordered her not to go on the trip, two journalists at VOA familiar with the matter told NBC News.

A VOA spokesperson said the broadcaster does not comment on internal personnel matters. Widakuswara did not immediately respond to a request for comment about her reassignment, which was first reported by NPR and the Washington Post.

Pompeo had come to the defense of Pack in his speech on Monday, expressing gratitude for his leadership and saying VOA had lost its way by being overly critical in its coverage of America for foreign audiences.

"Its broadcasts became less about telling the truth about America, and too often about demeaning America," Pompeo said in his speech, without offering examples.

"Voice of America has lost its voice, but it's on the road back," he said.

Members of Congress and current and former employees at VOA and other U.S.-funded broadcasters, including Radio Free Asia and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, say Pack has launched investigations of journalists and sought to turn the outlets into a propaganda vehicle for Trump.

A federal judge ruled against Pack in November, effectively banning him from making personnel decisions at the media outlets or interfering in editorial operations. A Washington D.C. Superior Court judge in October ruled that Pack did not have the authority to oust the management of a U.S.-funded non-profit, the Open Technology Fund, that develops anti-censorship software and apps used by civil society groups and journalists in repressive countries.

WHCA: Reassignment of VOA reporter who questioned Pompeo an 'assault on the First Amendment' (Politico)

Politico [1/12/2021 10:39 AM, Ben Leonard, Neutral]

The White House Correspondents' Association on Tuesday condemned Voice of America's move to reassign a White House reporter who questioned Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday after a speech.

The taxpayer-funded media organization reassigned Patsy Widakuswara after she asked Pompeo if he regretted saying there will be a second Trump administration, WHCA President Zeke Miller, said in a statement. Widakuswara also asked Pompeo what he was doing to improve the United States' reputation. Pompeo did not respond to Widakuswara's questions in a video she posted.

Miller said the reassignment gave "comfort" to attempts to inhibit freedom of the press.

"At a moment when the world already has watched an assault on our democratic institutions, the Trump administration has chosen to send another message — with an assault on the First Amendment," Miller said in the statement. "The move, mere hours before Widakuswara was to fly with the president as a member of the travel pool on Air Force One, harms the interests of all Americans who depend on the free press to learn about the actions of their government and gives comfort to efforts to restrict press freedom around the world."

A VOA spokesperson declined to respond to the WHCA statement, saying the organization "does not comment on internal personnel matters."

Pompeo was the subject of significant criticism in the aftermath of last November's presidential election, when he promised the State Department would facilitate "a smooth transition to a second Trump administration" after the race had been called for President-elect Joe Biden.

Pompeo's speech Monday at Voice of America's headquarters in Washington on "Reclaiming America's Voice for Freedom" included remarks that VOA's mission was to be

"accurate, objective, and comprehensive."

"Your mission is to promote democracy, freedom, and American values all across the world," Pompeo said. "It's a U.S. taxpayer-funded institution aimed squarely at that. Indeed, this is what sets VOA apart from MSNBC and Fox News and the like."

"It is not fake news for you to broadcast that this is the greatest nation in the history of the world and the greatest nation that civilization has ever known," Pompeo said.

[Iran] Pompeo Says Iran Is New Base for Al Qaeda, but Offers Little Proof (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 3:24 PM, Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes, Neutral]

Al Qaeda's new base of operations is in Iran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday, using his last days in office to tie together two of what he called the world's greatest terrorism threats but offering no underlying intelligence as evidence.

His conclusions were quickly tempered, and even contradicted, by some current and former American officials who said there was little new intelligence to suggest that Iran was any kind of active headquarters, much less a hub where Al Qaeda's leaders can direct operations with the support of the government in Tehran.

Mr. Pompeo, who was President Trump's first C.I.A. director for a year, called Iran "the new Afghanistan" for Qaeda militants. He described the ties between Tehran and Qaeda leaders in much starker terms than what most counterterrorism officials view as a very complicated relationship.

"They are partners in terrorism, partners in hate," Mr. Pompeo told an audience at the National Press Club in Washington, where he did not take questions from journalists afterward.

"The time is now for America and all free nations to crush the Iran-Al Qaeda axis," he said, crediting the Trump administration for making progress on that front.

Mr. Pompeo spoke alternately about Al Qaeda's "new home base" and a "new operational headquarters" in Tehran, bewildering counterterrorism officials, who said there was no evidence for his assertions. Some said his comments appeared to represent his own analytic conclusions, rather than those of the United States intelligence community.

Mr. Pompeo cited a "sea change" in the ties between Sunni-led Al Qaeda and Shiite Iran after 2015, when he said the clerical government in Tehran had allowed the terrorist network's senior operatives to centralize inside their borders.

He said Iran had given travel documents, identification cards and passports to Qaeda militants and allowed them to move freely around the country. He also confirmed for the first time a New York Times report in November that Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who went by the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was assassinated in Tehran in August.

At some point before Mr. al-Masri's death, the C.I.A. concluded that he and another senior Qaeda leader in Iran, Saif al-Adl, reorganized Al Qaeda's global management structure and placed a renewed priority on plotting attacks, according to a senior State Department official who briefed reporters after Mr. Pompeo's speech. The official would not give a date or approximate time frame for the C.I.A. assessment, saying only that it had happened after 2015 and was sent to the State Department in the past week.

Other American officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence said the confirmation of the al-Masri assassination was the core of any new or specific information that Mr. Pompeo revealed on Tuesday.

But it gave the secretary of state yet another platform to criticize Iran — a mainstay of his policies. That prompted swift pushback, including from Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, who on Twitter accused Mr. Pompeo of "pathetically ending his disastrous career with more warmongering lies."

Much of Mr. Pompeo's speech, some American officials cautioned, represented an inflated rehash of information about the ties between Al Qaeda and Iran that has long been known.

"The relationship between Al Qaeda and Iran is far more complicated than the picture laid out by Secretary of State Pompeo," said Colin P. Clarke, a counterterrorism analyst at the Soufan Group, a New York-based security consulting firm.

Mr. Clarke said Mr. Pompeo's characterizations obfuscated important details about the differences in ideology, target preferences and other critical factors between Iran and Al Qaeda.

Analysts also pointed out that even as Mr. Pompeo heralded a new dawn for Al Qaeda, in March he had dismissed Al Qaeda's significance in arguing why the United States should support a peace deal with the Taliban that called for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.

"Al Qaeda is a shadow of its former self," Mr. Pompeo said then.

It is true that Iran has consistently and unconvincingly denied housing Qaeda officials.

Terrorism experts have suggested that Tehran allowed Qaeda officials to remain in Iran after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as insurance that the group would not conduct operations in the country. American counterterrorism officials believe Iran may have allowed them to stay to run operations against the United States, a common adversary.

Bahram Ghasemi, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman at the time, said in 2018 that because of Iran's long, porous border with Afghanistan, some Qaeda members had entered Iran, but they had been detained and returned to their home countries.

Osama bin Laden's son Hamza bin Laden and other members of his family were freed by Iran in 2011 in exchange for an Iranian diplomat abducted in Pakistan. White House officials said last year that Hamza bin Laden had been killed in a counterterrorism operation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Mr. al-Masri was one of the few high-ranking members of the organization to survive the American hunt for the perpetrators of 9/11 and other attacks. When he and other Qaeda leaders fled to Iran, they were initially kept under house arrest.

In 2015, Iran announced a deal with Al Qaeda in which it released five of the organization's leaders, including Mr. al-Masri, in exchange for an Iranian diplomat who had been abducted in Yemen.

In his speech, Mr. Pompeo said surviving deputies to Al Qaeda's spiritual leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, were "living a normal life" in Tehran. He said the Iranian government was allowing Qaeda militants to communicate with one another, raise funds and carry out other operational functions that were previously done from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He announced new sanctions against two Iranian-based Qaeda officials — Muhammad Abbatay, who is also known as Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, and Sultan Yusuf Hasan — and three leaders of a Kurdish offshoot of Al Qaeda who operate on the Iraq-Iran border.

Mr. Pompeo also announced a \$7 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Mr. al-Maghrebi, who is Mr. Zawahri's son-in-law. State Department officials would not comment on Mr. Zawahri's whereabouts, including whether he was in Iran.

[Iran] Pompeo Accuses Iran of Allowing al Qaeda to Set Up Headquarters (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 2:06 PM, Michael R. Gordon, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of expanding its ties with al Qaeda by allowing the terrorist group to establish a new headquarters on its territory.

Mr. Pompeo said in a speech on Tuesday that Tehran had permitted al Qaeda to establish an "operational headquarters" on the condition that its operatives abide by the regime's rules governing its activities inside the country.

He added that senior deputies to Ayman al Zawahiri, the Egyptian terrorist who assumed leadership of the group following the killing of Osama bin Laden by Navy SEALs, were in the country today.

Mr. Pompeo's comments are the latest in a series of statements and actions the Trump administration has taken in recent days to defend its foreign policy and potentially constrain the incoming Biden administration's running room.

Mr. Pompeo said he was speaking to alert Americans to what he called an Iran-al Qaeda axis that the world needed to recognize, and he announced sanctions on two Iran-based al Qaeda leaders.

"Let's not lie to the American people about Iranian 'moderation' and pretend appeasement will work," he said.

The allegation that Iran had maintained ties to al Qaeda isn't new and was noted by the

9/11 Commission established by Congress to investigate the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York. The relationship was also noted by the Obama administration, which in 2011 accused Tehran of sending money and recruits to Pakistan, where al Qaeda was operating in the country's lawless tribal regions.

Neither the Trump nor the Obama administrations has seen the relationship as an obstacle to negotiations with Tehran in an effort to curtail Iran's nuclear program.

Mr. Pompeo, however, said that the relationship had grown substantially since 2015, when Iran gave al Qaeda greater freedom of movement under Tehran's supervision. Iranian security organizations, he added, have provided al Qaeda operatives with travel documents, passports and identity cards that have enabled its activities.

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, said that much of Mr. Pompeo's assertions weren't surprising.

"The timing for me is curious," Mr. Hoffman said. "This administration has repeatedly maintained that the threat from al Qaeda has been diminished. Has the relationship between Iran and al Qaeda been strengthened and increased? Yes, that is possible, but Iran has always been complacent about al Qaeda."

Mr. Pompeo confirmed that al Qaeda's second-ranking figure, Abu Muhammed al-Masri, died in August. While Mr. Pompeo didn't volunteer the circumstances of his death, he cited a report in the New York Times that al-Masri has been shot to death in Tehran.

Mr. Pompeo said there was no evidence that Iran had foreknowledge of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, but added that at least eight of the 9/11 hijackers traveled through Iran between October 2000 and February 2001.

A spokesman for Iran's mission to the United Nations didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

[Iran] Pompeo Confirms Death of Al-Qaeda's No. 2 in Tehran Last August (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 10:46 AM, Nick Wadhams, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo publicly confirmed for the first time that Al-Qaeda's second in command was shot to death on the streets of Tehran last August, as he gave a speech that sought to highlight Iran's links to the terror group.

Pompeo didn't say who was responsible for the Aug. 7 assassination of Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, also known as Abu Muhammad al-Masri, though the New York Times reported in November that Israeli agents carried out the job at the behest of the U.S. He was on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list and had been indicted over U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

The top U.S. diplomat disclosed Abdullah's death at the start of a speech that was intended to ratchet up even more pressure on Iran as the Trump administration winds down, and to make it harder for the incoming Biden administration to re-enter a nuclear deal with the

country's leaders.

"Al-Qaeda has a new home base: it is the Islamic Republic of Iran," Pompeo said on Tuesday. "We ignore this Iran-Al Qaeda nexus at our own peril."

Pompeo said he was publicly disclosing other information for the first time to show that the U.S. now believes Iran, which once closely monitored al-Qaeda operatives in the country, is giving them more freedom of movement and allowing it to establish an operational headquarters. He said that's given the group new time and resources to fundraise and plot new attacks.

"Al-Qaeda now has time, because they're inside Iran they have money," Pompeo said. "They now have new tools for terror."

[Iran] Pompeo warns Iran is new 'home base' for al Qaeda (The Hill)

The Hill [1/12/2021 12:22 PM, Laura Kelly, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday charged Iran with aiding and abetting al Qaeda, warning that the partnership poses a "grave threat" to international security and safety of Americans at home.

The secretary made his remarks in a speech at the National Press Club less than a week after a mob attacked the U.S. Capitol as lawmakers were certifying the Electoral College count for the presidential election.

Pompeo has condemned the violence by the mob, though he has avoided criticism of President Trump, who has widely been accused of inciting it.

The secretary focused his remarks on laying out the connection between Iran, which the U.S. lists as a state sponsor of terrorism, and al Qaeda, the group responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The secretary's speech served as a warning to the incoming Biden administration against rapprochement and engagement with Iran.

"Since 2015, Iran has also given al Qaeda leaders greater freedom of movement inside of Iran under their supervision," Pompeo said.

"As a result of this assistance, al Qaeda has centralized its leadership inside of Iran. Ayman al-Zawahiri's deputies are there today, and frankly, they're living a normal al Qaeda life," he said, referring to the current leader of al Qaeda.

"The time is now for America and all free nations to crush the Iran-al Qaeda axis. The Trump administration's actually made progress. Let's not tolerate Iran giving al Qaeda a second wind," he added.

Pompeo also acknowledged for the first time the death of senior Al Qaeda leader Abu Mohammed al-Masri in Iran in August, though he did not address the circumstances. The New York Times reported in November that al-Masri was shot by Israeli agents.

Al-Masri was behind the 1998 twin bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 200 people, including 12 Americans, and injured hundreds more.

"Al-Masri's presence inside Iran points to the reason that we're here today," the secretary said.

"Al Qaeda has a new home base. It is the Islamic Republic of Iran. ... We ignore this Iran-al Qaeda nexus at our own peril. We need to acknowledge it. We must confront it, indeed we must defeat it."

Pompeo has staked his legacy on his "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, a full-court press of sanctions meant to bankrupt and squeeze the leaders of Tehran to adhere to a list of 12 demands the secretary laid out to "act like a normal country."

He wrote on Twitter on Tuesday that the Trump administration has imposed sanctions on more than 1,500 individuals and entities that have deprived the Islamic Republic of \$70 billion in revenue and that Iran's proposed military budget has decreased by 24 percent this year.

Pompeo announced additional sanctions Tuesday, against two Iran-based al Qaeda leaders and three al Qaeda leaders of a Kurdish battalion operating on the border between Iran and Iraq.

The State Department also announced a \$7 million reward for information leading to the location or identification of Abd-al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, an Iran-based key leader of al Qaeda.

Critics say the Trump campaign against Iran failed to rein in its destabilizing activities in the Middle East and that confrontation with the U.S. has emboldened its leaders to violate the terms of the Iran Nuclear Deal meant to limit the amount of dangerous material that could be used for a nuclear weapon.

[Iran] Pompeo hits Iran for al-Qaida support on his way out (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 1:45 PM, Matthew Lee, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday accused Iran of having secret ties with the al-Qaida network and imposed new sanctions on several senior Iranian officials.

Pompeo's comments come just a week before the Trump administration leaves office and appeared aimed at President-elect Joe Biden's stated desire to resume negotiations with Iran over the 2015 nuclear deal. President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018.

In a speech to the National Press Club just, Pompeo attacked Iran for alleged secret ties with al-Qaida, citing newly declassified intelligence suggesting Tehran harbored the group's No. 2, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who was killed in August, reportedly by Israeli agents.

Shiite-ruled Iran and predominantly Sunni al-Qaida are not natural allies in the Islamic world and have had a fraught relationship since the Taliban, which harbored bin Laden, took over

Afghanistan in 1996. Two years later, Iran accused the Taliban of murdering several of its diplomats in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Although U.S. officials had previously confirmed the death of al-Masri and his daughter, the widow of Osama bin Laden's son Hamza, Pompeo's remarks were the first on-the-record comments supporting the claim.

"Today, I can confirm publicly to the world for the first time, his death on Aug. 7 of last year," Pompeo said. He also alleged that Iran had "closely monitored" al-Qaida members before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and had stepped up such activity and had decided to actively support them following the nuclear agreement.

Speaking after Pompeo's remarks, two senior U.S. officials told reporters that Iran had facilitated al-Masri's stay in Tehran, including by sending security guards with him on shopping excursions and granting him access to a swimming pool. The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence information, spoke on condition of anonymity.

Pompeo claimed that ties between al-Qaida and Iran vastly improved in 2015, when the Obama administration, along with France, Germany and Britain, were finalizing the nuclear deal. He offered no evidence for the claim. Pompeo has been adamantly opposed to the nuclear agreement since he was a member of Congress.

"A sea change was happening within the Iran-al-Qaida axis," Pompeo said. "Iran decided to allow al-Qaida to establish a new operational headquarters, on the condition that al-Qaida operatives inside abide by the regime's rules governing al-Qaida's stay inside the country."

He said that since 2015, Iran has given al-Qaida leaders greater freedom of movement inside Iran and have provided safe havens and logistical support to al-Qaida. Pompeo asserted that al-Qaida had now based its leadership in Tehran and was continuing to plot attacks on the U.S. and Western targets from there.

Iran has denied all such charges, and did so again on Tuesday.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh Tuesday condemned Pompeo's accusations as a "repeat of blaming and fabricating false evidence" against Iran since President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 nuclear deal and began to re-impose sanctions that had been lifted under the accord.

Khatibzadeh derided Pompeo's accusations as an indication of the "failure of the maximum pressure campaign" by the Trump administration against Iran, the official IRNA news agency reported. He said Iran has had "a crystal-clear and defensible record" in fighting al-Qaida and IS terrorism.

[Iran] Pompeo says Iran gives al Qaeda new 'home base,' analysts skeptical (Reuters)
Reuters [1/12/2021 1:20 PM, Humeyra Pamuk and Matt Spetalnick, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday without providing hard evidence that al Qaeda had established a new home base in Iran and that it was time "for America and all

free nations to crush the Iran-al-Qaeda axis."

The comments, rejected by Iran as "warmongering lies," in some ways echoed former U.S. President George W. Bush's 2002 description of Iraq, Iran and North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" – a comment he made about a year before invading Iraq.

With eight days left in President Donald Trump's term, Pompeo said Iran had allowed al Qaeda, the group blamed for the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, to establish a new operational headquarters there despite skepticism about the claim within the U.S. intelligence community and among independent analysts.

"Al-Qaeda has a new home base: it is the Islamic Republic of Iran," Pompeo said, saying that from 2015, Iran had allowed al Qaeda leaders greater freedom of movement inside Iran.

Pompeo said he was announcing publicly for the first time that al Qaeda's Abu Muhammad al-Masri, accused of helping to mastermind the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa, died on Aug. 7 last year.

The New York Times reported that al-Masri was killed by Israeli operatives in Iran. Iran denied the report, saying there were no al Qaeda "terrorists" on its soil.

Pompeo also asserted that the Iranian government had provided safe havens as well as logistical support such as ID cards and passports to enable al Qaeda activity and said the group had "centralized its leadership" inside Iran.

Terrorism experts voiced skepticism about Pompeo's claims, saying it long has been known that senior al Qaeda operatives were given refuge in Iran but that Pompeo was exaggerating that the group has made Iran its new home base.

A source familiar with U.S. intelligence reporting analysis said the U.S. Congress has been told that there is an al Qaeda presence in Iran which ebbs and flows and arguably is tolerated by elements of the Iranian government.

However, this source said that Pompeo's rhetoric was over the top and suggested his real objective may be to sabotage U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's expected efforts to restart the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

"Iran and al Qaeda are sort of strategic enemies, said analyst Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute think tank. "To paint Iran and Al Qaeda as being in a strategic relationship is far more fiction than fact."

Shi'ite Iran and al Qaeda, a Sunni Muslim group, have long been sectarian foes.

Pompeo said the United States had imposed sanctions on Iran-based two al Qaeda leaders – Muhammad Abbatay, also known as Abd al-Rahman al Maghrebi, and Sultan Yusuf Hasan – and on three leaders of the al Qaeda Kurdish Battalions, a group operating on the Iran-Iraq border.

He said the State Department would offer a reward of up to \$7 million for information leading to al Maghrebi.

On Twitter, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif dismissed Pompeo's accusations as "warmongering lies."

Alireza Miryousefi, spokesman for Iran's mission to the United Nations, described Pompeo's comments as "preposterous, false accusations."

Iran has been a target throughout the Trump administration and Pompeo has sought to further ratchet up pressure on Iran in recent weeks with more sanctions and heated rhetoric.

Biden advisers believe the Trump administration is trying to make it harder for him to re-engage with Iran and seek to rejoin the 2015 international deal on restraining Iran's nuclear program. U.S.-Iranian relations have deteriorated since 2018 when Trump abandoned that deal, which curbed its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of economic sanctions.

[Iran] Pompeo says Al Qaeda has set up 'home base' in Iran, are 'partners in terrorism' (FOX News)

FOX News [1/12/2021 12:30 PM, Adam Shaw, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday said that Al Qaeda has set up a "home base" in Iran – and Tehran and the perpetrators of the Sept. 11 terror attacks are "partners in terrorism."

"You now have the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world, the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the home base for Al Qaeda," he said in a speech at the National Press Club. "They are partners in terrorism, partners in hate."

Pompeo used the speech to confirm that Abu Muhammad al-Masri, described as Al Qaeda's number-two leader, had been killed in Iran last year.

Al Qaeda's previous base was in Afghanistan, where it plotted the 9/11 attacks and was eventually ousted after the U.S. invasion in 2001. Pompeo said the relationship with Iran had been in place for nearly three decades and had seen a "sea change" in 2015 with the signing of the Iran nuclear deal.

"Iran decided to allow Al Qaeda to establish a new operational headquarters, on the condition that Al Qaeda operatives inside abide by the regime's rules governing Al Qaeda's stay inside the country," he said.

He alleged that terrorist operatives have been given logistical support in the form of passports and travel documents, have been allowed to fundraise and communicate, and that they have been able to put a new emphasis on plotting attacks

"They have new tools for terror," he said

He described Iran as the "new Afghanistan" as a hub for Al Qaeda and warned that, in many ways, the situation in Iran is worse than when Al Qaeda was based in Afghanistan.

"Al Qaeda today is operating underneath the hard shell of the Iranian regime's protection," he said. "America has far less visibility on Al Qaeda's capabilities and activities now than we did on their activities when they were in Tora Bora or even the mountainous regions of Pakistan."

He said such an arrangement provides a terror threat in the region and elsewhere and could threaten the Abraham Accords – peace agreements between Israel and nearby Arab countries – by allowing Al Qaeda to blackmail them.

He said it could allow Al Qaeda leaders to increase influence in places like Syria and Somalia, launch attacks on European countries such as France and Germany, and could see a situation where Al Qaeda carries out attacks on Iran's orders.

"You don't have to be a former CIA director to see the Iran-Al Qaeda axis as a massive force for evil all over the world," he said.

As he called for more action, including for the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran, he announced sanctions on Al Qaeda leaders in Iran and a reward of \$7 million for one – Muhammad Abbatay.

Iran immediately shot back against the speech, with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif accusing Pompeo of "pathetically ending his disastrous career with more warmongering lies."

"No one is fooled. All 9/11 terrorists came from @SecPompeo's favorite ME destinations; NONE from Iran," he said.

The Trump administration has taken a "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran that has seen the U.S. withdrawing from the 2015 Iran deal and reimposing sanctions.

Tensions have been ramped up in recent days amid the one-year anniversary of the U.S.' killing of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

The incoming Biden administration has indicated it will reengage with the Islamic regime and will seek to reenter the 2015 accord.

[Iran] Pompeo claims Iran is 'home base' for Al Qaeda (NBC News)

NBC News [1/12/2021 2:59 PM, Dan De Luce and Abigail Williams, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday accused Iran of actively supporting Al Qaeda, saying the country now serves as a "home base" for the terror group and provides operatives with travel documents and logistical support.

Pompeo's allegations go well beyond previous statements by U.S. intelligence officials, other foreign governments and terrorism experts, who have described a complicated and sometimes tense relationship between the Shiite-ruled government in Tehran and the Sunni extremist group that launched the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

Pompeo, who did not cite U.S. intelligence reporting for his assertions, said the relationship

between Iran and Al Qaeda shifted in 2015 just as the regime in Tehran wrapped up an agreement with the United States and other world powers over its nuclear program.

"Everything changed in 2015 — the same year that the Obama Administration and the 'E-3' — France, Germany, and Britain — were finalizing the JCPOA," Pompeo said in a speech, referring to the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The secretary said it marked a "sea change" but did not explain what led Tehran to alter its approach to Al Qaeda at that moment, when the United States and other governments agreed to lift sanctions on Iran in return for limits on its nuclear work.

Pompeo, speaking at the National Press Club, said Iran decided at the time to allow Al Qaeda to set up "a new operational headquarters, on the condition that Al Qaeda operatives inside abide by the regime's rules governing Al Qaeda's stay inside the country."

Since 2015, Iran has given Al Qaeda leaders "greater freedom of movement" and the ministry of intelligence and Revolutionary Guard have "provided safe havens and logistical support — like travel documents, ID cards, and passports — that enable Al Qaeda activity," Pompeo said.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif vehemently denied the accusations, pointing out the hijackers behind the 9/11 attacks largely came from Middle Eastern countries with closer ties to the Trump administration, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"Mr. 'we lie, cheat, steal' is pathetically ending his disastrous career with more warmongering lies," Zarif tweeted in response. "No one is fooled. All 9/11 terrorists came from @SecPompeo's favorite ME destinations; NONE from Iran.

In the intelligence community's publicly released assessment of worldwide threats in 2019, there was no mention of Iran lending support to Al Qaeda.

Pompeo's assertions that Iran had increased its cooperation with Al Qaeda and had permitted the group to plot attacks from Iranian soil went further than previous statements by U.S. intelligence officials over the past four years, said Nicholas Rasmussen, a former intelligence official and now the executive director of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism.

"If those statements are true, that would have to be backed up by some pretty specific intel or a body of intel that emerged over a period of time. I just don't have a way to evaluate if that is an overstatement or an overreading of intelligence, or if that is what they think," said Rasmussen, who served as director of the National Counterterrorism Center under the Obama administration.

Rasmussen said that in his work in the intelligence world before Trump entered office, he did not remember analysis that saw a major shift in Iran's links with Al Qaeda around 2015.

"As I recall, there was not a view in the intelligence community through 2016 that Iran's approach to Qaeda went through a sea change in 2015," Rasmussen told NBC News.

U.S. intelligence did find that Iran was allowing Al Qaeda operatives to travel to Syria to fight in the war there, he said. "By 2013, we had come to appreciate the Iranians were more comfortable letting Al Qaeda have freedom of movement, to let them participate in what was happening in Syria," he said.

Because of Iran's links to Al Qaeda, Pompeo said the United States will impose sanctions on Al Qaeda leaders who he said are based in Iran, Muhammad Abbatay — also known as Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, and Sultan Yusuf Hasan al-Arif, as well as three leaders of an Al Qaeda-linked group operating on the border between Iran and Iraq.

The State Department is also offering a reward of \$7 million for information leading to "the location or identification of al-Maghrebi," he said.

Pompeo has attempted to draw connections between Iran and Al Qaeda since becoming the top U.S. diplomat, raising the issue in both closed door congressional briefings and open hearings on Capitol Hill.

Pompeo's insistence on an Iran-Al Qaeda axis over the past two years made some lawmakers wary that he was trying to lay the legal justification for a possible war with Iran, under the 2001 authorization for the use of military force (AUMF), adopted by Congress in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky pressed Pompeo in April 2019 on his intentions and Pompeo sidestepped the question, saying he preferred to "just leave that to the lawyers," but he remained firm. "There is no doubt there is a connection. Period. Full stop."

Democratic Rep. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan, who serves on the House Armed Services Committee, said just a few months later, "We were absolutely presented with a full formal presentation on how the 2001 AUMF might authorize war on Iran ... Secretary Pompeo said it with his own words."

Speaking Tuesday, Pompeo called Iran "the new Afghanistan," where the United States fought almost two decades of war in the name of destroying Al Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks. "It's actually worse," he added.

"Bin Laden's wicked creation is poised to gain strength, and capabilities. We ignore this Iran-Al Qaeda axis at our own peril," Pompeo said. "We must acknowledge it. We must confront it. We must defeat it."

Pompeo did not however say that Al Qaeda's presence in Iran posed a direct threat to the "homeland," and he did not cite U.S. intelligence agencies as the source of his allegations.

"I didn't hear the word homeland at any point, and God knows if he could have said that, he would have said that. If he could amp it up to include a scary homeland piece, he would have been happy to do that," Rasmussen said.

Pompeo's "statement that the Islamic Republic of Iran is now the home of Al Qaeda is a vast exaggeration," said Bruce Riedel, a 30-year veteran of the CIA and now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"It is true there is a complex relationship between Iran and Al Qaeda," Riedel said.

Iran turned a blind eye to Al Qaeda operatives who fled to Iran from neighboring Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion, and viewed them as a possible bargaining chip in countering the United States and ensuring the terror group did not target Iran, he said.

"It's not a black and white case. There is a germ of truth to the notion that there is some relationship between Iran and Al Qaeda. But it misses the much bigger picture, that they are quite hostile entities," he said.

On Tuesday, Pompeo also acknowledged the death of Al Qaeda's second highest leader, Abu Mohammed al-Masri, on the streets of Tehran on Aug. 7 of last year, the first such public acknowledgment by a U.S. official.

Al-Masri was considered the mastermind behind the 1998 bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that claimed the lives of twelve Americans. According to media reports, al-Masri was gunned down by Israeli operatives at the behest of the U.S. on the anniversary of the 1998 attacks. Pompeo did not provide any further details on the circumstances of his death.

A 2018 analysis of documents seized in Osama bin Laden's hideout after U.S. forces killed the al Qaeda leader in 2011 found no evidence that Iran and al Qaeda cooperated in carrying out terrorist attacks. The study was carried out by Nelly Lahoud, an academic and expert on al Qaeda, for the New America think tank.

NBC News has previously reported that the documents seized the night Navy SEALs killed bin Laden suggest that Al Qaeda and Iran occasionally cooperated but also had deep distrust marked by threats and kidnappings.

[Iran] Pompeo confirms No. 2 al-Qaeda leader killed in Iran, asserts Tehran giving 'home base' to terror group (USA Today)

USA Today [1/12/2021 2:04 PM, Deirdre Shesgreen and Kim Hjelmgaard, Neutral]

Abu Muhammad al-Masri, the No. 2 leader of al-Qaeda was killed in Iran last summer, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed on Tuesday, though he did not say if the U.S. ordered his assassination or had a role in carrying it out.

"Today, I can confirm for the first time his death on August 7th of last year," Pompeo said in remarks at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

The New York Times reported in November that al-Masri was "gunned down" in Tehran by Israeli agents at the behest of the United States. He was on the FBI's "Most Wanted List" for his role in the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which left more than 200 people dead, including 12 Americans.

Pompeo confirmed al-Masri's death in a broader speech that cast Iran as the new "home base" for al-Qaeda – without offering direct new evidence.

"Iran is indeed the new Afghanistan, as the key geographic hub for al-Qaeda," Pompeo

said. "They're partners in terrorism, partners in hate. This axis poses a grave threat to the security of nations and to the American homeland itself."

His provocative remarks come just days before President-elect Joe Biden takes office with promises to revive U.S.-Iran diplomacy, including the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal, aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear program, which the Trump administration withdrew from in 2018.

Pompeo, an Iran hawk, has made it clear he opposes Biden's plans to return to nuclear negotiations with Iran. Although he did not mention Biden by name on Tuesday, he denounced the "appeasement" of Tehran as naive.

"Let's not lie to the American people about Iranian moderation and pretend the appeasement will work," he said.

Pompeo said Iran's ministry of intelligence and security and other agencies have provided "safe havens and logistical support," such as ID cards and passports, that enable al-Qaeda activity. "As a result of this assistance, al-Qaeda has centralized its leadership inside Tehran," he said.

Iran experts cast doubt on Pompeo's allegations.

"It's just not believable at this point," said Trita Parsi, an Iran expert and executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a Washington, D.C. think tank. "This is an administration that is doing everything it can to create conflict inside of the U.S., and now it's doing everything it can to make sure that no diplomacy can take place between the U.S. and Iran after it leaves."

Parsi said Pompeo's claims amounted to "complete nonsense" and questioned why he waited until the waning days of the Trump administration to announce such potentially explosive allegations.

Alireza Miryousefi, an Iranian diplomat attached to Tehran's mission to the United Nations in New York, described the State Department's claims as "preposterous," "false" and "nothing new."

Iran has long maintained that al-Qaeda's chief backers in the Middle East are countries with whom the U.S. has good relations, such as Saudi Arabia.

Max Abrahms, a terrorism expert and professor at Northeastern University, noted that al-Qaeda is first and foremost associated with Saudi Arabia, not Iran. The Trump administration has forged extremely close ties with the Saudi kingdom and made isolating Iran a cornerstone of its foreign policy agenda over the last four years.

In a tweet after Pompeo's speech, Abrahms said it's true that Iran has had "some shady ties with Al Qaeda. We have know this for many, many years."

But, he added, "if you're looking to Iran rather than Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar & Pakistan to understand state sponsorship of Al Qaeda then you have been duped and lost the plot."

Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington, also questioned Pompeo's motives in making Tuesday's speech.

"It's just more of an effort to justify a failed policy toward Iran under the Trump administration. What more mud can they possibly throw?" Slavin said. "Iran has had a relationship with al Qaeda for a long time. If that relationship has gotten closer, then Mike Pompeo should just look in the mirror."

[Iran] Pompeo: Iran has allowed al Qaeda to establish 'a new home base' under the regime (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/12/2021 11:05 AM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

Al Qaeda operatives have established "a new home base" in Iran where senior members of the terrorist group are "living a normal life" while developing new plots, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

"We ignore this Iran-al Qaeda nexus at our own peril," Pompeo said Tuesday at the National Press Club. "They are partners in terrorism. Partners in hate."

Pompeo offered that assessment after observing that a senior al Qaeda operative was killed in Tehran in August. He confirmed that death, and declassified other intelligence about the Iranian regime's relationship with al Qaeda, in a warning that doubled as a closing argument against the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which President-elect Joe Biden and European allies hope to restore.

"Iran decided to allow al Qaeda to establish a new operational headquarters, on the condition that al Qaeda operatives inside abide by the regime's rules governing al Qaeda's stay inside the country," he said. "Imagine that al Qaeda starts carrying out attacks at Iran's behest — even if the control is not perfect. Who is to say that isn't the next form of blackmail to pressure countries back into a nuclear deal?"

Pompeo has orchestrated a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran since President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018, with an eye on establishing the sanctions "leverage" to force Iran to agree to tighter restrictions along a broader range of activity than the nuclear concerns covered by the pact. Biden's win in the 2020 elections has cost Trump's team the chance to oversee that expected negotiation, but Pompeo unveiled the Tehran-al Qaeda link to fortify the case for additional sanctions on Iran.

"Nations have an obligation to sanction entities designated as associated with al Qaeda under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1267," Pompeo said.

Iranian officials have taken a series of aggressive actions recently, including the decision of jump-starting certain parts of their nuclear program and the seizure of a South Korean oil tanker in an apparent effort to build pressure on the Biden team to ease the economic sanctions that Trump renewed. The nuclear provocations have drawn condemnation from the European Union and key European governments.

"At this critical juncture, Iran's action also risks undermining efforts aimed at building upon

the existing diplomatic process," the European Union's high representative, Josep Borrell, said Monday.

Pompeo emphasized in a separate statement that "Iran's threat goes much further than violating the JCPOA" as Tehran also challenges the nonproliferation treaty by contemplating a plan to expel international nuclear watchdog inspectors if Biden fails to provide sanctions relief.

"Every nation, not only the United States, will attach great importance to Iran's compliance with these obligations," Pompeo said Monday. "Nuclear brinksmanship will not strengthen Iran's position but instead lead to further isolation and pressure."

The announcement on Tuesday marked a final effort to deepen that isolation as the administration leaves power by arguing that Iran's ties to al Qaeda could lead to additional terrorist attacks in Europe.

As Iran provides al Qaeda with travel documents such as passports, countries such as Germany are ripe to be the site of the recreation of something like the Hamburg cell, which was so instrumental in the 9/11 attacks.

"Everything changed in 2015, the same year that the Obama administration and the 'E-3' — France, Germany, and Britain — were in the middle of finalizing the JCPOA," he said. "A sea change was happening within the Iran-al Qaeda axis ... Every country must recognize that his unholy collusion is dramatically increasing the risk of terrorist attacks against their people."

[Iran] Iran denies Pompeo's assertion it has ties with al Qaeda (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 1:03 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Tuesday rejected as "warmongering lies" an assertion by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Iran has ties to the Islamist militant group al Qaeda.

"(With) fictitious Iran 'declassifications' and AQ (al Qaeda) claims, (Pompeo) is pathetically ending his disastrous career with more warmongering lies," Zarif tweeted.

"No one is fooled. All 9/11 terrorists came from @SecPompeo's favourite ME destinations; NONE from Iran," Zarif said.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday that al Qaeda had established a new home base in Iran and the United States had fewer options in dealing with the group now it was "burrowed inside" that country.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said: "Iran has been a victim of U.S. state terrorism and affiliated groups for years and has had a clear ... record in the fight against al Qaeda and Islamic State," state media reported.

Iran's state religion is Shi'ite Islam, and the country views itself as a sworn enemy of Sunni Islamist militant groups such as Islamic State and al Qaeda. However, U.S. officials have

accused it in the past of providing shelter to some al Qaeda figures.

The New York Times reported in November that al Qaeda's Abu Muhammad al-Masri, accused of helping mastermind the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa, was gunned down by Israeli operatives in Iran. Iran denied the report, saying there were no al Qaeda "terrorists" on its soil.

Department of State News

State Department cancels travel amid transition efforts (The Hill)

The Hill [1/12/2021 2:37 PM, Lexi Lonas, Neutral]

The State Department on Tuesday announced that all planned travel will be canceled this week while they are solidifying plans to transition the department to President-elect Joe Biden's team.

"We are expecting shortly a plan from the incoming administration identifying the career officials who will remain in positions of responsibility on an acting basis until the Senate confirmation process is complete for incoming officials," the statement reads. "As a result, we are cancelling all planned travel this week, including the Secretary's trip to Europe."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was supposed to travel to Belgium between January 13-14 to "reaffirm" the United States's alliance with Belgium and support for NATO. He was also scheduled to visit Luxembourg. Those plans have been canceled.

According to a report from Reuters, citing people familiar with the matter, the move to cancel the trip came after Luxembourg's foreign minister and other top European Union officials said they would not meet with Pompeo and were "embarrassed" after the attacks on the Capitol last Wednesday.

The State Department statement says that the transition with Biden's team has been going well and will be finished before Biden's inauguration next Wednesday.

"Both the Department and the President-elect's team have been fully engaged for several weeks toward this end, and we are pleased with the level of cooperation and professionalism that has been displayed," according to the announcement.

The move for the State Department comes after Pompeo met Biden's pick for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, on Friday.

"Our meeting was very productive, and we will continue to work together on behalf of America throughout the transition, Pompeo tweeted.

The meeting occurred a day after President Trump released a video saying there would be a smooth transition for Biden's team to get into office. That video was the first time Trump acknowledged Biden's election win after weeks of refusing to concede and tweeting about election fraud.

The Hill has reached out to the State Department for comment.

Ahead of Biden transition, U.S. cancels U.N. envoy's trip to Taiwan (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:31 PM, Michelle Nichols and Humeysra Pamuk, Neutral]

A cancellation of all travel by the U.S. State Department this week includes a planned visit to Taiwan by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft, a State Department spokeswoman said on Tuesday.

Craft had been due to visit Taiwan from Wednesday to Friday, prompting China to warn that Washington was playing with fire. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday that all travel this week had been cancelled, including a trip by him to Europe, as part of the transition to the incoming Biden administration.

But European diplomats and other people familiar with the matter said Luxembourg's foreign minister and top European Union officials had declined to meet with him during his planned European trip this week.

Craft's Taiwan trip appeared to be another part of an effort by Pompeo and President Donald Trump's Republican administration to lock in a tough approach to China before Democratic President-elect Joe Biden takes office on Jan. 20.

China had said it was firmly opposed to the visit. China's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the cancellation.

Beijing, which claims the self-governed island as its own territory, has been angered by stepped-up support for Taiwan from the Trump administration, including trips to Taipei by top U.S. officials, further straining Sino-U.S. ties. Pompeo on Saturday said he was lifting restrictions on contacts between U.S. officials and their Taiwanese counterparts.

Chinese fighter jets approached the island in August and September during the last two visits – by U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach, respectively.

While the United States, like most countries, has no formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, it is the island's strongest international backer and arms supplier, being obliged to help provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.

EU warns Iran enrichment moves could imperil nuclear deal (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The official supervising the agreement aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions is warning that Tehran's decision to ramp up uranium enrichment could undermine efforts to keep the deal alive amid diplomatic efforts to bring the United States back on board.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Iran's intention to enrich uranium up to 20% at the Fordo underground nuclear facility "is a very serious development and a matter of deep concern," and "has very severe proliferation implications."

Last week, Iran began enriching uranium to levels unseen since the deal was struck in 2015.

Iran has argued that it is no longer obliged to respect limits laid out in the pact, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, because President Donald Trump violated it first by pulling the United States out of the deal in 2018, which resulted in crippling sanctions on Iran's moribund economy.

The deal offers Iran economic incentives in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, but with the reinstatement of American sanctions, the other signatories — China, France, Germany, Russia and the U.K. — have struggled to provide Iran the assistance it seeks.

President-elect Joe Biden has said he hopes to return the U.S. to the deal, which was negotiated while he was vice president. Borrell and the other countries would welcome such a move.

"At this critical juncture, Iran's action also risks undermining efforts aimed at building upon the existing diplomatic process. We urge Iran to refrain from further escalation and reverse this course of action without delay," Borrell said in his statement, released late Monday.

He said that full and timely cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency "remains critical."

Borrell added that the EU looks "forward to working with the incoming U.S. administration."

Despite Iran's violations, the IAEA has reported that Tehran continues to give inspectors full access to its nuclear sites — a key reason the signatories say it is worth preserving.

Iran demands sanctions 'snapback' removed in any new nuclear talks (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:45 AM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Iran demands the removal of the so-called snapback mechanism in its nuclear accord, which could revive all U.N. sanctions against Tehran, in the event of new talks with world powers, a senior aide to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said.

Under the 2015 deal, Iran agreed to curb its nuclear work in return for relief from U.S. and other sanctions. The accord includes the option of a snapback of U.N. sanctions if Iran breaches the deal, requiring Tehran to suspend all nuclear enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research development.

"This (trigger) mechanism must be abandoned as an irrational principle in the event of further negotiations," Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Khamenei, said in an interview posted on the Supreme Leader's website.

"From the beginning, the Supreme Leader was not satisfied with the issue of the trigger mechanism and this was done against his will," said Velayati, a former foreign minister.

Iran has rejected Western calls for wider international talks over its nuclear and military ambitions after U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions.

World powers and Iran have weeks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal after Tehran began to enrich uranium at higher levels and Iran's parliament threatened to curb the access of U.N. inspectors next month, the head of the global atomic watchdog said on Monday.

SolarWinds Discloses Earlier Evidence of Hack (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 12:52 PM, Dave Sebastian, Neutral]

SolarWinds Corp. SWI -0.27% said a computer breach tied to Russia-linked hackers who accessed U.S. government systems and corporate networks after manipulating some of the software provider's code began at least a month earlier than first disclosed.

Hackers were accessing its systems in early September 2019, the network-management company said Tuesday, based on a continuing investigation. Cybersecurity experts suspect preparations for the attack go back far longer. A month later, a version of the company's Orion Platform software appears to have contained modifications designed to test the hackers ability to insert malicious code into the system. The code was added starting Feb. 20, 2020, SolarWinds said, and the compromised software was available to its customers by March 26, 2020.

Intelligence officials have said the attack was one of the most sophisticated cyber intrusions of U.S. systems they had seen.

SolarWinds, working with hired cybersecurity experts, said it reverse-engineered the malicious code, called Sunburst, allowing them to learn more about the hack. The Austin, Texas-based company said an analysis suggests that hackers circumvented detection by mimicking legitimate network traffic that was run through U.S. servers. It is still trying to establish how the code entered its software and went undetected, the company said.

The investigation showed that the hackers removed the code from the system in June. SolarWinds said it learned of the breach on Dec. 12.

"We believe that sharing this information openly will help the industry guard against similar attacks in the future," the company said Tuesday.

The U.S. Justice Department last week became the latest federal agency to say it was breached by hackers, potentially affecting about 3% of the department's Microsoft Office email accounts.

U.S. government officials have blamed Russia for the attack. Moscow has denied involvement. SolarWinds said its probe hasn't independently verified the hackers' identities.

Intelligence officials and cybersecurity analysts involved in the response to the attack also were investigating whether a little-known software company called JetBrains s.r.o. might have played a role in the SolarWinds hack, The Wall Street Journal reported last week. JetBrains makes tools for software developers, including a product called TeamCity that is used to help manage and speed up large software development projects.

Investigators believe that the SolarWinds hackers gained access to a server used by the company to build its software products, but it is unclear how this system was accessed,

according to people familiar with the matter.

SolarWinds said it is reviewing historical and current customer inquiries that could help it better understand the attack. The company said it identified two prior customer-support incidents that could be related to the hack.

The Journal identified infected computers at two dozen organizations that installed the Orion software, giving hackers potential access to much sensitive corporate and personal data. Among them were technology giant Cisco Systems Inc.; chip makers Intel Corp. and Nvidia Corp.; accounting firm Deloitte LLP; cloud-computing software maker VMware Inc.; and Belkin International Inc., which sells home and office Wi-Fi routers and networking gear under the LinkSys and Belkin brands.

Official: Number of victims of Russian hack likely to grow (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 5:00 PM, Eric Tucker, Neutral]

The number of federal agencies and private companies who learn that they have been affected by a massive Russian hack is expected to grow as the investigation into it continues, the U.S. government's chief counterintelligence official said Tuesday.

The FBI and other agencies last week attributed the intrusions to Russia as part of what officials described as an intelligence-gathering operation rather than an effort to damage or disrupt U.S. government operations. U.S. officials said at the time that fewer than 10 federal agencies were believed to have been compromised "by follow-on activity on their systems."

William Evanina, the director of the U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center, said in a live-stream Washington Post interview that he expected to see a "growth" in the number of victims.

So far, the list of agencies known to have been affected includes the Treasury, Commerce and Justice departments, among others.

"I think this will expand accordingly as we identify" additional victims, Evanina said. "I think the hard part for the investigators is we don't know what we don't know, but I think this will continue to grow."

The hacking campaign was extraordinary in scale, with the intruders having stalked through government agencies, defense contractors and telecommunications companies for months by the time it was discovered. Experts say that gave the foreign agents ample time to collect data that could be highly damaging to U.S. national security, though the scope of the breaches and exactly what information was sought is unknown.

An estimated 18,000 organizations were affected by malicious code that piggybacked on popular network-management software from an Austin, Texas, company called SolarWinds.

Newly declassified report lays out U.S. strategy in Asia (Axios)

Axios [1/12/2021 5:17 PM, Zach Dorfman and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Neutral]

The Trump administration has declassified a report which lays out its Indo-Pacific strategy, including "accelerating India's rise," blocking China from establishing "illiberal spheres of

influence," and maintaining "U.S. strategic primacy" in the region, according to a copy viewed by Axios.

The strategy laid out in the ten-page report, written in early 2018, has guided the U.S. approach to China, India, North Korea and other nations in the Indo-Pacific region for the past three years. Its release sheds light on the geopolitical and security challenges soon to be inherited by the Biden administration.

China is the primary state actor of concern outlined in the document, followed by North Korea. The strategy emphasizes countering China's growing influence abroad by seeking strategic alignment with allies and partners, upholding a "liberal economic order" in the region, and working to "inoculate" the U.S. and its partners against China's intelligence activities.

The strategy also outlines a major expansion of military, intelligence, and diplomatic support to India as the primary regional counterweight to China — an approach which is likely to raise eyebrows in Beijing and Islamabad.

"The declassification of the Framework today demonstrates, with transparency, America's strategic commitments to the Indo-Pacific and to our allies and partners in the region," wrote National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien in a memo dated Jan. 5, 2021 and included with the strategy document.

The Trump administration has hewed closely to several of its stated objectives regarding China over the last three years, including:

Building an "international consensus that China's industrial policies and unfair trading practices are damaging the global trading system"

Expanding U.S. counterintelligence and law enforcement to counter China's intelligence activities in the U.S., and expanding intelligence sharing with allies to help them do the same.

Developing military and asymmetric warfare strategies to help Taiwan in its long-standing, tense relationship with China.

Strengthening national security reviews of Chinese investments into sensitive U.S. sectors

Working with allies and partners to try to "prevent Chinese acquisition of military and strategic capabilities."

Yes, but: Some objectives faced headwinds.

The strategy repeatedly calls for greater U.S. engagement with countries in the region, in particular the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In some cases the U.S. actually pulled back from the region, including through Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and snubbing of ASEAN summits.

The goal of showcasing the benefits of American democratic values as a counterbalance to

China in the region also suffered a major blow with the recent armed insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Those events prompted the resignation of one of the strategy's main authors, former deputy national security Matt Pottinger.

Of note: India forms an important cornerstone of the aptly-named Indo-Pacific strategy.

The document states that enhanced U.S. assistance and intelligence sharing should aid India in key areas of conflict with China, including over border disputes and water rights in the Himalayas. In 2020, India and China had their deadliest military skirmish along the border since 1967.

But the U.S.-India relationship is complex. During the cold war, India refused to squarely place itself in the Western camp, instead opting for leadership in the non-aligned movement. The U.S., meanwhile, often tilted towards Pakistan, India's historic arch-rival in South Asia.

The Trump administration ushered in a new official framework for viewing China and India as part of the same strategic region, the "Indo-Pacific," beginning with its National Security Strategy in 2017.

The U.S. Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, in a move widely viewed as a response to China's rise.

Australia's experience with China strongly influenced the drafting of the 2018 Indo-Pacific strategy.

"In many ways they were ahead of the curve in understanding influence operations and interference in domestic systems," one senior U.S. official told me. "They were pioneers and we have to give a lot of credit to Australia."

The official singled out former Australian senior intelligence advisor John Garnaut for praise, and said a 2017 report on Chinese influence operations by New Zealand-based scholar Anne-Marie Brady had also influenced the U.S. strategy.

India says trust with China 'profoundly disturbed', U.S. ties on upswing (Reuters)
Reuters [1/12/2021 4:11 AM, Kevin Krolicki, Neutral]

India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said on Tuesday that trust with China had been deeply impaired after last summer's border clash which resulted in the first combat deaths in 45 years.

Ties with the United States, on the other hand, were converging and were likely to expand under the new administration in Washington, India's top diplomat told the Reuters Next conference.

Tensions with China erupted in June, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in brutal hand-to-hand fighting, while China suffered an unspecified number of casualties in the clash on a disputed section of the border in the western Himalayas.

Both sides have deployed heavily in the contested area, and the escalation poses the most serious military crisis between the nuclear-armed neighbours for decades.

"After 45 years, you've actually had bloodshed on the border. And that's had a huge impact on public opinion and politically ... really the impact of trust and confidence in India where China and their relationship is concerned. That has been profoundly disturbed," Jaishankar said.

The two countries fought a border war in 1962, but until last summer they had largely kept a lid on tensions along the Line of Actual Control, the de facto border, while expanding commercial ties.

"Now last year, for reasons which are not clear to us, the Chinese really brought an enormous military force to one part of the border. And then at the Line of Actual Control, obviously we moved up when we saw them coming and that has sort of created, friction points along the Line of Actual Control," Jaishankar said.

Several rounds of military and diplomatic negotiations have taken place but there has been no pullback of forces from the frontline. India expects the talks to lead to an amicable solution, the Indian army chief Manoj Mukund Narvane said on Tuesday.

Jaishankar said relations with the United States were on the upswing and he was confident about its direction under the incoming Biden administration.

"When I look at many of the challenges we face, the U.S. is going to be much more open looking for partners and I'm confident about where we are going with the relationship.

India has built close defence ties with Washington, buying more than \$20 billion of weapons over the last 15 years, as it diversifies away from traditional supplier Russia.

Together with U.S. allies Japan and Australia, it has participated in naval exercises in the Indian Ocean which security analysts say is part of attempts to balance China's assertive actions in the region.

"Structurally the relationship with the U.S. is very very sound, it has very unique elements, there is political convergence, growing security and defence convergence," Jaishankar said.

On trade though, the two countries got bogged down in details and lost the "wood for the trees", he said. Negotiators have been working toward a mini trade pact for months without making headway.

Jaishankar said India would respond positively to any offer or invitation from the Biden administration to restart some kind of free-trade talks.

Biden CIA pick led secret 'back channel' negotiations for Iran deal (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/12/2021 6:30 AM, Jerry Dunleavy, 394K, Neutral]

Joe Biden's pick for CIA director led the secretive "back channel" with the Iranian regime

during the lead up to the Iran nuclear deal, signaling the former vice president's continued commitment to rejoining the controversial deal that the Trump administration left in 2018.

William Burns, the president of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, served as the U.S. ambassador to Jordan and to Russia, also working in a number of other key State Department posts, including deputy secretary of state from 2011 to 2014. A 2019 book by Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*, contained an entire chapter on "Iran and the Bomb: The Secret Talks."

The diplomat recounted President Barack Obama's early efforts at outreach to Iran but admitted that "this halting momentum ... came to an abrupt stop when the Iranian presidential elections in June turned into a bloodbath" as the Iranian regime suppressed Iran's Green Movement opposition in 2009. He admitted that "the White House's public response was initially tepid" and that "in hindsight, we should have ... been sharper in our public criticism from the start."

Burns said that "Oman sent the new U.S. administration a series of low-key overtures about its readiness to establish a channel to Iran" for years, and when John Kerry took over from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after Obama won reelection in 2012, it was decided that Burns would "lead the American team" with future Biden national security adviser Jake Sullivan as his "alter ego" to start secretly negotiating with the Iranians beginning in March 2013 in Oman. Burns said Obama convened meetings in February 2013 to hammer out their approach and that "in all my three decades in government, this was — along with the bin Laden raid in 2011 — the most tightly held effort."

Burns wrote of Obama that "secrecy would help prevent opponents in both capitals from smothering the initiative in its crib — but it would carry future costs, feeding stab-in-the-back criticisms from some of our closest partners, particularly the Israelis, Saudis, and Emiratis." Burns said Obama stressed that he should "focus the back-channel talks on the nuclear issue" and recounted that the president "was convinced that we'd never get an agreement with the Iranians without some limited form of domestic enrichment."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced in 2018 that Israel had obtained thousands of "Iran's secret nuclear files" that showed "new and conclusive proof of the secret nuclear weapons program that Iran has been hiding for years from the international community."

President Trump pointed to the revelations by Israel when he pulled the United States out of the deal in May 2018.

"No action taken by the regime has been more dangerous than its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them ... In theory, the so-called 'Iran deal' was supposed to protect the United States and our allies from the lunacy of an Iranian nuclear bomb ... In fact, the deal allowed Iran to continue enriching uranium and, over time, reach the brink of a nuclear breakout," Trump said. "The deal lifted crippling economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for very weak limits on the regime's nuclear activity, and no limits at all on its other malign behavior, including its sinister activities in Syria, Yemen, and other places all around the world."

The book by Burns described secret meetings with the Iranians in Oman as well as back in the U.S., noting one at Waldorf and a series of rounds at a hotel in Manhattan away from the United Nations meetings. Burns said he believed that his two main Iranian counterparts, Abbas Ravanchi and Majid Takht Araghchi, "were professional diplomats, not ideologues." He said the back channel soon fell into a regular pattern, "sometimes one-on-one and often Araghchi and Ravanchi with Jake and me, while our colleagues would get into more detail on the limitations and verification measures we had in mind, and the sanctions relief at the front of the Iranians' mind."

"It was hard to imagine when we embarked on that first secret flight to Oman in early 2013 that diplomacy could resolve the Iranian nuclear issue," Burns wrote, adding, "we couldn't neatly erase by military or diplomatic means Iran's basic know-how about enrichment. What we could do was to sharply constrain it over a long duration, monitor it with unprecedented intrusiveness, and prevent its leadership from building a bomb."

Burns wrote that "Trump's demolition of the Iran deal was a further blow to our own credibility."

Biden said Monday that "Bill Burns is an exemplary diplomat with decades of experience on the world stage keeping our people and our country safe and secure."

Burns noted "familiar threats" such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation while calling climate change and global health security "increasingly powerful challenges" in a short Monday video.

Iran received an influx of billions in cash as a result of the Iran nuclear deal. The U.S. flew a jet carrying \$400 million in euros and Swiss francs to Tehran in January 2016 as an apparent ransom payment as Iran released four U.S. hostages, and the U.S. provided another \$1.3 billion in cash to the Iranian regime, allegedly to settle outstanding claims. The Iran deal also released up to \$150 billion in frozen Iranian assets, and the lifting of international sanctions also provided Iran with hundreds of billions in relief.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was reached between the "P5+1" (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.), the European Union, and Iran in June 2015. Burns wrote that "the IAEA and the U.S. intelligence community repeatedly affirmed Iranian compliance," but he acknowledged that "Iran continued to export instability across the Middle East, exploiting and accelerating chaos in Syria and Yemen." He also admitted that "we could have done a better job ... of confronting the wider challenge of Iran in the Middle East."

Critics of the deal have said it did not properly restrain Iran's nuclear aspirations or address the regime's funding of terrorism. When the Senate voted on the Iran deal in September 2015, it was 58-42 in opposition, including Democrats such as Sens. Chuck Schumer, Bob Menendez, Ben Cardin, and Joe Manchin, but the Obama administration implemented it nevertheless.

Biden reaffirmed his determination to rejoin the Iran deal in December, telling the New York Times that "there's a lot of talk about precision missiles and all range of other things that are destabilizing the region" but that "the best way to achieve getting some stability in the

region" is to deal "with the nuclear program," and so "in consultation with our allies and partners, we're going to engage in negotiations and follow-on agreements to tighten and lengthen Iran's nuclear constraints, as well as address the missile program."

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in December that "we will not renegotiate a deal which we negotiated."

Iran said it resumed its 20% uranium enrichment earlier this month, and Iran's Parliament passed a law late last year vowing to block International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of nuclear sites starting a month after Biden's inauguration if U.S. sanctions aren't lifted. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said this weekend that "the Iranian regime is using its nuclear program to extort the international community and threaten regional security."

Sheldon Adelson, Billionaire Donor to G.O.P. and Israel, Is Dead at 87 (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 1:21 PM, Robert D. McFadden, Neutral]

Sheldon G. Adelson, a cabdriver's son who built the world's largest empire of casinos and resort hotels in Las Vegas, Macau, Singapore and other gambling meccas and used his vast wealth to promote right-wing political agendas in America and Israel, died on Monday night. He was 87.

The cause was complications of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a form of blood cancer, his company, Las Vegas Sands, said on Tuesday in a statement. It did not say where he died.

Mr. Adelson grew up tough, a Depression-era street urchin who hawked newspapers and fought roughnecks in Boston. Unfazed by risks, rivals or the law, he built a fortune estimated by Forbes in 2014 at \$36.6 billion and by Bloomberg Billionaires Index at \$40.8 billion, making him the world's eighth or ninth wealthiest person.

By March 2016, Forbes said Mr. Adelson's net worth had dropped to \$25.2 billion, largely because of gaming revenue declines at his giant casino in Macau, on China's south coast, where the swarms of junketing Chinese businessmen and Communist Party officials had all but dried up in a corruption crackdown by President Xi Jinping of China. But Mr. Adelson (pronounced ADDLE-son) seemed to take the loss in stride, and it had no apparent effect on his political influence or his bottom line. In March 2019, Forbes put his net worth at \$35.1 billion.

His ride to riches had been more roller coaster than escalator, anyway. After taking the Sands public in 2004, his net worth grew for two years by \$1 million an hour — weekends, holidays and nights included. In a few months in 2009, it fell from \$30 billion to \$2 billion. But by 2013, he had it all back, with billions to spare. Often the cash register rang up \$2 million an hour.

Along the way, he drew countless gamblers and vacationers to his archipelago of fantasy resorts with Venetian-themed canals, motorized gondolas, singing gondoliers and replicas of St. Mark's Campanile and the Rialto Bridge, all to support acres of slot machines and roulette wheels, lavish floor shows and the biggest, gaudiest hotels anywhere on the planet.

Mr. Adelson became one of America's heavyweight political spenders — the largest single donor in the 2012 elections — following the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling in 2010, which removed many limits on political contributions as unconstitutional infringements of free speech.

In May 2016, after Donald J. Trump became the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Mr. Adelson told him in a private meeting in Manhattan that he was willing to contribute more to help elect him than he had given to any previous campaign, a sum that could exceed \$100 million, according to two Republicans with direct knowledge of Mr. Adelson's commitment. He eventually gave the Trump presidential campaign only \$25 million but was still its largest donor.

Mr. Trump, who had swept through the primaries with astonishing ease, had relied for nearly a year on his own wealth and small campaign contributions. But he said at the time that he would need perhaps \$1 billion for the general election campaign. Many of the Republican Party's wealthiest contributors, including Charles G. and David H. Koch, indicated that they were unlikely to support Mr. Trump, so Mr. Adelson's pledge was a hefty boost to his campaign.

"He is a candidate with actual C.E.O. experience, shaped and molded by the commitment and risk of his own money rather than the public's," Mr. Adelson wrote in an op-ed for The Washington Post. Mr. Trump, he added, "has created a movement in this country that cannot be denied."

After Mr. Trump's election, Mr. Adelson gave \$5 million to the committee organizing the inauguration festivities. It was the largest single contribution to any president's inaugural event, and on the day of the swearing-in ceremony in January 2017, Mr. Adelson and his wife sat along the aisle a few rows back as Mr. Trump took the oath of office. Under the Trump administration, the Adelsons achieved at least one of their long-held goals: the relocation of the United States Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in 2018.

A Courted Moneyman

With cornucopias of cash, Mr. Adelson had for years showered king's ransoms on Republican Party stalwarts. He was a major supporter of President George W. Bush in 2004 and gave \$92.7 million to campaigns and super PACs supporting Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney and others in 2012. He told Forbes that he was willing to spend \$100 million to defeat President Barack Obama.

Mr. Adelson's influence was on display in March 2014, when four prospective presidential candidates — Govs. Chris Christie of New Jersey, Scott Walker of Wisconsin and John Kasich of Ohio, and former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida — went to Las Vegas for what critics called an audition before the Republican Party's most coveted and fearsome moneyman.

"The four Republican candidates prostrated themselves, seeking Adelson's stamp of approval and cash," Thomas B. Edsall wrote on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times.

Mr. Adelson set off another flap in December 2015 when he bought The Las Vegas Review-Journal, Nevada's biggest newspaper, for \$140 million, using a shell company to hide his

involvement. When he was revealed as the buyer by his own newspaper, questions were raised about whether he would interfere with its journalistic independence. His family pledged that the paper would be "fair, unbiased and accurate," but the editor and some staff members took a buyout and resigned. The Review-Journal was reportedly the only major newspaper in the nation to endorse Mr. Trump for president.

In succeeding months, the new ownership brought financial muscle to The Review-Journal, enabling it to hire personnel and upgrade equipment. But the newsroom was roiled by tensions between top editors on the one hand, who saw it as part of their job to review coverage of Mr. Adelson and his family and business affairs, and, on the other, news staff members who chafed at what they regarded as inappropriate interference. A longtime columnist who had filed for bankruptcy in 2007 while defending himself against an Adelson libel suit was barred by management from writing about Mr. Adelson. The columnist left the paper, one of about a dozen staff members who quit or were fired during the contretemps.

In Israel, where he had a home and owned major conservative media outlets, Mr. Adelson supported Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party. He opposed statehood for Palestinians, favored Israeli settlements in occupied territories and underwrote junkets to Israel by congressional Republicans.

The Israeli business news site Globes reported last year that Mr. Adelson had spent \$67.7 million to buy the former U.S. ambassador's residence in Tel Aviv. It was the largest amount paid for a home in Israeli history and appeared aimed at making it more difficult for future presidents to reverse the Trump administration's move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in 2018.

Mr. Adelson looked like a man spoiling for a fight: short, stout and pugnacious, with sparse reddish hair and a puffy pale face that reddened easily. Unions, reporters and associates he considered disloyal incurred his wrath. He kept bodyguards and lawyers close.

Mr. Adelson began his rise in 1979, when he and four partners started a Las Vegas computer trade show called Comdex. Years before computers proliferated in households, the show drew sellers and buyers to see the latest technology in a field that was growing exponentially. In the 1980s and '90s, it was the nation's top computer exhibition, and Mr. Adelson made \$500 million from its sale.

In 1989, his partnership concluded the purchase of the Sands Hotel and Casino, the Frank Sinatra-Rat Pack hangout, and added a convention center. Honeymooning with his second wife in Venice in 1991, he found the inspiration for his next move. He imploded the Sands in 1996 to make way for his \$1.5 billion Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in 1999. By 2003, it had 8,000 suites and rooms and a casino the size of two football fields. He owned a majority interest in the corporation, and, taking it public, became a multibillionaire overnight.

Palaces of a Casino King

In 2007, three years after gaining a toehold in Macau with a \$265 million casino, Mr. Adelson opened his next big thing: the Venetian Macao, a \$2.4 billion, 39-story hotel and casino — the world's seventh largest building, with a gaming paradise almost as big as 10 football fields. Asia's passionate gamblers poured in, and Mr. Adelson multiplied his wealth

many times over.

He built other casino-hotels in Macau, Singapore and Pennsylvania, and added the Las Vegas Palazzo. In 2013, he dropped plans for a \$30 billion resort near Madrid after failing to win Spanish concessions. But he planned casinos in Japan, an untapped gambling mega-market, and, with billions at stake, lobbied hard against online gambling.

His company faced lawsuits, investigations and accusations of bribing Chinese and American officials and of tolerating prostitutes and the Mafia. Mr. Adelson denied the allegations and was not personally implicated. Nor was his company convicted of serious wrongdoing, although it paid a \$47 million fine in 2013 to avoid criminal charges in a money-laundering investigation.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee once issued an apology after insinuating that he had profited from prostitution.

"Laura and I mourn the passing of a friend, Sheldon Adelson," former President Bush said in a statement on Tuesday, referring to the former first lady. "Sheldon battled his way out of a tough Boston neighborhood to build a successful enterprise that loyally employed tens of thousands — and entertained millions." He called Mr. Adelson "an American patriot," "a strong supporter of Israel" and a "generous benefactor of charitable causes, especially medical research and Jewish heritage education."

Sheldon Gary Adelson was born in Boston on Aug. 4, 1933, one of four children of Arthur and Sarah (Tonkin) Adelson. His father was descended from Jewish Ukrainian and Lithuanian ancestors; his mother had immigrated from England, and one of the boy's forebears had been a Welsh coal miner. In the family's two-room flat in the Dorchester section of Boston, the parents slept on a mattress and the children on the floor. Sheldon, a go-getter, sold newspapers and at 16 had candy-vending machines in factories and gas stations.

He fought anti-Semitism and toughs in the streets and at Roxbury Memorial High School. "We had to go to school with at least four kids," he told Forbes in 2012. "The Irish kids came out of the bushes and tenements with rubber hoses and chains and brass knuckles."

Mr. Adelson attended the City College of New York in the 1950s but dropped out after less than two years and joined the Army. He later sold toiletries, magazine ads and windshield de-icers; brokered mortgages, developed condominiums and booked charter tours. After his trade show successes, he bought the Sands Hotel and Casino for \$128 million.

Mr. Adelson had homes in Las Vegas, Malibu, Boston and Tel Aviv, and flew to Israel six to eight times a year on his own jetliners. A staunch Zionist, he even considered settling there.

"He fell in love with the country," an associate told The Times.

Mr. Adelson's first wife, Sandra, had three children, Mitchell, Gary and Shelley, all of whom he adopted. They divorced in 1988. In 1991, he married Miriam Farbstein Ochshorn, an Israeli physician, and had two sons, Adam and Matan. Complete information on his survivors was not immediately available.

Mr. Adelson and his wife contributed hundreds of millions to medical research, education and other philanthropies in America and Israel. They also gave \$500,000 to President George W. Bush for his second inauguration in 2005, and in 2008 accompanied him to Jerusalem for the 60th anniversary of Israel's founding.

Mr. Adelson had first visited Israel in 1988, wearing the shoes of his father, a Lithuanian-born Jew who had never made the trip.

Sheldon Adelson, Casino Mogul and Big Republican Party Donor, Dies at 87 (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 8:41 AM, James R. Hagerty and Alexandra Berzon, Neutral] Billionaire Sheldon Adelson, a giant in the casino-resort industry and one of the largest donors to the Republican Party, has died at the age of 87.

As a young man, Mr. Adelson seemed to lack focus. The son of an immigrant Jewish cabdriver, he flitted from one business to another, dabbling in mortgage brokerage, investment advice, venture capital, real estate, chartered tours and sales of De-Ice-It spray for windshields.

In his mid-30s, Mr. Adelson began finding his way as an entrepreneur who would become one of the world's richest men, with a fortune estimated by Forbes at \$35.9 billion. He made himself into a giant in the casino industry with his lucrative resorts, one of the largest donors to the Republican Party, a leading backer of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a newspaper publisher in Nevada and Israel.

Las Vegas Sands Corp. announced the death of its chairman and chief executive in a statement Tuesday, less than a week after the company said he was taking a medical leave for cancer treatment. In March 2019, the company said Mr. Adelson had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

His unlikely rise from obscurity began when he launched a trade publication for data-communications firms in the 1970s. Mr. Adelson noticed that other publishers sponsored trade shows. So, in 1979, near the beginning of the personal-computer boom, he launched Computer Dealers Exposition, or Comdex, which became a hugely successful trade exhibit held in Las Vegas and other cities. In 1988, needing space for his own exhibition center in Las Vegas to accommodate growing crowds, he bought the Sands hotel and casino on the Las Vegas Strip for \$110 million, opening up a new line of business.

He tore down the Sands and built in its place the Venetian resort, featuring a canal replica with singing gondoliers, and later poured billions of dollars into gambling, convention and entertainment palaces in Macao and Singapore. Las Vegas Sands, valued at \$44.7 billion, now derives around 87% of its revenue from Asia.

His breakthrough in Las Vegas reflected a bet that conventions and trade shows were a surer way to keep rooms filled than a pure focus on gambling. Yet the billions he invested in Asia underscored his conviction that demand for gambling there was nearly insatiable. "I believe there is enough room in Asia...for five to 10 Las Vegases," he told CNBC in 2010.

His Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, which opened in 2010, was designed by Moshe Safdie and cost \$5.7 billion. It features three curving 55-story towers, with 2,600 hotel rooms, surmounted by a rooftop park and infinity pool resembling a giant surf board. When the producers of the 2018 movie "Crazy Rich Asians" wanted a backdrop that screamed extravagance, they found it at the Marina Bay Sands.

But Asia also brought controversy. In 2016 and 2017, Las Vegas Sands agreed to pay a total of nearly \$18 million to the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and Nevada gambling regulators to settle investigations into violations of federal antibribery laws over payments the company made to a business consultant in China. Sands admitted it paid about \$5.8 million to the consultant, a former Chinese government official, even though there was no "discernible legitimate business purpose."

Despite a sometimes folksy public demeanor, Mr. Adelson was hard-nosed in litigation. After the fired head of his Macau operation sued for wrongful termination and accused the company of extensive wrongdoing, Mr. Adelson denied the accusations and fought a legal battle that his lawyers dragged out for five years. Eventually, his company agreed to pay the former executive more than \$75 million. Mr. Adelson had told The Wall Street Journal four years earlier that he wished he had settled the dispute when it began.

Mr. Adelson got positive publicity for donating large sums to the Birthright Israel Foundation, which provides trips to Israel for young Jewish adults. Maintaining close links between Israel and Jews living elsewhere was one of his top priorities. "We are like stonemasons," he said in a 2016 interview. "We mix the cement that connects one generation of Jews to another."

Another priority for Mr. Adelson was the Adelson Medical Research Foundation, which he set up and oversaw with his wife, Miriam, an Israeli-born medical doctor who founded treatment centers for drug addicts. The foundation funds research into cancer, immunologic and neural diseases.

Mr. Adelson, who was broad-shouldered and stood 5-foot-5, had suffered since 2001 from peripheral neuropathy, a condition that made it hard for him to walk.

His surging wealth by the late 1980s allowed him to increase political donations, and he eventually became a symbol of billionaires' influence on U.S. politics. Originally a donor to both parties, he came to channel nearly all his donations to Republicans. In the 2012 presidential election, after a Supreme Court decision made it much easier for rich people to spend freely on elections, Mr. Adelson became a massive financial force in politics, pouring money into both the primary and general presidential elections. He spent more than \$100 million during that cycle, but most of his candidates lost. He later said that the Republican Party needed to be at the forefront of immigration reform.

"Frankly, the Democrats don't have a monopoly on having hearts," Mr. Adelson, the son of an immigrant himself, wrote in Politico in 2014. His brand of Republicanism—pro-business and socially liberal on many issues—became eclipsed by Donald Trump's fiery rhetoric. Nonetheless, he became a hefty supporter of Mr. Trump and sat a few rows behind him as he was sworn in as president in January 2017.

President Trump awarded Miriam Adelson a Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2018.

Meanwhile, Mr. Trump and many congressional Republicans increasingly adopted many of Mr. Adelson's key stances, including promoting unflinching support for Israel's government and opposing online gambling. One of his longtime goals, moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, was adopted by the Trump administration in 2018.

The Adelsons donated \$75 million to Mr. Trump's failed re-election bid.

Mr. Adelson's relationship with reporters was often contentious. He sued several for libel, including Wall Street Journal reporter Kate O'Keefe. (That suit was settled. Both sides paid their own legal fees but the Journal didn't pay Mr. Adelson any money or make any changes to the story in question.)

In 2007, he launched a free newspaper in Israel, Israel Hayom, a conservative daily, which has supported Prime Minister Netanyahu. "I know everybody says it's Bibi's newspaper," he said in a 2016 interview, referring to Mr. Netanyahu by his nickname. "It's not." Mr. Adelson acquired the Las Vegas Review-Journal, the largest daily newspaper in Nevada, in 2015. In a very unusual step, the newspaper in 2018 published a front-page editorial by Miriam Adelson extolling the embassy move.

After the announcement of his non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 2019, he continued to lead the company, including through the global upheaval in the casino industry from the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr. Adelson watched as temporary shutdowns and pandemic restrictions wiped out revenues in 2020. In October, the company said it was considering selling its Las Vegas Strip casinos and convention center.

Sheldon Gary Adelson was born Aug. 4, 1933, in Boston and grew up poor in that city's Dorchester section. He said his father, who emigrated from Lithuania at age 12, had only a sixth-grade education. After years of driving a taxi, his father went into publishing with a trade paper for taxi drivers. His mother taught knitting and sold knitting supplies.

His father had a passion for gambling, Mr. Adelson recalled in a 2014 interview. It wasn't clear to him, he said, whether his father was addicted to gambling, but his parents "would bet on any number they could find, the Treasury numbers, the Irish sweepstakes...and they would bet on it daily. I saw the cost."

By age 12, Sheldon Adelson was selling newspapers on Boston street corners. At age 16, he set up a business operating candy-vending machines. He dropped out of City College of New York and received training in court reporting at a trade school. While serving in the U.S. Army, mostly on Governors Island in New York, he did court-reporting work.

Mr. Adelson described himself as a generalist, able to run almost any business. He estimated that he had been involved in at least 50 businesses. In the early 1960s, he spent time in Tampa, promoting over-the-counter stock offerings and organizing a branch of the Optimist Club.

A Boston Globe reporter who interviewed him in 1988 noted that his Needham, Mass., office was ratty, with a peeling vinyl cover on his chair. "I don't need the trappings of success to feel successful," Mr. Adelson said.

Some of his early ventures flopped, but his record was strong once he focused on casinos and resorts.

"I've learned to seek advice from other people," he said in a 2014 interview with Bloomberg TV.

In 1995, he sold Comdex to Japan's SoftBank Corp. for \$800 million. Within a decade, Comdex was defunct, superseded by the Consumer Electronics Show.

Mr. Adelson's survivors include his wife, Miriam, whom he married in 1991, their two sons and two children from an earlier marriage that ended in divorce.

In public appearances, he came across as poised and self-assured, with a playful sense of humor. At a gathering of the American Gaming Association in 2014, he was asked why people who had bet against his hotel- and casino-development strategies had been wrong. "Because they guessed against me," he said. "That should be clear."

Sheldon Adelson, casino mogul and GOP power broker, dies (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 12:47 PM, Kimberly Pierceall, Neutral]

Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire mogul, Republican mega-donor and power broker who built a casino empire spanning from Las Vegas to China and became a singular force in domestic and international politics, has died after a long illness.

Adelson died at 87 from complications related to treatment for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Las Vegas Sands announced Tuesday.

He was the son of Jewish immigrants raised in a Boston tenement who became one of the world's richest men. The chairman and CEO of the Las Vegas Sands brought singing gondoliers to the Vegas Strip and foresaw the same potential in Asia. Forbes ranked him No. 19 in the U.S., worth an estimated \$29.8 billion.

"If you do things differently, success will follow you like a shadow," he said during a 2014 talk to the gambling industry in Las Vegas.

Blunt yet secretive, the squatly-built Adelson resembled an old-fashioned political boss. He became one of the nation's most influential GOP donors by setting records for individual contributions.

In 2012, Politico called him "the dominant pioneer of the super PAC era."

Adelson hosted the party's top strategists and candidates at his modest office wedged among the casinos of the Las Vegas Strip. He helped ensure that uncritical support of Israel became a pillar of the GOP platform, never more visibly than when the Trump administration relocated the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018.

The inflammatory move had been adamantly opposed by Palestinians and was long a priority for Adelson, who sat front and center at the ceremony in Jerusalem, with his wife, Miriam.

More recently, he reportedly purchased the U.S. ambassador's official residence near Tel Aviv for some \$67 million in a maneuver that appeared to be aimed at preventing the embassy from relocating back to Tel Aviv after Trump leaves office. Just weeks ago, Adelson provided a private plane for Jonathan Pollard, a former U.S. intelligence analyst who spent 30 years in prison for spying for Israel, to move to Israel after his parole ended.

When asked at a gambling conference what he hoped his legacy would be, Adelson said it wasn't his glitzy casinos or hotels but his impact in Israel. He was closely aligned with the conservative Likud party and funded a widely-read free daily newspaper called "Israel Hayom," or "Israel Today," so supportive of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that some Israelis nicknamed it "Bibi-ton," a play on words combining Netanyahu's nickname with the Hebrew word for newspaper.

In the U.S., Adelson helped underwrite congressional trips to Israel, helped build a new headquarters for the lobbying group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and later was a top supporter of the Israeli-American Council, whose conferences have attracted top Republicans (Vice President Mike Pence) and Democrats (House Speaker Nancy Pelosi).

His attachment to Israel was life-long and so deep that he once said he wished his military service had been in an Israeli uniform instead of an American one.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Adelson "will forever be remembered" for his work strengthening ties between the U.S. and Israel.

Adelson was a late bloomer in business and in politics. He didn't become a casino owner, or a Republican, until well into middle age. Through the 1990s and after his wealth soared, his engagement in politics intensified. He was a supporter of President George W. Bush and backed Republican Rudolph Giuliani for the 2008 presidential race, before turning to the eventual candidate, Sen. John McCain, who lost to Barack Obama.

"Sheldon battled his way out of a tough Boston neighborhood to build a successful enterprise that loyally employed tens of thousands - and entertained millions," said Bush in a prepared statement Tuesday. "He was an American patriot."

Adelson's leverage grew considerably in 2010 after the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision lifted many restrictions on individual campaign contributions. He and his wife spent more than \$90 million on the 2012 election, funding presidential candidate Newt Gingrich and later Mitt Romney.

"I'm against very wealthy people attempting to or influencing elections," he told Forbes magazine in 2012. "But as long as it's doable I'm going to do it."

Adelson came around slowly to Trump, who ridiculed Adelson's support for Sen. Marco

Rubio of Florida, tweeting in 2015, "Sheldon Adelson is looking to give big dollars to Rubio because he feels he can mold him into his perfect little puppet. I agree!"

But after Trump's surprise victory, the new president spoke often with Adelson and embraced his hardline views on the Middle East. He cut funding for Palestinian refugees and withdrew from the Obama administration's nuclear nonproliferation deal with Iran. He bucked long-held and bipartisan U.S. policy that viewed Jerusalem as key to any peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Adelson, in turn, aided Trump financially, including \$5 million for his inauguration, and supported him through his media holdings. Late in 2015, Adelson secretly purchased the Las Vegas Review-Journal — the paper's own reporters revealed he was the new owner. Some longtime staffers left in protest.

In what was widely seen as a mark of the Adelsons' influence with Trump, Miriam Adelson was given a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2018.

Adelson, who contributed more than \$100 million to the 2018 off-year elections, held extraordinary power among Republicans even though he didn't always agree with them.

"Our nation lost a remarkable American with the passing of my friend Sheldon Adelson," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday.

In a 2012 interview with The Wall Street Journal, he called himself "basically a social liberal," who was pro-choice on abortion and supportive of immigrant rights. He cited taxes and differences over Israel as major reasons for leaving the Democratic party.

"His life made him a fearless advocate for freedom and entrepreneurship and a source of counsel and support to a generation of conservatives, including me," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

In Nevada, his influence was such that even the state's most prominent Democrat, Sen. Harry Reid, hesitated to take him on. In a 2014 interview with MSNBC, the then-Senate majority leader differentiated between Adelson and fellow GOP billionaire donors Charles and David Koch. Reid had sharply criticized the Koch brothers as callous and greedy, while saying that he respected Adelson because he was "not in it to make money," a widely challenged opinion.

"In the nearly four decades that I've known him, Sheldon Adelson has been outspoken with causes important to him," Reid said Tuesday. "His advocacy for the state of Israel and Jewish causes was without equal and made a difference in countless lives both at home and abroad."

Adelson was married twice. He and his first wife, Sandra, were divorced in 1988. Three years later, he married Miriam Farbstein-Ochshorn, an Israeli-born doctor he met on a blind date and whom many believe helped deepen his involvement with Israel. Their honeymoon trip to Venice inspired Adelson to raze the historic Sands hotel-casino, once a favorite hangout for Frank Sinatra among others, and replaced it with a pair of massive complexes: The Venetian and The Palazzo, one of the city's tallest buildings.

Adelson led efforts to move the NFL Raiders team from Oakland, California, to Las Vegas and his decision during pandemic to keep his casino employees in Las Vegas paid and insured despite closures and business slowing for casinos.

"That commitment helped keep thousands of Nevadans afloat during the most difficult of months, and Sheldon's commitment will never be forgotten," said Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak.

Sheldon Adelson adopted his first wife's three children and had two children with his second wife. Among numerous philanthropic projects, he and Miriam Adelson were especially committed to the research and treatment of substance abuse, a personal cause for Sheldon Adelson. His son Mitchell, from his first marriage, died of an overdose in 2005.

Sheldon Garry Adelson was born in 1933, in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. His father was a taxi driver, his mother the manager of a knitting store. A natural entrepreneur, he was selling newspapers by age 12 and running a vending machine business at 16. After dropping out of City College of New York and serving in the Army, he attempted to start dozens of small businesses.

Adelson, who said he disdained email, began to amass his fortune with a technology trade show, starting computer convention COMDEX in 1979 before selling his stake in 1995 for more than \$800 million.

When he bought the Sands Hotel in 1989, he was thinking convention space, not just gambling, would make money. It did. He built a convention hall to keep his hotel rooms full on weekdays and others soon followed the business model. Meanwhile, he worked to replicate the Strip in Macao, the only place in China where casino gambling is legal, and his wealth grew exponentially.

When faced with water and marsh land, Adelson directed his company to build land where there wasn't any, piling sand up to create the Cotai Peninsula. Soon his Macao revenue outstripped that of his Las Vegas holdings. He later expanded his business to Singapore, where his Marina Bay Sands hotel and its infinity pool were featured in the film "Crazy Rich Asians," and had been pressing to open a casino in Japan.

His Macao business also spawned a long-running wrongful termination lawsuit brought by a former chief of Sands China Ltd. who accused Adelson and the company of firing him for exposing a host of misdeeds.

The Sands China lawsuit was among dozens involving Adelson, whose cases included his suing a Wall Street Journal reporter for calling him "foul-mouthed" (the parties settled, the words remained) to being sued by his sons from his first marriage for cheating them out of money (he won).

A long-running feud with fellow casino tycoon Steve Wynn turned to friendship when Wynn joined Adelson's effort to end online gambling. Critics said Adelson was trying to stifle competition. Adelson countered that there was no way to ensure children and teenagers wouldn't gamble and said he was "not in favor of it exploiting the world's most vulnerable

people."

Trump's election would again prove useful to Adelson. During the Obama administration, the Justice Department said online gambling that does not involve sporting events would not violate the Wire Act, a 1961 federal statute. In a legal opinion that became public early in 2019, the department reversed itself and decided the statute applies to any form of gambling.

With Sheldon Adelson's death, Netanyahu loses key supporter (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 12:24 PM, Tia Goldenberg, Neutral]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday mourned the passing of U.S. casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, one of Netanyahu's staunchest American supporters, lauding his efforts to bolster ties between the U.S. and Israel that helped drive pro-Israel policy under the Trump administration.

With Adelson's death, Netanyahu loses a key U.S. backer who for the last four years had the ear of the American president and worked tirelessly to push Israel's priorities at the White House and in Congress. He also bids farewell to an important backroom player in Israeli politics who funded an influential free daily newspaper that served as an unofficial mouthpiece for Netanyahu.

"Sheldon's great actions to strengthen Israel's position in the U.S. and to strengthen ties between Israel and the diaspora will be remembered for generations," Netanyahu said in a statement, adding he had received news of Adelson's death with "deep sorrow and heartbreak."

"We will forever remember Sheldon and his great contribution to Israel and the Jewish people."

In a later, more personal statement in English, Netanyahu said Adelson was "a wonderful friend to us personally," saying "the warmth of his heart, the clarity of his thinking and the decisiveness of his actions were truly exceptional."

Israeli legislators from across the political spectrum as well as other public figures rushed to praise Adelson and his support for Israel and Jewish causes.

Gideon Saar, who is challenging Netanyahu in upcoming elections, said Adelson "devoted his time and energy to speaking up for Israel, making Israel's case to U.S. decision-makers, and strengthening ties between Israel and the United States."

Isaac Herzog, a former opposition leader and now the head of the Jewish Agency, an organization that works to fortify links between Israel and the diaspora, called Adelson "one of the leaders of the Jewish people in our generation, one of the pillars of Jewish education in the world."

Adelson, the son of Jewish immigrants, was a staunch supporter of Netanyahu and a driving force in pushing President Donald Trump's strong pro-Israel agenda, including the controversial move of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to contested Jerusalem.

Adelson sat in the front row when the Trump administration inaugurated the Jerusalem embassy in May 2018 and attended the unveiling of the Trump's Mideast plan, which overwhelmingly favored Israel over the Palestinians, at the White House last January.

More recently, he reportedly purchased the U.S. ambassador's official residence near Tel Aviv for some \$67 million last year in a move that was seen as helping prevent the embassy from relocating back to Tel Aviv after Trump leaves office. Just weeks ago, Adelson provided a private plane for Jonathan Pollard, a former U.S. intelligence analyst who spent 30 years in prison for spying for Israel, to move to Israel after his parole ended.

His attachment to Israel was life-long and so deep that he once said he wished his military service had been in an Israeli uniform instead of an American one. Friends of the Israel Defense Forces, a group that supports Israeli soldiers, said Adelson was one of the organization's greatest backers and that he had "adopted" three Israeli military brigades as part of one of its programs.

Adelson was also active in Israeli politics, launching a free newspaper called Israel Hayom that served as an unofficial mouthpiece for Netanyahu. The newspaper has played a central role in Israeli politics, promoting exclusives and leaks from his office and even helping trigger national elections in 2015 when a Netanyahu rival tried to pass a law that would limit its influence.

It also is connected to one of the corruption scandals for which Netanyahu is standing trial. Netanyahu is accused of promising the publisher of a rival newspaper that he would limit Israel Hayom's influence in exchange for more positive coverage in the publisher's daily, Yediot Ahronot. Adelson and his wife are listed as witnesses on the indictment against Netanyahu, who denies any wrongdoing.

After Adelson's death was announced, Israel Hayom's website was flush with photos of Adelson, with the site posting four articles on him, including an obituary written by his wife.

Adelson supported some causes linked to the Israeli settlement movement, including Ariel University, Israel's only university in the occupied territory, as well as City of David, a controversial archaeological park situated in an Arab neighborhood in east Jerusalem.

Adelson was also a major donor to numerous mainstream causes, and his foundation was a prolific giver to Jewish and Israeli groups, including Israel's national Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem.

His family foundation's tax return for 2018 showed donations of \$34 million to the Birthright Israel Foundation in New York, a program that brings young Jews from around the world on free trips to Israel.

It also lists a \$10.7 million donation to the Maccabee Task Force Foundation. The group says on its website that it's dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism generally, and the Palestinian-led movement promoting boycotts and sanctions against Israel specifically, on college campuses. Adelson's return also features more modest contributions, such as \$10,000 to the Caribbean Jewish Community.

In the U.S., Adelson helped underwrite congressional trips to Israel, helped build a new headquarters for the lobbying group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and later was a top supporter of the Israeli-American Council, whose conferences have attracted top Republicans and Democrats.

U.N. climate chief looks to Biden to boost global action (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Matthew Green and Kate Abnett, Neutral]

A swift resurgence of U.S. leadership under President-elect Joe Biden and wealthy nations fulfilling a promise of cash for poorer countries could galvanise action on climate change this year, the United Nations climate chief said on Tuesday.

In November in Glasgow, Scotland, the U.N. will stage its most important climate summit since the 2015 event that yielded the Paris Agreement, when nearly 200 countries committed to halt rising global temperatures quickly enough to avoid catastrophic change.

The November summit, which was delayed by a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, serves as a deadline for countries to commit to make deeper emissions cuts to deliver the Paris treaty's aim.

"The U.S. played a very important role in getting the Paris Agreement together. So we certainly are hoping that we will see this kind of leadership coming back," Patricia Espinosa, executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, told the Reuters Next conference.

With only 10 months until the summit, President-elect Joe Biden must reboot that leadership "very fast," Espinosa said.

While President Donald Trump doubts mainstream climate science and pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement, Biden has pledged to re-join the accord on his first day in office and spend \$2 trillion on clean energy.

The U.N. will also be watching for a U.S. pledge to cut emissions faster this decade – a move major economies including China and Japan have yet to make.

Espinosa also called on wealthy countries to fulfil their promise, made in 2009, to deliver \$100 billion each year by 2020 to help developing countries tackle climate change. They missed the goal by \$21 billion in 2018, according to the latest tally.

"We're not there," said Espinosa. "After the year where we had this COVID pandemic that prompted the richer economies to mobilise, in a matter of months, \$12 trillion for COVID recovery. It just doesn't make sense."

Breaking that promise would give developing countries an excuse not to make climate pledges of their own, she said. That could spell trouble in a year when major emitters, including India, will face pressure to step up action.

"I see this as one of the most important elements in order to rebuild trust," she said.

Sudden change to Homeland Security leadership raises new worries at the worst possible time (CNN)

CNN [1/12/2021 11:47 AM, Priscilla Alvarez and Geneva Sands, Neutral]

Against the backdrop of looming threats leading up to Inauguration Day, the Department of Homeland Security is bringing in its sixth secretary under President Donald Trump, fueling concerns over a department in flux as authorities brace for the possibility of more violence.

Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf abruptly resigned Monday after serving in the role since November 2019. In the middle of a national security crisis, Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Pete Gaynor – whose extensive experience in emergency management has been cited as a benefit – assumes the role of acting secretary.

The carousel of leaders who have filled, then vacated, roles within the Department of Homeland Security over the last four years has fueled turmoil and distrust – and it now comes just days before a major security event.

The acting leaders of the Defense, Justice and Homeland Security departments are all relatively new to their jobs. Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller began in early November and acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen started on Christmas Eve.

In a letter to the department, Wolf cited in part ongoing litigation challenging the validity of his appointment. "I am saddened to take this step, as it was my intention to serve the Department until the end of this Administration," Wolf wrote. But those legal challenges have been ongoing and a White House decision to rescind his formal nomination last week only made things more tenuous.

"For months we have known Chad Wolf has been serving illegally in his position, so the timing of his resignation from the Department today is questionable. He has chosen to resign during a time of national crisis and when domestic terrorists may be planning additional attacks on our government," said House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson in a statement Monday.

Rep. Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat and member of the Armed Services Committee, accused Wolf of "shirking" his responsibilities, but said the immediate question is dealing with the widespread domestic terrorism event that was "birthed last week."

"We have a lot of adversaries that are looking to take advantage of us during this time period of extreme vulnerability," Crow said.

Rep. Conor Lamb told CNN's "New Day" on Tuesday that lawmakers had been warned about a plan by extremists to encircle the seat of Congress and as well as more threats against legislators. "They were talking about 4,000 armed 'patriots' to surround the Capitol and prevent any Democrat from going in," the Pennsylvania Democrat said.

DHS, which was established in response to the 9/11 attacks, consists of numerous federal agencies, including the US Secret Service. The Secret Services becomes the lead federal agency in "developing, exercising, and implementing security operations" when an event is designated as a National Special Security Event, according to the Congressional Research

Service.

Shortly before publicly announcing his resignation, Wolf said he had instructed the US Secret Service to begin National Special Security Event operations for the inauguration on Wednesday instead of January 19, citing in part "events of the past week and the evolving security landscape leading up to the inauguration."

The inauguration is designated as a National Special Security Event, which is intended to bring in the full force of the federal government and its resources. Presidential nominating conventions, for example, is also designated as a National Special Security Event. Planning for these events often happens at least a year in advance, according to a former DHS official.

"I don't know that him leaving is going to have that much of an impact operationally," the former official said of Wolf, noting that DHS has been operating under acting leadership for much of the Trump administration and to some degree, is accustomed to the consistent change.

"It's a component operation. The role of a secretary in a NSSE is less operational, and more administrative," another former DHS official said. "The doers are at the worker bee level."

A senior DHS official told CNN that planning is ongoing, despite the change in leadership.

"As in every presidential transition, the senior career staff is diligently on the job, making sure the work of protecting the nation goes uninterrupted. Same for this," the official said, adding that Gaynor is uniquely qualified to facilitate coordination as a result of his extensive experience.

"[Emergency managers] know how to coordinate and that's what we need right now. That's why Pete is the perfect guy," the official said.

Another DHS official echoed the same confidence in inauguration planning. "Those plans are developed by experts and will be implemented as planned," the official said.

"I've been working with Administrator Gaynor, now Secretary Gaynor, for quite some time and he knows the department well and is well prepared to lead the department," Ken Cuccinelli, senior official performing the duties of the deputy secretary, said on Fox News Tuesday morning.

The White House referred questions about Wolf's departure to DHS.

Gaynor, who was confirmed by the Senate last January, has more than 11 years of experience in emergency management and served for 26 years as an enlisted Marine and Infantry Officer in the United States Marine Corps, according to his FEMA bio. During his time in the Marines, he was also assigned as the executive officer responsible for the security of Camp David.

"He's got a lot of experience working with Secret Service from his time at Camp David," the former DHS official told CNN, adding that Gaynor is "very capable."

Under Gaynor's tenure at FEMA, the agency juggled natural disasters as well as response to the coronavirus pandemic, including distribution of personal protective equipment.

Last year, in an attempt to self-correct the succession order, DHS had Gaynor temporarily exercise the authority of Homeland Security secretary to try to alleviate concerns over Wolf's legitimacy as acting chief of the department. Under one interpretation, Gaynor would be the lawfully serving acting secretary based on the Federal Vacancies Reform Act.

Gaynor told his workforce Monday that he would serve as acting DHS secretary until January 20 when Biden is inaugurated, adding that a regional administrator, Bob Fenton, will serve as the senior official performing the duties of the FEMA administrator in the interim.

"While there are many changes during any Presidential transition, our focus at FEMA continues to be helping people before, during and after disasters. Right now, our nation is facing significant challenges and it is our privilege to support the nationwide efforts to fight the pandemic and protect our homeland," Gaynor said.

FEMA is among the components involved in National Special Security Events to facilitate coordination across government entities.

Since last Wednesday's attack on the Capitol, there have been adjustments to inauguration planning, according to the senior DHS official. "There will be measures in place, some of which are visible, some of which are not, that will serve as a deterrent for threats," the official said.

F-35 Flies With 871 Flaws, Only Two Fewer Than a Year Earlier (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 2:00 AM, Anthony Capaccio, 6400K, Neutral]

Lockheed Martin Corp.'s F-35, the fighter jet already being flown by the U.S. and eight allies, remains marred by 871 software and hardware deficiencies that could undercut readiness, missions or maintenance, according to the Pentagon's testing office.

The Defense Department's costliest weapons system "continues to carry a large number of deficiencies, many of which were identified prior to" the development and demonstration phase, which ended in April 2018 with 941 flaws, Robert Behler, the director of operational testing, said in a new assessment obtained by Bloomberg News in advance of its publication.

Lockheed has delivered or is under contract for 970 aircraft of a potential 3,200 or more planes for the U.S. and other nations. The assessment outlining the seemingly intractable roster of flaws – it's down only two from the 873 that Behler reported last year – provides the incoming Biden administration with a primer on the \$398 billion F-35 program that retains strong backing in Congress and from overseas purchasers despite its problems.

Those include a stalled one-month simulation exercise required to certify the plane is combat-ready against the toughest Russian or Chinese threats and thus ready for a decision on full-rate production.

Laura Seal, a spokesperson for the Defense Department's F-35 program office, declined to comment until Behler's report is released officially.

Aside from the technical flaws, the F-35 program faces a \$10 billion shortfall in the Pentagon's planned budget for 2021 through 2025. The Trump administration's final budget blueprint calls for requesting \$78 billion for research and development, jet procurement, operations and maintenance and military construction. But the Pentagon's independent cost analysis unit estimates \$88 billion will be needed, according to a June 2020 analysis.

Upgrade Schedule

The F-35 program is undergoing a "Block 4" upgrade costing at least \$12.1 billion that's intended to correct past deficiencies and introduce new capabilities in six-month increments through 2026 to keep up with current threats. The plan includes retrofitting some planes already built and in use by militaries from the U.S. and the U.K. to Japan.

Even with this focused effort, "the overall number of open deficiencies has not changed significantly since" early 2018, Behler wrote, "due to ongoing problems with initial software quality" in Block 4 and "limited lab and flight test capability, resulting in a high rate of problem discoveries" in testing and in the field.

The Block 4 process "is not working," Behler wrote. "It is causing significant delays to planned schedules and results in poor software quality, containing deficiencies." Software changes "intended to introduce new capabilities or fix deficiencies often introduced stability problems."

Only 10 of the 871 unresolved deficiencies cited by Boehler involve potentially serious "Category 1" issues, defined as critical deficiencies that could jeopardize pilot or aircraft safety or degrade mission effectiveness. That's compared with 102 such problems among the 941 cases cited in 2018.

Lockheed said in a statement that none of the 10 current deficiencies are "1A" problems that could affect pilot or aircraft safety but instead are in "Category 1B," which the program office defines as representing "a critical impact on mission readiness," training or maintenance.

"Though we have not seen the report, we track all F-35 deficiency reports," Lockheed spokesman Brett Ashworth said in a statement. He said about 70% of the 871 pending items "are categorized as low priority or are with the F-35 Joint Program Office for resolution."

Of the 10 pending "mission impacts" deficiency reports, nine have "closure resolution plans, with seven already delivered to the government awaiting action," and the others currently being reviewed.

A defense official who's seen the Behler assessment said many of the deficiencies will be resolved with production line changes and software updates. Although deficiencies must be documented for contractual and reporting purposes, the official said, depending on their

severity they might not be rapidly resolved. The size, scope and resolution status are being evaluated as part of the ongoing negotiations for a 15th production contract, the official said.

Among other findings, the testing office's report said that although the F-35 is showing increased reliability, it's still taking maintenance personnel too much time to repair aircraft and that cybersecurity vulnerabilities identified during earlier testing "have not been resolved."

OPEC+ oil output cuts compliance falls to 75% in Dec. – Petro-Logistics (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 12:24 PM, Alex Lawler, 5304K, Neutral]

OPEC+ compliance with pledged oil output curbs fell to 75% in December, among the lowest levels since the supply pact started in May 2020, tanker tracker Petro-Logistics said on Tuesday.

This is a lower estimate of compliance by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies, known as OPEC+ than others have reported. A trend of lower compliance could weigh on oil prices, which are currently at an 11-month high.

OPEC+ made a record oil-output cut of 9.7 million barrels per day, about 10% of world output, to support prices which were pushed to historic lows by the coronavirus pandemic. They had tapered the cut to 7.7 million bpd by December.

Petro-Logistics, a Geneva-based consultant, said December compliance by the OPEC members participating in the deal fell to 82%, down 10% from November, with top exporter Saudi Arabia among the nations showing weaker adherence.

"Even Saudi Arabia saw its compliance drop 10% to 92%," Petro-Logistics said in an email to Reuters.

The non-OPEC countries involved in the pact, of which Russia is by far the largest producer, was even lower at 64%, down 8% from the previous month.

Other estimates have so far found December compliance to be higher.

A Reuters survey found OPEC delivered on 99% of pledged cuts in December. A survey by Platts, one of the sources OPEC uses to track its output, put adherence by OPEC+ at 99%.

Ebola vaccines stockpiled against future outbreaks (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 4:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The World Health Organization and partners said Tuesday they are creating a global stockpile of Ebola vaccines to help stamp out future outbreaks.

In a statement, WHO, Doctors Without Borders, UNICEF and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said they were establishing an emergency reserve of about 500,000 doses; nearly 7,000 are available now and more will be added throughout the year and beyond. Financial support for the vaccine stockpile was provided by the vaccines alliance GAVI.

The Ebola vaccine being stockpiled is made by Merck. Before it was licensed, the shot was used to previously help contain outbreaks in Guinea and Congo under a protocol for "compassionate use."

Other stockpiles managed by WHO and partners exist for diseases including meningitis and yellow fever.

The Ebola vaccines will be stored in Switzerland, where they will be ready to be shipped after WHO and partners receive a request from countries. The agencies say any decision to release vaccines will be made within 48 hours of any such request and that the targeted delivery time is within one week.

The vaccines will be reserved for those at highest risk of being infected with Ebola during any epidemic, including those exposed to the disease and health workers treating patients and their contacts.

[Iran] A last-ditch Trump strike on Iran could face legal and ethical challenges from the military (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/12/2021 6:30 AM, Abraham Mahshie, 394K, Neutral]

Political theater ran high when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley to contain President Trump's ability to launch a nuclear strike in his final days, but a military legal expert and the nuclear commander said the military is under no obligation to follow an illegal, immoral, or unethical order.

"[There is] some fuzzy ground," Steve Bucci, a Heritage Foundation military law expert and former adviser to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, told the Washington Examiner when asked about the possibility that Trump may launch a strike against Iran in his final days.

"We're not martinets. The American military doesn't just salute blindly and execute," he said. "You never have to obey an illegal order or one that you feel is morally or ethically incorrect."

U.S. Strategic Command chief Adm. Charles Richard said on Jan. 5 he agrees with the American system that allows civilian control of the military when asked if he would follow a Trump order to strike Iran in his final days.

"I get asked this question a lot," he said on a Zoom media call hosted by the Defense Writer's Group.

"Bottom line, look, I will follow any legal order that I am given. I will not follow any illegal orders," he said.

In the days surrounding the first anniversary of the U.S. strike against Iranian Quds Force commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani on Jan. 3, rhetoric ran high from both the United States and Iran.

Senior Iranian officials implied Trump's own life was at risk. Meanwhile, Trump warned Iran to "Think it over" in a Dec. 23 tweet that promised, "If one American is killed, I will hold Iran

responsible."

U.S. Central Command also flexed its muscle near Iran.

Multiple B-52 bombers flew missions over international waters near Iran, and Trump ordered the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier to turn around and remain in the Persian Gulf on the ready.

Last Wednesday's storming of the Capitol by pro-Trump rioters prompted Pelosi to try to limit the president's ability to launch a nuclear strike. The speaker told House Democrats Friday that she feared Trump might start a war in his final days.

"I spoke to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley to discuss available precautions for preventing an unstable president from initiating military hostilities or accessing the launch codes and ordering a nuclear strike," Pelosi told Democrats in a memo Friday.

Bucci said it wouldn't be that easy.

"The president all by himself doesn't get to make the decisions on shooting nukes. There's a whole advisory system there with him," he explained.

Bucci said the secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, U.S. Central Command, and the entire intelligence community would be involved in a threat assessment involving Iran. Then, military planners would evaluate targets and proportional options would be recommended to the president.

U.S. Central Command did not immediately respond to a request by the Washington Examiner to comment on the threat presently posed by Iran and what U.S. forces remain in the area.

In recent weeks, Iran began to increase its uranium enrichment in violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran nuclear deal that Trump pulled the U.S. out of in 2018. The move arguably puts Iran on a faster breakout path to a nuclear weapon.

Nonetheless, Bucci said Trump has given no indication he wants to strike Iran as a way of reversing the activity.

"People who are speculating about that, that's a lot of political theater," he said. "With due respect to the speaker of the House, she's the one jumping the shark here."

The Uniform Code of Military Justice, the military's legal system, protects service members who disobey illegal orders but also prosecutes those who disobey a legal order.

"We do have this requirement to take a moral stand when something is morally incorrect," the former Army Special Forces operator said.

While quiet in recent days, Iran had escalated proxy attacks on U.S. interests in recent months.

"Iran has been surprisingly quiet up until recently in Iraq. Now, it's starting to ratchet up the attacks again," Heritage Foundation Mid-East security expert Jim Phillips recently told the Washington Examiner.

If an order is legal, Bucci said the service member must resign or face court-martial if he or she refuses to obey it.

"It gets less clear when you're talking about a country that is an avowed adversary of us. Iran is an adversary," he said. "They have said, 'We're going to destroy you.'"

[China] U.K. to Fine Firms That Hide Chinese Imports From Uighur Labor (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 9:20 AM, Kitty Donaldson, 6400K, Neutral]

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the U.K. will fine companies if they cover up imports from the Xinjiang region of China, where international observers have accused Beijing of overseeing forced labor by Uighur Muslims.

All companies with an annual turnover of more than 36 million pounds (\$49 million) will be obliged to publish a supply chain transparency report or face fines, Raab told Parliament on Tuesday. Public sector procurement will also be banned from the region and there will be tougher export controls.

"This package will help make sure that no British organizations, government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently profit from or contribute to the human rights violations against the Uighurs or other minorities in Xinjiang," Raab said. "We will continue to speak up for what is right."

The measures are designed to be a precise and preemptive tool to tackle abuses in the region, Raab's office said, though it added there is no way of quantifying how many imports come to the U.K. direct from the region. China was the U.K.'s third-biggest trading partner in 2019, after the U.S. and Germany; the U.K. ranked a distant 14th for China.

"I am left slightly lost for words why the foreign secretary has come here today," Labour's foreign affairs spokeswoman Lisa Nandy told the House of Commons. She accused him of "tinkering around the edges," while other countries are introducing legislation.

'Barbaric'

"What law would a company actually be breaking if they profit from what he called the barbaric forced labor in Xinjiang?" she asked.

Conservative MP and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Tom Tugendhat said "dirty goods" are one issue but "dirty money" is another problem, citing Chinese funding at British universities.

In December, the U.S.-based Center for Global Policy published a report alleging new evidence from Chinese government documents and media reports of hundreds of

thousands of Uighurs in Xinjiang being forced to pick cotton by hand through coercive state-mandated labor.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Australia-based ASPI think tank estimated that more than 80,000 Uighurs were transferred out of the far western Xinjiang autonomous region to work in factories across China. It said some were sent directly from detention camps.

China has repeatedly described such claims of forced labor as “baseless,” arguing it is fighting separatism and religious extremism among the minority group.

[China] UK to use fines to target forced labor in China's Xinjiang (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 10:57 AM, Staff, Neutral]

British companies will face fines unless they meet new government requirements showing their supply chains are free from forced labor, the U.K.'s foreign secretary said Tuesday as he announced measures aimed at tackling human rights abuses against the Uighur minority in China's Xinjiang region.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said officials have issued guidance to British firms with links to Xinjiang on how to carry out due diligence checks. The government intends to exclude suppliers when there is evidence of rights violations in their supply chains and also to review export controls to prevent the shipping of any goods that could contribute to such violations in Xinjiang.

“Our aim, put simply, is that no company that profits from forced labor in Xinjiang can do business in the U.K., and that no U.K. business is involved in their supply chains,” Raab told lawmakers.

However, Raab didn't provide details, and he stopped short of announcing specific sanctions against Chinese officials, saying that the U.K. government continues to sanctions over human rights violations under review.

Beijing has been accused of widespread rights abuses in its far western Xinjiang region, mainly targeting the Muslim Uighur population. Raab said mounting evidence, including first-hand testimony and non-profit reports, supports claims of unlawful mass detention in internment camps, widespread forced labor and forced sterilization of women on an “industrial scale.”

The evidence “paints a harrowing picture” and showed the practice of “barbarism we had hoped lost to another era,” Raab said.

Chinese officials have denied the accusations and said some of the claims were fake news or lies perpetrated by Western media. They also say measures were needed to deradicalize the population after a series of attacks in the Xinjiang region several years ago.

The U.S. customs agency blocked imports of clothing and other goods from Xinjiang last year over the forced labor issue.

The foreign affairs spokesperson, for Britain's opposition Labour Party, Lisa Nandy, said the

strength of Raab's words did not match his actions.

"I'm sorry to say that that will be noticed loud and clear in Beijing," she said.

[China] Toughening stance on China's Xinjiang, Britain introduces new company rules (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 10:26 AM, Sarah Young and Elizabeth Piper, Neutral]

Britain will introduce new rules for companies to try to prevent goods linked to China's Xinjiang region entering the supply chain, foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Tuesday, toughening London's response to allegations of forced labour.

Addressing parliament, Raab said there was harrowing evidence of forced labour among Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang after the United Nations estimated at least 1 million of the minority among others were held in an internment camp.

Beijing denies the charges.

Raab said Britain wanted to make sure it was free from any products that had links with Xinjiang, where he cited widespread reports of internment camps housing more than 1 million Uighurs, forced labour and the forced sterilisation of Uighur women.

"We must do more and we will," he said.

"Xinjiang's position in the international supply chain network means that there is a real risk of businesses and public bodies around the world, whether it's inadvertently or otherwise, sourcing from suppliers which are complicit in the use of forced labour."

It is not clear how many products connected to Xinjiang enter the supply chain in Britain.

Britain's stance marks a further deterioration in its relationship with China just five years after London hailed the start a "golden era" in ties and President Xi Jinping was feted in a state visit to the capital which included a dinner hosted by Queen Elizabeth.

Since then, Britain has criticised China over Hong Kong and ordered the removal of Huawei equipment from its 5G network.

Raab said Britain would check sourcing more thoroughly and toughen the Modern Slavery Act to include fines. It would also bar from government contracts any companies which do not comply to procurement rules, and launch a Xinjiang-specific review of export controls.

"This package put together will help make sure that no British organisations, government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently are profiting from, or contributing to, human rights violations against the Uighurs or other minorities in Xinjiang," he said.

After Britain finally left the European Union at the end of last year, Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants to forge an independent role for Britain in foreign affairs, and the move was touted as London leading the way.

But the government has so far resisted the calls of some in the ruling Conservative Party to introduce Magnitsky-style sanctions, with Raab saying he was keeping the possibility in reserve.

Magnitsky-style sanctions target individuals accused of committing human rights violations and are named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who was arrested in 2008 after alleging that Russian officials were involved in large-scale fraud. He died in a Moscow prison in 2009.

Some opposition lawmakers criticised the government for not going far enough and questioned what kind of impact the new measures would have.

Raab said Britain still wanted a positive and constructive relationship with China "but we won't sacrifice our values or our security."

[China] Britain introduces new company rules to stop links to China's Xinjiang (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 8:00 AM, Sarah Young and Paul Sandle, 5304K, Neutral]

Britain will introduce new rules for companies to try to prevent goods from China's Xinjiang region entering the supply chain, foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Tuesday, toughening London's response to allegations of forced labour.

He told parliament Britain would create more robust guidance for due diligence on sourcing, toughen the Modern Slavery Act to include fines, bar from government contracts any companies which do not comply to procurement rules and launch a Xinjian-specific review of export controls.

"This package put together will help make sure that no British organisations, government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently are profiting from, or contributing to, human rights violations against the Uighurs or other minorities in Xinjiang," he said.

[China] UK says will keep Magnitsky sanctions in reserve over China's Xinjiang (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 8:24 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said on Tuesday that it would keep in reserve Magnitsky sanctions against China over allegations of forced labour in the country's Xinjiang region.

Raab said "on Magnitsky, we will keep that in reserve," after he announced new rules for companies to try to prevent goods from the region entering the supply chain.

Magnitsky sanctions are designed to deter and provide accountability for serious violations of human rights.

[China] Canada urges firms to examine supply links to forced labor in China (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 9:17 AM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

The Canadian government said on Tuesday it was "deeply concerned" by reports of repression of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities by Chinese authorities and urged businesses with links to the Xinjiang region to examine their supply chains for evidence of forced labor.

[China] Canada, joining UK, clamps down on imports made by Chinese forced labor (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Canada joined Britain on Tuesday in announcing steps to ban the import of goods it said were made by Chinese forced labor in the Xinjiang region, a move likely to exacerbate tension with Beijing.

In a statement, Ottawa said it was "deeply concerned" by reports of repression of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities by Chinese authorities and urged businesses with links to Xinjiang region to examine their supply chains.

Canada will prohibit goods produced wholly or in part by forced labor and require companies operating in Xinjiang to acknowledge the human rights situation in the region. Earlier in the day, Britain announced similar measures.

Last month, the United States expanded economic pressure on Xinjiang, banning cotton imports from an organization it says uses the forced labor of detained Uighur Muslims.

The Chinese embassy in Ottawa was not immediately available for comment.

[Cuba] Cuba condemns new U.S. sanctions, hopes for better with Biden (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 5:27 PM, Andrea Rodriguez, Neutral]

Cuba is convinced that U.S. President-elect Joe Biden does not believe the Caribbean island nation sponsors terrorism, a senior Cuban diplomat said Tuesday, a day after the outgoing U.S. administration returned Cuba to a terrorism list.

"We are convinced that President Biden and his team know perfectly and recognize that Cuba is not and has not been a sponsor of terrorism," Carlos Fernández de Cossío, director general of the United States department in Cuba's Foreign Ministry, told a small group of journalists.

"And we trust that this truth will have a certain influence on the government team that enters next January 20," he said.

The Trump administration on Monday re-designated Cuba as a "state sponsor of terrorism," hitting the country with new sanctions that could hamstring Biden's promise to renew relations with the communist-governed island.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the step, citing Cuba's continued harboring of U.S. fugitives, its refusal to extradite a coterie of Colombian guerrilla commanders and its support for Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.

The Cuban government believes Trump is seeking last-minute political gain with a move favored by Cuban exiles in Florida.

"It is the opportunism" of those who "feel in political debt due to the recent elections, or who are advancing favors for the 2024 (election)," Fernandez de Cossío said.

Removing Cuba from the terrorism list had been one of former President Barack Obama's main foreign policy achievements as he sought better relations with the island, an effort endorsed by Biden as his vice president. Ties had been essentially frozen after Fidel Castro took power in 1959.

Trump took a tough line on Havana and reinstituted many of the sanctions that the Obama administration had eased or lifted after the restoration of full diplomatic relations in 2015.

[Venezuela] Maduro remains Venezuela's president two years after the U.S. declared him 'illegitimate' (FOX News)

FOX News [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Hollie McKay, Neutral]

Two years ago, the Trump administration government took a bold stance when it declared that it was no longer recognizing Nicolas Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela.

Instead, the U.S. – followed by more than dozen countries including the European Union – backed Juan Guaido, a little-known opposition leader, as the South American country's interim leader.

This decision triggered massive upheaval as thousands of Venezuelans poured into the streets of Caracas, calling for Maduro's resignation.

However, the socialist leader's much-anticipated fall from grace never really happened and two years on, Maduro remains firmly inside the Presidential Palace, presiding over a grave humanitarian crisis and dizzying economic degradation.

Evan Ellis, research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, told Fox News that Maduro's grip on Venezuela never fully released because while few actually supported the embattled leader, "many had long been complicit in the criminal activities that had become the lifeblood of the regime."

"Guaido and his team, and the Trump Administration, deserve credit for coordinating an extensive international diplomatic effort under extraordinary circumstances, which ultimately resulted in 57 countries across Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere, recognizing his legitimacy," Ellis said. "Guaido and his government also deserve extraordinary credit that, without control over Venezuelan territory or resources, they not only engaged within Venezuela against constant implicit and explicit threats by the Maduro regime but coordinated a broad-ranging international diplomacy."

Earlier this year, Maduro secured an even tighter grip on power – resuming control of Venezuelan Congress, the only wing it didn't domineer following elections in December. The vote was largely snubbed by the opposition and condemned as a mockery.

Some analysts say the loss by the opposition illuminates the lack of accordance Guaidó had in appealing to an exhausted and disappointed Venezuelan majority.

Additionally, despite initial hopes by U.S. officials and anti-Maduro activists that the military top brass would steadily abandon their loyalty to the socialist leader, he retains a sturdy grip on the Armed Forces.

Sources in Venezuela tell Fox News that Maduro uses the military to "control the food distribution, and some imports and customs," making the starving populous all the more adherent to the socialist command.

"The (Trump) administration talked tough, but it was never backed up with a robust plan. There was this false belief that if we huffed and we puffed, the Venezuelan regime would fall. We actually needed a strategy and more sustained engagements," argued Brett Bruen, a former White House director of global engagements. "Maduro has strengthened his hold on power in the last year. COVID-19 has helped. He was able to justify repressive measures as being in the service of public health. Russia and China have continued to reinforce his position, while the West was distracted with the pandemic."

While the U.S. has maintained a far more fervent stance against the "illegitimate" leader, there are some signs that the Washington-led pushback may be starting to fragment.

In a statement last week, the E.U. pledged to continue its "engagement" with opposition leader Guaidó, not referencing to him as the "interim president" as it had previously. An E.U. official insisted to the Associated Press that there was no change to the union's posture.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the U.S. still considers the Maduro regime to be "illegitimate" and "will not recognize it nor its pronouncements."

"President Guaidó and the (old) National Assembly are the only democratic representatives of the Venezuelan people as recognized by the international community, and they should be freed from Maduro's harassment, threats, persecution, and other abuses," he said.

The U.S., E.U. and Lima Group, a multilateral body established to oversee a peaceful Venezuelan power transition, have jointly broadcast calls for new, democratic elections in Venezuela.

However, now with an apparent fractured opposition, Maduro is free to pursue so-called "hate" charges against those perceived to be dissidents of the government, raising even more concern that challenging voices and truth to power will be eased further in the authoritarian country.

According to one Caracas-based analyst, who requested anonymity due to security reasons, the hefty economic sanctions piled on the Maduro regime by the U.S. over the recent years have been useful – but their effectiveness has slowed.

"Sanctions on PDVSA and giving control of the Venezuelan government assets in the U.S. to the Guaidó administration has strangled the Maduro regime financially, but that was not

enough," the source explained. "What was missing was a coordinated effort between the Trump administration and the rest of the international community involved. The European Union decided not to embark on a 'maximum pressure' strategy, instead only issuing personal sanctions. Thus, Maduro eventually is finding ways to evade the crippling U.S. sanctions."

A U.S. oil executive operating in the gas-rich nation also told Fox News that sanctions were at first effective, with oil production going from approximately 1.2 million barrels down to the 400k level average we see currently.

"However, sanctions are 'a wasting asset,' and they had unintended consequences, most pressing, an increase in illegal mining and drug trade which now accounts for a majority of money coming into the country and creates added regional instability," the insider explained. "As well as allowing for other foreign actors to find ways to evade sanctions and ultimately profit from these sanctions."

One U.S.-based executive, who was not authorized to speak on the record, contended that the U.S. potentially "over-estimated" the credibility and strength of the opposition with the Venezuelan opposition, as well as Maduro's capacity to keep the "military on his side."

Multiple sources highlighted that the combined support of Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and Cuba has proved enough to keep Maduro afloat.

US DESIGNATES CUBA STATE SPONSOR OF TERRORISM

The onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic paved the way for Maduro to harden his grasp on the increasingly impoverished nation through means of enforced lockdowns and limiting of movement.

Officially, the country has registered just over 1,000 deaths induced by the global pandemic – but most experts contend that figure is far higher given the limited health resources and lack of testing.

"The humanitarian situation is still critical and getting worst. The minimum wage is now \$1.10 per month. COVID-19 put the brakes on migration for a while, but now is starting again," one Caracas-based source said. "U.N. Agencies estimate 2.4 million Venezuelans will flee the country in 2021, even with COVID-19 still lurking around. Politically, the opposition is again in disarray, with multiple factions fighting over the direction over the fight against Maduro."

Johan Obdola, president of the Canada-based Global Organization for Intelligence (IOSI), stressed that 90% of the population lives in a critical state of survival.

"[About] 60% of Venezuelans are registered with severe cases of malnutrition and mental health issues. In cities and towns of Venezuela, it is more critical where the majority of the population, it is normal that in a week they only eat rice, butter or pasta," he asserted. "The scenario is that the country's devastated economy now mainly moves money coming from narco-trafficking. Maduro allowed the military sector to operate in the business of selling oil in Venezuela. They are also profiting from human trafficking and sexual exploitation of

women as well as of children."

However, Ellis underscored that, as it stands, Maduro's government actually controls very little beyond Caracas.

"Maduro himself has little power; his survival reflects that those in his military and government with the power to act, are sufficiently implicated in years of the corruption of the Chavista system," he said. "For the moment, they fear the fallout from seeking to replace him by a democratic government – or a more competent authoritarian one – more than they fear the consequences of his bad policies."

It remains to be seen if the incoming Biden administration will drastically alter the current approach.

"It doesn't work. It's nice to see them having trouble and prices over their heads, but that's it," added Caesar Oporeza, a Caracas political commentator. "The only solution will be by lethal force. They are criminals. Period."

Editorials and Op-eds

We Still Don't Know Where Covid-19 Came From (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 10:45 AM, Faye Flam, Neutral]

People want to know where the coronavirus came from. If humans first caught it from bats, then where and how? Did Covid-19 escape from a lab, as several magazine articles have insinuated? While most scientists dismiss a deliberate release of the virus as a conspiracy theory, they can't completely dismiss the possibility that it escaped by accident.

International investigations could shed light on the matter, but they've gotten off to a bumpy start. A WHO investigative team was held up for months before finally getting admitted to China this week. Another team associated with the Lancet has yet to start field work there. Getting to the bottom of things is not only critical for preventing future pandemics, it's important for keeping the public in the loop, to keep people motivated to help mitigate the spread.

"I think we all feel that more work should be done in China on trying to find the origins," says UC Berkeley geneticist Rasmus Nielsen, who has been trying to piece together how SARS-CoV-2 evolved. "I think we all feel that would benefit science."

One problem, he says, is the spread of conspiracy theories that Covid-19 was created in a lab and then intentionally released. "I think that has really harmed the case for a proper investigation." While investigating a lab-accident origin is important, he says, it's gotten lumped in with tinfoil hat ideas.

He says the Chinese government has also thrown up barriers. "There certainly hasn't been openness." The fact that a WHO team finally got into the country does not mean they will get the kind of access they need.

He and other scientists I interviewed say ideally investigators should be able to collect

environmental samples from different parts of China, including areas inhabited by bats known to harbor genetically similar coronaviruses. (The closest-related viruses have previously been found in bats living hundreds of miles from Wuhan.)

That could help them track down the virus's origin, despite the delay in getting access to China. Neilsen says mutations in coronaviruses crop up at a steady enough rate to work as a sort of molecular clock. Taking advantage of this, he's been able to show that SARS-CoV-2 diverged from the most closely related known bat viruses 51 and 37 years ago. They've been evolving in different directions ever since.

Researchers also need to get access to medical samples from patients. Banked blood and other samples could reveal when the virus first started circulating in humans. Finally, he says, they need to get into the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which houses the world's largest collection of bat coronaviruses, to study samples, lab notebooks and other records. (Officials at the lab have flatly dismissed the "lab accident" hypothesis.)

Lab accidents have released viruses in the past, says David Sanders, a Purdue University virologist. One led to an outbreak of influenza in 1977. This version of the flu was genetically identical to a strain from the 1950s, he says, "and it almost certainly came from a lab." He says a likely origin was a Siberian lab called Vector. The Ebola virus leaked from that same lab in 2004. "In the Vector lab that I inspected in Siberia, one of the workers infected herself and then was allowed to go home and, like, gather her stuff up — and then she eventually died."

One of the mysteries that remains unsolved is how a bat virus got to be so well-adapted to being transmitted between humans. Most bat viruses are not particularly adapted to spread in humans, says microbiologist Stanley Perlman of the University of Iowa, who has studied coronaviruses for years and is a member of a SARS-CoV-2 investigative team organized by the Lancet. That's one reason two previous epidemic coronavirus diseases he's studied — SARS, which broke out in 2003, and MERS, or Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome — fizzled out.

One explanation he favors is that Covid-19 spread to humans long before it was noticed, becoming better adapted to infecting our species. Since the virus is not particularly harmful in most young people, a low level of SARS-CoV-2 could have been circulating for months. He says clues could come from banked blood and other medical samples, which have been used to suggest the virus had already reached Europe in late 2019.

He agrees that ideally his team and the one from the WHO should have full access to medical samples and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. He also agrees that so far, China has not been transparent — but points out that U.S. has played a part in straining relations, in part by yanking U.S. CDC workers from China once the pandemic began.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology not only houses the world's biggest collection of bat coronaviruses, they also do research that involves altering those viruses, possibly to make them more transmissible in humans, biologist Richard Ebright of Rutgers University, a longstanding opponent of biological weapons proliferation, told me via email. This "gain-of-function" research doesn't require genetic engineering. Scientists can use forms of selective breeding to make viruses more transmissible in different species. They do this by infecting

or "passaging" the virus through different animals or human cell cultures, selecting for mutations that are more likely to infect us. He says gain-of-function research is not justifiable, but others say it's valuable for vaccine research as well as learning more about how new viruses get into humans.

Neilsen, the geneticist from Berkeley, says there's also the possibility that we got this pandemic through bad luck — that a bat virus just happened to have features that made it very bad for people. "There are millions of viruses out there and the one time where we get a pandemic like this that would be that one virus that just happened to have the right mutations to be virulent enough," he says.

And yes, he says, it's not tinfoil hat stuff. "This virus has affected us all so much. And so we all want to know as much as we can about the origins, right? Also, to make sure that we minimize the risk of something like this happening again."

[Iran] Why Is Iran Kidnapping and Executing Dissidents? (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 3:00 PM, Arash Azizi, Neutral]

He has been dead for a month.

On Dec. 12 Iranians woke up to bleak news: Their government had executed Ruhollah Zam, a 42-year-old journalist. The sentencing judge described Mr. Zam as a spy, as someone who incited violence and had "sown corruption on earth," a vague charge which is often used to describe attempts to overthrow the Iranian government.

Mr. Zam, who had been imprisoned in Iran after the disputed presidential election in 2009, fled to France in 2011, where he was granted political asylum. From Paris, he started Amad News, a popular anti-government website, which also operated on the encrypted messaging app Telegram and other social media platforms. His father, Muhammad Ali Zam, a cleric, was once a high-ranking regime official and the family was well-connected in Iranian power circles. Mr. Zam used his connections to garner critical information and published revelatory accounts of insider corruption.

Iran was roiled by protests against unemployment and the high cost of living in December 2017 and January 2018. Mr. Zam's Amad News helped coordinate disparate protests across the country. A manual for making Molotov cocktails was published on Amad News' Telegram channel, but Telegram shut it down after Tehran argued that it was inciting violence.

In October 2019, an anonymous contact promised Mr. Zam a meeting in Najaf, Iraq with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme Shiite spiritual leader, whose religious authority surpasses that of Iran's supreme leader. The Grand Ayatollah has lent his support to electoral democracy in Iraq and opposed rule by clerics. Mr. Zam, who was planning to establish a television channel, was hoping to discuss financing for his project. Instead, he was arrested on his arrival in Iraq by government officials and was handed over to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' operatives who transferred him to Iran.

Mr. Zam faced 17 criminal charges, including spying for France and Israel. Very little evidence was presented in court to substantiate the allegations against him. In September,

a few months before Mr. Zam's execution, Navid Afkari, an Iranian wrestler who supported the 2017-18 protests, was hanged in Shiraz.

The kidnapping, the conviction and the execution of Mr. Zam is reminiscent of tactics widely used by the Islamic Republic in its first two decades. Since its foundation in 1979, the Islamic Republic has assassinated up to 360 people around the world.

In August 1991, three Iranian operatives murdered Shapor Bakhtiar, who served as the last prime minister of Iran before the 1979 revolution deposed the monarch Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. Mr. Bakhtiar and his secretary were killed in his home in the Paris suburb of Suresnes. One of the killers was eventually arrested and confessed to receiving orders from the Iranian government.

From Cyprus to the Philippines, from Romania to the United States, Iranian operatives assassinated anyone they deemed a threat. Those men and women included people from relatives of the deposed shah to Marxist political activists to religious figures from Iran's Sunni minority.

The assassins often returned to Tehran to a hero's welcome. Dawud Salahuddin (born David Theodore Belfield), an African-American convert to Islam, was hired by Iran in 1980 to kill Ali Akbar Tabatabai, a former Iranian diplomat turned outspoken opponent of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader. After killing Mr. Tabatabai at his home in Maryland, the assassin fled to Iran, where he later worked as a journalist, rising to be the editor of the website of Press TV, Iran's English-language broadcaster.

And then in 1988, six leading public figures and dissident intellectuals were murdered in Tehran. Many more killings were revealed over time and the murders came to be remembered as "the chain murders."

Tehran's nasty habit of assassinating critics and opponents at home and abroad seemed to have been reined in around 1997 after Iran faced international blowback for the killings and the subsequent election of a reformist president.

In 1992 Iranian agents killed Sadegh Sharafkandi, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, at a Greek restaurant in Berlin, where he was meeting Ingvar Carlsson, the former prime minister of Sweden, and Mona Sahlin, the leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. The Swedish leaders had to cancel at the last minute, which may have saved their lives. Germans vigorously investigated and prosecuted the case, which led to a landmark ruling by a German court in April 1997, and international arrest warrants were issued against top Iranian regime officials including Ayatollah Khomeini.

A few months later, in August 1997, Mohammad Khatami, a reformist cleric, was elected president with a large popular backing and a mandate for change. Tehran sought to present a new face to the world; the assassination program was reined in. Iran's energized reformists and reinvigorated press pressured the regime to investigate the assassinations. Eighteen intelligence operatives, who were described by Tehran as "rogue agents," responsible for the murders, were put on trial. Three operatives were sentenced to death.

In the following years, dozens of opposition media outlets opened outside Iran, and exiled

dissidents like myself didn't fear for our lives in Europe and North America anymore. Mr. Zam's abduction and execution is among several recent incidents that is forcing Iranian dissidents living overseas to reconsider the threat to their lives.

On Dec. 17, Turkey released video footage and documents exposing how Iranian authorities collaborated with drug gangs to kidnap Habib Chabi, an Iranian-Swedish activist for Iran's Arab minority. Mr. Chabi was lured to Istanbul for a rendezvous with a female agent posing as a potential lover. He was kidnapped from Istanbul, smuggled across the border to Iran and put on trial there. He faces execution. A California-based member of an Iranian militant opposition group-in-exile, Jamshid Sharmahd, was abducted from Dubai in July.

Tehran seems to have revived its old tactics, and the timing of Mr. Zam's execution within weeks of President-elect Joe Biden's win and his desire to rejoin the 2015 Iran nuclear deal raises questions about the motives.

During the long negotiations for signing the 2015 nuclear deal, the Revolutionary Guards often tried to scuttle the process by repeatedly arresting dual nationals of Iran and Western countries and brazenly using them as hostages.

Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, and President Hassan Rouhani have expressed their willingness to return to the nuclear deal, but others virulently oppose them and dream of turning Iran into a fortress of hard-liners. Abductions and executions seem to be aimed at complicating the resumption of talks under the Biden administration.

President-elect Joe Biden must press Iran on its appalling campaign of kidnapping and execution, its policy of using arrested dual nationals as hostages while also keeping up the diplomatic engagement that could help sideline the hard-line factions in Tehran.

[Morocco] Morocco Wants Compromise, Not War, in Western Sahara (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [1/12/2021 11:31 AM, Samir Bennis, Neutral]

Since U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in December, a number of political commentators and scholars have been quick to caricature and decontextualize the decades-long dispute while omitting key historical facts.

Recent Foreign Policy articles by Stephen Zunes and John Bolton are the latest illustrations of this tendency.

Their black-and-white history is often driven by a false urgency to save the Sahrawis. Lost are the intricacies of the dispute, as well as its implications for the region and the world at large.

One audaciously ahistorical conclusion that stands out from Zunes's and Bolton's articles is the notion that the conflict's history started in 1975 and ended in 1991. Nothing that happened before and after these dates seems to matter. Instead, they express outrage at a U.S. decision that supposedly violates international law and prevents the Sahrawis from

establishing their own independent state.

One aspect that has been conspicuously absent from this debate is the change in the legal status of the territory over the past 15 years. According to the predominant narrative, a solution to the conflict should be in line with international law, which enshrines the right of the Sahrawis to self-determination. This narrative omits the fact that self-determination is a product of customary international law, which takes the force of law based on the consistency of the practice of individual states, as well as that of international organizations, regarding any given conflict.

In the case of Western Sahara, the principle of self-determination has been the basis for the solution of the conflict since December 1966. As Spain showed no willingness to negotiate the future of the territory, Morocco called on it to allow the population of the territory to decide its future through a referendum of self-determination that was scheduled for 1967. But that referendum never took place. By virtue of the principle of consistency of practice in international customary law, the referendum then became the basis for the solution.

Although countries such as Algeria, South Africa, and Cuba still cling to the self-determination argument, the principle of a compromise-based, mutually acceptable political solution is now the U.N. consensus on how to end the Western Sahara stalemate.

In many ways, the past 15 years feel like an extension of this scenario. The consistency of practice of the U.N. Security Council, as well as individual member states, created legal consequences for the conflict. From the perspective of the council, peace will only come through negotiations and the achievement of a mutually acceptable political solution.

In his latest report, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres clearly indicated that Resolution 2440 and subsequent resolutions are the basis of the political solution. Former U.N. envoy Peter van Walsum argued in *El País* in 2008 that when the Security Council took the reality of the conflict into account, it acted within the limits of its powers, as well as international law. He added that there is nothing in international law that obliges the "Security Council to use all the powers at its disposal to implement the resolutions of the [U.N. General Assembly] or the advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice."

Although countries such as Algeria, South Africa, and Cuba still cling to the self-determination argument, the principle of a compromise-based, mutually acceptable political solution is now the U.N. consensus on how to end the Western Sahara stalemate. This gives the compromise-driven approach force of law according to the principle of consistency of practice.

Critics of Morocco fail to explain the genesis of the Sahrawi independence group Polisario Front, how it first intended to end Spanish colonialism and sought the support of Moroccan authorities, and how Algeria took control of it after Morocco turned down its request. Zunes and Bolton don't mention that Morocco laid its claim to the territory in 1957 and was behind the U.N. decision to include Western Sahara on its list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. Nor do they mention that Morocco proposed holding a referendum on self-determination in 1981 but Algeria and the Polisario rejected it.

So, too, with the period since 1991. Both authors still regard the Western Sahara conflict as

one where the United Nations needs to allow the Sahrawis to exercise their right to self-determination. They systematically portray Morocco as the villain, an occupying country that has annexed a defenseless territory and has since stymied any U.N. efforts to hold a referendum.

Yet by the account of former U.N. officials, the hasty way in which the U.N. concluded the cease-fire agreement, as well as the disagreement between the parties over Sahrawis eligible to vote, is the fundamental reason that the referendum never took place.

In a report from February 2000, then-U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan emphasized the lack of means to enforce the result of a referendum, saying that it was time to consider other ways. Consequently, Annan asked his U.N. envoy to Western Sahara, James Baker, "to explore ways and means to achieve an early, durable and agreed resolution."

Between 2001 and 2003, Baker presented two proposals. Morocco accepted the first one, but Polisario and Algeria rejected it. In 2002, then-Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika proposed the partition of the territory, which Morocco rejected.

Morocco repudiated the second Baker Plan, while Algeria and Polisario embraced it. Following Baker's resignation in 2004, the U.N. called on the parties to submit proposals to reach a mutually acceptable political solution.

In 2007, Morocco submitted its autonomy proposal. The U.N. is widely reported to have tacitly blessed Morocco's proposal, not least because Security Council resolutions in the past decade have described the Moroccan plan as "serious and credible."

In a much reported April 2019 interview, then-Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz said that neither the United States nor Europe supported the establishment of an independent state in the fragile Sahel-Sahara region.

But mainstream reports and analyses tend to overlook all these facts. This blurs the picture for policymakers and diplomats, preventing them from basing decisions on an informed, well-documented, and comprehensive understanding of the conflict.

The Biden administration should not fall prey to this biased analysis. By supporting the Moroccan autonomy plan and building on Trump's decision, the Biden administration would not only be respecting international law but also doing justice to a staunch ally whose territory was dismembered by colonial powers.

With its support, the United States would also be honoring the commitment it made in 1906 to preserve Morocco's territorial integrity. When European countries convened in the Spanish city of Algeciras from January to April 1906 to deliberate on Morocco's colonial status, Western Sahara was officially still an integral part of the North African kingdom's territorial domain.

Only after colonial conquest was the territory divided in two: the French protectorate in mainland Morocco and the so-called Spanish Sahara in the kingdom's southern provinces, as well parts of northern Morocco.

Since the Allied victory against the Nazis, Morocco has remained steadfast in its support for the United States. Over the past two decades, Rabat has played a pivotal role in the U.S. war on terrorism in the region—making it an indispensable security partner for Washington and its allies.

In 2004, the U.S. government designated Morocco as one of its three major non-NATO allies in Africa. Furthermore, Morocco is the only African country that has signed an free trade agreement with the United States; it is also the only African country with which the U.S. military conducts an annual military training. These facts speak volumes about the level of trust between the two countries.

Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty and overtly declare the country's autonomy plan as the basis of a mutually acceptable solution brings into the open U.S. support over the past two decades. Indeed, successive U.S. administrations have supported Morocco's decision to make Western Sahara a semi-autonomous region. By consistently validating Morocco's autonomy plan, the U.S. government has created in Morocco legitimate expectations of similar U.S. conduct in the future.

It was former U.S. President Bill Clinton who convinced Morocco to submit the autonomy plan and pledged to support it. This support continued under President George W. Bush.

In April and October 2007, the Bush administration sought to make the Moroccan plan the basis of the U.N.-led political process. However, this attempt faced pushback from France, Russia, and then-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who feared alienating the Non-Aligned Movement. Under President Barack Obama, the United States embraced the Moroccan proposal on numerous occasions.

Over the past 13 years, a solution resulting in a victorious party and a vanquished one has been off the table in U.N. negotiations. This is clear in the absence of the term "referendum" from all resolutions adopted since 2007. Since 2018, "compromise" has become the cornerstone of the political process. For the U.N., the only viable way to end the conflict is through negotiations that preserve the interests of all parties and preserve stability in the region.

By providing clear support to Morocco, the United States would not only do justice to a long-standing and reliable ally. It would also contribute to stability in the region. Better still, such a move would provide investment opportunities to U.S. businesses in the African market. With the world-class infrastructure projects it has launched in recent years, such as the Dakhla Atlantic Port, Morocco seeks to turn the disputed territory into a trade hub between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa.

This could enable U.S. businesses to explore opportunities in the untapped African markets where many global and regional powers, such as China, Russia, India, France, Britain, and Turkey, are vying for influence and market share. With the African Continental Free Trade Area's entry into force this month, the economic growth potential of several African countries will be unprecedented. Washington could very well use Dakhla's location and its strong relations with Morocco as a springboard for its African policy.

Contrary to Zunes's and Bolton's accounts, businesses operating in the area would be by

no means complicit in Morocco's alleged "exploitation" of the territory's natural resources. One oft-cited example of this unfounded exploitation thesis is that of phosphates.

Yet the proportion that Morocco's state-owned phosphate company OCP extracts from the region's deposits represents only 2 percent of its reserves and 5 percent of the company's total revenues. The same applies to allegations pertaining to the region's fisheries resources. Since 1995, Morocco has signed several four-year agreements, the latest of which was signed in January 2019 in exchange for 52 million euros (\$63 million) a year. The agreement allows European vessels to operate in Moroccan waters off its Atlantic coast, including in the disputed Western Saharan territory.

While Morocco reaps minimal financial benefit from the fisheries agreement and phosphate deposits, it has made massive investments in the territory since 1975. It has built cities from scratch, enabling the local population to have far better living standards and higher levels of literacy. The cities of the Sahara are all run by Sahrawis, many of whom are members of the parliament or are local elected officials.

Other development indexes, which consistently show that the region now fares better than the rest of Morocco, call into question the argument that Morocco illegally exploits and benefits from Western Saharan resources.

King Mohammed VI said in a speech in 2014 that for every dirham it earns from Western Sahara, the Moroccan government invests 7 dirhams. In addition, Morocco has recently embarked on an unprecedented investment spree in infrastructure projects to turn the region into a regional trade hub.

Zunes and Bolton fail to acknowledge that the value of the territory for Morocco lies not its natural resources but in its symbolic value for the Moroccan people as part of their homeland that was snatched away by colonial powers and in its strategic importance as a link between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa.

U.S. policy toward Morocco should be based on realism and reciprocity. On the Western Sahara question, this means taking into account the recent developments in the conflict, as well as Morocco's proven desire to reach a compromise-based and sustainable political solution. Above all, U.S. policymakers should not ignore Morocco's status as a staunch ally.

At stake is America's prestige and its reputation as a reliable partner. If Biden is to reestablish that prestige and win the trust of U.S. allies, he should start by providing clear support for Morocco.

[Italy] Vaccine Skepticism Helped Put Them in Power. Can They Inoculate Italy? (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 2:44 PM, Jason Horowitz, Neutral]

Over a decade ago, an activist in Italy's Five Star Movement wrote to the nascent party's leaders to tell them that his law firm, after years of seeking "damages from vaccination," had convinced a judge that a vaccine was a potential source of autism.

"We're dealing with a historic legal precedent," he wrote emphatically.

Today that lawyer, Alfonso Bonafede, is the Italian justice minister, and his populist Five Star Movement leads the government.

The Five Star's long history of sowing doubt about vaccines may have made its job that much harder as it seeks to convince Italians that a mass inoculation program is necessary to beat back a pandemic that has killed nearly two million people worldwide and shuttered entire economies.

The irony is not lost on Italians, who are not even Europe's most skeptical population when it comes to the benefit of vaccines. While 62 percent of Italians have said they would get an available vaccine, according to figures by Ipsos, a polling firm, in France only 40 percent said they would be.

But it is Italy where a party that explicitly trafficked in anti-vaccine skepticism currently holds power. With Five Star's rise, anti-vaccine campaigns are no longer merely an easy tool wielded by the political fringe to tear down established parties and gain power. They are a key factor that could determine the health and vitality of the nation at a critical juncture in the pandemic.

The first European country hit by the coronavirus, Italy is still struggling to control its spread. Like other nations, it has looked for salvation in the vaccines already available to health care workers.

But a significant number of nursing home workers appear reluctant to get the shot, prompting concerns that entrenched skepticism and confusion about the safety of vaccines may undercut the rollout.

"I'm one of those who is really dubious," said Frida Faggi, an orderly in a nursing home in northern Italy, adding she probably would not get the vaccine.

A Five Star supporter, she worried that pharmaceutical companies had developed the vaccine too fast, that it might sicken her with autoimmune diseases and that negative reports had been censored. Others feel the same.

"Many are very skeptical," said Barbara Codalli, who runs a nursing home in the northern province of Bergamo where 34 of the 87 residents died during the first wave. "The ignorance is immense."

After a slow start, Italy's vaccination program is picking up speed. More than 730,000 people have been inoculated, or more than 1 percent of the population — a higher rate than Germany's.

But some critics wonder if things would be better if Italian populist forces had not spent nearly a decade questioning vaccines.

In particular they had entertained a connection between vaccines and autism — a belief that caught fire after a 1998 paper in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, which was subsequently retracted and discredited. The study's author lost his medical license.

The scientific consensus, supported by many rigorous studies, is that vaccines are not a cause of autism, and are safe and recommended in most cases. But doubts flowered on the internet, and among some Five Star supporters.

Since entering power, Five Star has tried to back away from some of its anti-vaccine propaganda. But Roberto Burioni, a prominent virologist at San Raffaele University in Milan, said that the government had yet to forcefully clarify the issue and that it did not "have a stance" on whether vaccinations should be required for health workers. The result remains confusion and misunderstanding.

"Unfortunately, the damage was done in the past," said Mr. Burioni, who spent years publicly criticizing Five Star for its excoriation of doctors as a self-interested elite and for its doubts about vaccines, which he said eroded faith in science.

"When you destroy the trust in something," he said, "it's not something you can rebuild in a few days."

Italy was an early adopter of vaccines. In the early 1800s, Dr. Luigi Sacco, once called the "most extensive vaccinator in the world," inoculated hundreds of thousands of Italians against smallpox. His drawings and wax models of cowpox infections stand in Pavia University's medical museum; the Milan hospital treating many coronavirus patients is named for him.

In 1973, when cholera broke out in Naples, the authorities vaccinated about a million people in one week.

But between 2010 and 2015, vaccination rates for the measles-mumps-rubella shot fell from nearly 94 percent to 85 percent, one of the lowest in Europe. That coincided with the rise of internet conspiracy theories about vaccinations, among other things, that eroded trust in traditional government institutions and led to surging support for Five Star.

Five Star's co-founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, liked to riff on safety suspicions, suggesting that vaccines weaken children's immune systems, and claiming that the pharmaceutical industry had pushed them for profit.

Its members campaigned against laws making vaccines obligatory and professed a link between vaccines and cancer and allergies, as well as autism. Affiliated websites drew traffic, and advertising revenue, with posts by vaccine skeptics. One party leader called vaccine scars "branding for beasts."

And Five Star was not alone. By 2015, Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's nationalist League party, had gotten in on the anti-vaccine action. "Obligatory vaccinations, sanctions on the doctors who advise against it. What do you think?" he asked his Facebook and Twitter followers, market testing the issue.

Five Star and the League created an alliance that fell apart in 2019. By then, Five Star had begun to shed its anti-establishment and anti-vaccine rhetoric. Some of the party's vaccine doubters left or were forced out. Others who remained kept mum or changed their tune.

"As a lawyer I limited myself to providing information about a decision handed down in the context of a lawsuit followed by a colleague in my office," said Mr. Bonafede, the justice minister, in a statement about his enthusiastic note to Five Star leaders 10 years earlier.

"I personally never questioned the importance of vaccines, and I wholeheartedly support the ongoing vaccination campaign, with respect to which I am waiting for my turn," he said.

Five Star, which has hemorrhaged support, has welcomed the vaccine and urged Italians to get it.

But some Italians seem less than convinced.

Claudia Alivernini, the first Italian nurse to receive the vaccine, said she was so inundated with hateful messages on Facebook that she deleted her account. Facebook, which was a preferred method for spreading anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, recently removed the page of the main anti-vaccine group in Rimini.

Rimini, a city on Italy's east coast, is a hotbed of vaccine skepticism where judges have linked vaccines to autism and workers in nursing homes have refused to be vaccinated.

Maurizio Grossi, the president of a doctors' association in Rimini, warned that 30 percent of nursing home workers were initially unwilling to get vaccinated.

He said that while persuasion campaigns had decreased the number of skeptics, Five Star had in the past "exploited" anxieties for political gain, and then given members who were elected "a megaphone because they could talk as political representatives."

The mayor of nearby Bagno di Romagna wrote a letter to Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warning that half of the 36 orderlies working his town's nursing home had refused to be vaccinated.

The mayor, Marco Baccini, said Five Star's early mixed messages about vaccines contributed to confusion about their safety. But he said the country's media was also to blame.

Italy's virus-obsessed newspapers and television channels often fill space with minority and unproven scientific opinions, casting doubt on vaccine efficacy or suggesting that a shot might cause illness.

Critics say Italy also lacks a single, trusted institutional messenger within the government.

Mr. Burioni, the virologist, said the true level of skepticism would reveal itself only at the end of the vaccination efforts.

He expressed confidence that people would get with the program once they saw their colleagues get vaccinated and not get sick. The challenge, he said, was what the government would do with the holdouts.

"We have to decide if it is acceptable that a medical doctor, nurse, health care worker can continue caring for patients without being protected, so with the danger of spreading the disease," he said.

Sandra Zampa, the deputy health minister, with the Democratic Party that is now Five Star's coalition partner, said it was "evident" that health care workers should be vaccinated as "a precondition" of their continued employment.

But Fabiana Dadone, a Five Star member who serves as minister of public administration, has opposed requiring vaccinations for public sector employees.

Forcing people to get inoculated, she said on Italian television, was "absurd."

[Ireland] Ireland has the world's highest Covid rate. How did it go so wrong? (CNN)
CNN [1/12/2021 11:45 AM, Eoin McSweeney, Neutral]

When Ireland came out of a strict six-week lockdown in December it had one of the lowest levels of Covid-19 cases in Europe. Since then, the situation has dramatically unraveled.

The country recorded the highest infection rate in the world last week, according to Our World in Data, an online scientific publication based at the University of Oxford.

In the seven days leading up to January 10, Ireland reported around 1,323 Covid-19 cases per one million people, the statistics showed, more than any other country over the same period.

On Friday, it recorded the highest daily increase in infections since the beginning of the pandemic with 8,248 new cases, according to a statement from the Irish health department.

"The alarming level of disease is unprecedented in terms of our experience of the levels of Covid-19 in the community," warned Professor Philip Nolan, a member of Ireland's National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). "We are seeing numbers of cases per day, and numbers in hospital, that we just could not have comprehended prior to Christmas."

Ireland's medical experts, politicians and members of the public are now all debating what went wrong.

The seasonality of the virus, the presence of the more transmissible UK variant, and households mixing over the holidays all contributed to the surge, according to a spokesperson from Prime Minister Micheál Martin's office.

The spike is not "simplistic" and there have been a number of factors that have led to it, the spokesperson told CNN on Tuesday.

"We had the rise in socializations over the Christmas period and our public health experts said the seasonality of the virus was a huge factor," they said.

Ireland reopened hospitality and other sectors with some restrictions on December 4. Defending that decision, the spokesperson said the sectors involved "by and large" adhered

to the public health measures and the incidence of infection was "relatively low" in hospitality, retail and construction settings.

The more contagious UK variant, discovered in Ireland for the first time on Christmas Day, "had a very significant impact [on] the growth of cases because it is believed to be between 50% and 70% more transmissible," the spokesperson added.

Some 40% of Ireland's most recent positive cases of Covid-19 are caused by the more contagious UK variant, said Cillian De Gascun, director of the National Virus Reference Laboratory, in a statement on Monday.

From December 18, Irish households were allowed to mix with up to two others, despite other European countries canceling Christmas gatherings.

More than 54,000 people flew into the Republic of Ireland between December 21 and January 3, according to the Department of Justice.

"There was no properly managed isolation system in place," the president of epidemiology and public health at the Royal Society of Medicine, Gabriel Scally, told CNN over the phone on Tuesday. "Ireland and Britain are unsuccessful islands in Covid terms when you look at others. There was an understandable desire for normality over Christmas after a hard year; but the virus doesn't know that."

Ireland shut restaurants, pubs serving food and some shops on Christmas Eve and has since further tightened its lockdown measures – including closing non-essential construction sites, schools, and childcare services.

There are currently 1,582 Covid-19 patients hospitalized in Ireland, of which 146 are in intensive care, just short of the springtime peak of 155, according to the health department.

"We know that hospitalisations occur some weeks after a confirmed case is notified, and mortality after that again," said Ireland's chief medical officer, Tony Holohan, in a statement on Monday. "That means we are unfortunately set for a period of time where the situation in our hospitals gets worse before it gets better."

Ireland has only five intensive care beds per 100,000 people, much lower than the OECD22 average of 12, according to OECD data.

So far the country has reported a total of more than 152,000 Covid-19 cases and 2,352 deaths, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

As for the recent spike, the tools to address "this accelerated growth rate" are in Ireland's hands, according to Nolan, who chairs NPHE's Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group.

He added that he hoped the current measures would "significantly suppress transmission of the virus."

[Hong Kong] In Hong Kong, dozens of arrests for pro-democracy activities will have a chilling effect (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/12/2021 6:00 AM, Maggie Shum, 13480K, Negative]

Some 8,000 miles from the U.S. Capitol, democracy in Hong Kong also came under assault last week. On Jan. 6, Hong Kong police arrested 53 pro-democracy lawmakers, activists and lawyers for their involvement in the pro-democracy camp's primary election last July. All were accused of "subversion of state power" under the National Security Law, an offense that carries the possibility of a life sentence. Police also raided the offices of the Public Opinion Research Institute and a law firm that assisted in the primary, demanded that three news outlets hand over information and froze \$206,000 in funds related to the election.

Since China implemented the National Security Law in July, pro-democracy figures have faced repeated arrests. Prominent activists Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam were sentenced to prison over illegal assembly charges. Media mogul Jimmy Lai is behind bars, charged with colluding with foreign entities.

What makes the latest sweep so devastating to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement? Here are four takeaways for the city's political future.

1. Attempting to win an election becomes subversion under the National Security Law

The non-binding primary election in July was an informal effort by the opposition to select their most popular candidates to compete in the September Legislative Council (LegCo) election, which Hong Kong's pro-Beijing government then postponed to September this year. Emboldened by a landslide victory in the 2019 district council elections, the pro-democracy camp hoped to capture a majority of seats in the LegCo, which has been historically dominated by pro-Beijing factions. Such a majority would grant the opposition power to veto the government's annual budget. More than 600,000 Hong Kongers voted peacefully in the unofficial primary as a symbol of defiance against Beijing's tightening grip on the city.

The primary also served as a coordinating exercise to maximize the pro-democracy camp's chance of winning a majority — pro-Beijing parties have taken similar efforts with the aid of the Central Government Liaison Office to coordinate strategically, as early as 2004. But Hong Kong Secretary for Security John Lee denounced the primary as a "malicious" plan, claiming the opposition would overthrow the government if it obtained a majority and plunge the city into a "bottomless abyss." Lee's logic in justifying the arrests displayed the lengths to which the Hong Kong government would extend the National Security Law to quash pro-democratic forces.

2. Hong Kong appears to be purging the opposition widely

Among those arrested were candidates in last summer's primary who span the political spectrum of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. They include veteran lawmakers, younger and radical activists who rose to prominence during the protests, and moderate independents. Jeffrey Andrews, for instance, was the first ethnic minority candidate to advocate for marginalized communities in Hong Kong. Although most of the arrested were released on bail, with their travel documents confiscated, the message from Beijing remains clear: Any association with the opposition could result in suppression.

3. The arrests may dampen pro-democracy activism.

The police also arrested those who helped organize the primary, including professor Benny Tai, former lawmaker Au Nok-hin and Andrew Chiu Ka-yin, the convenor of Power for Democracy, an advocacy group that coordinates the pro-democracy camp's electoral campaigns. John Clancey, an American human rights lawyer who served as the treasurer of Power for Democracy, was also a target of the operation, becoming the first foreign citizen arrested under the security law.

What about the 600,000 Hong Kongers who turned out to vote in the primary? Despite Secretary Lee's claims that voters were not targeted in Wednesday's operation, the fear of prosecution by association will likely discourage new generations from becoming more politically active. A number of civic groups are disbanding and deleting their records for fear of a new wave of crackdowns, and pro-democracy media outlets also report increasing intimidation by the police.

4. The rules of political engagement have tightened.

For authoritarian regimes that permit some level of political competition, elections are points of vulnerability that may weaken the regime — and, in Hong Kong's case, potentially erode Beijing's political control over the city.

But Beijing and the Hong Kong government miscalculated the broad support for the pro-democracy movement and suffered an embarrassing defeat at the district council elections in 2019. Since then, Chinese and Hong Kong officials have intensified efforts to manage politics on the street and in elections. The covid-19 pandemic along with the National Security Law, for instance, have stifled the large protests in the streets.

The Hong Kong government has been tilting the playing field since the implementation of the National Security Law. It postponed the September election, in which the opposition seemed likely to do well, then disqualified four sitting LegCo members of the Civic Party, accusing them of being "unpatriotic," based on a resolution passed by Beijing's top legislative body to curb further dissent. The disqualification rendered the remaining 15 pro-democracy legislators powerless to challenge any bills in the 70-seat legislature dominated by pro-Beijing lawmakers, which prompted a mass resignation of the pro-democracy camp in protest against Beijing's decision. The latest mass arrest seems to suggest that simply participating in or supporting opposition politics in Hong Kong is now considered a crime.

It's likely Hong Kong will continue to hold elections, but the future elections will no longer resemble the semi-democratic contests Hong Kong has seen before. Instead, elections may become an institutional tool for Beijing to co-opt elites and segments within society, and to establish legitimacy at home or abroad — particularly as a way of maintaining the "one country two systems" façade.

New parties friendly with Beijing will likely fill the LegCo void in the election rescheduled for September 2021. There's speculation that the Bauhinia Party, a new party composed of business and financial professionals born in China who have settled in Hong Kong, will compete with the existing pro-Beijing groups across all electoral levels. Much like the

nomination process for the chief executive election, the list of parties qualified for political contest would be heavily vetted by Beijing, with pro-democracy candidates likely to be filtered out as disqualified to participate. With these moves, critics warn, Hong Kong slides further toward authoritarianism.

Coronavirus News

U.S. Expected to Require Covid-19 Tests for All International Visitors (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 12:55 PM, Michelle Hackman and Andrew Restuccia, Neutral]

The U.S. government is expected to require all international airline passengers to show proof of a negative Covid-19 test before boarding flights to the country, people familiar with the matter said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is planning to issue its order as soon as Tuesday, following weeks of discussions among federal agencies and the White House coronavirus task force. The order is expected to go into effect Jan. 26, according to a person familiar with the matter. The CDC and other administration officials were still completing the order.

The CDC order for universal testing of passengers, including for U.S. citizens returning from abroad, comes weeks after the Trump administration imposed a testing requirement for travelers from the U.K. over concerns about a more infectious strain of the virus that was detected there. Since then, the new strain has been found elsewhere in the world, and its presence in the U.S. has been confirmed.

The U.S. requirement comes during a difficult time for the aviation industry and international travelers who face a thicket of varied testing protocols and quarantine requirements around the world, including public-health advisories urging people to stay home.

U.S. airlines have voiced support for the new requirement but argued that ramped-up testing protocols should take the place of travel restrictions and quarantines to reduce the spread of Covid-19.

The Canadian government recently began requiring incoming international passengers to show proof of a negative Covid-19 test before boarding a flight to Canada. An airline trade group in Canada said the rule would be challenging to enforce.

Airlines for America, a U.S. trade group, said that "a well-planned program focused on increasing testing of travelers to the United States will further these objectives in a much more effective way than the blanket travel restrictions currently in place," according to a letter its chief executive, Nick Calio, sent on Jan. 4 to Vice President Mike Pence.

Mr. Calio said the requirement should take into consideration countries where testing is limited, and he suggested the government make rapid testing available for the effort. He also touched on other complications, such as what to do with passengers who make short, international round-trips.

The U.S. currently bans travelers from certain countries including the U.K., European nations and China if they are non-U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Americans are likewise barred from visiting many countries, including most of Europe.

Before Covid-19 infection surged on both sides of the Atlantic in recent months, U.K. and U.S. officials had been working on developing a "travel corridor" that would afford passengers shortened quarantines after mandatory tests before departure and after arrival to avoid quarantines. For now, airlines have started to introduce testing protocols on certain routes that could eventually dovetail with international agreements to avoid quarantines.

U.S. will require Covid testing for arriving international flights (Politico)

Politico [1/12/2021 5:27 PM, David Lim and Sam Mintz, Neutral]

The U.S. will require that all international air passengers entering the country test negative for the coronavirus starting on Jan. 26, the CDC said Tuesday — a broad expansion of pre-flight testing that the airline industry hopes will replace restrictive quarantines and help reinvigorate air travel.

Under the impending order, which an agency spokesperson said will be signed Tuesday and which was first reported by the Wall Street Journal, air passengers will be required to test negative up to three days before their flight to the U.S. departs. They must also provide written documentation of their results or show they've already recovered from the virus to the airline.

"Testing does not eliminate all risk, but when combined with a period of staying at home and everyday precautions like wearing masks and social distancing, it can make travel safer, healthier, and more responsible by reducing spread on planes, in airports, and at destinations," said CDC Director Robert Redfield in a statement.

It expands on an effort that already had been underway for flights from the U.K., and places a significant responsibility for policing on the airline industry itself. Airlines will have the responsibility of confirming negative results, and will have to deny boarding to passengers if they don't meet the criteria.

The announcement meets part of a request from the U.S. airline industry, which has lobbied for pre-flight testing as an alternative to quarantines or other restrictions on who can enter the country. It's unclear whether the government is immediately planning to do away with those other restrictions.

Testing has been the travel industry's best hope for reinvigorating international air travel, and the major U.S. airlines already offer pre-flight testing to help passengers comply with rules in place at their destination. And this week the U.S. airline industry trade group Airlines for America endorsed CDC's proposal to require a negative Covid test for travelers seeking entry into the U.S.

The new requirement may help passengers feel better about flying, but it's not a silver bullet for avoiding infections. A study published last week in the CDC's Emerging Infectious Diseases journal warned that testing passengers for Covid-19 before they fly may not fully

prevent in-flight spread of the virus.

Notably, the study came to its conclusions thanks to the kind of enforced quarantine program that the travel industry is fighting to avoid. The researchers studied seven Covid cases detected through New Zealand's aggressive 14-day "managed isolation and quarantine" program.

Long haul flights are particularly vulnerable to potential in-flight transmission of the virus because it's harder to avoid crowding and masks are difficult to keep on for the entire trip, according to Jeff Engel, senior adviser for Covid-19 at the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists.

"Airlines are always reporting that they circulate their air through filters that filter out 99.9 percent of germs, which is true," Engel said. "But transmission occurs through direct person-to-person spread without that air even going through the circulation system."

In addition, a test is only a snapshot in time. Justin Lessler, an associate professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, cautioned that if airlines only require a negative test that was taken a few days before passengers actually travel, individuals could become infectious in the time between the test and stepping onto their plane.

Testing passengers at the airport using antigen tests that deliver results at the point-of-care would "likely significantly cut down" on the risk of transmission, but Lessler warns there will "always be residual risk."

"That would be far more effective than a PCR test two or three days before somebody got on the aircraft," Lessler said. "I think that it would have a positive public health impact."

In any case, the airport industry has opposed testing in airports. The Airports Council International warned last year that creating long lines for screening in airports would go against social distancing and create security risks.

Airlines have also raised concerns about the availability of testing to meet the demands of a requirement. In a recent letter to the Trump administration, the U.S. airline trade group asked the government to consider making rapid testing available to aid airlines in meeting the impending requirement.

The industry had also asked for a two-week implementation timeline, to train staff and alert customers.

The Department of Homeland Security, which would be responsible for lifting the existing restrictions on non-citizens entering the U.S. from Europe, the U.K., Brazil and elsewhere, did not respond to a request for comment.

U.S. counter-intelligence chief worried about China, Russia threats to vaccine supply chain (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 4:02 PM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

The U.S. counter-intelligence chief said on Tuesday he was worried about threats from China and Russia to disrupt the coronavirus vaccine supply chain in the United States.

William Evanina, director of the U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center, told an online Washington Post event that U.S. adversaries were trying to interfere with Operation Warp Speed, the U.S. government operation distributing the vaccines.

"Our adversaries are trying to disrupt that supply chain," he said. Asked which adversaries he was particularly concerned about, he replied, "I would say China and Russia right now."

The Chinese and Russian embassies did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Evanina's assertion. Russia and China have denied U.S. accusations that hackers linked to both governments tried to steal data from vaccine manufacturers.

U.S. states are scrambling to accelerate inoculations as infections and deaths surge - COVID-19 has claimed on average about 3,200 lives nationwide every day over the past week.

Since the pandemic began more than 10 months ago nearly 375,000 people in the country have died, according to a Reuters count.

Evanina said that his agency was working with the U.S. Army and the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure the safe "transportation" of the vaccines "from the manufacturing site to the end-user inoculation."

Vaccines available are made by Pfizer and BioNTech and Moderna. Nearly 9 million Americans have received the first of two doses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, less than one-third of the 25 million doses distributed by the federal government.

Public health experts have said no U.S. state has so far come close to using up its federal vaccine allotments, a much slower-than-expected roll-out blamed in part on rigid rules sharply limiting who can be inoculated.

China says WHO team will fly from Singapore to Wuhan on Jan. 14 (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:46 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A World Health Organization (WHO) team of international experts investigating the origin of the novel coronavirus will arrive in the Chinese city of Wuhan from Singapore on Thursday, a Chinese official said.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said his organisation looked forward to working with China on the mission to identify the source of the virus and how it entered the human population.

He had previously said he was "very disappointed" when the experts were denied entry earlier in the month, forcing two members of the team to turn back. China said there had been a "misunderstanding."

"According to the current plan, they will fly from Singapore to Wuhan on January 14," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a regular news briefing in Beijing on Tuesday.

He did not respond to a question on whether the team would have to go into quarantine upon arrival and gave no further details on the mission's itinerary.

The coronavirus was first detected in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019 and has since spread around the world, infecting more than 90,500,000 people and killing nearly 2 million.

Much remains unknown about its origins and China has been sensitive about suspicion of a cover-up that delayed its initial response and allowed the virus to spread.

Ahead of the team's visit, China has been seeking to shape the narrative about when and where the pandemic began, with senior diplomat Wang Yi saying "more and more studies" showed it emerged in multiple regions.

A health expert affiliated with the WHO said previously that expectations should be "very low" that the team would reach a conclusion from its trip to China.

Iran, Cuba, Under U.S. Sanctions, Team Up for Covid-19 Vaccine Trials (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 3:01 PM, Sune Engel Rasmussen and Aresu Egbali, Neutral] Iran and Cuba have begun trials of a joint Covid-19 vaccine, as Tehran fights the worst coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East while pledging not to use vaccines from the U.S. and U.K.

The Cuban vaccine, called Soberana 02, is the most advanced of Cuba's four vaccine candidates and will be developed in cooperation between Cuba's Finlay Vaccine Institute and Iran's Pasteur Institute, authorities from both countries said Monday.

The cooperation between two staunch opponents of the U.S., which are both under U.S. sanctions, reflects a shared drive for self-sufficiency and less reliance on imports from the West. The name of the vaccine, Soberana, is Spanish for "sovereign."

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has said the country of 80 million wouldn't import vaccines from the U.S. or the U.K, calling the vaccines untrustworthy. Mr. Khamenei accused the U.S. and the U.K. of wanting to use Iranians for trials.

The president of Iran's Medical Council, Mohammad Reza Zafarghandi, said Monday that the country would import two million Covid-19 vaccines from India, China and Russia by March, far below what is needed to fulfill President Hassan Rouhani's recent pledge to inoculate 60 million Iranians.

Cuba's public-health officials said they need to conduct Phase 3 trials abroad because the island doesn't have a big enough outbreak to get meaningful statistics on vaccine protection.

Vicente Várez, the head of Cuba's Finlay institute, recently told Cuba's state media that to demonstrate the efficacy of vaccines they need to be tested in settings where the population has a lot of exposure to the virus and there are many ways for the virus to propagate.

While Cuba's isolation has helped it keep a lid on the pandemic, Iran has been the hardest-hit country in the Middle East. Iran is logging about 6,000 cases a day, a decrease from a high of more than 14,000 in late November. More than 56,000 Iranians have died from Covid-19. Cuba has recorded about 15,000 cases and 153 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Iranian officials from the Pasteur Institute are currently in Havana to supervise a smaller second phase of Cuban trials. Starting in late January and running through March, Cuba will carry out a Phase 3 trial on 150,000 Cubans and Iran will test the vaccine on 50,000 Iranian volunteers, according to health officials in both countries. The Soberana 02 is a protein-subunit vaccine, according to the Finlay Vaccine Institute.

Iran will also transfer production technology to Cuba, which aims to have its population of about 11 million immunized with its own vaccines within the next six months.

For Communist Cuba, the vaccine rollout is crucial for a country mired in economic stagnation, hard hit by President Trump's decisions to impose damaging sanctions and reverse efforts by the Obama administration to improve ties with the former Cold War foe.

On Monday, the U.S. government put Cuba back on the list of countries considered state sponsors of terrorism, a designation that is likely to complicate efforts by President-elect Joe Biden to improve relations with Havana.

"Cuba and Iran continue to resist the most cruel and inhumane sanctions of the U.S. government, which have been intensified in times of the Covid-19 pandemic in direct contradiction to the spirit of cooperation and respect for the right to life of our people," Cuba's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The launch of joint Iran-Cuba vaccine trials comes after many years of scientific collaboration between the two countries, and follows a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in November to Havana, where Mr. Zarif praised Cuba's achievements in the fight against Covid-19.

Coronavirus Vaccine Doses That Were Held Back Now Being Released (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 1:34 PM, Stephanie Armour, Neutral]

The Trump administration is releasing second doses of coronavirus vaccines that had been held back for booster shots and is urging states to administer the vaccine to anyone over age 65 and people with pre-existing health conditions, a shift from its earlier guidance to give priority to doses for health-care workers.

"First, we have already made available every dose of vaccine. So we had been holding back second doses as a safety stop," Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said on ABC's "Good Morning America" Tuesday. "We now believe that our manufacturing is

predictable enough that we can ensure second doses are available to people from ongoing production. So everything is now available to our states and our health-care providers."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 25.4 million doses of vaccine have been distributed, but only 8.9 million Americans have received a shot.

Axios first reported the planned announcement.

The decision could help increase the number of people who receive the vaccine. But it also raises the risk of not having reserves to provide booster shots and could strain some states that lack the staffing or infrastructure to meet potential demand.

Expanding vaccinations to people age 65 and older and individuals with medical conditions would be a sweeping change likely to vastly increase the population that is vaccinated. At least 56% of persons age 18 to 64 report at least one high-risk medical condition, according to the CDC's immunization advisory committee.

More than 100 million people have high-risk medical conditions and about 53 million people are age 65 and older, according to the CDC. Examples of high-risk conditions include obesity, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer and heart conditions, the agency has said.

The Trump administration's decision to release the additional doses of vaccine comes after officials had initially criticized a plan from President-elect Joe Biden to do the same once he takes office.

"If President-elect Biden is calling for the distribution of vaccines knowing that there would not be a second dose available, that decision is without science or data and is contrary to the FDA's approved label," Michael Pratt, a spokesman for Operation Warp Speed, said last week after the Biden transition team announced the plan.

Allocations to states will no longer be based on population size, Mr. Azar said in a news conference. Instead, doses will be allocated based on the pace states say they are administering the vaccine, as well as the size of a state's population of people age 65 and older. States are being notified of the change two weeks in advance.

People with comorbidities should have documentation from a physician, Mr. Azar said, to be vaccinated as part of the next stage.

The entire supply is being released for order by states and second doses will be supplied by vaccines coming out of the supply line, he said.

"It's time to move onto the next phase of the vaccination campaign," Mr. Azar said. "This next phase reflects the urgency of the situation we face."

Nearly 38 million total doses to date have been made available for states, with more available this week, Mr. Azar said. The doses allocated exceed the population of seniors in long-term care facilities and health-care workers.

"There was never a reason states needed to complete vaccinating" all health-care workers before turning to other vulnerable populations, Mr. Azar said.

Mr. Azar said the U.S. is reporting 700,000 vaccinations a day and on track to hit 1 million a day in a week to 10 days time, he said.

"States have ample funding, including \$3 billion more in funding on the way," he said, adding that science shows it is imperative people get their second doses on time.

"We clearly have enough vaccine at this point to begin to expand," said CDC Director Robert Redfield, adding that urgency is growing as more areas exhibit significant growth in cases.

Most transmission, he said, is occurring in and between households rather than in public space. "We need to work all together now, it's going to be a difficult January and probably February."

The CDC is doing a deep dive on 64 jurisdictions to see why some areas of the country are doing well with administering the shots and others are lagging behind, Dr. Redfield said, and the agency expects to have an understanding of what is driving the differences by the end of the week.

Gen. Gustavo Perna, the head of Operation Warp Speed, said the administration of shots in skilled nursing and assisted-living facilities has grown from about 900 facilities in the first week to more than 11,000 facilities—or just under 1 million doses—three weeks later. Mr. Perna said 12,000 more centers are scheduled this week and every week going forward.

The administration will also expand distribution of vaccines to the more than 40,000 retail pharmacies enrolled in the allocation program, with plans to expand it to 70,000 retail pharmacies, he said.

Mr. Azar said teams will be available to help states with their mass vaccination efforts.

The early weeks of the vaccine rollout have been marred by lines of seniors waiting for shots in Florida, pharmacies offering shots to anyone who happened to be in stores and appointment websites crashing.

The changes should speed the way for more people to get vaccinated, a need that has become more urgent because a more transmissible variant of the virus has been identified in a number of states.

States have been deciding who gets priority, with most giving the initial batch to doctors, nurses and other health-care workers.

Some states, including Florida, have already opened vaccination to people age 65 and older, but most haven't.

In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo tweeted Tuesday that New Yorkers 65 and older were now eligible for the vaccine. "I urge patience," Mr. Cuomo tweeted, adding that there were

more eligible New Yorkers than current supply.

New Mexico officials said they would adjust their program if they could. The state has moved beyond vaccinating only health-care workers and is making its doses available to people 75 years of age and older, as well as people 16 and older with underlying medical conditions, front line essential workers who can't do remote work and other vulnerable populations.

Congress in late December approved about \$8 billion in funding to states for their vaccination efforts, and some state leaders have said it would take weeks to hire the additional staff they need for expanded vaccination programs. The federal government has relied on states to handle vaccine administration, but many health departments say they are underfunded and already stretched coping with a surge in Covid-19 cases.

Chinese Covid-19 Vaccine Is Far Less Effective Than Initially Touted in Brazil (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 12:03 PM, Samantha Pearson and Luciana Magalhaes, Neutral]

Brazilian researchers testing China's Sinovac Vaccine said Tuesday that full data showed it to be 50.38% effective against Covid-19 in late-stage trials, almost 30 percentage points lower than previously announced, as concerns grow over the study's transparency.

The São Paulo-based Butantan Institute said last week that late-stage trials had shown the CoronaVac vaccine to be between 78% and 100% effective, offering total protection against severe cases of the disease.

However, after rising pressure from scientists, some of whom accused the trial's organizers of misleading the public, Butantan said those rates only included volunteers who suffered mild to severe cases of Covid-19. When data from all volunteers is considered, including those who contracted "very mild" cases of Covid-19 and required no medical assistance, the total efficacy rate falls to 50.38%, Butantan said Tuesday.

Despite having one of the lowest efficacy rates for any new coronavirus vaccine, CoronaVac is still more effective than some flu vaccines and can be stored cheaply in an ordinary refrigerator, making it a viable option for developing countries, public health experts said.

However, the piecemeal and unorthodox announcement of CoronaVac's efficacy rate, which was first scheduled to be announced last month, risks damaging the credibility of a vaccine that many Brazilians are already reluctant to take, doctors said.

New Brazil data shows disappointing 50.4% efficacy for China's CoronaVac vaccine (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 4:11 PM, Eduardo Simoes, Neutral]

A coronavirus vaccine developed by China's Sinovac Biotech was just 50.4% effective at preventing symptomatic infections in a Brazilian trial, researchers said on Tuesday, barely enough for regulatory approval and well below the rate announced last week.

The latest results are a major disappointment for Brazil, as the Chinese vaccine is one of two that the federal government has lined up to begin immunization during the second wave of the world's second-deadliest COVID-19 outbreak.

Several scientists and observers blasted the Butantan biomedical center for releasing partial data just days ago that generated unrealistic expectations. The confusion may add to skepticism in Brazil about the Chinese vaccine, which President Jair Bolsonaro has criticized, questioning its "origins."

"We have a good vaccine. Not the best vaccine in the world. Not the ideal vaccine," said microbiologist Natalia Pasternak, criticizing Butantan's triumphant tone.

Last week, the Brazilian researchers had celebrated results showing 78% efficacy against "mild-to-severe" COVID-19 cases, a rate they later described as "clinical efficacy."

They said nothing at the time about another group of "very mild" infections among those who received the vaccine that did not require clinical assistance.

Ricardo Palacios, medical director for clinical research at Butantan, said on Tuesday that the new lower efficacy finding included data on those "very mild" cases.

"We need better communicators," said Gonzalo Vecina Neto, a professor of public health at the University of Sao Paulo and former head of Brazilian health regulator Anvisa.

Piecemeal disclosures about Chinese vaccine trials globally have raised concerns that they are not subject to the same public scrutiny as U.S. and European alternatives.

Palacios and officials in the Sao Paulo state government, which funds Butantan, emphasized the good news that none of the volunteers inoculated with CoronaVac had to be hospitalized with COVID-19 symptoms.

Public health experts said that alone will be a relief for Brazilian hospitals that are buckling under the strain of surging case loads. However, it will take longer to curb the pandemic with a vaccine that allows so many mild cases.

"It's a vaccine that will start the process of overcoming the pandemic," Pasternak said.

Researchers at Butantan delayed announcement of their results three times, blaming a confidentiality clause in a contract with Sinovac.

In the meantime, Turkish researchers said last month that CoronaVac was 91.25% effective based on an interim analysis. Indonesia gave the vaccine emergency use approval on Monday based on interim data showing it is 65% effective.

Butantan officials said the design of the Brazilian study, focusing on frontline health workers during a severe outbreak in Brazil and including elderly volunteers, made it impossible to compare the results directly with other trials or vaccines.

Still, COVID-19 vaccines in use from Pfizer Inc with partner BioNTech SE and Moderna Inc

proved to be about 95% effective in preventing illness in their pivotal late-stage trials.

The disappointing CoronaVac data is the latest setback for vaccination efforts in Brazil, where more than 200,000 people have died since the outbreak began – the worst death toll outside the United States.

Brazil's national immunization program currently relies on CoronaVac and the vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca Plc – neither of which has received regulatory approval in Brazil.

Anvisa, which has stipulated an efficacy rate of at least 50% for vaccines in the pandemic, has already pressed Butantan for more details of its study, after it filed for emergency use authorization on Friday.

AstraZeneca failed to deliver active ingredients to Brazil over the weekend, leaving the government scrambling to import finished doses of the vaccine from India to begin inoculations.

Pfizer could pitch its vaccine to Russian regulators: TASS (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 11:31 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Pfizer is considering seeking approval for its COVID-19 vaccine in Russia, the TASS news agency cited the U.S. drugmaker as saying on Tuesday.

"Pfizer is considering the possibility of applying to register its COVID-19 vaccine candidate in the Russian Federation," TASS cited the company as saying in a statement.

Pfizer, which developed the vaccine with Germany's BioNTech, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Russia has registered two COVID-19 vaccines for domestic use, both developed by Russian research institutes. They have been used to inoculate over a million people since Moscow's mass-vaccination programme began last month, authorities say.

On Monday, the Interfax news agency cited Pfizer as saying that this year it would only ship its vaccine to countries where it has already inked government-level contracts. No contract for delivery has been signed with Russia.

Israel is reportedly planning to provide COVID-19 vaccines for Holocaust survivors around the world (Yahoo News/The Week)

Yahoo News/The Week [1/12/2021 10:50 AM, Tim O'Donnell, Neutral]

Israel is planning to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Holocaust survivors, both within the country and across the diaspora, Israel Hayom reports, per **The Jerusalem Post**.

The operation is reportedly in the early stages — Israel's Diaspora Affairs Minister Omer Yankelovich has instructed the Shalom Corps to strategize, and the group has reportedly approached large medical shipping companies about logistics. Meanwhile, the diaspora affairs ministry is reportedly working with Israel's health ministry to coordinate with Pfizer and Moderna, the companies producing coronavirus vaccines authorized in Israel. The

intention is reportedly to provide survivors around the world with additional vaccines, rather than take from Israel's quota.

"In a time of acute global crisis in the face of the coronavirus, we have the privilege to repay, if only slightly, Holocaust survivors who survived the inferno of Nazi oppression," Yankelevich told Israel Hayom.

Israel has received international praise for its vaccination program, which includes inoculating roughly 150,000 people, or a world-leading 1.5 percent of the population, per day, putting the country on pace to complete the mission within a matter of months. At the same time, Jerusalem has faced criticism for not distributing vaccines to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, instead contending the Palestinian Authority holds that responsibility. Read more about the plan to vaccinate Holocaust survivors around the world at The Jerusalem Post.

New Zealand Accepts Vaccines Should Go to Hotspots First (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 5:12 PM, Tracy Withers, Neutral]

New Zealand wants access to Covid-19 vaccines as soon as possible but accepts that other nations where the death toll is rising have a higher priority, Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson said.

"We're doing every single thing that is possible to get the vaccines here as soon as we can, but I don't think it will be a surprise to anybody that countries where there are literally thousands of people dying every day, that those are countries where the vaccines are going out right now," Robertson told NewstalkZB Wednesday.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced mid-December that the entire population of five million would be offered vaccination from the second half of 2021 after the government signed contracts with four drug companies. Political opponents have raised questions about the risk of waiting another six months amid a global resurgence of the virus and the emergence of variants that are more transmissible.

Robertson denied that New Zealand, which has eliminated the virus from its community and recorded just 25 deaths, was being polite and waiting on the sidelines.

"I wouldn't describe it as polite, I'd just describe it as real," he said. "We've got a situation in the U.K. and the U.S. where they are really struggling at the moment with tragic levels of deaths. That's where the vaccine is rolling out first."

New Zealand has got its orders in, but there are likely to be some delays given the global scale of the rollout, Robertson said.

"I can assure New Zealanders we've got those contracts signed, we will be getting the vaccines here," he said. "We're doing everything we can to get it out the door as soon as possible."

Trade

Biden Trade Policy to Center on Workers, USTR Nominee Says (Wall Street Journal)
Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 12:05 PM, Yuka Hayashi, Neutral]

President-elect Joe Biden's trade policy will focus on helping American workers by ensuring trade agreements protect and enhance U.S. jobs—and not just ensure low prices of imported goods for consumers, his nominee for the top trade-policy job said Tuesday.

Katherine Tai, in her first speech since Mr. Biden nominated her for U.S. Trade Representative, said the new administration's policy priorities also include confronting China over its trade practices and enforcing the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement signed by President Trump last year with bipartisan support.

"The president-elect's vision is to implement a worker-centered trade policy," Ms. Tai said in a video-streamed speech to the National Foreign Trade Council, a business-advocacy group. "What it means in practice is that U.S. trade policy must benefit regular Americans, communities and workers. And that starts with recognizing that people are not just consumers. They are also workers and wage earners."

The emphasis on protecting U.S. jobs was a guiding principle of the Trump administration's trade policy, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* published Monday, in which he credited Ms. Tai for helping win Democratic support for the USMCA, which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Ms. Tai has spent much of her career in the government, first as a lawyer for the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, then as a congressional staff member. Most recently, she was chief trade counsel for the House Ways and Means Committee.

Trade-policy experts say the USMCA serves as a model for the Biden administration's trade policy. It aims to create a more level playing field for U.S. workers by encouraging more domestic vehicle production, while imposing tougher rules on protecting the environment and worker rights.

Ms. Tai played a key role in negotiations between congressional Democrats and the Trump administration, leading to her ascent from a congressional staffer to a nominee for the country's chief trade ambassador with support from labor unions and business lobbies alike. If approved by the Senate, she would be the first woman of color to lead the U.S. Trade Representative's office.

"The USMCA is notable for incorporating groundbreaking labor and environmental provisions, including enforcement mechanisms that address long standing wounds and grievances suffered by regular working people," Ms. Tai said in her speech Tuesday.

She added that the challenge now is to make sure the agreement lives up to its promises and potential through enforcement actions and some course correction.

A fluent Mandarin speaker, Ms. Tai was a top lawyer with the U.S. Trade Representative's office on China issues between 2007 and 2014, litigating Washington's disputes against China at the World Trade Organization.

Ms. Tai said the U.S. faces stiffening competition from China, "whose economy is directed

by central planners, who are not subject to the pressures of political pluralism, democratic elections, popular opinion." She has said in the past that Beijing needs to be confronted strongly and strategically.

In her short speech, she didn't discuss the U.S.'s other trading partners, except for a brief mention of working with allies. Mr. Biden has said he didn't plan to enter new trade agreements until he addresses key domestic issues.

'We've lost 30 years': Brexit shatters supply chains for French fish hub (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 11:44 AM, Richard Lough, 5304K, Neutral]

French fishmongers and seafood factories are suspending orders from Britain and battling to salvage just-in-time supply chains, after they were upended by post-Brexit red tape that impedes next-day delivery of salmon and lobster from Britain to Europe.

Importers in Boulogne-sur-Mer told Reuters that deliveries were sometimes being held up because the Latin names of fish species were incorrectly entered on papers.

Other reasons for delays included sanitary certificates missing the required stamps and French agents adopting a zero-tolerance approach to mistakes in the cumbersome process.

The result is a chaotic breakdown in supply chains from the outer reaches of the British Isles to the northern French port of Boulogne, which used to see Scottish langoustine and scallops in French shops just over a day after they were harvested.

Deliveries were taking at least one or two days longer than previously, if they got through at all.

"We've never known such delays," said Arnaud Mille, head of sourcing at Demarne Freres, who counts Britain as his number one supplier. "It's been apocalyptic."

Now in its second week, the disruption meant it was almost impossible for importers to place orders in a truck carrying multiple consignments from different suppliers.

Mille said he had sent an SMS message to French customs officials asking them to go easy while the industry learned to navigate the new bureaucracy, but was yet to receive a response.

The delays mean seafood is not always hitting European markets as fresh as it once did. In a consignment of English-caught crab that arrived at Mille's warehouse a day late on Saturday, 20% of the crustaceans had perished.

Brexit had undone decades of cooperation to finesse the supply chain, some importers in Boulogne, Europe's biggest fish processing centre, said.

"We've lost 30 years," said Mille.

SENDING FISH TO MARS

Britain's divorce from the EU heralded the return of a customs border and additional paperwork and costs. Those moving seafood from Britain into the bloc face some of the toughest requirements, including mandatory sanitary checks.

Stephane Pruvost, chief executive of fish processor JP Maree, said he had suspended all imports from Britain. For now he was trying to fill the gap in his salmon and monkfish orders from markets such as Norway and Denmark.

"When you have fewer sellers, there's less choice on price, and sometimes quality," he said. "For now we've no other choice."

Scottish truck driver Robert Marshall spent a day sat in his cab at Boulogne's sanitary control checkpoint, a few hundred metres from the hangar-like complex where he was to drop off his salmon cargo, waiting for a snag with his customs documents to be fixed.

"My wheels are not turning so I'm not making money," the ex-soldier said. "I'll be looking at this over the next couple of months to see if it's viable."

Sanitary control agents were conducting tests on 15% of consignments of wild-caught fish and 30% of farmed fish and molluscs, said Charles-Henri Goeury, head of Boulogne's SIVEP checkpoint. The checks involved opening iced crates to check the merchandise was fresh and conserved at the correct temperature.

He denied trucks had been held up for hours because of the checks, pointing instead to customs paperwork. His team had been flexible with minor administrative oversights but would soon get stricter, he said.

Fish exports have also been hit in the opposite direction.

The need for Boulogne wholesalers to obtain the license, signature and boat registration of each skipper made it impossible to send a mixed load of mullet from France, turbot from Belgium and sea urchins from Spain to a buyer in Britain. Customs charges added hundreds of euros to costs.

In charge of exports at L'Argonaute, Pierre Haem said he had spent more time chasing papers than selling fish since Jan. 1, and had resorted to shipping only squid.

"Sending fish to London used to be as simple as selling it down the end of the road," Haem said. "Now it's like sending fish to planet Mars."

[Mexico] Exclusive: Mexico may raise U.S. farm concerns if energy dispute bites, minister says (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 1:45 PM, Dave Graham, Neutral]

Mexico could raise concerns over potential barriers to its agriculture exports to the United States in any future negotiations over the Mexican government's contentious energy policy, Economy Minister Tatiana Clouthier said.

Since President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took office in late 2018 vowing to

strengthen the state's influence over energy policy, Mexico has been at increasing odds with international investors due to measures he has overseen to achieve that goal.

U.S. lawmakers have urged outgoing President Donald Trump to pressure Lopez Obrador to respect private energy investments, and Clouthier said she was well aware of the concern the policy was causing in the United States, Mexico's top trade partner.

If push comes to shove, Mexico would pursue a negotiated solution under the new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) trade deal, while setting out its own concerns about aspects of U.S. trade policy, she told Reuters in an interview.

"It means we keep talking within the framework we signed, the free trade accord," she said on Monday afternoon, ten days after she took office. "And getting into a negotiation about what bothers one side, and what bothers the other."

Fresh trade disputes under the U.S. administration of President-elect Joe Biden could cloud the rollout of USMCA at a time North America is seeking to claw its way out of a deep economic hole left by the coronavirus pandemic.

Mexico, Clouthier said, was concerned about U.S. anti-dumping probes that could hit exports of seasonal agricultural fare. Products in question include blueberries, strawberries, cucumbers, zucchini and peppers, her ministry says.

On Tuesday, the ministry said it reserved the right to retaliate over any curbs on blueberry exports.

Mexico's energy ministry, meanwhile, has called into question billions of dollars' worth of investment in renewable power generation projects on the basis that the previous Mexican administration skewed the market in favor of private capital.

Power plants have had approvals held up or been prevented from connecting to the grid by decrees and regulations.

Clouthier, Lopez Obrador's former election campaign manager, emphasized that her ministry did not set Mexico's energy policy, and said she hoped agreement could be reached with investors without arbitration proceedings.

"In a relationship as binding as the one we have and which we've signed up to with USMCA, we want it to be an enduring and lasting relationship, we want things to be friendly and smooth for everyone," said Clouthier, 56.

BUSINESS OUTREACH

A member of a prominent political family with strong ties to the Mexican business community, Clouthier is regarded as an astute political operator who helped broaden Lopez Obrador's appeal among middle-class voters during his 2018 election run.

Both foreign diplomats and corporate leaders hope her appointment will usher in a more fruitful relationship between the government and business to counteract an economic slump

in Mexico that had begun before the pandemic even took hold.

Saying her ministry would be doing everything possible to create the conditions to spur more investment, Clouthier said she aimed to be "more available" to the business community, without necessarily always agreeing with it.

Asked what she would say to companies thinking of investing that were unsettled by the energy row, the minister said she was confident Mexico had plenty of broader selling points.

Clouthier expressed hope that with the entry of Democrat Biden into the White House on Jan. 20, the United States could move back from the protectionist urges it has shown under Trump.

Nevertheless, analysts and officials say Biden could lean on the Mexican government to honor its environmental commitments if, as expected, he seeks to position the United States as a leader in the fight against climate change.

Lopez Obrador has put the brakes on Mexico's transition toward wind and solar power in his drive to strengthen debt-laden state oil firm Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex) and national power utility, the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE).

Clouthier has been a noted advocate of green energy, and she said it was important to remember that the president's Mayan Train rail project in the Yucatan Peninsula was due to draw a significant part of its power supply from renewable sources.

That, she argued, would make an important contribution to Mexico's efforts to meet its climate commitments.

Audio of outgoing Trump appointee describes Capitol riot as largely peaceful, led by 'a few violent people' (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/12/2021 2:55 PM, Yeganeh Torbati, Neutral]

An outgoing Trump administration political appointee at the nation's leading foreign aid agency told staff on Tuesday that the deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol was the work of "a few violent people," and added that "several million" others there were protesting peacefully for electoral reform, according to audio recordings of a staff meeting obtained by The Washington Post.

Tim Meisburger is a Trump appointee and an outgoing deputy assistant administrator at the U.S. Agency for International Development's bureau for development, democracy and innovation. Meisburger made the comments on a video call with approximately 70 to 80 USAID workers, according to one USAID official who was granted anonymity to describe internal communications at the agency.

"What I saw was several million people demonstrating in the Capitol, peaceful protesters in the Capitol," said Meisburger, according to an audio recording of the video call. "I saw a few violent people and I'm not, I would never endorse violence. But what I saw was a lot of people who were committed to reform. And they were committed to electoral reform."

A USAID spokeswoman declined to comment. The Washington Post obtained two different recordings of the same meeting, where Meisburger made the comments. When The Post reached Meisburger by phone for comment, Meisburger declined to comment and then hung up, and did not respond to subsequent text messages.

There were not several million people protesting at the Capitol last Wednesday, nor at an earlier rally at the Ellipse, near the White House. Organizers had expected up to 30,000 people to attend the rally.

Also, multiple videos of the incident contradict the description that Meisburger gave of the riots, showing that scores of people pushed their way into the capitol, attacking several police officers, including one who was beaten with a flagpole. More than 60 people have been arrested in connection to the storming of the capitol. Five people died, and 56 Washington D.C. police officers were injured.

Republicans and Democrats have denounced the violence. Lawmakers in both parties have called for Trump's removal, because of his role in inciting the mob.

Meisburger also suggested that the fact that some people believe the presidential election was fraudulent was enough to call the overall results into question. There has been no evidence of widespread fraud, with multiple courts across the country dismissing cases that alleged fraud in the November election.

"Whether you believe the elections were free or fair or not, all of you know that in the election game, perception is reality, and if people don't have confidence in their institutions then it doesn't matter whether what occurred in the election machine was perfectly correct or whether it was completely false," he said.

Meisburger also seemed to lament his own professional prospects after serving in the Trump administration. Before joining USAID, he worked at the Asia Foundation for more than two decades, most recently as director for elections and political processes, according to his LinkedIn profile.

"I know that I've been blacklisted now by the Lincoln Project and canceled by Antifa, so I may not be working in this particular sector in the future," he said.

It is unclear what Meisburger was referring to. The Lincoln Project did not immediately return a request for comment. For weeks, Meisburger's private Twitter account has included retweets of election fraud allegations. On Nov. 7, Meisburger tweeted that the "media perpetrated hoax after hoax designed to influence the election in 2018 and 2020, and actively censored my political party, and we are supposed to accept in when THEY call the election? Never!!!"

Meisburger works within the Bureau for Development, Democracy and Innovation at the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, according to USAID's website. The website also reports he began his career in international development as a Peace Corps volunteer in Lesotho in 1988 and has worked as a specialist in elections and democratization since 1992.

One official on the call pushed back on Meisburger's comments, noting that her husband was at the Capitol during the riots. "It was a lot of people, it was enough people to actually break into the Capitol," said the woman, according to an audio recording of the video chat.

She also pushed back on the idea that "perception" of a supposedly fraudulent election was enough to call the results into question, referring to efforts before the election by President Trump to sow doubt in the results if he did not win.

Meisburger replied that he was "not going to get into a debate with anyone today."

Another employee then asked Meisburger if he himself was at the Capitol with the rioters, but was told that Meisburger was no longer on the call. Meisburger later rejoined and said his connection had dropped, but he did not answer whether he had been at the rally.

Near East & North Africa

Egypt reopens airspace to Qatar, sources, state media say (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:28 AM, Abdelnasser Aboelfadl and Mahmoud Mourad, 5304K, Neutral]

Egypt reopened its airspace to Qatari flights on Tuesday and will allow the resumption of flights between the two countries, aviation sources and state media said.

The decision follows moves by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt to end a boycott in which they severed diplomatic, trade and travel ties with Qatar in 2017.

The lifting of Egypt's aviation ban allowed Qatari flights to cross Egyptian airspace and national carriers from both countries to submit flight operating schedules for approval, Al-Ahram state newspaper reported.

Agreements set to be activated will also allow for goods transport between the two countries, according to sources from the civil aviation authority and aviation ministry.

Egypt and its Gulf allies imposed the embargo on Qatar over allegations it supports terrorism, allegations Doha denies.

Egypt expressed its support for regional reconciliation at a summit in Saudi Arabia last week but had stopped short of announcing concrete steps to end the boycott.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have all announced the reopening of their airspace to Qatar.

Families reunite as Qatar-Saudi flights resume after rift (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 10:12 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Khalid al-Qahtani stood in the arrivals hall at Riyadh's main airport on Monday, waiting to see his sister almost four years after a diplomatic rift with neighbouring Qatar split his family apart.

Other relatives from other families clustered around him waiting for the passengers to get off the first flight from Doha allowed into Saudi Arabia since a U.S-backed deal reopened travel routes.

"My sister has been (in Qatar) for about four years. We communicate on WhatsApp ... My feelings – me and every Gulf citizen – are indescribable," he said.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a diplomatic, trade and travel boycott on Qatar in 2017, accusing it of supporting terrorism – a charge dismissed by Qatar which said the move was meant to curtail its sovereignty.

As the states argued, relatives and friends separated by the dispute had to fly to a neutral third country to meet.

Then Saudi Arabia's foreign minister announced a breakthrough in ending the dispute at a summit on Tuesday and the air, land and sea links started to re-open.

"Thank God ... thank God," said grinning schoolboy Khalid al-Harji at Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport, soon after arriving from Doha and meeting his uncle and cousin.

"Qatar and us, we share many things: politically, economically, socially, geographically. There are relations, blood between us," said Bandar al-Qahtani waiting to greet his aunt.

Nomura Follows Saudi Retreat With Plan to Exit Bahrain, Qatar (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 2:49 AM, Nicolas Parasie, Neutral]

Nomura Holdings Inc. is closing its offices in Qatar and Bahrain as part of a push to move some of its regional and client coverage to bigger financial centers, according to people familiar with the matter.

Japan's biggest brokerage, which also exited Saudi Arabia last month, has been shrinking its investment banking presence in the Middle East. Nomura will continue to serve clients in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar from Dubai or locations like London, where it has a larger presence, said the people, who asked not to be identified because the information is private.

Nomura began overhauling its global wholesale business more than a year ago in a bid to save \$1 billion in costs and sustain profitability abroad. Chief Executive Officer Kentaro Okuda has persisted with those efforts by cutting dozens of investment banking jobs in the U.S., Bloomberg reported in July. Nomura also eliminated some investment banking positions in Dubai last year.

The restoration of ties between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt after a three-year dispute may be a factor for financial firms looking to reshape their presence in the region. Gulf states are opening their airspace to Qatar and resuming trade with the gas-rich state after this month's diplomatic breakthrough.

[Egypt] Liverpool striker Salah donates oxygen to support his Egyptian village's COVID fight (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 7:32 AM, Ahmed Fahmy, 5304K, Neutral]

Liverpool striker Mohamed Salah has donated oxygen and an ambulance to his home village in the Egyptian region of Gharbia, helping locals treat people suffering with COVID-19 as the country battles a second wave of infections.

The 28-year-old himself tested positive for the coronavirus last November.

"We have 14 oxygen cylinders inside the Mohamed Salah Charity Foundation. These help people in the village of Nagrig [Salah's hometown], as well as those from surrounding villages," said Hassan Bakr, the head of the charity.

Bakr delivers oxygen cylinders direct to patients homes.

"We also have an ambulance unit built by Mohamed Salah, which has been operating since July 2020 ... this also helped us during the coronavirus, when transporting patients to the isolation hospitals."

Salah maintains deep connections with the small, poor village where he grew up, some 130km north of Cairo, and donates around \$64,000 each year to the Mohamed Salah Charity Foundation, the group said.

Egypt's government has confirmed 150,753 infections and 8,249 deaths since the start of the pandemic more than 10 months ago. However, health officials say the real number is likely far higher because of the relatively low rate of coronavirus testing and the exclusion of private test results.

[Israel] Leading human rights group calls Israel an 'apartheid' state (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 7:51 AM, Joseph Krauss, Neutral]

A leading Israeli human rights group has begun describing both Israel and its control of the Palestinian territories as a single "apartheid" regime, using an explosive term that the country's leaders and their supporters vehemently reject.

In a report released Tuesday, B'Tselem says that while Palestinians live under different forms of Israeli control in the occupied West Bank, blockaded Gaza, annexed east Jerusalem and within Israel itself, they have fewer rights than Jews in the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

"One of the key points in our analysis is that this is a single geopolitical area ruled by one government," said B'Tselem director Hagai El-Ad. "This is not democracy plus occupation. This is apartheid between the river and the sea."

That a respected Israeli organization is adopting a term long seen as taboo even by many critics of Israel points to a broader shift in the debate as its half-century occupation of war-won lands drags on and hopes for a two-state solution fade.

Peter Beinart, a prominent Jewish-American critic of Israel, caused a similar stir last year when he came out in favor of a single binational state with equal rights for Jews and Palestinians. B'Tselem does not take a position on whether there should be one state or

two.

Israel has long presented itself as a thriving democracy in which Palestinian citizens, who make up about 20% of its population of 9.2 million, have equal rights. Israel seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war -- lands that are home to nearly 5 million Palestinians and which the Palestinians want for a future state.

Israel withdrew troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005 but imposed a blockade after the militant Hamas group seized power there two years later. It considers the West Bank "disputed" territory whose fate should be determined in peace talks. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in 1967 in a move not recognized internationally and considers the entire city its unified capital. Most Palestinians in east Jerusalem are Israeli "residents," but not citizens with voting rights.

B'Tselem argues that by dividing up the territories and using different means of control, Israel masks the underlying reality -- that roughly 7 million Jews and 7 million Palestinians live under a single system with vastly unequal rights.

"We are not saying that the degree of discrimination that a Palestinian has to endure is the same if one is a citizen of the state of Israel or if one is besieged in Gaza," El-Ad said. "The point is that there isn't a single square inch between the river and the sea in which a Palestinian and a Jew are equal."

Israel's harshest critics have used the term "apartheid" for decades, evoking the system of white rule and racial segregation in South Africa that was brought to an end in 1994. The International Criminal Court defines apartheid as an "institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group."

"There is no country in the world that is clearer in its apartheid policies than Israel," said Nabil Shaath, a senior adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "It is a state based on racist decisions aimed at confiscating land, expelling indigenous people, demolishing homes and establishing settlements."

In recent years, as Israel has further entrenched its rule over the West Bank, Israeli writers, disillusioned former generals and politicians opposed to its right-wing government have increasingly adopted the term.

But until now B'Tselem, which was established in 1989, had only used it in specific contexts.

Israel adamantly rejects the term, saying the restrictions it imposes in Gaza and the West Bank are temporary measures needed for security. Most Palestinians in the West Bank live in areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, but those areas are surrounded by Israeli checkpoints and Israeli soldiers can enter at any time. Israel has full control over 60% of the West Bank.

Itay Milner, a spokesman for Israel's consulate general in New York, dismissed the B'Tselem report as "another tool for them to promote their political agenda," which he said was based on a "distorted ideological view." He pointed out that Arab citizens of Israel are

represented across the government, including the diplomatic corps.

Eugene Kontorovich, director of international law at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum, says the fact that the Palestinians have their own government makes any talk of apartheid "inapplicable," calling the B'Tselem report "shockingly weak, dishonest and misleading."

Palestinian leaders agreed to the current territorial divisions in the Oslo accords in the 1990s, and the Palestinian Authority is recognized as a state by dozens of nations. That, Kontorovich says, is a far cry from the territories designated for Black South Africans under apartheid — known as bantustans — to which many Palestinians compare the areas governed by the PA.

Kontorovich said the use of the word "apartheid" was instead aimed at demonizing Israel in a way that "resonates with racial sensitivities and debates in America and the West."

Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York, rejects the term. "Occupation, yes. Apartheid, absolutely not."

But he acknowledged that critics of Israel who had refrained from using the term, or who had used it and been attacked, "will now conveniently say, 'Hey, you know, Israelis are saying it themselves.'"

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Union for Reform Judaism, which estimates its reach at more than 1.5 million people in 850 congregations across North America, says the situation in the West Bank and Gaza is a "moral blight" and an "occupation," but not apartheid.

"What goes along with saying that, to many in the international community, is that therefore Israel has no right to exist," he said. "If the accusation is apartheid, that is not simply a strong critique, it's an existential critique."

EI-Ad points to two recent developments that altered B'Tselem's thinking.

The first was a contentious law passed in 2018 that defines Israel as the "nation-state of the Jewish people." Critics say it downgraded Israel's Palestinian minority to second-class citizenship and formalized the widespread discrimination they have faced since Israel's founding in 1948. Supporters say it merely recognized Israel's Jewish character and that similar laws can be found in many Western countries.

The second was Israel's announcement in 2019 of its intention to annex up to a third of the occupied West Bank, including all of its Jewish settlements, which are home to nearly 500,000 Israelis. Those plans were put on hold as part a normalization agreement reached with the United Arab Emirates last year, but Israel has said the pause is only temporary.

B'Tselem and other rights groups argue that the boundaries separating Israel and the West Bank vanished long ago — at least for Israeli settlers, who can freely travel back and forth, while their Palestinian neighbors require permits to enter Israel.

There have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade. The occupation, which

critics have long warned is unsustainable, has endured for 53 years.

"Fifty years plus, that's not enough to understand the permanence of Israeli control of the occupied territories?" El-Ad said. "We think that people need to wake up to reality, and stop talking in future terms about something that has already happened."

[Kuwait] Kuwaiti Cabinet Resigns After a Month, Fueling Political Turmoil (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 8:59 AM, Fiona MacDonald, Neutral]

Kuwait's cabinet ministers resigned after just a month in office, following a dispute with opposition lawmakers over issues including the re-election of parliament's speaker.

The resignations were forced after a majority of lawmakers backed a request to question Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, a move that could have led to his dismissal or parliament's dissolution. The cabinet, formed after parliamentary elections last month, was the second Sheikh Sabah has headed in less than a year.

State-run Kuwait News Agency didn't say whether Sheikh Sabah accepted the ministers' resignations.

Tensions mounted during parliament's first session, when incumbent Speaker Marzouq Alghanim was re-elected in a vote that, like most in Kuwait's parliament, was open to both the elected legislators and cabinet ministers. Opposition lawmakers alleged Alghanim's victory was due to government intervention and threatened to question the prime minister about it.

Kuwait has had 17 governments and eight elections since 2006. It last chose a new National Assembly on Dec. 5, replacing dozens of incumbent legislators in a blow to pro-government forces, women and liberals.

The fresh turmoil comes at a critical moment for an economy reeling from lower oil prices, the coronavirus pandemic and stalled reform. Lawmakers have thwarted plans to reallocate state handouts and blocked proposals to issue debt. They've barely addressed the pressures on the economy, and neither policy makers nor legislators have made reference to a delayed bill that would allow the government to return to international bond markets.

The Gulf Arab nation, home to about 6% of the world's oil reserves and the fourth-largest producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, is facing a record budget deficit. The International Monetary Fund expects gross domestic product to contract more than 8% in 2020.

[Kuwait] Kuwait's government quits, deepening political deadlock (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 11:15 AM, Isabel Debre, Neutral]

Kuwait's Cabinet submitted its resignation Tuesday, the latest development in a cycle of clashes between the government and lawmakers that long has convulsed the sheikhdom with the strongest parliament in the Gulf.

The move, while not a surprise after some 30 lawmakers backed a no-confidence motion

against the government this month, reveals how the country's politicking has caused instability, diminished public confidence and aggravated the oil-rich state's worst economic crisis in decades.

The ministers quit after the recently elected members of parliament, more than 60% of them new faces, grilled the prime minister to protest his new Cabinet appointments. The decision to reinstate the old parliament speaker, who hails from an elite merchant family, stirred anger among new lawmakers skeptical of corruption and the country's patronage system.

The prime minister must now submit the resignations to the country's ruling emir, Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Sabah, who is widely expected to accept them.

During their interrogation of the prime minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al Hamad Al Sabah last week, lawmakers accused him of staffing the Cabinet with "provocative and unqualified members," according to local media. Other sore points included the choices for interior minister and justice minister, who opposed a draft law on Kuwait's stateless people that parliament had hoped to pass.

The tensions boiled over in last week's parliamentary session, with footage showing shouting matches and physical brawls in the chamber. Security guards struggled to restrain lawmakers wearing traditional headdress and robes as they clambered over rows of chairs, screaming at supporters and friends of the parliament speaker.

"The lawmakers are trying to bring reforms, but they feel their hands are tied because the government keeps bringing in the same old faces," said Mohammed al-Yousef, an independent Kuwaiti political analyst. "The system is designed to create deadlock."

The resignation of the government raises concerns that the emir may dissolve parliament and force a second election in as many months. It wouldn't be the first time. Kuwait's unusual combination of an emir-appointed government and elected parliament frequently gives rise to wrangling that analysts say impedes the country's economic and social progress. The parliament can introduce legislation and question ministers, though the country's emir retains ultimate authority and ruling family members hold senior posts.

Last year, the ratings agency Moody's downgraded Kuwait for the first time in its history as the coronavirus pandemic and plunging oil prices burned a hole in the country's finances. Even with the treasury rapidly depleting, the government has no legal framework to deficit-spend beyond its current limit of \$33 billion without parliamentary approval. Lawmakers have fiercely opposed raising the debt ceiling, fearing the money will be pillaged thanks to corruption.

[Lebanon] The Long Road to Rebuild Beirut After the Explosion (Wall Street Journal)
Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 5:30 AM, Roque Ruis, Alex Newman and Isabel Coles, Neutral]

The shockwave unleashed last August by one of the biggest nonnuclear explosions in history shattered windows, ripped doors off their hinges and carved a swath of wreckage through the capital of Lebanon.

As Lebanese questioned their country's future in the wake of the blast, conservationists mobilized to safeguard its past, cataloguing the damage to historic homes, libraries and museums.

Led by architect Gilbert Nicolas, one team of 70 volunteers raced to secure Beirut's heritage and protect it against the elements until resources could be marshalled for restoration. Behind broken facades, the contents of historic buildings—including books, ceramics and artworks—were also in peril.

Mr. Nicolas was in his car less than a mile from the Port of Beirut when a warehouse containing nearly 3,000 tons of highly combustible ammonium nitrate caught fire. In an instant, the city's historic districts resembled a war zone.

Beirut residents quickly rallied to pick up the pieces, sweeping away tons of glass and rubble, but restoration is still months—if not years—away.

What is at stake goes beyond the outward appearance of Beirut, said Mr. Nicolas. "We wanted the soul of the city to stay and we wanted to keep this urban tissue, to keep the residents inside the city," he said.

Beirut isn't new to rebuilding. It got back on its feet after a 15-year civil war that ended in 1990 and bouts of conflict with Israel. But this time, the damage is concentrated in some of the city's most storied neighborhoods and the country is in the throes of a deep economic crisis. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 80% of its value against the dollar since last year, making imported materials needed to rebuild prohibitively expensive.

Among the most prominent casualties of the explosion is the Sursock Museum, one of Beirut's most visited attractions, which has been closed since the blast. The museum's art collection is safe in the basement, but finding the right artisans and material to rebuild its century-old tinted windows may be impossible.

Several blocks away at the Bibliothèque Orientale, which was founded in 1875 and houses a collection of maps, photos and books from the Middle East, shattered doors and windows left the collection vulnerable to humidity, cold temperatures and cockroaches. Cockroaches can eat paper.

Meanwhile, many who have made their homes in the city's historic buildings simply don't have the means to rebuild.

Few expect help from a government widely blamed for years of negligence and dysfunction that culminated in the explosion. And the international community, which came to Lebanon's aid in previous times of crisis, is refusing to bail out the country this time without political reforms the ruling elite has so far shown little appetite to adopt.

The iconic Sursock Museum, built in 1912 as a home for Lebanese art collector Nicolas Sursock and converted into a museum after his death, has been closed since the explosion and plans to reopen in phases in 2021, beginning with outdoor spaces. The interior of the museum is expected to re-open in November 2021.

Museum Director Zeina Arida estimates the museum needs about \$3 million to rebuild. A half-million dollar grant from the Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas paid for weatherproofing the building before winter, sealing the exposed roof, windows and doors with plastic coverings. In total, including the grants, the museum has raised about \$700,000 from organizations and private donors and artists.

Ms. Arida said there are many buildings around the museum that don't have the means to rebuild and the area could be left without the diversity of shops, residents, artists and galleries it had been known for.

"Basically what we are losing is the spirit of Beirut, in a way," she said.

About 57 artworks out of a total 130, including a portrait of Sursock himself, were damaged. All 51 fireproof metallic doors were blown off their hinges. Skylights and other parts of the roof are gone. An elevator, a recent addition, needs repair.

The most difficult pieces to rebuild are the richly colored windows that are part of the original construction in 1912. So far, the artisan hired by the museum has been unable to find the same type of glass needed to recreate the windows.

The Bibliothèque Orientale houses 250,000 books, 3,500 manuscripts, more than 2,400 maps and 250,000 photographs. The collection's sheer size means it can't be relocated for safekeeping. All 21 doors and 149 windows of the historic, five-story structure blew out. An enormous cedar door, the entrance to the library since its construction, may be one of the first things to be repaired.

The collection itself was unscathed by the blast. The rarest and oldest pieces, including a Bible and manuscripts from the ninth century, were stored in metal boxes that were tossed off shelves during the explosion, but were safe. Two temperature-controlled rooms are no longer functional after the walls crumbled.

The library's biggest problem is that its fortress-like building is now open to the elements and cockroaches, said Vice-Rector Carla Edde.

Since the explosion, the windows and doors have been covered up with plastic, but this still leaves the library's collection exposed to temperature swings and humidity until the temperature-controlled rooms and air conditioning can be rebuilt.

"We have guards to protect [the library] 24 hours a day but they can't do much about the cockroaches," Ms. Edde said. "Once they are in the books, in the collection, it's very difficult." She added that humidity and high temperatures also are damaging to paper.

Typical bug-fighting tools such as insecticide are often too acidic and can damage the fragile books.

The library is still trying to loan works to researchers who need them to finish projects, but nobody is allowed in the building until more repairs can be made.

Ms. Edde said that institutions such as the Bibliothèque Orientale have to rebuild.

"This library, this heritage, this identity of Lebanon is about culture, richness, diversity of science," she said. "If we don't have libraries, what do we have?"

The library doesn't have an expected reopening date. Funding from international donors is still in progress and some materials are difficult to come by.

"There's not enough aluminum, glass in the country," said Ms. Edde. "When we receive stuff, we'll be able to start the repair."

Many of Beirut's historic buildings are clustered along Gourard Street, popularly known as Gemmayzeh. Once the heart of the city's nightlife, the street runs parallel to the port.

The explosion gutted apartments, small businesses, restaurants and bars tucked in Ottoman-era buildings and mansions dating back to the period when Lebanon was placed under a French mandate following World War I.

Some businesses have now reopened, with restaurants crowdfunding from their patrons online to cover the cost of repairs. But stretches of the street remain dark and eerily quiet and residents of some historic buildings are struggling to repair their homes.

In the days following the blast, volunteers helped Nadine Gholam Kassab clean up her first-floor apartment, but she couldn't afford to fix the smashed woodwork and glass.

The American University of Beirut has identified the four-story building where she lived with her husband and children as a possible pilot for restoration due to its unique blend of Ottoman-era and French-mandate architecture.

While some residents of the building managed to scrape together funds by borrowing from friends and family or digging into their life savings, others have abandoned the building, at least temporarily. Some, like Ms. Kassab, are relying on NGOs to help repair their apartments.

Ms. Kassab, an architect, doubts it will be possible to source certain materials used in the original construction of the building, such as a variety of Turkish wood.

For now, she has covered the window frames with plastic sheeting and is staying elsewhere with her family.

Jean Tofiq Yazigi and his wife are the only residents to have moved back into the building since the explosion. They borrowed money from relatives to pay for repairs, which cost about \$8,500.

The building's distinctive green wooden shutters were ripped off by the blast and are too expensive for Mr. Yazigi to replace, so he ordered curtains instead.

Beneath the stone vaults on the ground floor is a workshop rented by carpenter Joseph Haddad. Three framed documents hanging from the wall and rendered illegible by the years attest to Mr. Haddad's long relationship with the building; the 75-year-old has worked here

since dropping out of school to help his father, also a carpenter.

Two of Mr. Haddad's workers were wounded in the explosion, but the workshop wasn't badly damaged because it is in the basement. And unlike many businesses that were ruined by the blast, Mr. Haddad's is thriving due to high demand for carpenters to help repair broken homes.

Paul Sacre was behind the counter of his pharmacy when the explosion ripped through the building. The 65-year-old was unharmed, but the pharmacy he bought in 1982 was ruined, including valuable stocks of medicine.

After spending the entirety of his savings, Mr. Sacre is back in business. But the blast destroyed some old medical implements he had inherited from the pharmacy's previous owner and put on display as a testament to the long history of the business.

"What we have lost is something really important: heritage," said Mr. Sacre. "You cannot replace it."

[Lebanon] Statue of Iranian commander divides Lebanese (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 6:38 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A statue of top Iranian military leader, Qassem Soleimani, erected to mark a year since his assassination, has stirred controversy between supporters and opponents on social media. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Oman] Omani sultan's eldest son to succeed him under new law (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 12:48 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Oman's Sultan Haitham will be succeeded by his eldest son Dhi Yazan, according to a new basic law published on Tuesday that creates a new position of crown prince and establishes succession from ruler to the eldest son.

Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said had announced plans for the constitutional change on Monday, a year after the death of his predecessor, Sultan Qaboos. The new basic law was published on Tuesday in the official gazette.

Sultan Qaboos fathered no children and designated no successor publicly during his 49-year reign.

Haitham's move to designate a crown prince could strengthen the predictability of Omani politics, following the final years of Sultan Qaboos' rule when secrecy about the succession raised concerns for stability.

Qaboos, who took power by overthrowing his father, named his cousin Haitham as his preferred successor in a sealed envelope to be opened after his death should the royal family disagree on the succession line. The family went with his choice.

Sultan Haitham has overhauled government and state entities and moved to enact long-awaited fiscal reform since taking power, appointing finance and foreign affairs ministers and a central bank chairman – portfolios held by the late sultan.

Dhi Yazan bin Haitham, 30, was named minister of culture, sport and youth in August in the shake-up to become Oman's youngest minister. He previously worked at the foreign ministry, according to Omani media.

The new basic law published in the Gazette stipulates maintaining a foreign policy based on friendly relations with all states. It also retains an elected advisory Shura Council, the lower house of parliament.

A separate decree on Monday had created a new law for the parliament - the bicameral Council of Oman. The published text says changes to conditions of membership and the council's terms of reference have been made, but the full decree has not yet been published.

Oman has traditionally charted an independent foreign policy, not taking sides in a power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or in a Gulf dispute with Qatar.

[Tunisia] Tunisia to lock down for four days from Thursday (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Tunisia will impose a four-day national lockdown from Thursday along with lesser measures lasting until Jan. 24 to combat a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases, Health Minister Fouzi Mehdi said on Tuesday.

"The situation is very critical and the vaccination will not come before February," Mehdi said.

Other measures will include rotating staffing in state jobs to reduce people in offices and transport, school closures, longer curfew hours and the removal of all chairs from cafes.

On Monday Tunisia announced a new record high for confirmed cases in a day of 3,074 and said the intensive care units in most public hospitals were full.

Thursday is a national holiday to mark the anniversary of Tunisia's revolution a decade ago when it threw off autocratic rule for democracy.

An earlier lockdown in the spring successfully contained the coronavirus, but caused great financial pain in a country where economic woes have undermined faith in successive democratic governments.

President Kais Saied has called for a partial lockdown in the regions experiencing rapid infection.

Tunisia banned travel among the country's regions and extended a nightly curfew in October, as it tried to contain the pandemic.

The new curfew will be from 4 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Europe and Eurasia

[Belgium] Belgium fears surge of COVID-19 cases in coming weeks (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 6:41 AM, Marine Strauss, 5304K, Negative]

Belgium could see an increase in daily cases of COVID-19 infections in coming weeks as more Belgians undergo tests on return from holidays, the government said on Tuesday.

Health ministry spokesman Yves Van Laethem said a rise in cases in recent days could be explained by more tests being done than during the winter holidays.

"The situation remains fragile, hesitant. There could be an upsurge in the coming weeks, although a reverse evolution cannot be ruled out either," Van Laethem told a news conference.

Van Laethem said Belgium recorded its highest annual mortality rate last year since the Spanish flu and the end of the First World War in 1918.

Data from the Sciensano health institute showed that the total number of positive COVID-19 tests reached 665,220 on Monday, with 2,000 new daily cases detected on average in the last seven days.

"This increase affects all age groups globally but is more pronounced in 10-year-olds, young adults and — a little more worryingly, because they probably did not go on vacation — in people over the age of 90," he said.

The country of 11 million, home to the headquarters of the European Union and NATO, has one of the world's highest COVID-19 mortality rates per capita, with 20,122 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

The federal government will meet on Jan. 22 to review the lockdown measures. Belgium's southern Wallonia region decided on Tuesday to extend its nightly curfew until Feb. 15.

[Bosnia] Migrants in Bosnia camp health checked after days in cold (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 4:22 AM, Kemal Softic, Neutral]

Many migrants and refugees staying at a camp in northwestern Bosnia have complained of respiratory and skin infections after spending days in makeshift tents and containers amid freezing weather and snowstorms, aid workers warned.

Most of the hundreds of migrants stuck at the Lipa facility near Bosnia's border with Croatia have been accommodated in heated military tents following days of uncertainty after a fire gutted most of the camp on Dec. 23.

Bosnia has faced sharp criticism for leaving around 1,000 people without shelter after the blaze. The authorities first said they would move the migrants to another location, but they ended up setting up military tents at the site instead.

The Amnesty International rights group in a statement on Tuesday said a sustainable and durable solution for the migrants in Bosnia is needed. It said political bickering has marred efforts to deal with the crisis facing people fleeing war and poverty in their nations.

"Accommodation is available to house most of the people currently sleeping rough in bitterly cold temperatures in Bosnia and Herzegovina," said Eve Geddie, Director of Amnesty International's European Institutions Office. "What is lacking is the political will to make that happen."

Geddie added that the current crisis is also "a consequence of EU's policy of fortifying its borders that has left thousands of people stranded on its periphery or in the neighboring countries."

Weather forecasters in Bosnia on Tuesday issued a warning for an upcoming spell of even colder weather in the coming days.

The Lipa site also has lacked basic facilities such as electricity or running water and migrants lit fires for days to protect themselves from the biting cold. Many migrants at the camp said they haven't showered in a long time, while some have washed outside despite the cold.

On Monday, doctors were screening migrants' health at the Lipa camp and handing out medicines. It wasn't immediately clear whether any of the migrants might have COVID-19, said Verica Racevic from the Danish Refugee Council humanitarian group.

"Some are under the system of febrile status, which means they have a temperature," she said. "It's not really easy to differentiate in those circumstances whether this is COVID-19 or this is any other kind of respiratory infection."

Impoverished and ethnically divided Bosnia has struggled with the influx of thousands of people who are trying to reach Western Europe through the Balkans. Aid groups estimate that hundreds of people have been sleeping rough in abandoned houses or improvised forest camps.

Migrants at Lipa appeared to be pleased to finally have some shelter, warm food and medical help. Holding an umbrella in the snow, Suleiman Shahid from Pakistan said the new tents are warm and "suitable for living."

From Bosnia, migrants first aim to reach neighboring European Union member state Croatia over illegal mountainous routes before moving on toward wealthier nations in the 27-nation bloc. They have complained of pushbacks and violence at the hands of Croatia's police.

[Bosnia] 'Please help us': Migrants endure Bosnia's winter (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 7:39 AM, Olivia Chan, Neutral]

Hundreds of migrants are taking shelter in abandoned buildings in and around the northwestern Bosnian town of Bihac, wrapping up as best they can against the snow and freezing weather and hoping eventually to reach EU member Croatia across the border.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[France] Senegal's star student has vanished in France. Where is Diary Sow? (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/12/2021 12:32 PM, Danielle Paquette, Neutral]

Before she vanished in France eight days ago, the young woman had become an academic legend in Senegal.

Her name — Diary Sow — is practically synonymous with achievement in this West African nation, which crunches grades every year and names a top student. Sow won that honor in 2018 and 2019.

She landed a spot at a prestigious preparatory school in Paris and, her peers say, continued to ace classes. She published a novel last year at the age of 19.

"To Diary," the Senegalese president wrote to her in an August note, "a rising star who is the pride of the people."

Then her school, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, alerted the Senegalese Embassy on Jan. 4 that Sow had stopped showing up.

Nobody has heard from the student who was known to never miss a lecture — neither friends nor family.

Paris police have shared no leads as they scour the city. The prosecutor's office called the disappearance "worrying."

"This has devastated everyone," said a former teacher, Mame Coumba Diouf Sagna, who proofread early drafts of Sow's book. "She has so many dreams to realize. She has so much hope to give."

Senegalese President Macky Sall sent investigators to help, while Sow's classmates embarked on their own search. By Tuesday, a team of eight had called 12 hospitals each.

"We're doing everything we can," said Moussa Gueye, a 21-year-old engineering student from a suburb of Dakar, the Senegalese capital. "We're out here printing and distributing fliers."

Sow is reserved yet kind, he said — not boastful, though she has the right to be.

"She gets the best grades in everything," he said.

Hundreds of Senegalese expatriates in Paris and other French cities took to the streets this week, passing out pamphlets featuring Sow's face and a number to call. Video shows them chanting, "Ensemble allons chercher Diary Sow." Together let's find Diary Sow.

"She is famous for being brilliant," said Souleymane Gueye, vice president of the Federation of Senegalese Students and Trainees of France. "She stands out. Those academic awards usually go to boys."

In Senegal, speculation blazes across social media: Was she taken? Did she run away?

"What if Diary Sow doesn't want to be found?" someone tweeted. "I've been thinking about

it all night, the pressure of being a good student is hard for anyone."

In September, the month she turned 20, Sow visited Dakar to promote her novel, "Under the Face of an Angel."

It's about a complicated girl, she told a bookstore audience. The character is guarded and keeps to herself. Her love interest sees only "roses," she said — not the thorns.

"The names are fictitious," she said, "but I use words to express myself to the world."

Abdoulaye Diallo, the director of Harmattan Senegal, a publishing house in Dakar, teared up as he recalled the day Sow's uncle urged him to read her manuscript.

"It took us a year to publish it — with two blind proof-readings," he said. "With the quality of the text, one couldn't imagine that the author was a woman of her age. It must be recognized that this is a higher mind."

Sow wanted to explore people's inner worlds, she said in an August television appearance. The expectations and pressures — "the secret emotions," she said.

Though her novel was popular in Senegal, she wants to pursue an engineering career.

"I am a scientist," she said, "but that doesn't mean I should be limited to science."

Her fervor for learning was clear early on.

"She is in front of books all the time," her mother told news crews after Sow won her first big scholastic prize. "She doesn't want to waste a second of her life."

Sow grew up in the fishing city of Mbour, about 60 coastal miles south from the hustle of Dakar.

She came from humble means, said Sagna, her former teacher. There were no fancy tutors.

"Just pure determination," Sagna said. "When I called for recess, the other students would go outside and play, but Diary would just get something to eat — some pasta or rice — and sit inside with a book."

By age 13, the star pupil was always scribbling in a notebook. At 15, she began to write the story that would turn into her first novel. Sagna corrected grammar and smoothed some phrasing, she said, but the raw talent was obvious.

Together, they polished hundreds of pages over four years. "She became like my daughter," Sagna said.

They last talked in August, a few months after Sow's father had died. The teacher had expected grief.

"She was just so positive," Sagna said. "She rarely complains. No one had any idea of what

was to come."

Now Sagna weeps and prays for the young woman's return.

"She is the inspiration of so many," she said. "She's the example. I don't want my students to think, is it worth striving so hard if something like this can happen?"

[France] Paris opens inquiry into disappearance of Senegalese student (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 7:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Paris prosecutor's office said Tuesday that it had opened an "worrying disappearance" inquiry into a Senegalese student, who reportedly vanished on Jan. 4.

The disappearance of Diary Sow, 20, has caused ripples in her home country. There has been a vocal social media campaign to find their "little sister."

French media report that Senegalese President Macky Sall has asked his diplomatic service to take all necessary steps to find their compatriot quickly.

Sow was in her second year of science classes at the prestigious Louis-le-Grand High School in the 5th arrondissement of Paris.

[Germany] German investigators shut down big darknet marketplace (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 8:50 AM, Staff, Neutral]

German prosecutors said Tuesday that they have taken down what they believe was the biggest illegal marketplace on the darknet and arrested its suspected operator.

The site, known as DarkMarket, was shut down on Monday, prosecutors in the southwestern city of Koblenz said. All sorts of drugs, forged money, stolen or forged credit cards, anonymous mobile phone SIM cards and malware were among the things offered for sale there, they added.

German investigators were assisted in their months-long probe by U.S. authorities and by Australian, British, Danish, Swiss, Ukrainian and Moldovan police.

The marketplace had nearly 500,000 users and more than 2,400 vendors, prosecutors said. They added that it processed more than 320,000 transactions, and Bitcoin and Monero cryptocurrency to the value of more than 140 million euros (\$170 million) were exchanged.

The darknet is a part of the web accessible only with specialized identity-cloaking tools.

The suspected operator, a 34-year-old Australian man, was arrested near the German-Danish border. Prosecutors said a judge has ordered him held in custody pending possible formal charges, and he hasn't given any information to investigators.

More than 20 servers in Moldova and Ukraine were seized, German prosecutors said. They hope to find information on those servers about other participants in the marketplace.

Prosecutors said the move against DarkMarket originated in an investigation of a data

processing center installed in a former NATO bunker in southwestern Germany that hosted sites dealing in drugs and other illegal activities. It was shut down in 2019.

That center hosted DarkMarket at one point.

[Ireland] Irish Virus Intensive Care Patients Hit Record Amid Surge (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 9:37 AM, Peter Flanagan, 6400K, Neutral]

The number of Irish coronavirus patients in intensive care reached a record Tuesday, as the hospital system nears capacity amid one of the worst outbreaks in the globe.

Some 158 confirmed Covid-19 cases are intensive care, according to the health ministry, beating a record set in April. Overall, 1,620 patients are in hospital, almost double last year's high. The nation is in the teeth of a new wave of the pandemic, and now has the worst instance of the virus per million people globally, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Hospitalizations have tripled since the start of the year, while intensive care beds are about 89% full even as the health system ramps up so-called surge capacity to bring more beds online. ICU is full in as many as 13 hospitals in the country, which has among the fewest critical care beds per capita in Europe.

The government relaxed restrictions last month, a tactic that may have contributed to one of the world's highest contagion rates amid increasing evidence of the U.K. variant in Ireland in recent days. While there are signs that government restrictions to contain the virus are starting to have an impact, the situation in hospitals will continue to deteriorate, Irish Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar told RTE Radio Tuesday.

[Ireland] Irish Inquiry Finds 9,000 Infants Died in Homes for Unwed Mothers (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 4:14 PM, Stephen Fidler, Neutral]

More than 9,000 infants died in homes for unmarried mothers in Ireland between the 1920s and the 1990s, many run by Catholic religious orders, a long-awaited inquiry concluded after years of campaigning from survivors and their offspring.

In some years during the 1930s and 1940s, the report said, more than 40% of the children in the mother-and-baby homes were dying before their first birthday, high mortality rates often known to the government and local authorities.

Over the entire period of the study, about 15% of all the children who were in the 18 institutions that were investigated died in the homes, some of which were owned and run by local health authorities and others by religious orders.

Ireland's Prime Minister Micheál Martin said the report described a "dark, difficult and shameful chapter of very recent Irish history" that had lasting consequences. He said the Church, state and society shared responsibility and that religious orders responsible should make a contribution to those seeking redress.

Some of the religious orders responsible for the homes issued apologies. The former

Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said "the church way outstepped its role and became a controlling church," and should apologize, in comments to RTÉ, the Irish broadcaster. He said those responsible for the abuse betrayed vulnerable women and their calling.

Catherine Corless, an academic who has campaigned for survivors of the homes who was mentioned by name by Mr. Martin, said survivors weren't satisfied by Mr. Martin's expressions of regret and that he blamed society for what happened in the homes. "It's like church and state are both hand in hand," she told RTÉ.

At some homes, investigators have uncovered the remains of fetuses and young children in unmarked graves, including in Tuam, some 120 miles from Dublin in western Ireland, where mass graves were found at an institution where 978 children are known to have died.

"No register of burials was kept and it is likely that most of the children who died in Tuam are buried inappropriately in the grounds of the institution," the report said.

In other homes, burials often went unrecorded.

The report describes a country in which the lives of unmarried mothers "were blighted by pregnancy outside marriage, and the responses of the father of their child, their immediate families and the wider community."

Some of the women were raped and others suffered mental problems or intellectual disabilities—but many were only distinguished by the fact they were pregnant without being married. Widely stigmatized and often rejected by their families, they had little alternative but to go into the institutions.

Adoption of children wasn't allowed by law until 1953.

"Responsibility for that harsh treatment rests mainly with the fathers of their children and their own immediate families," the report said. "It was supported by, contributed to, and condoned by, the institutions of the State and the Churches. However, it must be acknowledged that the institutions under investigation provided a refuge—a harsh refuge in some cases—when the families provided no refuge at all," it said.

The report said conditions in the homes changed from 1922 until 1998, when the last one closed. Living conditions in Ireland were generally poor before the 1960s, but the report found such conditions had much more serious consequences for people living close together in institutions than for those living in single homes.

The report said it hadn't seen any evidence of major shortcomings in any of the homes or flatlets that were operating from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In the years before 1960, the report said the homes reduced children's chance of survival. Death rates of "illegitimate" children were significantly higher than those born to married women, but in some years the death rate of infants in the homes was twice that of "illegitimate" children outside.

"The very high rate of infant mortality (first year of life) in Irish mother and baby homes is probably the most disquieting feature of these institutions," the report said.

[Ireland] Irish PM says 'perverse' morality drove unwed mothers' homes (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 12:24 PM, Jill Lawless, Neutral]

Ireland's prime minister said Tuesday that the country must "face up to the full truth of our past," as a long-awaited report recounted decades of harm done by church-run homes for unmarried women and their babies, where thousands of infants died.

Micheal Martin said young women and their children had paid a heavy price for Ireland's "perverse religious morality" in past decades.

"We had a completely warped attitude to sexuality and intimacy. Young mothers and their sons and daughters paid a terrible price for that dysfunction," he said.

Martin said he would make a formal apology on behalf of the state in Ireland's parliament on Wednesday.

The final report of an inquiry into the mother-and-baby homes said that 9,000 children died in 18 different mother and baby homes during the 20th century. Fifteen percent of all children born in the homes died, almost double the nationwide infant mortality rate.

The report said "the very high mortality rates were known to local and national authorities at the time and were recorded in official publications."

The inquiry is part of a process of reckoning in overwhelmingly Roman Catholic Ireland with a history of abuses in church-run institutions, including the shunning and shaming of unwed mothers, many of whom were pressured into giving up babies for adoption.

Church-run homes in Ireland housed orphans, unmarried pregnant women and their babies for most of the 20th century. The institutions have been subject to intense public scrutiny since historian in 2014 Catherine Corless tracked down death certificates for nearly 800 children who died at the former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway in western Ireland – but could only find a burial record for one child.

Investigators later found a mass grave containing remains of babies and young children in an underground sewage structure on the grounds of the home, which was run by an order of Catholic nuns and closed in 1961

The commission of inquiry said about 56,000 unmarried mothers and about 57,000 children had lived in the homes it investigated, with the greatest number of admissions in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The last of the homes did not shut until 1998.

"While mother and baby homes were not a peculiarly Irish phenomenon, the proportion of Irish unmarried mothers who were admitted to mother and baby homes or county homes in the 20th century was probably the highest in the world," the report said.

The commission said that the women's lives "were blighted by pregnancy outside marriage, and the responses of the father of their child, their immediate families and the wider community.

"The vast majority of children in the institutions were 'illegitimate' and, because of this, suffered discrimination for most of their lives," the report added.

The prime minister said the report "presents all of Irish society with profound questions."

"What has been described in this report wasn't imposed on us by any foreign power," he said. "We did this to ourselves, as a society."

[Italy] Italy's Conte faces showdown with aggrieved coalition party (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 7:42 AM, Crispian Balmer, 5304K, Neutral]

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte faced a cabinet showdown on Tuesday with a small coalition partner that could bring down his government and unleash political chaos on Italy as it struggles to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Italia Viva, headed by former premier Matteo Renzi, has threatened to withdraw its two ministers in protest over various issues, including Conte's plans for spending billions of euros promised by the European Union to relaunch the battered economy.

The long-delayed cabinet meeting is scheduled to start at 9:30 p.m. (2030 GMT) and if Italia Viva pulls its support, Conte would no longer have a working majority in parliament.

Days of behind-the-scenes talks have failed to bridge the differences and the leaders of the main coalition parties warned of dire consequences if Renzi, anxious to give his fringe party new impetus, acted on his threat.

"I think it would be serious political error that would hurt Italy and that fellow Italians would not understand," Nicola Zingaretti, head of the Democratic Party (PD), told Sky Italia TV. "I appeal for a return to common sense and to talks."

One possible scenario if Italia Viva quits would be for all the coalition parties to renegotiate a new pact, which would almost certainly open the way for a major cabinet reshuffle, with or without Conte at the helm.

However, upping the pressure on Renzi, the head of the largest ruling party, the 5-Star Movement, rejected that idea.

"If Renzi is guilty of withdrawing his ministers, then there cannot be another government with him and Italia Viva. There is a limit to everything," Vito Crimi told ANSA news agency.

A source in Conte's office confirmed that the prime minister would not seek a new coalition deal with Renzi if his ministers quit the cabinet.

Zingaretti warned that events could quickly get out of control, possibly triggering early

elections, which opinion polls say the opposition rightist bloc, headed by Matteo Salvini's euro-sceptic League, would win.

President Sergio Mattarella, who would have to pilot Italy through a political crisis, has said he wants both the cabinet and parliament to approve a project for utilising the EU Recovery Plan, before opening cross-party consultations.

If the coalition cannot agree on a way forward, Mattarella would almost certainly try to put together a government of national unity to deal with the health emergency, which has killed almost 80,000 Italians, and knock-on economic crisis.

If that failed, the only option would be a national vote.

[Italy] Factbox: Possible scenarios as Italy lurches towards political uncertainty (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 8:00 AM, Crispian Balmer, 5304K, Neutral]

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte faces a cabinet showdown on Tuesday with a small coalition partner that could bring down his government and unleash political chaos on Italy.

Here are possible scenarios if Italia Viva, headed by former premier Matteo Renzi, pushes ahead with its threat to walk out.

NEW GOVERNMENT, OLD PARTNERS

Conte could look to negotiate a new pact with the same parties that make up the current coalition. This would open the way for a major cabinet reshuffle, as Renzi has demanded. Such a shake-up would require a fresh confidence vote in parliament and would be regarded as a completely new government.

This has been touted in the media as the most likely outcome. However, a source in Conte's office told Reuters on Tuesday the prime minister would not look to forge a new deal with Italia Viva if it walked away from the cabinet now.

NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW SUPPORTERS

Conte's aides have suggested he might try to put together a group of "responsible" parliamentarians from opposition ranks who would promise to prop up his government in parliament. To do this, he would need to find around 25 lawmakers in the 630-seat lower house and 18 in the 315-seat Senate.

Such an operation carries many risks in terms of future stability and the Democratic Party (PD), second largest member of the ruling coalition, has said it is against the idea. Italy's president, Sergio Mattarella, is also reportedly opposed to such a manoeuvre.

NEW GOVERNMENT, OLD ALLIES, NEW PRIME MINISTER

In this scenario, Conte would exit the scene and the existing coalition partners would draw up a new pact and decide on a new prime minister. Renzi has a personal antipathy to Conte

so would certainly welcome his departure, but the 5-Star Movement, which boasts most lawmakers in the ruling coalition, wants him to stay. Finding a substitute agreeable to all sides would be tough.

Conte himself has no formal party affiliation but is seen as close to 5-Star.

GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY

If a normal government cannot be forged, Mattarella would explore whether coalition and opposition parties could support a government of national unity. Such an administration would be headed by a non-political figure. The names most often mentioned for such a role are former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi and Marta Cartabia, ex-head of the constitutional court.

The opposition is divided over such a prospect, with Matteo Salvini, head of the League, refusing to rule it out while his main ally, the far-right Brothers of Italy, has rejected it. It is not clear if 5-Star or the PD would sign up to such an idea.

EARLY ELECTIONS

The option of last resort. One problem with this scenario is that parliament has not yet agreed on a new electoral law to take into account a 2020 referendum that approved a drastic cut in lawmakers. There is no consensus on how the new law should look, which would slow the rush to a vote. Another problem is that Italy currently chairs the G20, and prolonged political paralysis would hamper its presidency – not to mention the country's ability to tackle the COVID and economic crises.

Given the looming cut in parliamentary numbers, lawmakers are expected to push for alternative solutions to an early vote.

[Italy] Hundreds of alleged members of Italy's most powerful mafia network face 'maxi trial' in Calabria (Yahoo News/The Telegraph)

[Yahoo News/The Telegraph](#) [1/12/2021 11:04 AM, Nick Squires, Neutral]

The biggest mafia trial in more than 30 years will start on Wednesday when more than 350 alleged mobsters and their collaborators face justice in a huge, purpose-built courtroom in southern Italy.

On trial will be members of the 'Ndrangheta, a network of clans based in Calabria, in the toe of the Italian boot.

It is regarded as the most powerful of Italy's mafia organisations, having surpassed the more famous Cosa Nostra of Sicily.

"It's the most dangerous and it is present in every continent," said Nicola Gratteri, a leading prosecutor in the trial who has lived under police protection for 30 years.

"And it is the richest because it has a virtual monopoly on the importation of cocaine into Europe," he told AFP, while guarded by three plain-clothes police officers wearing black

balACLavas to hide their identity.

The drug trade earns the 'Ndrangheta an estimated €50 billion euros a year. The network is also renowned for its brutality – last week it was claimed that a businesswoman from Calabria was murdered and fed to pigs in 2016 after refusing to sell her land to a man with 'Ndrangheta connections.

The alleged Mafiosi face charges ranging from murder and attempted murder to drug trafficking, money laundering and extortion.

Also on trial will be accountants, lawyers, public servants and politicians who allegedly collaborated with mob bosses. More than 900 prosecution witnesses will be called in a trial that will involve 400 lawyers.

It is the biggest mass trial since the 1980s, when a similar judicial marathon held in Palermo delivered a decisive blow against Sicily's Cosa Nostra mafia.

The proceedings, expected to last at least two years, will take place in a fortified courthouse in an industrial area outside the city of Lamezia Terme in Calabria.

The alleged mafia members on trial come from clans in the town of Vibo Valentia, and exclude the powerful godfathers who are based in the city of Reggio Calabria to the south.

One of the most prominent figures on trial is Luigi Mancuso, who has allegedly continued to run drug trafficking operations despite spending much of his adult life behind bars.

"I think the impact of the trial will be limited because it doesn't target the most important people, apart from Mancuso," said Anna Sergi, an expert on the Italian mafia at Essex University.

"He's the youngest of 11 brothers, a very charismatic figure. He is seen as a sort of cult leader," she told The Telegraph. "He's a major player in drug trafficking and created connections across Europe, especially in Germany."

The 'Ndrangheta – the name comes from a Greek word which means "society of men of honour" – so far has only a "scattered" presence in Britain, said Prof Sergi.

"They use the banking system of London to launder money from the rest of Europe but they don't have as much of a physical presence in the UK as in other countries."

Mr Gratteri, the prosecutor, has an intimate knowledge of the 'Ndrangheta – as a boy he went to school with the children of mafia bosses. "I understand their criminal philosophy, their reasoning," he said.

Having seen the mob's corrupting influence on his home region, he said he had vowed to do something about it when he became an adult.

Many of the defendants were arrested during a series of coordinated pre-dawn raids in Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Bulgaria in December 2019.

In one of the properties that was raided, police found a scrap of paper with details of the secret blood oath which new members of the 'Ndrangheta must swear, replete with esoteric references to swords and white horses.

The raids were carried out by police officers, some of them equipped with night-vision goggles, as well as soldiers from the army's parachute regiment and elite helicopter-borne tactical units.

[Norway] Norway eyes sea change in deep dive for metals instead of oil (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 9:51 AM, Nerijus Adomaitis, 5304K, Neutral]

Norway's oil and gas reserves have made it one of the world's wealthiest countries but its dreams for deep-sea discovery now centre on something different.

This time, Oslo is looking for a leading role in mining copper, zinc and other metals found on the seabed and in hot demand in green technologies.

Norway could license companies for deep-sea mining as early as 2023, its oil and energy ministry told Reuters, potentially placing it among the first countries to harvest seabed metals for electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines and solar farms.

That could also place it on the front line of a controversy over the environmental risks posed by exploiting the world's unexplored seabeds, however.

Norway on Tuesday announced it was starting preparations for an environmental impact study needed to open areas of its seabed mineral exploration and production.

The move follows three years of expeditions on which Norway has found deep-sea deposits containing copper, zinc, cobalt, gold and silver, according to the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate which conducted the work.

There could be up to 21.7 million tonnes of copper – more than the world's copper output in 2019 – and 22.7 million tonnes of zinc on the Norwegian continental shelf, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) researchers have estimated.

Mean estimates however are far lower, at 6.9 million and 7.1 million tonnes, respectively.

"Copper mining inside Norway's jurisdiction will probably never replace extraction onshore, but ... it can be an important contributor in meeting future global demand," NTNU Associate Professor Steinar Loeve Ellefmo told Reuters.

"Deep-sea mining might also change the geopolitical climate," he said.

The metals have been found in polymetallic sulphides, or "black smokers," which are formed when sea water reaches magma, heats up and is flushed back to the seabed carrying dissolved metals and sulphur.

The expeditions have also discovered high concentrations of lithium and the rare earth

metal scandium used in electronics and alloys in manganese crusts which grow on bedrock, the Directorate said.

Norway has mapped these deposits along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge between Jan Mayen Island and the Svalbard archipelago in the Norwegian Sea as far as 700 kilometres (435 miles) offshore.

TIMELINE

Once completed, the government plans public consultations on its environmental impact assessment and on a proposal for opening areas for exploration and production by the end of 2022 followed by debate and a vote in parliament in the second quarter of 2023.

"Were parliament to decide to open up, exploration licences could be issued – possibly in the second half of 2023 or in 2024," the oil and energy ministry said.

"We are moving forward on this, and the momentum is high," Oil and Energy Minister Tina Bru told Reuters. "This is an industry with great potential."

Japan has similar plans but its project with private firms is not expected to begin before some time between 2026 and 2028, an official at the Japanese Agency for Natural Resources and Energy told Reuters.

Timing will depend on metals prices and reducing the costs of deep-sea mining, the official said.

The United Nations' International Seabed Authority (ISA), which regulates seabed mineral activities in international waters, has approved 30 contracts for exploration with China holding the most with five.

The Jamaica-based ISA was forced to postpone plans to approve rules governing the production of deep-sea minerals to 2021 from last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Norway, however, doesn't have to wait as its resources are not in international waters.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Though demand for the metals on offer is being driven by clean technologies, exploration of the seabed presents environmental challenges of its own.

Environmentalists including Britain's David Attenborough have called for a moratorium on deep-seabed mining until more is known about species living on the seabed and the potential impact on them. Greenpeace in a recent report called for a permanent ban.

"Greater knowledge of the environmental impacts, as well as the ability to mitigate these to acceptable levels, is required before we can be confident that engaging in industrial-scale deep-seabed mining would bring a global net benefit," said an expert report published last month commissioned by the Ocean Panel.

The Ocean Panel is co-chaired by Norway and groups 14 coastal states that seek to shape policy on the world's oceans.

"We are not saying a complete and final "no" to seabed mining, but we know that it can have very substantial impact on the seabed habitat, more than oil and gas extraction," said Peter Haugan, a professor at the University of Bergen and one of the report's co-authors.

Giant tube worms, clam shells, crabs and micro fauna all rely on the bacterial oxidation of chemicals in fluids in the hydrothermal vents where seabed minerals are found, according to the ISA.

Companies seeking exploration licences say they will focus their attention on inactive "smokers."

"I believe Norway can do this in a sustainable way, but we have to do it step by step, which has been a key success factor for developing our oil and gas industry," Oil and Energy Minister Bru said.

PIVOT FROM OIL

While oil and gas have made Norway rich, the country of 5.4 million is keen to find alternatives to gradually replace its top industry and to play its role in greener energy and the growth it offers.

Deep-sea mining could generate up to \$20 billion in annual revenue for Norway towards 2050 – compared to around \$61 billion from oil and gas in 2019 – and create about 20,000 jobs, Oslo-based consultancy Rystad Energy has estimated.

Seabird Exploration, which maps out the seabed for oil and gas deposits, plans to list a deep-sea mining subsidiary on the Euronext Growth Oslo small-cap bourse this quarter.

The Cyprus-based firm believes production could start by the late 2020s and could apply technologies used in the oil and gas sector.

"We will need to design from scratch the production system, but the basic elements are there ... it will be a mixture of mining and petroleum technology," Seabird Executive Chairman Staale Rodahl told Reuters.

Nordic Mining also said it would seek exploration licences while Norway's largest energy firm Equinor and oil-focused investment group Aker have not yet decided whether they will get involved, they said.

State-run Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corp (JOGMEC) successfully conducted the world's first test involving the excavation and raising of deep-sea minerals to the surface off Japan in 2017.

"It sounds fantastic to go deep for minerals, but remember what the oil and gas industry has achieved over the last 50 years, and you can stand on the shoulders of it," said Walter

Sognnes, chief executive of start-up LOKE Marine Minerals and a former co-founder of several oil firms.

[Russia] Russia reports 22,934 new coronavirus cases, 531 deaths (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:04 AM, Staff, Negative]

Russia reported 22,934 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, including 5,001 in Moscow, taking the national tally – the world's fourth highest – to 3,448,203.

Authorities said 531 people had died from the virus in the last 24 hours, pushing Russia's official death toll to 62,804.

[Russia] Russia for First Time Holds More Gold Than U.S. Dollars in \$583 Billion Reserves (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 5:05 AM, Natasha Doff and Anna Andrianova, Neutral]

A multi-year drive to reduce exposure to U.S. assets has pushed the share of gold in Russia's \$583 billion international reserves above dollars for the first time on record.

Gold made up 23% of the central bank's stockpile as of the end of June 2020, the latest date for which data on the breakdown is available, according to a report published late Monday. The share of dollar assets dropped to 22%, down from more than 40% in 2018.

The shift is part of a broader strategy outlined by President Vladimir Putin to "de-dollarize" the Russian economy and lower its vulnerability to U.S. sanctions amid deteriorating relations with Washington. Gold is now the second-biggest component of the central bank's reserves after the euro, which makes up about a third of total assets. About 12% of the stash is in yuan.

The increase in Russia's gold reserves was aided by a 26% surge in prices between June 2019 and June 2020. The central bank also bought \$4.3 billion worth of the precious metal over the period, according to the report.

Russia spent more than \$40 billion building a war chest of gold over the past five years, making it the world's biggest buyer. The central bank said it stopped buying gold in the first half of last year to encourage miners and banks to export more and bring in foreign currency into Russia after oil prices crashed.

[Russia] Russian Opposition Leader Navalny Faces Threat of Imprisonment (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 11:57 AM, Henry Meyer, Neutral]

Russia's prison service asked a court to substitute a suspended sentence for opposition leader Alexey Navalny for a term of imprisonment, which would threaten him with arrest if he returns home from Germany.

Navalny, who survived a nerve-agent attack that he and Western governments have blamed on the Kremlin, accused President Vladimir Putin of orchestrating the move. He said on Twitter Tuesday that the Russian leader was "so angry that I survived the poisoning" that he ordered the penal authority to demand his jailing.

The request submitted by the Federal Penitentiary Service to Moscow's Simonovsky court, in a filing posted on Monday, concerns a 3 1/2 year suspended sentence for fraud that Navalny received in 2014. The prison authority in late December warned the opposition politician he faced imprisonment if he didn't obey a summons to appear in person. Restrictions imposed over the suspended jail term expired on Dec. 30.

The opposition leader is currently convalescing in Berlin, where he was flown for treatment after the near-fatal poisoning in August during a campaign trip to Siberia. The European Union in October sanctioned six Russian officials over the use of the banned Novichok chemical weapon. Russia has denied any involvement.

Investigators last month stepped up pressure on Navalny, opening a new criminal case against him for alleged fraud.

"What else are they going to think up so Navalny doesn't return to Russia?" his spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said on Twitter.

[Turkey] Turkey says its ready to repair frayed ties with Europe (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 9:08 AM, Suzan Fraser, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Tuesday his country is ready to put its frayed relationship with the European Union "back on track" and called on the 27-nation bloc to display the same determination.

In an address to EU nations' ambassadors in Ankara, Erdogan also expressed hope that a recent decision by Turkey and Greece to restart talks aimed at resolving their disputes will "herald a new era," but at the same time called on Greece to avoid steps which he said were escalating tensions.

Erdogan's address comes as Turkey, a candidate to join the EU, has been striking a more conciliatory tone toward its Western allies, following deep rifts last year that brought Turkish and Greek naval forces shadowing each other in the eastern Mediterranean over conflicting energy prospecting claims. Last year, the leaders of France and Turkey engaged in a series of terse exchange of words due to divergences over the conflicts in Syria and Libya, among other issues.

The EU has drawn up a list of sanctions against Turkey over its exploration of gas reserves in waters claimed by EU members Greece and Cyprus, but has postponed the punitive measures until March.

"We as a nation plan our future together with Europe," Erdogan told the ambassadors. "Regardless of all the double standards and injustice we have faced in this process, we never gave up on our final goal of full membership."

Erdogan said: "We are ready to put our relations back on track and we expect the EU to show the same determination."

Greece and Turkey announced on Monday that they would restart talks aimed at resolving

disagreements tensions on Jan. 25 in Istanbul. The talks would be the 61st round of a long-running process of negotiations between the two.

"We are inviting Greece, which has been increasing its airspace violations and unlawful activities in islands that are demilitarized, to give up their actions that are raising tensions. I believe that the exploratory talks with our neighbor Greece ... will, God willing, herald of a new period," said Erdogan.

He added: "We want to save our relationship with our Mediterranean neighbor, France, from the line of tension with a new visionary approach,"

Turkey began EU membership negotiations in 2005 but the talks have come to a standstill. The EU frequently accuses Turkey for drifting away from European democratic values but relies on the country to prevent refugees and migrants from crossing into European nations.

Erdogan told the EU ambassadors that he believes that Turkey's membership in the EU would help overcome "uncertainties" created by Britain's departure.

"Uncertainties that are increasing with Brexit can only be dissipated with Turkey receiving its rightful place in the European family," Erdogan said.

[Ukraine] Ukraine asks EU neighbours for more help getting COVID-19 vaccines (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 9:29 AM, Natalia Zinets, 5304K, Neutral]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy on Tuesday asked European Union countries for more help in procuring coronavirus vaccines after his government resisted turning to Russia for assistance.

The pandemic has killed more than 20,000 Ukrainians and plunged one of Europe's poorest countries into recession last year.

Ukraine has agreed to buy some vaccines from China and also expects to secure some under the global COVAX programme for poorer countries.

But it has dismissed calls from a Russian-leaning opposition leader to buy vaccines from Russia. The neighbours are estranged over Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

"Today, for all countries of the Eastern Partnership initiative, in particular Ukraine and Moldova, the issue of obtaining vaccines is important," Zelenskiy said in a televised statement while hosting Moldovan President Maia Sandu in Kyiv.

"The countries of the Eastern Partnership should be given increased attention by the EU states in matters of joint procurement procedures and accelerating the supply of vaccines."

A week ago, 13 of the EU's 27 member states jointly urged the bloc's executive, the EU Commission, to do more to help combat the coronavirus in the bloc's Balkan neighbours and in Ukraine.

Sandu came to power in November by defeating Moldova's Moscow-backed incumbent president, Igor Dodon, and has promised closer cooperation with the EU.

Last month, while visiting Chisinau, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis promised to donate 200,000 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine to Moldova as a gesture of solidarity following Sandu's election.

East Asia and Pacific

[China] China Reimposes Covid-19 Lockdowns as It Battles Worst Outbreak in Months (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 9:39 AM, Sha Hua, Neutral]

China is battling its biggest coronavirus outbreak in months, imposing lockdowns on hard-hit areas, quarantining more than 20 million people and urging citizens to forgo unnecessary travel as the Lunar New Year holiday approaches in February.

The tightening, which comes during northern China's coldest winter in a generation, underscores official skittishness nearly a year after authorities shut down the city of Wuhan to contain the initial outbreak.

On Tuesday, China's National Health Commission reported 42 new cases of locally transmitted symptomatic infection, a day after recording 85 such cases—its highest daily count in six months.

The bulk of the recent cases have been detected in the northern province of Hebei, which surrounds China's capital city of Beijing.

Local authorities in the city of Langfang on Tuesday placed its five million residents in home quarantine for seven days while rolling out citywide testing. Authorities had imposed similar measures on the provincial capital of Shijiazhuang last week, barring people and vehicles from leaving the city and halting public transportation within the city.

Hebei's provincial government has also postponed an annual policy-setting meeting that typically gathers hundreds of top officials and political advisers, which precedes China's national legislative conclave in March.

For the tens of millions of Chinese citizens who crisscross the country during the Lunar New Year for their annual family reunion, the rising case count means a second straight year of disruptions to the most important holiday on the calendar.

In recent days, provincial and municipal authorities across China have encouraged their citizens to refrain from travel during the festive season, which begins this year on Feb. 12.

Lavine Luo is heeding the advice. The 24-year-old Ms. Luo, who works for a state-owned enterprise in Beijing and therefore felt an extra sense of duty to comply, scrapped her plans to return home to the southern metropolis of Guangzhou after a string of infections emerged in December.

"I'm used to it by now, after all that has happened last year," she said.

Others are still holding hope of a reversal in the situation in the coming weeks.

Nie Zimeng, a 26-year-old Shanghai-based fitness coach, wants to hold off on making a decision about visiting her parents in the northeastern city of Shenyang until February. "If the infection numbers are staying high or getting worse, then I'll stay put," she said.

An online poll conducted last week of more than 15,000 people by Banyuetan, a magazine published by the state-run Xinhua News Agency, found respondents almost equally divided between those choosing to forego travel, those anxiously waiting and those hurrying home for the festivities.

In recent months, Chinese authorities have turned to a familiar playbook of targeted lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions to smother outbreaks.

On Tuesday, Zhang Wenhong, a public-health expert and director of the infectious diseases department at Huashan Hospital in Shanghai, wrote on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform that he was confident Hebei would suppress the outbreak within the next month.

At the same time, health authorities are vaccinating millions across the country, though that is unlikely to change the picture dramatically before next month's holiday.

Beijing's municipal government said Monday it had inoculated more than one million residents and aims to vaccinate more than 100,000 residents a day until Lunar New Year, at more than 240 sites across the city. On Saturday, Chinese health officials said they had administered vaccines to more than nine million people and planned to inoculate 50 million key workers nationwide before the start of the long holiday.

Even so, public-health officials have been warning about greater risks of new infection clusters emerging throughout the winter, particularly from asymptomatic carriers.

The National Health Commission has urged citizens to limit gatherings and to shop online. Some local governments have offered extra wages to workers who don't return to their hometowns over the long holiday, while private companies have been asked to stagger holidays to reduce the throngs of travelers.

To disincentivize travel, some localities are requiring returnees to produce a negative nucleic acid test, even those coming back from low-risk areas, while others are asking residents to report their travel plans beforehand.

China State Railway, which in mid-December forecast some 407 million train trips during the peak travel rush between late January and early March, is offering full refunds on train tickets purchased before Jan. 7.

Authorities have also been aided by social pressure that has kept compliance high.

When a colleague of Ms. Nie, the fitness coach in Shanghai, returned from Shijiazhuang in

early January and her government-backed smartphone health app signaled that she had potentially been exposed to the virus, Ms. Nie and others called on the colleague to self-isolate, she said.

Such caution is likely to incur an economic cost, though the damage has so far mostly been confined to Hebei, without affecting China's overall economic outlook, said Trey McArver, co-founder of the consulting firm Trivium China.

"Hebei is taking the hit for now to protect the smooth running of the capital city," Mr. McArver said.

China's leadership has made clear that its priority is containing the pandemic, and on Saturday, Premier Li Keqiang warned officials against covering up or underreporting cases, describing epidemic control as a matter of national security and social stability, as well as public health.

Though economic activity had mostly returned to normal by the summer, domestic travel had only bounced back to about two-thirds of pre-coronavirus levels by November, Cui Ernan, a Beijing-based analyst at consulting firm Gavekal Dragonomics, told clients in a note. Ms. Cui said it was unlikely authorities would issue a nationwide ban on travel and gatherings unless the outbreak significantly worsens.

Even so, Ms. Nie is worried that if infections rise, tighter rules could make working closely with clients impossible.

"We all have to cut back a bit now so that we all can continue to live a relatively normal life," she said.

[China] Analysis: The trillion dollar weapon in the U.S.-China tech stock war (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 10:08 AM, Marc Jones, Neutral]

The threat of a \$1 trillion U.S. sanctions hit on the Chinese internet giants that have led emerging market stocks to their first record high since 2007 is overshadowing the rally, just as increased scrutiny from Beijing itself squeezes valuations.

U.S.-Sino tensions ratcheted up in recent days as outgoing President Donald Trump's administration pushed through a ban on Americans investing in 35 firms it considers to be linked to China's military.

Sources in Washington last week said Trump was considering adding Alibaba and Tencent, worth a combined \$1.3 trillion, the second and third biggest EM stocks in the world and held by almost every major U.S. investment fund, to the list of banned firms.

Targeting China's two most valuable companies would be the most dramatic step yet against the country's firms as Trump seeks to cement his hardline policy against Beijing during his final days in office.

Goldman Sachs estimates that U.S. investors hold roughly \$1 trillion of Chinese internet

and tech stocks, or have U.S. listings known as American Depositary Receipts (ADRs) that Washington has also been clamping down on.

"To unwind 1 trillion of investment (if Alibaba and Tencent were removed) is a lot!" said Vivian Lin Thurston, a portfolio manager and Chinese equity analyst at William Blair Investment Management.

"It would be unprecedented," she added. "It hasn't happened before in any global market."

Swiss bank UBS calculates that just over a third of Alibaba's \$616 billion market cap is held by U.S. investors, while 12% of Tencent's \$35 billion value is.

The two firms also account for almost 11% of MSCI's \$7 trillion Emerging Market index which they respectively joined in 2015 and 2008. Chinese firms now make up 40% of the index, up from just 17% a decade ago.

THE BIG UNWIND

Global index providers such as MSCI, S&P Dow Jones and FTSE Russell as well as the New York Stock Exchange have been forced to eject high profile firms on Trump's list like China Mobile, China Telecom and semiconductor giant SMIC from their top benchmarks.

William Blair's Lin Thurston explained how those removals then trigger a wave of selling by investment funds that passively track the indexes.

"As soon as it is delisted – bang it's gone," she said referring to the need to shed the stocks.

While incoming President Joe Biden could reverse the ban, analysts at UBS say the new administration may not want to appear "soft" on China.

Neither Biden nor his team have commented on the matter, but a reversal still wouldn't undo the billions of dollars of disruption already caused.

Chinese investors have swooped in to buy up some of the offloaded shares but may struggle to absorb everything if things snowball.

Goldman Sachs estimates there would be a \$28 billion selloff if every international fund tracking MSCI's main global, emerging market or Asia indexes were to liquidate holdings of the 42 Chinese firms its views as at risk, not including Tencent or Alibaba.

It and fellow Wall Street banks JPMorgan and Morgan Stanley have also said they will withdraw as many as 500 Hong Kong-listed structured products they had issued linked to the Chinese firms.

ANT PROBLEMS

The Trump administration has had both Tencent and Alibaba's financial technology affiliate Ant Group in its crosshairs for some time.

Just last week, Trump signed an executive order banning U.S. transactions with Alibaba's Alipay mobile payment app and Tencent's WeChat and QQ Wallet over concerns they could be used to "track the locations of federal employees" and "build dossiers of personal information".

China's foreign ministry responded saying the U.S. was abusing its power and unreasonably suppressing foreign firms with the measures.

Tencent and Alibaba have declined to comment.

In early November, it was Beijing itself though that rattled investors after the surprise suspension of Ant Group's \$37 billion public listing, set to be the world's largest stock market debut, with just days to go.

Alibaba, which owns about a third of Ant, has seen its market value shrink by more than a quarter since the IPO was shelved and regulators zeroed in on its business model, although it is still among the biggest 10 companies globally with a valuation of more than \$600 billion.

Some fund managers considered Beijing's move a sensible one as Ant, a major online lender, lacked adequate capital buffers. But others like Aviva Investors' Head of Global Emerging Market Equities Alistair Way are concerned.

"We have become rather more nervous about the regulatory climate in China and the seeming desire to reduce competitive dominance of big e-commerce players such as Alibaba," he said.

"In aggregate we have been reducing exposure to Chinese internet firms."

Standard Life Aberdeen senior investment director Nick Robinson is also unsure.

"It feels unlikely at the moment that they (Alibaba and Tencent) will be added to the blacklist, but so far it hasn't been right to bet on a de-escalation."

"So could it happen? Absolutely. And if it does happen it could be quite significant."

[China] Rescuers seek to free 22 following China mine explosion (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 5:11 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Rescuers are seeking to free 22 Chinese workers trapped underground for more than two days following an explosion at a partially built gold mine in the country's east, state media reported Tuesday.

Some 300 rescuers were seeking to clear obstructions to reach the workers, whose condition remains unknown, the reports said.

The mine in the eastern province of Shandong was under construction at the time of the explosion. The cause of the blast has not been announced.

Mine managers did not report the explosion to authorities in the city of Yantai until Monday

evening.

China's mining industry focused on coal used to be the world's deadliest, suffering more than 5,000 fatalities a year from explosions, floods and gas leaks. Safety improved dramatically after authorities overhauled the industry starting about 15 years ago, boosting supervision and closing most smaller, more dangerous operations.

Accidents still occur relatively frequently, however, including two in the southwestern megacity of Chongqing last year that killed 39 miners.

[Hong Kong] First came political crimes. Now, a digital crackdown descends on Hong Kong. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/12/2021 4:41 AM, Shibani Mahtani, Neutral]

The police officers who came to take away Owen Chow on national security grounds last week left little to chance.

Determined to find his phones, they had prepared a list of cellphone numbers registered to his name, even one he used exclusively for banking, the 23-year-old Hong Kong activist said. Officers called each number in succession, the vibrations revealing the locations of three iPhones around his apartment.

By the end of their operation, police had amassed more than 200 devices from Chow and 52 others held for alleged political crimes that day, according to those arrested, as well as laptops from spouses who are not politically active and were not detained.

The digital sweep showed how Hong Kong authorities are wielding new powers under the national security law, introduced last summer, far more widely than the city's leader promised. Since the Jan. 6 raids, authorities have blocked at least one website, according to the site's owner and local media reports, raising concerns that Hong Kong is headed for broader digital surveillance and censorship akin to that in mainland China.

"It is a redo of the Great Firewall," said Lokman Tsui, an assistant professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who specializes in privacy and online communications. "They are testing the waters for now, so the results are uneven — but it is a question of when and how, not if."

Hong Kong police have begun sending devices seized from arrested people to mainland China, where authorities have sophisticated data-extraction technology, and are using the information gleaned from those devices to assist in investigations, according to two people familiar with the arrangement who spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect their safety.

Glacier Kwong, founder of Keyboard Frontline, which tracks digital rights in Hong Kong, said the government clearly intends to crack down on one of the last free spaces for dissent.

"The government has actually set a precedent," Kwong said. "As long as it is not to the liking of the regime, a website can be blocked without any reason under the national security law, which is a clear blow to the freedom of the Internet, freedom of information and

freedom of speech.”

In emailed comments to The Washington Post, a Hong Kong police spokesman said the force would not comment on specific cases but pointed out that the national security law allows police to unilaterally disable access to online content. Police would not disclose details of investigations, he added.

Data sweep

The dozens arrested last Wednesday spanned the pro-democracy spectrum, including civil society activists — labor unionists, promoters of rights for minorities and the disabled — and former lawmakers. Two others already in custody, former student protest leader Joshua Wong and radio presenter Tam Tak-chi, were rearrested.

Their alleged crime was participating in a primary vote to choose candidates who would later run in legislative elections that the pro-democracy camp stood a strong chance of winning. (Only half of Hong Kong's legislature is directly elected, a feature designed to maintain the pro-Beijing establishment's hold on power.) The city's government subsequently postponed the elections, citing the pandemic.

All but the two already in detention and the former Democratic Party chairman Wu Chi-wai were released on bail, and none have been charged under the security law. If charged and found guilty, they could face life in prison.

Police have been seizing devices from protesters arrested at anti-government rallies since late 2019, but the targeted roundup under the national security law ensnared almost every prominent opposition figure.

Shortly after the arrests and device seizures, colleagues and associates of those detained started noticing strange activity on their social media and email accounts. Tam, already in jail, appeared to join the encrypted messaging app Telegram, popular with Hong Kong protesters, and was contacting people through it. The administrator of his Facebook page said Tam had not reactivated his Telegram account, and urged people to ignore the messages.

Ray Chan, a former pro-democracy lawmaker arrested at his home, said he kept receiving confirmation codes sent by Telegram to a replacement phone after police confiscated his devices. The codes are used to verify the authenticity of a user trying to log into an account.

Separately, Lam Cheuk-ting and Helena Wong, two former Democratic Party lawmakers, said their staff received notifications from Google that state-sponsored hackers were trying to breach their work accounts, which are hosted on a Gmail server. The Google alerts arrived just after their arrest, once their devices were in the hands of police.

“They are spreading the net and are using all means to collect information,” Lam said in an interview. “If there is any information they find that they can use to charge us, they will continue to dig.”

A Hong Kong police officer, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive

details, said the force's Cybersecurity and Technology Bureau is unable to crack newer Apple iPhone models locally but has found ways to compromise Android systems and information on Google Drive once they have seized a person's devices.

A Google spokeswoman said she could not comment on specific incidents. Notifications of a government-backed hacking attempt are sent even when Google may have already successfully blocked the attempt.

One of the people familiar with police practices who spoke to The Post said that the force remains convinced that pro-democracy protests that gripped Hong Kong in 2019 were highly planned and coordinated, though they were largely leaderless. Police believe they need to fully map out pro-democracy and civil society links in the city to have a clearer picture, this person said.

Activists fear the same.

"The government would like to map the network of the opposition with the devices they confiscated, like who is in contact with who, to completely crack down on us," said Kwong, the digital rights activist, who lives in exile in Germany.

Access restricted

After the arrests, Hong Kong users reported trouble accessing HKChronicles, a website founded during the 2019 anti-government movement. The website is known for publishing personal details of Hong Kong police officers and pro-Beijing figures; it also identifies businesses in Hong Kong that support the Chinese government, so that protesters can boycott them.

In a post on the HKChronicles Telegram channel last week, Naomi Chan, the website's owner and chief editor, said she noticed that site visitors had "decreased drastically." Users trying to reach the site from different Internet service providers based in Hong Kong received error messages.

HKChronicles has since changed IP addresses, Chan said on the Telegram channel. The site continues to be inaccessible locally except via a virtual private network.

Four of the major ISPs in Hong Kong did not respond to requests for comment or declined to comment. Chan, an 18-year-old high school student, did not respond to messages sent via Telegram.

Businesses and technology companies have been bracing for fallout from the national security law and are sensitive to any moves that undermine the free Internet in Hong Kong — an attribute that distinguished the city from the Chinese mainland. Google, Facebook and other U.S. social media companies are blocked in China, but operate freely in Hong Kong.

Experts say that technical attempts to block online content, so far, are clumsy and less sophisticated than methods used in mainland China. They predict a lighter touch than China's Great Firewall so as not to drive away businesses in the financial center.

But none doubt that this is the beginning of unprecedented restrictions on the Internet in Hong Kong.

"The Internet is really the only place that we can breathe a little, so it is not surprising to me that they are trying to colonize that space now and invade it too," Tsui, the CUHK professor, added.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Leaders 'Not in a Hurry' to Roll Out Covid-19 Vaccines (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 6:27 AM, Iain Marlow and Jinshan Hong, 6400K, Neutral]
Hong Kong is in no hurry to roll out Covid-19 vaccinations, according to government advisers, preferring instead to see what happens in other, harder-hit places.

"We have the luxury of a bit of time to observe how the program is being rolled out elsewhere, especially on the safety side," Lam Ching-choi, a medical doctor and member of the Chief Executive's advisory Executive Council, said in an interview on Monday. "Our experts are not in a hurry to be the first to be doing a vaccination program. We're finding a balance between not having the vaccine late, and having adequate supplies, and we have the luxury to know that the vaccine we've purchased is safe."

Unlike the U.S., the U.K. and China, which have administered millions of vaccinations since December, Hong Kong has yet to authorize a vaccine and doesn't plan to begin inoculations until February.

Officials already declined to receive a January shipment of Sinovac vaccines because regulatory approval was pending, according to Lam. The city has purchased enough doses – a mix of the Pfizer Inc.-BioNTech SE, Sinovac Biotech Ltd. and AstraZeneca Plc vaccines – to cover its 7.5 million residents, and plans to offer people a choice of which vaccine they'll take.

Hong Kong has reported just 9,283 coronavirus cases since the pandemic began, making it one of the most Covid-resilient places in the world. But the city is now struggling to contain a fourth wave that has resurrected tight social distancing requirements and frustrated local businesses – especially restaurants – and parents of school-age children. Authorities have reported between 25 and 60 daily cases over the last week.

The city has also seen 159 deaths from Covid-19 – still roughly half of the total death toll inflicted on Hong Kong from severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, which killed nearly 300 people in the early 2000s.

In separate comments on Tuesday, Chief Executive Carrie Lam noted that rolling out vaccines wouldn't bring an immediate end to social distancing.

Hong Kong's government didn't immediately respond Tuesday to further inquiries about the vaccination program.

The cautious approach could result in wider public acceptance of the vaccines once they become available, according to David Hui, a professor of respiratory medicine at the

Chinese University of Hong Kong and a member of the government's Covid-19 advisory panel.

"It's good that we have data from North America and also the U.K. – which have already commenced the vaccination program – to show us more information about the unknown side effects, such as severe allergic reaction, so we can have better preparation," Hui said.

[Indonesia] Data Recorder Recovered From Indonesian Plane Crash (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 10:17 AM, Richard C. Paddock and Muktita Suhartono, Neutral]

Indonesian Navy divers have recovered the flight data recorder from Sriwijaya Air Flight 182, which crashed into the Java Sea shortly after takeoff on Saturday with 62 people aboard, officials said Tuesday.

Remains of some of the victims were also brought ashore in dozens of body bags, officials said. So far, four victims have been identified. No survivors from the flight are expected to be found.

The quick recovery of the flight data recorder, sometimes known as a "black box" and one of two on the aircraft, will help officials understand why the 26-year-old Boeing 737-500 crashed just four minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, the capital. The plane was bound for Pontianak on the island of Borneo, a flight of about 90 minutes.

The divers retrieved the flight data recorder from the wreckage in about 75 feet of water between the small islands of Lancang and Laki, officials said.

The Boeing carried two data recorders at opposite ends of the plane: a flight data recorder in the tail of the plane, which can provide information about the jet's mechanical operation during its brief flight; and a cockpit voice recorder that records the conversation between the pilot and co-pilot.

Investigators hope that analysis of the information found on both devices can provide a clear picture of what happened during the flight.

The plane plunged nearly 11,000 feet shortly after takeoff from Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport and the wreckage is spread over an area about 1,200 feet long and 300 feet wide, the authorities said.

The relatively compact size of the debris field is consistent with an aircraft that did not explode before hitting the water.

Each data recorder has an underwater acoustic beacon that emits a signal in the event of a crash to help searchers recover the recorders.

But in this case, the acoustic beacon broke lose from the cockpit voice recorder and was found separately, said the commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, Hadi Tjahjanto.

Divers are continuing to search for the recorder itself, he told reporters.

"We are certain the cockpit voice recorder will be found as well," he said.

Sriwijaya Air released a statement saying that the aircraft had received a certificate of airworthiness from the Transportation Ministry of Transportation that was valid through Dec. 17, 2021.

A ministry spokeswoman, Adita Irawati, said the aircraft's operating certificate had been extended in November.

"Sriwijaya Air has met the stipulated conditions," she said.

The latest crash adds to a list of previous airline tragedies in Indonesia. Air Asia Flight 8501 crashed into the Java Sea off the coast of Borneo in December 2014. And in October 2018, Lion Air Flight 610 nose-dived into the Java Sea northeast of Jakarta, minutes after takeoff.

[Indonesia] Plane That Crashed in Indonesia Didn't Fly for Nine Months (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 11:04 AM, Jon Emont and Feliz Solomon, Neutral]

The Sriwijaya Air jet that crashed on Saturday didn't fly for nearly nine months last year, with air travel severely reduced because of the coronavirus pandemic, Indonesia's transportation ministry said, as search crews pulled one of the plane's so-called black boxes from the Java Sea.

The Boeing Co. 737-500 was inspected and declared airworthy before resuming flying operations, the ministry said.

The Indonesian carrier's aircraft with 62 people on board went down minutes after taking off from the country's capital, Jakarta. There are believed to be no survivors.

Divers and search crew, who grappled with sharp debris and low underwater visibility, managed to recover the plane's flight-data recorder on Tuesday, an important early step in uncovering why SJ182 crashed.

The plane had stopped operating in late March, weeks after Indonesia announced its first Covid-19 case, the transportation ministry said. The aircraft began flying again on Dec. 19, after clearing an inspection by the ministry's Air Transportation Directorate General, the ministry said.

The plane conducted a total of 132 flights after it resumed flying, according to aviation data provider Flightradar24.

"This is pretty standard for this airline and this part of the world," said Ian Petchenik, a Flightradar24 spokesman. "Because aircraft are the main source of connectivity, there are a lot of short routes with high frequencies."

Its first flight after the long hiatus didn't carry passengers and was noncommercial, the ministry said. The first with passengers was on Dec. 22, 2½ weeks before the crash.

The aircraft's certificate of airworthiness from the transport ministry is valid until Dec. 17, 2021, the transportation ministry said.

The ministry said it followed an airworthiness directive issued by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration dated July 24 that required operators of some Boeing flight models, including the Boeing 737-500, to conduct an engine inspection before flying. On Dec. 2, Indonesia's air inspector gave the plane an engine-corrosion check.

Sriwijaya Air Chief Executive Jefferson Irwin Jauwena said Tuesday that since March, Sriwijaya Air had undergone a security and safety audit under the Basic Aviation Risk Standard program, which is run by the Flight Safety Foundation in Alexandria, Va. The audits look at several aspects, including safety- and quality-system management, manual operations, licensing, and supervision of aircraft and spare parts, he said.

A spokeswoman for Sriwijaya Air didn't immediately respond to requests for comment on whether the plane's prolonged inactivity might have affected its flightworthiness and what maintenance was undertaken when the plane resumed flights in December. The airline said earlier that the plane was in good condition before the crash.

"It's important that the full records be made public, to show where it was serviced, when and by whom," said Shukor Yusof, founder of Malaysia-based aviation consulting firm Endau Analytics. "I'm not questioning the reliability of these documents, but it would be really good if we could see a full list, a full history of this aircraft."

Some experts around the world have raised concerns that the lower frequency of air travel during the pandemic could impact air safety. Chow Kok Wah, a Singapore-based aviation consultant, said planes that have been grounded for longer periods than usual require unique inspection protocols. Investigators might look for explanations in the aircraft's maintenance records, he said.

Answers about what happened to the aircraft may start to emerge as investigators extract data from the recovered black box. The flight-data recorder collects information about how plane systems performed. The vast data it holds ranges from basic speed and altitude figures to flight-control inputs by the crew.

"Hopefully it goes smoothly and we can reveal the mystery about the cause of this accident," said Soerjanto Tjahjono, head of the national transportation committee, after the device was retrieved.

The recorder will be sent to a Jakarta laboratory run by the country's national transportation safety committee, where specialists will clean and dry it out before downloading the information, which is stored in binary format. That process is expected to take two to five days, followed by a deeper analysis of the data.

Investigators often can assess what likely transpired on board within a short period, though a detailed assessment typically takes months.

Search crews will continue their underwater hunt for the second black box—the cockpit-voice recorder—which captures pilot conversations. That can help investigators understand what the pilots were experiencing in the moments before the plane went down, and connect the dots with what they glean from the flight-data recorder. Both devices are important to help determine what caused the crash.

Investigators haven't revealed the focus of their probe. Based on a preliminary analysis, the head of the transportation safety committee said the plane is unlikely to have exploded in the air and instead likely broke apart when it crashed into the water at high speed.

Authorities arrived at that conclusion because the shattered aircraft's debris was contained in a limited area rather than scattered over large areas of water, and based on an analysis of radar signals.

[Indonesia] Indonesia retrieves crashed Sriwijaya Air plane's flight data recorder (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 9:27 AM, Agustinus Beo Da Costa and Fransiska Nangoy, 5304K, Neutral]

Indonesian divers on Tuesday retrieved from the sea bed the flight data recorder (FDR) of a Sriwijaya Air plane that crashed into the Java Sea with 62 people on board at the weekend, officials said.

Divers had also found a separate radio beacon, raising hopes that the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) it was connected to could soon be found and reveal what caused the plane to lose control moments after takeoff.

"We are sure that, because the beacon that was attached to the cockpit voice recorder was also found around the area, so with high confidence, the cockpit voice recorder will soon be found," military chief Hadi Tjahjanto said at a news conference.

With few immediate clues on what happened after takeoff, investigators will rely heavily on the flight recorders to determine what went wrong.

The Boeing 737-500 plane plunged into the sea on Saturday, four minutes after it departed from Jakarta's main airport and disappeared off radar screens.

It was the second major air crash in Indonesia since 189 people were killed in 2018 when a Lion Air Boeing 737 MAX plunged into the Java Sea soon after taking off from Jakarta. The jet that crashed on Saturday was of a largely different design.

The National Transportation Safety Committee (KNKT) expects to download the FDR data within two to five days, its chief Soerjanto Tjahjono said.

'UNVEIL THE MYSTERY'

"Hopefully we will be able to unveil the mystery of what caused this accident ... so this becomes a lesson for all of us to avoid this in the future," Soerjanto said.

Earlier on Tuesday, more human remains were found at the crash site, as well as personal effects, such as wallets containing identification cards.

The plane had been headed to Pontianak on Borneo island, about 740 km (460 miles) from Jakarta.

The KNKT's initial findings showed the plane's engine was running when it hit the water, based on jet parts retrieved from the sea.

"The damage on the fan blade showed that the engine was still working on impact. This is consistent with the hypothesis that the plane's system was still working at 250 feet altitude," Soerjanto said.

Indonesia's transport ministry said earlier on Tuesday the jet, which was grounded during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, had passed an airworthiness inspection on Dec. 14 and had returned to service shortly after.

The Sriwijaya Air plane was nearly 27 years old, much older than Boeing's problem-plagued 737 MAX model.

Older 737 models are widely flown and do not have the stall-prevention system implicated in the MAX safety crisis.

[Malaysia] Malaysia declares emergency to curb virus, shoring up government (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 6:02 AM, Rozanna Latiff and Joseph Sipalan, 5304K, Neutral]

Malaysia's king declared a nationwide state of emergency on Tuesday to curb the spread of COVID-19, a move that the opposition decried as an attempt by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to retain control amid a power struggle.

In a televised address on Tuesday, Muhyiddin said the parliament will be suspended for a stipulated period of time and that elections would not be held in the Southeast Asian nation during the emergency, which could last until Aug. 1.

"Let me assure you, the civilian government will continue to function. The emergency proclaimed by the king is not a military coup and curfew will not be enforced," Muhyiddin said in an attempt to dispel alarm over the measures.

Muhyiddin also gave his commitment that elections would be held as soon as it was safe to do so.

The move should reduce, at least for now, some of the political uncertainty hovering over Muhyiddin since his unelected alliance came to power with a razor thin majority in March following the collapse of the previous coalition led by Malaysia's veteran leader Mahathir Mohamad.

Some lawmakers in the ruling coalition have pulled support for the premier and have called

for early elections, while opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said last year that he had a majority to form a new government.

In a statement, Anwar's coalition Pakatan Harapan accused Muhyiddin of using the pandemic to avoid a collapse of his administration and questioned the need for an emergency, saying existing laws were sufficient to tackle the virus' spread.

"We also see the move to suspend parliament and state legislatures ... as affecting checks and balance, inhibiting the nation's democracy and denying the people's voices," they said.

The emergency declaration, which allows the Muhyiddin government to introduce laws without parliamentary approval, comes a day after the premier announced a nationwide travel ban and a 14-day lockdown in the capital Kuala Lumpur and five states.

The healthcare system for the country of 32 million people was at a breaking point, the premier said. The number of new daily infections hit a record high on Tuesday with 3,309 cases. Total coronavirus cases passed 141,000 with 559 deaths.

Under the emergency, the military can be given powers to help carry out functions related to public health, he said, adding that the police can also be given extra powers.

Economic activities will be unaffected, he said.

Malaysia's benchmark share index fell as much as 1.6% and the ringgit currency lost as much as 0.5% after the emergency announcement.

'CRITICAL STAGE'

Malaysia's economy took a hit from measures taken to curb the epidemic last year, posting its first economic contraction in over a decade in the second quarter of 2020.

Economists warned the emergency and new lockdown measures will harder for the expected economic recovery to meet the government's 2021 growth target of 6.5-7.5%.

Malaysia's palace said King Al-Sultan Abdullah agreed to Muhyiddin's request to declare emergency due to the "critical stage" of the pandemic.

The emergency will last until Aug. 1 or earlier depending on whether coronavirus infections have been brought under control, the palace said.

The king had rejected a similar request from Muhyiddin in October. Opposition leaders had then criticised the request as a move to cling to power.

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy in which the king has a largely ceremonial role, carrying out his duties with advice from the prime minister and cabinet. But, the monarch also has the power to decide if an emergency should be declared, based on threats to security, economy or public order.

[Malaysia] Malaysia's Pharmaniaga buys 14 million doses of China's Sinovac COVID vaccine (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:00 AM, Liz Lee, Neutral]

Malaysia Pharmaniaga Bhd has signed an agreement with China's Sinovac to purchase 14 million doses of ready-to-fill COVID-19 vaccines and later to manufacture the vaccine domestically, it said on Tuesday.

Pharmaniaga said in a bourse filing that the company will carry out a fill-and-finish process of the vaccine in Malaysia, and will subsequently enter into local manufacturing, under license from Sinovac for its technology and know-how.

Group Managing Director Zulkarnain Md Eusope said the company has a monthly fill-and-finish capacity of two million doses and that Sinovac's vaccine will be the first to be manufactured in Malaysia.

"Upon approval from the (local pharmaceutical regulator), we are confident to manufacture and have the vaccine ready to be distributed to the hospitals by the end of March," he said at the signing event.

The government-backed firm said the agreement will also help it in long-term partnerships, including technology transfers to grow the sector in Malaysia.

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said Malaysia would be able to procure the 14 million doses of vaccine through Pharmaniaga at a lower price than if procured directly from Sinovac.

"We will finalise the government procurement part of it hopefully by next week," he added.

Malaysia has been in talks to secure a total of 23.9 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines from Sinovac and another Chinese manufacturer CanSino Biologics, and from Russia's Gamaleya Institute, the maker of the Sputnik V vaccine.

The Southeast Asian nation has also procured coronavirus vaccines from U.S. and German drugmakers Pfizer and BioNTech, as well as British-Swedish biopharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca PLC.

[Malaysia] Why a state of emergency raises concerns (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 7:21 AM, Joseph Sipalan and Rozanna Latiff, 5304K, Neutral]

Malaysia declared a state of emergency on Tuesday to try to rein in coronavirus infections and suspended parliament in a move that helps Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin avoid an immediate challenge to his leadership.

The emergency also gives Muhyiddin and his cabinet extraordinary powers, such as introducing laws without the approval of parliament.

It was the first time in more than 50 years that a national emergency has been declared, and only the second time parliament has been suspended since independence from Britain in 1957.

Opposition parties said Muhyiddin was using the declaration to cling to power as he faces calls to step down and hold a general election.

The emergency announcement came a day after Muhyiddin declared a nationwide travel ban and lockdowns in the capital and five states and could last until Aug. 1, or earlier, depending on whether infections have been brought under control.

Daily coronavirus cases hit a new record of 3,309 on Tuesday.

WHAT POWERS WOULD THE PM GAIN?

With parliament suspended, the prime minister and his cabinet gain powers to make laws and approve the expenditure necessary to ensure public security without a parliamentary vote.

The government can introduce temporary laws — called ordinances — that take effect over the course of the emergency. The king, who plays a largely ceremonial role, issues the ordinances on the advice of the prime minister and cabinet.

"The constitution is more or less suspended, as a substantial part of it can be overridden by emergency law," said Nik Ahmad Kamal Nik Mahmood, a legal expert at the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

In a televised address after the declaration, Muhyiddin said the king could issue several emergency ordinances to curb the spread of the pandemic, expand the powers of the military to help protect public health and also strengthen the police.

The government could also increase penalties for anyone who violates laws and regulations related to the pandemic, he said.

WHY THE CONCERN OVER EMERGENCY POWERS?

Constitutional provisions on lawmaking during an emergency are broad and leave a lot of room for the government to clamp down on anything from politics to personal and media freedoms, analysts said.

The opposition Pakatan Harapan said the emergency undermines checks and balances and inhibits democracy.

"Emergency powers mean granting absolute power to the prime minister to do nearly anything, at a whim," it said in a statement.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MUHYIDDIN'S POLITICAL SURVIVAL?

Muhyiddin will serve as premier unopposed at least until Aug. 1. Elections then seem to be inevitable.

Muhyiddin became premier in March, since when he has grappled with a razor-thin

parliamentary majority that relied heavily on support from the former ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

Two UMNO lawmakers withdrew their support in recent days, which means Muhyiddin no longer commands majority support in parliament.

Some UMNO leaders have in recent months also repeatedly called for early elections, unhappy at playing second fiddle in the ruling coalition to Muhyiddin's smaller Bersatu party.

Elections are only due in 2023 but Muhyiddin said he was committed to holding polls as soon as it was safe to do so.

[Malaysia] 'We should not give up', says Malaysian journalist ahead of court verdict (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 7:03 AM, Poppy McPherson, 5304K, Neutral]

A Malaysian journalist on trial over comments posted by readers on his news website said on Tuesday reporters should not "give up" in the face of "harassment" by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's government, days ahead of an expected verdict in the case.

Last year, Malaysia's attorney-general filed an application to cite Malaysiakini and its editor-in-chief Steven Gan for contempt of court over five comments posted by readers on its website that it said undermined public confidence in the judiciary.

Malaysiakini and Gan, who could face a jail term as well as a fine, have maintained they could not be held responsible and the offending comments had been immediately removed after they were contacted by police.

The Federal Court is expected to return a verdict on Friday in the case, widely seen as a test for press freedom in the country.

Muhyiddin's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"We as journalists should not give up," Gan said, speaking at the Reuters Next conference, adding that a new generation of journalists was "just as driven and just as determined to struggle to fight for press freedom for many years to come."

He said in the two decades since he founded Malaysiakini, its journalists had been declared traitors, faced debilitating cyber-attacks, kicked out of press conferences, arrested, and raided by the police.

"Malaysia voted for a reformist government about two years ago but that did not last. I guess the old regime does not give up easily," he said.

An alliance of opposition parties won Malaysia's general election in 2018, in a stunning defeat of the coalition that ruled the Southeast Asian country since independence from Britain six decades ago.

Muhyiddin unexpectedly emerged as prime minister in March last year after forging an

alliance with parties from the former ruling coalition to gain a parliamentary majority. The opposition have accused him of stealing power by shifting alliances instead of earning it at the ballot box.

Malaysia has moved up the World Press Freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders in recent years. But rights groups have said freedom of speech and freedom of the press face renewed pressure under the new government.

Gan said despite the legal challenges, the situation facing journalists elsewhere in Southeast Asia was even worse.

"While you definitely face harassment from the government you don't get to the point where journalists are being killed touch wood," he said. "We are relatively better off."

[Myanmar] China will give Myanmar some COVID-19 vaccines, says ministry (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 4:15 AM, Staff, Neutral]

China will give Myanmar a batch of coronavirus vaccines for free, the Chinese foreign ministry announced on Tuesday, as the government's top diplomat wrapped up a two-day visit to Myanmar.

"China will continue to provide anti-epidemic materials according to Myanmar's needs. We shall give a batch of coronavirus for free and will continue discussions on vaccine cooperation," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry also said that when top diplomat, Wang Yi, met the commander-in-chief of the Myanmar military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, he sought the support of the military for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

The corridor is a network – some of it existing and some planned – of transport and other infrastructure projects passing through areas where ethnic minority factions battle each other and government forces.

Fighting in northeastern Myanmar sometimes sends refugees fleeing over the border into China.

After leaving Myanmar, Wang Yi, China's state councillor and foreign minister, will visit Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines before returning to China on Jan. 16.

[Philippines] Philippine central bank gov sees solid 2021 growth, policy support sufficient (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:00 AM, Karen Lema, 5304K, Neutral]

The worst is over for the pandemic-hit Philippine economy, and a 'remarkable rebound' is expected this year, the central bank chief said on Tuesday, adding that the current accommodative monetary stance is sufficient for a revival in growth.

"The worst is behind us. The recovery phase has begun," Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) Governor Benjamin Diokno told the Reuters Next conference, citing 'green shoots'

such as improvements in remittances and foreign direct investments.

Speaking ahead of the release of the 2020 GDP data on Jan. 28, Diokno said he also expected 'solid' growth in the December quarter and 'double-digit' growth in the second quarter of this year.

He added that "the current policy is sufficient to carry us through" after the economy suffered its first recession in nearly three decades in 2020.

Gross domestic product growth is forecast between 6.5%-7.5% this year, after last year's projected contraction of 8.5%-9.5%, he said.

The consumption-driven Philippine economy was one of Asia's fastest growing until the pandemic prompted President Rodrigo Duterte to impose one of the world's strictest and longest lockdowns, triggering a dramatic slowdown in domestic spending.

Remittances by Filipinos abroad, a life blood of the economy, dropped 0.9% in the first 10 months of 2020 from a year earlier.

To revive growth, the BSP delivered five interest rate cuts totalling 200 basis points last year, with the benchmark overnight reverse repurchase facility rate at a record low of 2%, making it among the world's most aggressive in policy easing.

It also cut banks' reserve requirement ratio by 200 basis points and provided extra liquidity support by purchasing government securities and extending loans to the government.

In sum, the BSP has injected about 2 trillion pesos (\$41.6 billion) into the financial system, equivalent to 10% of the country's GDP.

Diokno said inflation, which averaged 2.6% in 2020, will remain within the 2%-4% target range this year and in 2022, providing space for the BSP to further support growth, if necessary.

The country's COVID-19 vaccine rollout would be "a plus to GDP growth," he said, adding that he does not expect a resurgence in infections.

The government has gradually lifted the coronavirus restrictions, but some analysts have warned a slow vaccine rollout and weak fiscal support could derail the economy's recovery.

The Southeast Asian nation, which trails regional peers in securing vaccines, has sealed initial supply deals, aiming to inoculate 70 million people, or two-thirds of the population, starting next month.

[Taiwan] Taiwan reports two new domestically transmitted COVID-19 cases (Reuters)
Reuters [1/12/2021 1:34 AM, Ben Blanchard, Negative]

Taiwan on Tuesday reported its first locally transmitted cases of COVID-19 since Dec. 22 - a doctor in a hospital, who was treating an already infected patient, and a nurse.

Until last month's domestic transmission the island had not reported any local cases since April 12, with the vast majority of infections in people coming to Taiwan from overseas.

[Thailand] Thailand Aims to Inoculate At Least Half The Population in 2021 (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 12:51 AM, Randy Thanthong-Knight, 6400K, Neutral]

Thailand is set to begin inoculating its citizens against Covid-19 before the end of February, with the goal of vaccinating at least 33 million people, half the nation's population, by the end of 2021.

The Southeast Asian nation, battling its biggest wave of coronavirus infections since the pandemic began, will start with doses from Sinovac Biotech Ltd. once the Thai Food and Drug Administration approves it, according to the Health Ministry. By April, it plans to complete distribution of two million Sinovac shots to healthcare and front-line workers, people with underlying conditions and those over the age 60.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha's government has approved purchase of a total of 63 million doses and the National Vaccine Institute is in talks with several manufacturers for additional supplies for delivery as early as this quarter. The government expects the first batch of AstraZeneca Plc vaccines – to be approved by the regulator this month – will be ready for distribution in May.

Thailand has closed schools and temporarily shut some businesses to contain a resurgence that's seen Covid-19 cases more than double to 10,834 in less than a month. The government is betting on wider availability of vaccine to stamp out the virus and pave for the reopening of its tourism industry, a lifeline for the economy.

"Once 50% of the population has been vaccinated, we'll be able to control the infections and there won't be any large outbreaks in the country," Nakorn Premisri, director of the vaccine institute, said in an interview. "Once we've reached 70%, we can be certain that there will be no outbreaks here. We may have one or two isolated cases, but the country can move forward."

Thailand may reach the herd immunity threshold only in 2022, given its slow vaccine rollout compared to higher-income countries with a similar population, like the U.K. The delay stemmed from the government's inability to order vaccines in advance during the research when there's no guarantee of viable shots at the end of the trials, Nakorn said.

The agreement with AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford, currently the nation's biggest vaccine supplier, will also allow local production through technology transfer, Nakorn said.

Thailand will administer vaccines from more than 10,000 locations across the country free of charge for citizens. It will also allow private firms to import and sell those vaccines approved by the country's regulator to people who can afford to pay, according to officials.

South and Central Asia

Afghan Shiite leader in Pakistan after killings of miners (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 3:03 AM, Kathy Gannon, Neutral]

An influential Afghan Shiite leader is visiting Pakistan where members of the minority sect are still reeling from the brutal killing of 11 Shiite coal miners, nine of whom were Afghan immigrants, earlier this month.

The miners, who were abducted and killed by militants from the Islamic State group in southwestern Baluchistan province, were members of the minority Hazara. They were buried on Saturday, following a week of protests in Pakistan that sought to highlight the community's plight.

The visiting Afghan leader, Karim Khalili is also an ethnic Hazara. Members of the mostly Shiite community live in both Pakistan and Afghanistan and have suffered persecution from the majority Sunni Muslims in both countries.

The Sunni militant Islamic State group, which is headquartered in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province bordering Pakistan, as well as Pakistani Sunni militant groups have repeatedly targeted Shiites.

Khalili's visit is seen as part of an effort to repair the troubled relations between the two neighboring countries in parallel with the peace talks underway in Qatar between the Afghan government negotiators and the Taliban. The warring sides are trying to find a political roadmap that would bring an end to decades of war in Afghanistan.

Khalili's visit is part of Pakistan's policy "to reach out to political leadership in Afghanistan to forge common understanding on the Afghan peace process," Pakistan's foreign ministry said in a statement. The Shiite leader, who was a vice-president under Afghan ex-President Hamid Karzai's government, is also to meet with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Khan travelled to Afghanistan late last year, while several senior Afghan leaders, including the head of the country's reconciliation council Abdullah Abdullah, came to Islamabad in recent months in an effort to reset a relationship that has been marked by deep mistrust and relentless accusations that the other was supporting insurgent enemies.

Kabul accuses Islamabad of harboring the Taliban and seeking to wield influence over Afghanistan as part of a defense strategy against archrival India. Pakistan and India, two nuclear-armed neighbors, have fought three wars since gaining independence from Britain.

Meanwhile, Islamabad accuses Kabul of providing safe haven to separatists in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, as well as working with India to destabilize Pakistan.

Stakes are high for the region as the U.S. proceeds to reduce its troop levels in Afghanistan — expected to go down to just 2,500 this month, with the remainder scheduled to leave by April along with other NATO service members — in line with a U.S.-Taliban agreement signed last February.

President-elect Joe Biden has expressed support for a small contingent of U.S. intelligence troops in Afghanistan to hunt down and monitor terrorist groups, but the incoming administration's plans have not been made public.

Violence, meanwhile, has continued unabated across war-weary Afghanistan. After 20 years and billions of dollars spent in the country, a U.N. statement on Monday warned that nearly half of all Afghans will need humanitarian aid just to survive this year — something the world body blamed on “the ongoing conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Many Afghans also blame runaway government corruption and lawlessness for the dire economy.

The U.N and its humanitarian partners will seek \$1.3 billion to provide “life-saving” aid this year, according U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric, money is needed to help 16 million Afghans. That’s up from last year, when an estimated 2.3 million Afghans needed life-saving assistance.

“It’s a huge increase in people who need aid,” Dujarric said.

[Afghanistan] ‘I Could Just Vanish’: In Kabul, Pocket Notes to Prevent Anonymous Death (New York Times)

New York Times [1/12/2021 11:36 AM, David Zucchino and Fatima Faizi, Neutral]

Tareq Qassemi, a bookseller, lost a close friend to a suicide bombing that killed 80 civilians in Kabul one scorching summer day. Four years later, he still mourns his friend, but also the nameless Afghans who perished with him.

“Their bodies were shattered — the only thing that remained was a shoe or a bag or a pen,” he recalled.

Mr. Qassemi, 28, now carries a special slip of paper, known as a pocket note, that contains his full name, his blood type and the phone numbers of family members — like a homemade, civilian version of a soldier’s dog tags. He knows too well how fragile and ephemeral life in Kabul can be, and he refuses to become an unidentified victim.

“I could get killed on my way to work or in a car or anywhere, and no one knows about me and they will look for my body everywhere,” he said. “I could just vanish.”

The bearers of pocket notes hope the slips of paper will help emergency medical workers identify an injured person’s blood type for a lifesaving transfusion. They might also help authorities quickly summon family members for precious final moments with a mortally wounded loved one. And they could help identify a badly disfigured corpse.

For some young people, the pocket note has become an essential element of daily life. It can validate human existence — an identity marker ensuring that if violent death comes, it does not have to be anonymous.

“If something happens to me, who will collect my body? What if I need blood?” said Masouma Tajik, 22, a computer science student in Kabul, whose family lives hundreds of miles away.

Those questions confronted Ms. Tajik when she was stuck in a Kabul traffic jam one recent day, terrified that a car bomb might explode at any moment, she said. She now carries a slip of notebook paper with her personal information. The note says, "If anything happens to me."

In the years since the 2001 American invasion unleashed a deadly Taliban insurgency, each new day has brought the potential of sudden death by car bombing, shooting, roadside explosion or rocket attack.

Since signing a February agreement with the United States, the Taliban have curtailed mass-casualty attacks in urban centers. But the country has seen a rise in targeted assassinations, singling out government functionaries, prosecutors, journalists, religious scholars and civil society activists in near-daily attacks with guns or magnetic bombs attached to vehicles. The government has accused the Taliban of carrying out most of these killings, but they have repeatedly denied responsibility.

Some officials worry that at least some of the attacks are being committed by political factions outside the Taliban to settle old scores, a disturbing trend harking back to Afghanistan's civil war a generation ago.

At the same time, the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for recent suicide bombings and other mass-casualty attacks in Kabul. A suicide bomber killed 44 people at a tutoring center on Oct. 24, and gunmen killed 21 more at Kabul University on Nov. 2.

The constant threat of a sudden, brutal death has left many Afghans with a sense of despair and fatalism. The most prosaic acts can end violently — commuting to work, visiting a friend, buying groceries, striding into a classroom.

"Every morning when I leave home, I am not sure if I'll come back alive," said Arifa Armaghan, 29, who works for a nongovernmental organization.

"This is how we live in Afghanistan," she added. "It is not just me. I talk to some people who say goodbye to their families every morning because they don't know what will happen to them during the day."

Ms. Armaghan has carried a pocket note since July 2017, when a close childhood friend died in a Taliban suicide attack on a government minibus that also killed 23 other people. The body of the friend, Najiba Hussaini, was identified by her trademark silver ring, studded with a turquoise-colored stone.

"When you lose people you know, you feel that you are next, and you feel death coming closer to you," Ms. Armaghan said.

After every mass bombing, she said, she and her friends send urgent text messages to loved ones. "There is always a fear that someone will never get back to you," she said.

Some of those who carry pocket notes say they have considered leaving the country.

"But it is hard to decide when my brain is busy thinking about who will come to kill me," said

Mujeebullah Dastyar, 31, a geographic information specialist. For the past two years, he said, he has carried a pocket note with his name, blood type and a relative's phone number.

Some Afghans have posted messages on Facebook, warning of threats against them or detailing premonitions of death.

Burhanuddin Yaftaly, 24, a former lieutenant in the Afghan army, was shot and killed by a Taliban gunman while attending his sister's wedding in the northern province of Badakhshan in December. The bride was wounded when she tried to save her brother, police said.

Mr. Yaftaly's father, Khairuddin Ziaye, 61, said his son had been threatened by the Taliban. Shortly before his death, Mr. Yaftaly posted a final note on his Facebook page: "Dear friends: I am sorry for any mistakes I have made in the past. I have been receiving many threats from different sides. I think I won't be able to survive anymore."

In Western nations, people routinely carry an array of items that can identify them, but in Afghanistan, things like driver's licenses and employee badges are not as common, and credit cards are not used. Afghans are issued a tazkira, a national identity document, but few carry the card because considerable time and effort are required to replace it if lost.

Rafi Bakhtiar, 21, a consultant, said he has carried his tazkira since the Kabul University attack on Nov. 2. That day, he said, neighbors searched into the night for their daughter, a student, before the university confirmed that she had died in the attack. The school used a contact number in a phone found on the student's body to call Mr. Bakhtiar's sister, a close friend.

"If I get killed, there should be evidence on me so people can get in touch with my family, and they don't search the whole city to find my body," Mr. Bakhtiar said.

Like many Kabul residents, Mr. Bakhtiar said he had contempt for insurgents who kill civilians, but he also blamed the American-backed government for failing to safeguard its citizens.

"If the government doesn't do anything to protect us, you lose your hope and you can't dream for a better future," he said.

Mr. Bakhtiar said he had accepted the harsh reality that he could die, capriciously and violently, on any given day anywhere in the capital.

"We are broken. We are shattered," he said. "The angel of death is flying over Afghanistan."

[India] India delivers COVID-19 shots to prepare for 'world's biggest vaccination drive' (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 6:48 AM, Aditi Shah and Sachin Ravikumar, 5304K, Neutral]

Indian airlines started delivering batches of COVID-19 vaccines nationwide on Tuesday, preparing for the launch of a campaign to offer shots to 1.3 billion people, in what officials call the world's biggest vaccination drive.

Vaccinations are set to begin on Saturday in an effort that authorities hope will see 300 million high-risk people inoculated over the next six to eight months.

First to get the vaccine will be 30 million health and other frontline workers, followed by about 270 million older than 50 or deemed high-risk.

Airlines were due to deliver 5.65 million vaccine doses on Tuesday to various cities, Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said on Twitter.

Officials in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's western home state of Gujarat said vaccine distribution was their top priority.

"These vaccines will be taken to the cold storage from the airport and swiftly delivered to vaccination booths," said Nitin Patel, the state's deputy chief minister.

Modi's government signed purchase pacts on Monday with vaccine maker Serum Institute of India (SII), based in the western city of Pune, for its Covishield shot, more than a week after approving the vaccine developed by Britain's AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

"We've given a special price of 200 rupees (\$2.73) for the first 100 million doses only to the government of India on their request," Adar Poonawalla, the firm's chief executive, told Reuters television's India partner ANI.

The price represented a gesture of support for the common man, those who are poor and vulnerable, and healthcare workers, he said, adding, "After that we'll be selling it at 1,000 Indian rupees in private markets."

While AstraZeneca has said it would not profit from the vaccine during the pandemic, neighbouring Bangladesh is expected to pay about \$4 a dose, and pricing in Britain is as yet unknown.

Health authorities in eastern and western states said they would make use of experience gained from running regular child immunisation programmes for polio to ensure full coverage in what they called the world's biggest vaccination drive.

But creaking transport networks and a crumbling healthcare system add an enormous layer of complexity, they said.

India's tally of close to 10.5 million infections is the world's second highest after the United States, although the rate of increase has been slowing.

On Tuesday, India added 12,584 cases, for its lowest daily increase in several months, while the death toll exceeds 151,000.

[India] Indian foreign minister expects vaccine exports to be determined in few weeks (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:25 AM, Kevin Krolicki, 5304K, Neutral]

India will be able to decide on exports of coronavirus vaccines within the next few weeks, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said on Tuesday, as governments abroad seek to shore up supplies.

India, one of the world's biggest producers of vaccines and generic drugs, is expected to be a key manufacturing centre for COVID-19 vaccines.

Jaishankar told the Reuters Next conference that India understood the anxieties of foreign governments about getting the vaccines delivered to their populations.

"We will get clarity pretty soon on what our own consumption is going to be, (what) deployments are going to be. And we will keep our global role very much," he said.

Last week, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro wrote a letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking to expedite a shipment of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, which is being made by Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest producer of vaccines.

Bangladesh this week said it expected to receive initial shipments of the vaccine from SII by Jan. 25.

India has to balance the needs of its own population, which is set to receive the first shots this weekend, with that of foreign countries, Jaishankar said, speaking from Delhi at the virtual conference.

"The policy of course is we will start the rollout in India. We have our own challenges," Jaishankar said.

"A number of countries are in touch with us ... and what we are telling them is, look, this is the first month," he added. "The production is now coming into stream. There is a certain amount of stock taking going on."

Along with AstraZeneca's locally branded COVISHIELD, India's drug regulator also cleared an indigenous vaccine developed by Bharat Biotech, jointly developed with a government institute.

Four more vaccines are in clinical trials, Jaishankar said.

Zydus Cadila's ZyCoV-D and Russia's Sputnik V are among those being tested.

Jaishankar said India had done well to control the pandemic, beating grim forecasts about the virus' tearing through the world's second-most-populous country.

"We surprised ourselves, probably the world as well. And if you recall the kind of apocalyptic scenarios around the summer of 2020, at the end of the year, it is very visible who came through better, and who came through less," he said.

India, which has the world's second highest number of coronavirus infections – nearly 10.5 million – after the United States, has among the lowest coronavirus fatality rates.

[India] India's top court orders stay on new farm laws that riled growers (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:34 AM, Suchitra Mohanty and Manoj Kumar, 5304K, Neutral]

India's Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered an indefinite stay on the implementation of new agricultural laws that have triggered widespread protest from farmers, saying it wanted to protect farmers and would hear their objections.

For more than a month, tens of thousands of farmers have camped on the outskirts of New Delhi, the capital, to protest against reform measures that they say benefit large private buyers and harm growers.

Chief Justice Sharad Bobde told a hearing the Supreme Court would set up a panel to hear the farmers' grievances.

"We have the power to make a committee and the committee can give us the report," he said, ordering the stay for an undisclosed period on the laws passed in September.

"We will protect farmers."

There were no immediate further details.

Farm leaders said their demand for a full repeal of the laws remained unchanged.

"We are grateful to the Supreme Court for its positive response," said Rakesh Tikait, president of one of the largest farmers unions, Bharti Kisan Union.

"The protests will continue until demands are met."

India says the laws aim to modernise an antiquated farming system, bedevilled by wastage and bottlenecks in the supply chain.

But farm leaders say the reforms are an attempt to erode a longstanding mechanism that ensures farmers a minimum support price for their crops.

The government has said there was no question of dropping the reforms and eight rounds of talks have failed to find common ground. The two sides are set to meet again on Friday.

[India] Mumbai blasts perpetrators enjoying 5-star hospitality under State protection: Jaishankar at UNSC (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [1/12/2021 10:39 AM, Yoshita Singh, Neutral]

India on Tuesday asserted that the international community must not allow terrorism to be justified and terrorists glorified as it told the UN Security Council that the crime syndicate responsible for the 1993 Mumbai blasts is given not just State protection but enjoying 5-star hospitality, a veiled reference to the D-company head Dawood Ibrahim believed to be hiding in Pakistan.

'First, we must all summon up the political will to unhesitatingly combat terrorism. There must be no ifs and buts in this fight. Nor should we allow terrorism to be justified and terrorists glorified. All member States must fulfill their obligations enshrined in international

counter terrorism instruments and conventions," External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said in a virtual address.

He was speaking at the UNSC Ministerial Meeting on 'Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts: International cooperation in combating terrorism 20 years after the adoption of resolution 1373 (2001),' the first address by Jaishankar to the Security Council after India began its two-year tenure on the 15-nation body this month.

Jaishankar proposed an eight-point Action Plan for the UN system to credibly address the menace of terrorism and ensure effective action. He asserted that linkages between terrorism and transnational organised crime must be fully recognised and addressed vigorously.

He is the senior-most Indian leader to address the UNSC since India joined the 15-member council this month.

'We, in India, have seen the crime syndicate responsible for the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts not just given State protection but actually enjoying 5-star hospitality,' he said, alluding to D-Company and its head Ibrahim, believed to be hiding in Pakistan.

In August last year, Pakistan had for the first time acknowledged the presence of Ibrahim on its soil after the government imposed sweeping sanctions on 88 banned terror groups and their leaders which also included the name of the underworld don wanted by India.

Jaishankar emphasised that the international community must not 'countenance double standards' in the battle against terrorism.

'Terrorists are terrorists; there are no good and bad ones. Those who propagate this distinction have an agenda. And those who cover up for them are just as culpable,' he said.

'Accordingly, we must reform the working methods of the Committees dealing with Sanctions and Counter Terrorism. Transparency, accountability and effectiveness are the need of the day. The practice of placing blocks and holds on listing requests without any rhyme or reason must end. This only erodes our collective credibility,' he said, an apparent reference to China which had repeatedly blocked India's bids at the UN to designate Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist.

Before India succeeded in its nearly 10-year long efforts to have Azhar designated as a global terrorist at the UN last year, China, Pakistan's all-weather ally, had repeatedly blocked New Delhi's attempts to list him under the 1267 Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee of the UNSC.

In a strongly-worded statement, Jaishankar said combating terrorist financing will only be as effective as the weakest jurisdiction. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) should continue to identify and remedy weaknesses in anti-money laundering and counter-terror financing frameworks.

Jaishankar also underlined that enlisting and delisting individuals and entities under the UN sanctions regimes must be done objectively, 'not for political or religious considerations.

Proposals in this regard merit due examination before circulation.' Last year, Pakistan had made attempts to get four Indian nationals listed as terrorists under the 1267 Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee of the UNSC. Pakistan's attempt was thwarted as the US, the UK, France, Germany and Belgium blocked the move in the Council as no evidence was given by Islamabad.

Jaishankar said the global community must firmly discourage 'exclusivist thinking' that divides the world and harms the social fabric.

'Such approaches facilitate radicalisation and recruitment by breeding fear, mistrust, and hatred among different communities. The Council should be on guard against new terminologies and misleading priorities that can dilute our focus,' he said.

He voiced concern that in recent years, terrorist groups and lone wolf attackers have significantly enhanced their capabilities by gaining access to new and emerging technologies, including drones, virtual currencies and encrypted communications. Social media networks have also contributed to the radicalisation and recruitment of youth.

'The COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the situation. The relative isolation and extended disruption due to the lockdowns and the associated distress and economic uncertainty has made the world more susceptible to radicalising narratives and extremist propaganda,' he said.

UNSC Resolution 1373, adopted in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, is a reminder that terrorism continues to be the gravest threat to mankind.

'It not only grievously impacts human life but uproots the very foundation of humanity,' he said, adding that India has always been at the forefront of global counter terrorism efforts.

In 1996, long before the adoption of Resolution 1373, India took the initiative to pilot the draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism with the objective of providing a comprehensive legal framework to combating terrorism.

[Nepal] Russia to send Nepal up to 25 million Sputnik V vaccine doses: RIA (Reuters)
Reuters [1/12/2021 4:23 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia intends to supply Nepal with up to 25 million doses of its Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19, the RIA news agency reported on Tuesday, citing the Russian foreign ministry.

[Pakistan] Gunmen kill policeman escorting polio workers in Pakistan (AP)
AP [1/12/2021 3:14 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Gunmen riding on a motorcycle shot and killed a policeman in northwestern Pakistan on Tuesday as he escorted a team of polio workers.

The attack in the district of Karak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province came on the second day of a nationwide anti-polio vaccination campaign that Pakistani authorities launched in an effort to eradicate the crippling disease by the end of the year.

The polio workers on the team in Karak escaped unharmed, according to local police officer

Irfan Khan. A search for the attackers who fled the scene was underway, he added. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

Pakistan regularly launches polio drives. It had hoped to eliminate polio back in 2018, when only 12 cases were reported. But in the years since there has been an uptick in new cases. The latest five-day anti-polio drive started Monday, with the goal to vaccinate 40 million children across Pakistan.

Militants often target polio teams and police assigned to protect them. The Pakistani Taliban claim the campaigns are a Western conspiracy to sterilize children.

Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan are the only two remaining countries in the world where polio is endemic, after Nigeria was last year declared free of the wild polio virus.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Trump to exit with key promise unfulfilled: 1,000-mile border wall unfinished and Mexico didn't pay (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/12/2021 6:29 AM, Anna Giaritelli, Neutral]

President Trump is leaving the White House having failed to keep one of his biggest campaign promises: to build 1,000 miles of border wall for \$4 billion and get Mexico to pay for it.

Trump is wrapping up his four years in office with a final trip to the southern border Tuesday, where he is expected to tout his accomplishment of putting up a wall. However, he will not have much to point to. The president will stop in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, where, despite more migrants being arrested here over the past decade than any other of the nine border regions, just a dozen miles of wall has been put up along the 320 riverfront miles of border under Trump.

Seven hundred and thirty eight miles have been funded for \$15.5 billion and, of that, more than 450 miles have been installed on the U.S.-Mexico border since Trump took office in January 2017. The question whether Trump fulfilled his campaign promise to erect fencing on half the 2,000-mile border is complicated but, at face value, can be answered with a resounding "no."

The wall was a leading issue in the 2016 presidential election. On many occasions as a candidate, Trump vowed to build 1,000 miles of it for \$4 billion as part of an effort to woo voters concerned by illegal immigration. Trump's campaign promise, which vastly understated what it would cost, will not be met even if President-elect Joe Biden allows the unfinished wall projects to be finished.

The new barriers are far superior to the flimsy, short fences that they replaced and can hardly be called "replacement." Yet even if the administration had achieved its timeline of completing 738 miles by Jan. 20, just 281 miles of the 738 miles is new in the sense that it will go in previously unsecured areas of the border, far short of what Trump once described as "very easy" to achieve.

Border wall projects have been undertaken in all four states that border Mexico, from the Gulf Coast of Texas to the Pacific coast of California. To date, more than 450 miles of wall have gone up in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

Customs and Border Protection, which oversees federal law enforcement operations at the borders, determined where the funding would be spent. It differentiated in border wall that is just one wall and border wall that is "secondary," or an additional wall behind the first so that if people do get over it, they face another obstacle to get around.

The majority of completed wall has been in places where the Department of Homeland Security deemed existing barriers needed to be replaced, often in populated areas where people who ran across the border could quickly blend into communities. The unsecured areas are remote spots, often with no access to roads on either side of the border.

Of the 450 miles put up under Trump, 47 are new primary wall, and 351 miles have been in place of outdated models, such as vehicle barriers and shorter barriers. The remaining 54 miles were of backup wall, 21 replacing old backup wall and 33 miles for new backup wall.

The remaining approximate 275 miles of funded wall is either under construction or not yet ready to go up. More than 240 miles of the 278 will be for wall in never-before-fenced areas of the border.

History of wall construction

Border wall construction is nothing new. Projects took off in the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton approved a Border Patrol hiring surge and infrastructure. A decade later, during the George W. Bush administration, Congress approved the Secure Fence Act, which funded more than 650 miles of barrier. Half of those 650 miles of barrier were short fences just tall enough to block vehicles from driving across rural parts of the border, while the other half was tall enough to prevent people from illegally walking over. Border wall projects continued, albeit at far slower rates, under the Obama administration.

The Trump administration began a lengthy prototype phase in 2017 to test out four concrete and four nonconcrete barriers. Elements of the eight designs were incorporated into the final design.

The wall that CBP decided to build ranges from 18 to 30 feet above the ground and is rooted in a concrete bed to keep it stable and to prevent shallow tunnels. It is slatted, which Border Patrol agents preferred because it allows them to see what is going on beyond the barrier, but the beams are close enough that people cannot pass through it. The slats are filled with rebar and cement to prevent efforts to cut through it easily, and anti-climb steel plates sit atop the slatted portion to make scaling the fence difficult.

The border wall "system," as homeland security officials refer to it, includes the physical barrier, a host of technology options, paved and gravel roads, and lighting.

How and where the wall was funded

Trump entered office in an ideal situation with a Republican-majority House and Senate, yet

failed to acquire the billions of dollars in funding needed for such an extravagant project. In President Barack Obama's final appropriations year, Congress made available \$341 million for 40 miles of replacement wall in San Diego and El Centro, California, and El Paso, Texas — all of which have been completed. The three regions are among nine that the Border Patrol divides the border by.

In fiscal 2018, the White House quadrupled its wall funding. Congress gave Trump \$1.375 billion for 78 miles, but there was a catch: Congress decided how the administration could spend the money. Lawmakers approved it for new and replacement wall in the Rio Grande Valley, various regions of California, and Yuma, Arizona. Fifty-five miles have been completed.

Trump then asked for \$18 billion in late 2018 but was denied, prompting a 35-day government shutdown over his refusal to accept a far lower amount of funding. Unsuccessful, Trump declared a national emergency at the border, which allowed him to take more than \$10.5 billion in 2019 and 2020 from funding that Congress had appropriated for the Treasury and Defense departments and redirect that toward border wall projects. He received \$1.375 billion from Congress in 2019 and redirected \$601 million from the Treasury Forfeiture Fund for new wall in the Rio Grande Valley, which is where Border Patrol reports the highest number of illegal immigrant arrests nationwide. A dozen miles have been finished to date from those projects, and it is where Trump will visit Tuesday to tout his accomplishments on the border.

The Sierra Club sued over a portion of the Pentagon funds that Trump took for the wall, which resulted in a delay, but construction was eventually allowed to proceed.

The remaining \$9.9 billion was taken from the Pentagon — \$6.3 billion in counternarcotics funds and \$3.6 billion in military construction funds. The military construction money went toward a 175-mile portion of primary and secondary fence in San Diego, El Centro, Yuma, El Paso, and Laredo, Texas, of which 86 miles is finished.

The counternarcotics money went toward two projects. The first was replacing 129 miles of border wall in El Paso; Tucson; and El Centro — all but 1 mile has been completed. The second project went to new and replacement primary and secondary walls in all four border states — 118 miles of the 162-mile project are complete.

Congress gave CBP another \$1.375 billion in 2020 for new wall near Laredo. Construction has not started and is pending until the land can be acquired.

Where the wall was built

Approximately 110 miles of 30-foot wall have gone up to the east and west of El Paso, including where barbed wire fence was the only barrier in remote spots of New Mexico where buses would drop off hundreds of migrants at a time during the 2018-2019 humanitarian crisis. An 18-foot mesh fence built during the Obama years in Sunland Park, New Mexico, is slated to be replaced. It is located in one of the busiest areas for the arrest of illegal immigrants on the border. Mexican highways run close to remote sections of the border, making it a prime spot to drop off migrants. Although the mesh fence is fairly tall, it is easily cut by smugglers almost every night, which is why it will be replaced.

In western Arizona, roughly 130 miles of new wall have gone up, including almost 40 miles that are duplicate fencing. The top Border Patrol official in Yuma told the Washington Examiner during a visit this fall that he believes the tall wall prevents people from attempting to climb over compared to the shorter models they have had through the years. Ground sensors, cameras, and radars make the physical barrier even stronger because agents can remotely monitor activity by the wall in place of agents.

A double-layer wall comprising 18-foot and 30-foot barrier was put up in San Diego so that if someone gets over the first wall, he or she cannot immediately disappear into a populated area. San Diego sits across from Tijuana, a densely populated city. The new walls here stretch thousands of feet into the mountains 15 miles from the ocean. Border officials told the Washington Examiner during a recent tour that the barriers have forced smugglers out to sea, underground, or into the skies.

Wall progress in southeastern Texas has been slower than in other regions along the border, with just a dozen miles completed despite the region being the top area nationwide for illegal immigration activity. Another 100 miles are set to go up, which would be in addition to an existing 55 miles of barrier. Border Patrol agents in the valley are responsible for 277 miles of largely overgrown brush that runs along the international boundary river. Southeastern Texas is the only place where the wall doubles as a levee system.

Delays

Despite the lack of new barriers, Trump has applauded his administration for building more border wall. His 2020 campaign made the border wall its primary messaging at his first rally, debuting the slogan "Finish the Wall" at a campaign rally in El Paso in January 2019. At one point during his speech, the crowd began cheering, "Build that wall." Trump responded, "Now, you really mean 'finish that wall' because we've built a lot of it," though he did not share numbers with the thousands of people in attendance.

Builders have put up more border wall during the coronavirus pandemic than at any similar block of time in the nearly three and a half years the president has been in office. However, a Government Accountability Office report in July 2018 blasted CBP for proceeding on the wall without key information on cost and how previous barrier and technology introductions have helped.

The Trump administration did not install a single mile of wall in a previously unfenced part of the border in its first 30 months in office, instead focusing on replacement projects. The delays in getting started were due to a number of reasons, including poor planning early on, problems acquiring private and public land, and funding shortages.

A senior administration official previously told the Washington Examiner that Border Patrol and the Army Corps of Engineers moved faster on replacement projects than ones in unfenced areas because the approval process for environmental and zoning permits was less extensive than areas of the border with no barrier.

"One of the reasons they're prioritizing the replacement of the barrier is there's no issue with acquiring the land," said Theresa Cardinal Brown, immigration and cross-border director for

the Bipartisan Policy Center and a former senior official at both CBP and the DHS. The intense competitive bidding process likely took longer than Trump expected, she said.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, a North Dakota Republican, said the Army Corps should have been "fired" because it "wasted taxpayer funds and been egregiously slow in constructing physical barriers."

A second senior official blamed Democrats in Congress for their "unprecedented obstruction" in blocking funding for additional projects the White House has tried to move on.

However, a former senior DHS official told the Washington Examiner that DHS Secretaries John Kelly and Kirstjen Nielsen dropped the baton early and criticized House and Senate Republicans for not working with Trump to boost funding while they had control of Congress during his first two years in office.

"There was an opportunity to add money to the [continuing resolution] right when Trump took office, as well as the first appropriations request by the administration — both severely missed opportunities made even worse by lack of even trying to present a clear and concise strategy to the Hill," the same official said.

[Argentina] Argentina poised to distribute hyperimmune serum to combat COVID-19 (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:44 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Argentina successfully passed clinical trials for a hyperimmune serum to combat COVID-19 developed with antibodies from horses, and its distribution will begin over the next few days, the company involved in the studies said on Tuesday.

The serum, to be prescribed at hospitals and other medical facilities, is produced by Argentine biotechnology company Inmunova. "This week it will be ready for distribution," an Inmunova spokeswoman told Reuters.

The anti-COVID-19 serum has already completed its last phase of clinical studies, she said.

"We are working at the moment with a capacity in the plant of about 60,000 vials per month, that implies between 12 and 15,000 treatments because the treatment is based on the weight of the patient so it varies between 4, 5 or 6 vials per patient" Linus Spatz, director of Inmunova, told media.

"After supplying Argentina, we are in contact with several Latin American countries and we are even thinking about increasing capacity further. We believe that in March we will be at 1,000,000 vials per month," he added.

According to the latest official data, Argentina has recorded 1,730,921 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 44,654 deaths.

[Brazil] Brazil environmental fines fall 20% as deforestation soars (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 8:41 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Brazil's main environmental enforcement agency, Ibama, handed out 20% fewer fines in 2020, a Brazilian non-profit factchecking initiative said on Tuesday, as the government rolls back conservation efforts and Amazon deforestation skyrockets.

The federal agency gave out 9,516 fines in 2020 compared with 11,914 in 2019, according to an analysis of public databases by Fakebook.eco, which is run by the Climate Observatory campaign group.

Since assuming office in 2019, right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro has sought to weaken Ibama here by cutting its funding and installing managers who have promoted softer tactics against illegal logging, farming and mining.

Bolsonaro has said more commercial farming and mining in the Amazon rainforest are necessary to lift the region out of poverty, and has accused Ibama of creating an "industry of fines."

Fakebook said Bolsonaro had hamstrung Ibama and created impunity for illegal deforestation and mining.

Bolsonaro's office directed questions about his environmental agenda to Ibama, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Amazon deforestation hit a 12-year high in 2020, when an area of forest seven times the size of London was cleared, according to the government's space research institute (Inpe).

According to Fakebook's analysis, fines specifically for "flora" violations in the Amazon region, which includes deforestation, fell by 42% for the 12 months through July 2020, compared to the previous 12-month period.

[Canada] Canada's PM shuffles top Cabinet players ahead of possible election (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 10:15 AM, Steve Scherer and David Ljunggren, Neutral]

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau named a new foreign minister on Tuesday and shuffled other top players in his Cabinet ahead of an election that insiders in his Liberal Party say is likely this year.

Trudeau's hand was forced when Innovations Minister Navdeep Bains, 43, unexpectedly announced he was resigning from politics for family reasons. Bains, who has two school-age daughters and had been in the job since November 2015, was a senior minister in the populous province of Ontario, a Liberal stronghold.

Canadian prime ministers traditionally shuffle their team if a Cabinet member says they will not run in the next election.

Francois-Philippe Champagne, 50, will leave the foreign ministry to take over for Bains. Marc Garneau, 71, moved from transport to become Canada's fourth foreign minister in just over four years.

Garneau's main tasks will be establishing relations with the new U.S. administration and handling a major diplomatic dispute with China.

One of Champagne's first jobs will be to decide whether to allow China's Huawei Technologies Co Ltd to supply next-generation equipment for 5G networks. Liberal sources say Ottawa will ban Huawei gear but is keeping silent so as not to anger Beijing.

Bains was first elected in 2004, lost his seat in 2011, and returned to parliament four years when Trudeau took power.

"It's time for me to put my family first, and I couldn't be happier about it," Bains said in a video posted on Twitter.

Trudeau, who retained power in an October 2019 election but only has a minority of seats in the House of Commons, relies on other parties to govern.

He said last week there could well be an election this year but stressed he wanted to stay in office to focus on the coronavirus epidemic.

Backbench legislator Omar Alghabra will replace Garneau at transport and Jim Carr rejoined the Cabinet as a special representative for the Prairies, where the Liberals failed to win seats in the last election.

[Canada] Ontario declares emergency amid surging COVID-19 cases as Canada buys more vaccines (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:40 PM, Moira Warburton and David Ljunggren, Neutral]

Ontario declared an emergency on Tuesday after latest modelling put Canada's most populous province on track to have more than 20,000 new COVID-19 cases per day by the middle of February, a nearly ten-fold increase from the current count.

Ontario, which is battling a coronavirus surge that has swamped its hospitals and triggered a province-wide lockdown, could also see roughly 1,500 more deaths in its long-term care homes through mid-February under a worst-case scenario, according to modeling from experts advising the government.

New restrictions that take effect on Jan. 14 mandate that residents must stay at home except for essential activity, while outdoor gatherings will be limited to five people, and non-essential construction work will be restricted.

"I know the stay at home order is a drastic measure, one we don't take lightly. Everyone must stay home to stay lives," said Ontario Premier Doug Ford at a media briefing. "Enforcement and inspections will increase."

Canada began targeted vaccinations in December, with current efforts focused on healthcare workers and residents of long-term care homes.

The federal government ordered an additional 20 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine

from Pfizer Inc and BioNTech, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters on Tuesday. That would take the total number of doses to be delivered this year in Canada to 80 million.

Ontario, the country's economic engine, has been under lockdown since Dec. 26, with non-essential businesses shuttered and schools closed for in-person learning.

Yet the daily number of COVID-19 cases has spiked above 3,500 on average over the past seven days, government data showed. On Tuesday, Ontario reported 2,903 new COVID-19 cases.

Under the worst-case scenario with 7% case growth, there would be 40,000 new cases daily by mid-February, while the best-case scenario with 1% growth would result in 5,000 new cases every day, Ontario's data showed. Case growth has recently been over 7% on the worst days, the data showed.

In five of the hardest hit areas of Ontario – including the Toronto area, nearby Hamilton, and Windsor-Essex across the border from Detroit – schools will remain closed until at least Feb. 10. Childcare for children who are too young for school will remain open, along with emergency childcare for some school-age children.

"We will have to confront choices that no doctor ever wants to make and no family ever wants to hear," Dr. Steini Brown, head of Ontario's case modeling, said at a briefing on Tuesday. "People will die from the virus itself and from the overloaded health system that is unable to respond to their needs."

Brown warned that the new COVID-19 variant from Britain was already in Ontario and could decrease the doubling time of cases – or how long it takes for case counts to double, currently 30 to 40 days – to 10 days.

Last week Quebec, Canada's worst-affected province from COVID-19, became the first in the country to introduce a curfew to limit the spread.

[Canada] Canada orders 20 million more doses of Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine: PM (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 11:31 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Canada has ordered an additional 20 million doses of Pfizer Inc's coronavirus vaccine, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday after provinces complained about inadequate supplies.

Trudeau told reporters that Ottawa now had agreements with Pfizer, which developed its vaccine with German partner BioNTech, and Moderna Inc for a total of 80 million doses of their COVID-19 vaccines to be delivered this year.

Canada, which had initially ordered 20 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine with an option for 56 million more, now has a firm deal for 40 million doses of the two-shot vaccines.

Canada's 10 provinces, which have responsibility for administering the vaccines, say supplies are being delivered far too slowly.

Trudeau said that between April and June, Canada would have enough doses for 20 million people. Canada's population is just over 38 million.

Trudeau also said Canada was extending an existing ban on non-essential travel with the United States until Feb 21. The measures, which do not apply to trade flows, were first imposed last March and have been regularly rolled over.

[Canada] Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou asks Canada court to drop security detail to loosen bail conditions (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:20 PM, Moira Warburton, Neutral]

Lawyers for Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou argued in a court on Tuesday to let her leave home without the security detail that was a condition of her bail since she was released after her December 2018 arrest.

Meng's husband, Liu Xiaozong, gave an affidavit citing the negative impacts his wife's bail conditions have had on her and their family.

Meng, 48, was detained at the Vancouver International Airport two years ago by Canadian authorities acting on a U.S. arrest warrant. She faces charges in the United States of bank fraud for allegedly misleading HSBC bank about Huawei's business dealings in Iran, causing the bank to break U.S. sanctions.

She has said she is innocent and is fighting extradition.

"Allowing her to leave without her being in a vehicle or followed by Lionsgate Management (the security company) is the essence of our application," defense lawyer Bill Smart said.

Beijing detained two Canadians soon after Meng's arrest and has held them in prison for over two years, permitting them to see diplomatic representatives only rarely and subjecting them to interrogations.

Meng has been under house arrest after being released from jail on a C\$10 million (\$7.9 million) bail. She is permitted to leave home between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m. and pays for a round-the-clock security detail and wears a GPS tracking anklet.

Restrictions intended to limit the spread of COVID-19 are made "even more challenging due to the added presence of Lionsgate personnel," Liu added, stating that he believed his wife was at increased risk of the virus due to various surgeries in the past.

Prosecutors for the Canadian government will cross-examine Liu on Tuesday.

The Canadian government said in statement on Monday there was no reason to vary the conditions at this time. The bail hearing is set to finish on Wednesday.

[Canada] Huawei had plane waiting to whisk CFO away after extradition judgment in May, Canada court hears (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 5:24 PM, Moira Warburton, Neutral]

Huawei Technologies had a plane waiting to take Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou back to China from Vancouver as a key verdict in her extradition case was to be handed down last May, prosecutors said in a Canadian court on Tuesday.

Meng, 48, has been fighting extradition from Canada to the United States since her arrest at Vancouver International Airport over two years ago. She has been charged with bank fraud for allegedly misleading HSBC on Huawei's business dealings in Iran, causing the bank to break U.S. sanctions.

In May, a Canadian judge sided with prosecutors representing the Canadian government on a key component of Meng's case, allowing her extradition hearing to continue. That ruling supported the prosecutors' case that Meng's alleged actions were illegal in both Canada and the United States and therefore met the standard of double criminality.

Before the ruling was announced, Huawei chartered a 777 Boeing from China Southern Airlines ready to take Meng back to China, should the decision on double criminality come down in her favour, prosecutor John Gibb-Carsley said during a bail variation application hearing on Tuesday.

The move was revealed during Gibb Carsley's cross-examination of Meng's husband, Liu Xiaozong, as Huawei lawyers sought to loosen her bail conditions and drop the security detail that monitors her constantly.

"Are you aware ... there were arrangements made to take your wife, Ms. Meng, back to China if she was successful in a court decision?" Gibb-Carsley asked.

Liu said he was.

"Are you aware that members of the Chinese consulate were also involved in making arrangements for that flight being chartered?" Gibb-Carsley said.

"I don't know," Liu said.

Meng's bail hearing is scheduled to finish on Wednesday. Arguments in her case are set to wrap up in May.

[Canada] Canada Lawmaker Seeks Probe of WE Charity's Kenya Operations (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 10:57 AM, Danielle Bochove and Theophilos Argitis, Neutral]

A Canadian opposition lawmaker is pressing to broaden conflict-of-interest investigations linked to WE Charity to include the organization's operations in Kenya.

Charlie Angus, a member of the House of Commons ethics committee, has issued a letter to colleagues on the panel asking them to examine allegations that pupils at some WE-operated schools in Kenya were sometimes subjected to corporal punishment by teachers. In the letter, Angus said he has instructed the clerk of the committee to request that Guy Spencer Elms, WE's lawyer in Kenya, be invited to testify.

Last year, the WE organization and its founders, brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger, were swept up in a conflict-of-interest scandal involving Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that resulted in increased public scrutiny of the charity.

According to the Jan. 11 letter, which was seen by Bloomberg News, Angus says Elms "is listed as director and secretary to many of the Kielburgers' companies in Kenya, including WE Education for Children Ltd." Reached by Bloomberg, committee clerk Miriam Burke would not comment on whether she received the request from Angus.

Angus is the sole member of the opposition New Democratic Party on the 11-member ethics committee. The governing Liberals have five members, the Conservatives four and the Bloc Quebecois one member. There's no guarantee the committee will pursue Angus's request to broaden its inquiry.

Asked about the request, Michael Barrett, a Conservative member of the panel, said: "From the beginning, Conservatives have been trying to get answers for Canadians on the WE charity scandal, and Canadians can count on us to carefully continue the critical work of the Ethics Committee when Parliament resumes."

In December, Bloomberg Businessweek reported allegations of corporal punishment from three former students and a former teacher at charitable schools operated by WE in Kenya. Students described being caned multiple times from 2012 to 2016, on the back, legs, buttocks and hands.

WE disputed the allegations and criticisms of its Kenya operations, as well as other concerns and allegations raised in the article about oversight, corporate structure and the organization's real estate portfolio.

In responding Tuesday to news of Angus's letter, WE said: "Any suggestion that some students at WE-operated schools were caned has been disputed in formal statements by four former students, three former teachers and the former principal, all of whom would have been present during the time of the alleged caning incident, as well as senior representatives from the Kenyan Narok County for Education who confirmed the same."

In his letter to colleagues on the ethics committee, Angus wrote: "I am sure you will share my deep concern over allegations that students were beaten at WE Charity schools. These allegations require investigation." He also said it would be necessary to invite other witnesses that worked in the WE organization, or students at its overseas schools, to provide testimony.

To that end, the letter asks the clerk provide written reassurance "that any witness appearing before us is protected by the full power of parliamentary privilege," meaning they can speak frankly even if they have signed non-disclosure agreements. International witnesses should be told "we have the ability to offer the chance to provide their testimony in camera," the letter says.

Last June, Trudeau's government announced that WE would be the sole administrator of a C\$544 million (\$426 million) Covid-19 program offering grants to student volunteers.

Controversy erupted after it emerged that WE had previously paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking fees and expenses to Trudeau's mother, brother and wife for speaking engagements since 2012.

Former finance minister Bill Morneau, whose two daughters have had connections to WE, also acknowledged he accepted more than C\$41,000 in travel expenses from WE for family trips to Kenya and Ecuador in 2017. Belatedly discovering that his family hadn't paid for the trips, Morneau reimbursed WE for C\$41,366 toward the end of July. He resigned abruptly the following month amid a broader rift with Trudeau.

Canada's federal ethics watchdog, as well as at least two parliamentary committees, have been conducting probes into potential conflict-of-interest violations.

The contract was rescinded and Trudeau has acknowledged he should have recused himself from the decision. The issue has continued to dog the Canadian leader, though it has lost momentum in recent months amid a second wave of Covid-19 cases.

The House of Commons ethics committee held a number of meetings in November and December on conflict-of-interest and lobbying issues related to pandemic spending, in which WE Charity and its operations featured prominently. The House of Commons finance committee has also looked at the matter, including taking testimony from the Kielburgers last summer.

During parliamentary testimony, Craig Kielburger acknowledged building a "labyrinth" over 25 years, in part to comply with what he described as overly restrictive Canadian tax rules. He said the approach was also intended to ensure that each overseas jurisdiction had separately-incorporated entities complying with local laws.

The ethics committee has already requested that Craig and Marc Kielburger; Sofia Marquez, WE's former director of government and stakeholder relations; and Chief Financial Officer Victor Li appear, according to Angus. "Their testimony will be crucial in finishing our report in a timely manner," he says in his letter. "Therefore, if they continue to delay or deny our request, I will be looking to use the committee's authority to compel them to appear."

Trudeau's argument has been that it was public servants, not his government, who recommended WE for the contract, on the premise it was the only organization in Canada capable of building out the plan quickly. That assertion prompted opposition lawmakers to look more closely at WE, raising questions about its complex corporate structure, which included for-profit activities, as well as its political connections.

Founded in 1995 as Free the Children by then 12-year-old Craig Kielburger, the charity evolved into a juggernaut in non-profit circles. It became known for its massive celebrity-stoked youth rallies and school programs in Canada, the U.S. and Britain. It also created a for-profit travel arm offering volunteers the chance to help build schools or dig wells in impoverished parts of the world, with a portion of its profits feeding back into the charity.

[Mexico] Mexico aims to fast track Russian Sputnik vaccine authorization after seeing data (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:10 PM, Dave Graham and Raul Cortes, Neutral]

Mexican health authorities will quickly make a decision on whether to authorize Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine after getting access to data on it, Deputy Health Minister Hugo Lopez-Gatell said on Tuesday.

Lopez-Gatell said President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador had instructed authorities to "proceed speedily" with the process.

"The file has been under review since the weekend by (health regulator) COFEPRIS and very soon there will be a decision regarding the authorization for emergency use, as occurred with the other two vaccines," he said at a regular government news conference.

Lopez-Gatell, Mexico's coronavirus czar, said on Monday evening that Mexico was considering acquiring 24 million doses of Sputnik V.

Mexico has already authorized the vaccines developed by Pfizer Inc with BioNTech SE and AstraZeneca Plc.

Lopez-Gatell said he met with Russian officials to discuss the vaccine during a trip last week to Argentina, whose government has started rolling out Sputnik V to health workers.

Mexican officials had access to "the entire scientific and technical file" on the Russian vaccine while in Argentina, including results of its Phase III clinical trials. Previously, Mexico had difficulty getting information about Sputnik V, prompting safety concerns, Lopez-Gatell added.

"It's a vaccine that has a capacity and efficacy similar to those of the other vaccines that have been authorized," he said.

While the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which has funded Sputnik V, has deals with multiple countries to supply millions of doses, only about 1.5 million doses of the vaccine have rolled out domestically.

The RDIF has said it plans to rely on manufacturing partners in China, India, South Korea and elsewhere to fulfill its major international supply deals.

A shipment of almost 440,000 doses of Pfizer's vaccine arrived in Mexico on Tuesday, the largest consignment yet to reach the country and a key step toward the government's goal of concluding the vaccination of health workers this month.

Mexico could in February begin receiving batches of a vaccine made by Chinese company CanSino Biologics, Lopez-Gatell said.

[Mexico] Mexico sees holiday bump in tourism amid pandemic surge (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 9:44 AM, Emilio Espejel and Christopher Sherman, 2164K, Neutral]

The friends from Jackson, Mississippi, relaxed on lounge chairs dug into a white sand

beach and romped in the turquoise Caribbean waters, grateful for a break from the pandemic winter in the United States.

They were among tens of thousands of American tourists who descended on Mexico's glittering Caribbean beaches at the close of 2020 and start of this year. Quintana Roo state, the country's tourism crown jewel, home to Cancun, the Riviera Maya and Tulum, received 961,000 tourists during that stretch — nearly half from the U.S. — down only 25% from the previous year.

"You come here and it's a sigh of relief from all the turmoil of the COVID," said Latron Evans, a 40-year-old Jackson firefighter.

But concern is spreading that the winter holiday success could be fleeting, because it came as COVID-19 infections in both Mexico and the United States, the main source of the foreign tourists, were reaching new heights — and as a new, more easily spread variant was beginning to emerge in the U.S. If a sharp rise in infections forces a new shutdown of the tourism sector, the effects would be devastating.

Tourism accounts for 87% of Quintana Roo's gross domestic product, said state Tourism Secretary Marisol Vanegas Pérez. The state lost some 90,000 tourism jobs — only 10,000 of which have come back — and countless others that depend on tourism.

Flights from the U.S. dried up last spring as the pandemic took hold but have risen steadily since then. In December, Quintana Roo was averaging 460 air arrivals and departures per day compared to a pre-pandemic average of 500, Vanegas said.

The increase in American tourists helped compensate for the Europeans, whose numbers remain sharply down. More U.S. tourists came to Quintana Roo during this pandemic-stricken holiday season than a year earlier, when the world was just beginning to learn of the coronavirus. They accounted for 9 out of 10 foreign tourists, Vanegas said.

And they are staying longer, with some seemingly waiting out the pandemic at the beach, she said.

Officials strive to "create a tourist bubble that generates confidence in everything a tourist does," Vanegas said, describing how the visitors move from the airport to a van to a hotel, and then to tours of sun-splashed archaeological sites certified by state health authorities.

"Where there could be risk is when they leave that bubble," she said.

For example, the throbbing crowd that packed shoulder-to-shoulder — many not wearing masks — in downtown streets and clubs to ring in the New Year in Playa del Carmen, the lively beach town between Cancun and Tulum.

Indoor venues also pose a risk: Restaurants, theaters, salons and other businesses are permitted to operate at 60% capacity, and indoor gyms at 50%. Hotels can book at 70% capacity.

Evans, the Mississippi firefighter, said he was impressed by the health measures

everywhere he went. "They're taking temperatures when you enter the building and giving you hand sanitizer every place you go," he said.

His friend, Gearald Green, a 32-year-old music producer from Jackson, where nearly everyone in his immediate circle of friends has been infected, said the climate and outdoor-focused beach living inspired confidence.

"I don't have to try an extra amount to keep social distance because it's the beach, it's water and when you come out it's not like a lot of people on top of one another," he said.

Vanegas said the state health department aggressively traces any reported infections. Still, there are worrisome signs. The positivity rate on COVID-19 tests in the state is nearly 50% and the weekly number of COVID-19 deaths quadrupled from the week before Christmas to the week after, according to federal government data.

Health experts fear the increase in travel through the holiday season will likely lead to spikes in places that previously seemed to have it under control.

"In the most popular tourist destinations, you're going to have epidemic activity increase again in a big way," said Dr. Mauricio Rodríguez of the medical school at Mexico's National Autonomous University, citing beach destinations like Puerto Vallarta, Acapulco, Quintana Roo and the Riviera Maya.

The southern state of Oaxaca, which draws tourists to its colonial capital as well as its laid-back Pacific beaches, had half the number of tourists this holiday season as a year earlier. State Tourism Secretary Juan Carlos Rivera said that wasn't bad considering the pandemic.

"We are going to enter in ... an economic recession in terms of tourism in the coming months, not only in Oaxaca, in the whole country," Rivera said.

If infections increase sharply, pressure will build to close beaches again like last spring, spurring massive layoffs.

When the pandemic arrived in Mexico, big hotels started laying off workers with what they called "solidarity breaks." Workers were told it was temporary, that they'd be hired back in a month and most were let go without the benefits they deserved.

There was little debate over the health risks of promoting tourism versus the economic impact of losing all those jobs, said Alejandro Palafox-Muñoz, a professor of tourism at the University of Quintana Roo. The people who lost those jobs had no choice but to go out and look for new work to feed their families, he said.

Sally Camacho, 25, had worked at a beach club on the island of Cozumel for two years, as a hostess, selling tours and at the cash register. Barely two weeks after the first recorded COVID-19 infection in Mexico, she was out of a job.

Camacho earned commissions from selling tours and could make \$110 on a good day. After she was laid off, she lived off her savings for a month, thinking that she'd be hired back. She put finishing her college degree on hold.

Her mother and two siblings lost their tourism sector jobs too. Her mother — and many others — tried to sustain themselves by selling food from their homes via social networks.

Her mother, a hotel chambermaid, finally started a new hotel job this month. After a long search, Camacho was hired as a cashier at a supermarket where it takes her almost two weeks to earn what she made on a good day at the beach club.

"Before, I was working to save for my future, to buy a house, a car," Camacho said. "And now, honestly, I only work to get by, for food, for expenses."

She still has concerns about the coronavirus, but admitted that she was buoyed by seeing tourists return. "To see tourists, truly, was something exciting, because it's the sustenance for the island," she said.

[Mexico] Mexico publishes medicinal cannabis regulation, creating new market (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:20 PM, Drazen Jorgic, Neutral]

Mexico's health ministry on Tuesday published rules to regulate the use of medicinal cannabis, a major step in a broader reform to create the world's largest legal cannabis market in the Latin American country.

The new regulation was signed off by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, and will now allow pharmaceutical companies to begin doing medical research on cannabis products.

The cannabis reform taking place includes the recreational use of marijuana, and will create what would be the world's biggest national cannabis market in terms of population.

The new medicinal rules state companies which wish to carry out research have to obtain permission from the Mexican health regulator, COFEPRIS, and this research has to be done in strictly controlled, independent laboratories.

"The standard of regulation is very, very high," said Luisa Conesa, a lawyer and pro-cannabis activist who spearheaded legal challenges that led to decriminalization of medical cannabis.

"(The regulation) is not aimed at patients growing their own cannabis, it is aimed at pharmaceutical companies producing pharmaceutical derivatives of cannabis which are classified as controlled substances that need prescription."

The regulation also sets rules for the sowing, cultivation and harvesting of cannabis for medicinal purposes, which would allow businesses to grow marijuana legally on Mexican soil.

While some cannabis plant imports are permitted for companies looking to create products, exports of Mexican-grown cannabis is prohibited.

Foreign weed companies from Canada and the United States have been looking at Mexico with interest. Many had delayed making investment decisions due to policy uncertainty and were waiting for the final regulation to be published.

Mexico's lawmakers are also in the final stages of legalizing recreational use of marijuana, with the bill expected to pass in the next period of Congress.

The legislation marks a major shift in a country bedeviled for years by violence between feuding drug cartels, which have long made millions of dollars growing marijuana illegally and smuggling it into the United States.

[Peru] Peru to pay \$26 million for first shipment of Sinopharm vaccine – minister (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 1:34 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Peru will pay \$26 million for an initial batch of one million doses of Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine, the first part of a broader agreement with the Chinese company to supply 38 million doses, economy minister Waldo Mendoza said on Tuesday.

Peruvian president Francisco Sagasti last week said his interim administration had negotiated vaccine supply deals with Sinopharm Group and AstraZeneca Plc, jumpstarting a vaccine program that has been slow to take root in the country. Mendoza called the payment a "concrete and objective step the government is taking so that the vaccines arrive as soon as possible."

Sagasti originally said the first batch of the Sinopharm vaccine would arrive in January, but foreign minister Elizabeth Astete later said the delivery could be delayed until early February.

Peru has reported more than one million cases of coronavirus since the pandemic struck in March. COVID-19 cases have crept up recently following the end-of-year holidays, prompting a shortage of beds in critical care wards in Lima and across the country.

Economy minister Mendoza said Peru was currently in talks with 10 pharmaceutical companies to buy vaccines. He said the government has budgeted up to \$2.7 billion for the supply and distribution of vaccines and related expenses.

"This figure may vary according to the needs of the country and the development of the pandemic," Mendoza said.

Peru has lagged behind some of its wealthier neighbors in efforts to secure vaccines for its citizens amid a political crisis in 2020 where one president was ousted and another resigned.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Official: Africa secures close to 300 million vaccine doses (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Cara Anna, Neutral]

The African Union has secured close to 300 million COVID-19 vaccine doses in the largest such agreement yet for Africa, a continental official said Tuesday.

Nicaise Ndembi, senior science adviser for the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told The Associated Press in an interview that the current AU chair, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, is expected to announce the news on Wednesday.

The 300 million doses are being secured independently of the global COVAX effort aimed at distributing COVID-19 vaccines to lower-income countries, Ndembi said.

"We have reached the final stage of our deals," he said, referring questions about who will be providing the vaccines and at what cost to the upcoming announcement.

While richer countries have been urged to donate any excess COVID-19 vaccine doses to countries in need, Ndembi said that "the Africa CDC not going to table to beg for vaccines. We're going to the table to buy....All these doses I mentioned have been procured and being paid for."

The news comes as coronavirus infections spike again in parts of Africa, especially South Africa, where a rapidly spreading variant of the coronavirus now makes up most of the new cases. The continent over the weekend surpassed 3 million confirmed cases since the start of the pandemic, with more than 1.2 million in South Africa.

"We plan to have these by the end of the first quarter" of 2021, Ndembi said of the nearly 300 million doses, which will be allocated on the continental platform the AU set up last year to make it easier for Africa's 54 countries to pool their purchasing power and buy pandemic supplies in bulk.

"We're expecting 600 million doses from the COVAX facility," he said, but African officials are still waiting on the details, so "we're happy we have alternative solutions."

Ndembi said African officials have approached at least 10 vaccine manufacturers and developers as the continent seeks to vaccinate 60% of its population of 1.3 billion people, or about 780 million people. The Africa CDC has said some 1.5 billion doses are needed for that, assuming two doses per person. It estimates the effort will cost some \$10 billion.

Ndembi has said he's very optimistic that can be achieved within two years. The Africa CDC has warned that taking much longer than that risks having the virus become endemic in parts of the African continent.

In an address to South Africans on Monday night, Ramaphosa announced the country had secured 20 million vaccine doses "to be delivered mainly in the first half of the year." He gave no further details but said "we will make further announcements as we conclude our negotiations with vaccine manufacturers."

Africa has scrambled on multiple fronts to obtain vaccine supplies. Ramaphosa said the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team recently created under the AU "has done tremendous work to secure vaccine doses" through what he called intensive engagement

with manufacturers.

"The South African government has also been engaging directly with several vaccine manufacturers for over six months," he said.

"Given the massive global demand for vaccines and the vastly greater purchasing power of wealthier countries, we are exploring all avenues to get as many vaccine doses as soon as possible," Ramaphosa said.

Ethiopia warns Sudan it is running out of patience over border dispute (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 3:45 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Ethiopia warned Sudan on Tuesday it was running out of patience with its neighbour's continued military build-up in a disputed border area despite attempts to diffuse tensions with diplomacy.

The decades-old dispute over al-Fashqa, land within Sudan's international boundaries that has long been settled by Ethiopian farmers, erupted into weeks of clashes between forces from both sides late last year.

"The Sudanese side seems to be pushing in so as to inflame the situation on the ground," Ethiopian foreign ministry spokesman Dina Mufti told reporters. "Is Ethiopia going to start a war? Well, we are saying let's work on diplomacy."

"How long will Ethiopia continue to resolve the issue using diplomacy? Well, there is nothing that has no limit. Everything has a limit," he told a briefing in Addis Ababa.

Sudan's information minister and government spokesman Faisal Mohamed Saleh said the country did not want war with Ethiopia but its forces would respond to any aggression.

"We fear that these comments contain a hostile position towards Sudan. We ask of Ethiopia to stop attacking Sudanese territory and Sudanese farmers," he told Reuters.

Later, Sudan's foreign ministry condemned what it called an attack by Ethiopian "gangs" in al-Fashqa on Monday, five km (three miles) from the border. Five women and a child were killed, and two other women who had been harvesting were missing, it said.

Sudan said on Dec. 31 that it had taken control of all Sudanese territory in the area. Ethiopia says Sudan took advantage of its forces being distracted by the Tigray conflict to occupy Ethiopian land and loot properties.

The United Nations said in a report last week on the humanitarian situation in Tigray that there were reports of a military build-up on both sides of the border around the area.

The border tensions come at a time when Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt are also trying to resolve a three-way row over Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Ethiopia sees the dam as key to plans to become Africa's largest power exporter. Egypt, which gets more than 90% of its scarce fresh water from the Nile, fears the dam across the

Blue Nile could devastate its economy.

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan said on Sunday that they reached a new impasse in the dispute. Egypt and Ethiopia separately blamed Sudanese objections to the framework for the talks.

On Tuesday, Ethiopia's Dina criticised both Egypt and Sudan for delaying the negotiations. "Are the two speaking the same language? More or less. The two are speaking the same language when it comes to stalling it."

Gas-Rich Mozambique, Tanzania Rally to End Insurgency (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 7:28 AM, Matthew Hill and Borges Nhamirre, Neutral]

Mozambique and Tanzania are strengthening their relations to fight cross-border terrorism ahead of a regional summit on the insurgency that threatens almost \$60 billion of natural gas projects.

Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi traveled to Tanzania to hold talks with his counterpart John Magufuli ahead of a Southern African Development Community meeting next week that will seek to draft a regional response. The bloc failed to come up with specific strategies in successive meetings last year. The two leaders agreed to resume a joint commission on defense and security, Nyusi told reporters Monday on his return.

Insurgents who've aligned with Islamic State have since 2017 staged increasingly bold attacks in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province that borders southern Tanzania, including occupying a port town in August. More than 500,000 people have fled the violence.

Total SE this month said it started evacuating workers from its \$20 billion liquefied natural gas export project, Africa's biggest private investment yet, as the violence reached its concession area. That's heightened questions around the government's response, and what the insecurity means for the project's future.

Mozambique hopes to reap as much as \$96 billion in revenues over the next 25 years from the project and others planned by ExxonMobil Corp. and Eni SpA at a combined cost of about \$40 billion.

Relations between Mozambique and Tanzania have been strained, with each blaming the other for the continuing insurgency that's left nearly 2,500 dead, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which tracks the violence. The nations' police chiefs agreed in November to start joint operations to combat the insurgents, who killed more than 300 people in an October attack in southern Tanzania.

The U.S. has joined a growing list of nations offering Mozambique help in containing the insurrection. Anthony Tata, policy undersecretary at the Department of Defense, last week discussed with the southeast African nation's defense and interior ministers the possibility of providing military training, according to a statement Monday.

[Uganda] Ugandan opposition reels from widespread repression ahead of Thursday's election (Washington Post)

Washington Post [1/12/2021 2:08 PM, Max Bearak, Neutral]

When Sharon Kemigisha and her husband joined a political movement growing out of this city's sprawling ghettos, they knew it might cost them their lives.

The National Unity Party, led by the reggae singer and lawmaker Robert Kyagulanyi — better known by his stage name Bobi Wine — was quickly evolving into the most popular challenger that Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, had faced in 35 years in power.

Thursday's elections will bring them head to head, but the government has unleashed a wave of intimidation and repression against the opposition party and its supporters, extinguishing any hope many had in a fair vote.

Kemigisha's husband, a close aide of Wine's, has spent the past two weeks locked up in a military barracks on what she says are preposterous charges of illegal possession of ammunition. Kemigisha, 28, is weeks from giving birth to their second child.

"I just thank God he is alive," she said in an interview from the back seat of a car, where she felt safe talking to a journalist — another group that Uganda's military has cracked down on. She sleeps at different friends' houses most nights, fearing her own arrest. "We've lost friends, colleagues. We've buried them."

At least 54 protesters were killed in November after Wine was arrested at a campaign rally, the second of three times he was arrested ahead of the election. Wine's prominence has likely protected his life, analysts said. Another opposition candidate, Patrick Oboi Amuriat, was arrested on Monday for the ninth time since declaring his candidacy — this time over a traffic law barring people from sticking their heads out of sunroofs.

Wine has said all 23 members of his campaign team had been arrested, and the majority were still in jail.

Fred Enanga, a police spokesman, declined to comment on the arrests of opposition figures, including Kemigisha's husband, but referred to a previous statement in which he justified the arrests as part of enforcement of social distancing protocols and blamed the deaths of protesters on Wine and "others who seek to incite."

Taking to Twitter before the government ordered all social media to be blocked on Tuesday, Wine called the tactics "the kicks of a dying horse."

The shutdown of social media came in apparent retaliation for Facebook's culling of around 100 profiles on Monday it said were fake accounts spreading pro-government misinformation ahead of the election.

"This month, we removed a network of accounts and pages in Uganda that engaged in CIB (Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior) to target public debate ahead of the election," Facebook's head of communication for sub-Saharan Africa, Kezia Anim-Addo, said in an email.

Museveni's spokesman, Don Wanyama, whose Facebook and Instagram accounts were shut down, alleged a foreign plot to influence the election.

"Shame on the foreign forces that think they can aid and plant a puppet leadership on Uganda by disabling online accounts of NRM supporters," he said on Twitter.

Ugandan authorities say that public order and preventing the spread of the coronavirus are their utmost priorities, and they have imposed restrictions on campaigning in Kampala and almost all other Ugandan cities.

Breaches of social distancing guidelines had previously been cited in Wine and Amuriat's arrests. Museveni has continued to campaign in ways that less obviously flout those rules, such as visiting the sites of development projects. His presence still attracts large crowds that are not dispersed.

The prospect of further violence looms over Thursday's vote, and the military was already out in a show of might on Tuesday evening.

Wine and other leading opposition candidates urged their supporters to stay within 100 meters of polling stations rather than return home as the electoral commission has advised. If the past weeks have been any indication, the military would likely meet such action with violent dispersal.

"The terror, frankly, is unprecedented," said Kizza Besigye, a veteran opposition leader who took on Museveni in four previous elections, at a news conference. "This election has witnessed untold violence. It gets worse and worse by the day."

Last week, Wine filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court against Museveni and nine security officials, accusing them of incitement to murder unarmed protesters and authorizing the arrests and beatings of political figures and human rights lawyers. Wine also alleged that the Ugandan government has repeatedly tried to kill him since 2018.

Past Ugandan polls have been discredited by widespread allegations of rigging. The country hasn't peacefully transferred power since independence from Britain in 1962.

Museveni has had the constitution changed twice to legally remain in power — once to remove term limits on presidents, the other to remove age limits. His next term would be his sixth.

While allegations of unfair tactics are already mounting, this election still feels different, opposition supporters said.

"You would have to be naive to think this is a fair election. But what's different is the surge of support Bobi has from young people who've had a rough life — the people who make up the poverty and unemployment figures that we hear about our country," said Patience Akumu, a human rights lawyer. "Bobi found deliverance in this life, rising to where he is. In him, they see the possibility of their own."

Kemigisha sees herself in Bobi Wine. Like him, she grew up in a slum and has spent her life scrapping by. She migrated to Oman for two years where she worked as a maid for poor pay, and when she came back, she was crushed that what little money she saved wasn't

enough to change her station in life.

"There is a chain of problems in that ghetto that girls face: underage marriage, domestic abuse and loss of self-esteem. You are constantly told that you are nothing. That is what our presidential candidate wants to change, and that is what I want to change," she said.

"We respect the democratic process, but I don't expect my vote to be respected. If it is not, then we will wait for our candidate to give us a Plan B."

[Uganda] Aging Strongman Faces Youthful Musician Bobi Wine in Battle for Uganda's Future (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [1/12/2021 10:47 AM, Nicholas Bariyo and Joe Parkinson, Neutral]
Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has won six consecutive elections since 1986, but the strongman's winning streak appears to be faltering in the face of a new kind of opponent: a youthful rapper-turned-lawmaker who campaigns in a bulletproof vest.

When Ugandans head to the polls Thursday, 76-year-old Mr. Museveni will face the gravest threat to his rule from Bobi Wine, a 38-year-old musician whose campaign has struck a chord with many of the 18 million voters in one of the world's most youthful nations.

The election has sparked the worst political violence in Uganda for decades, with more than 50 people shot dead by government forces following Mr. Wine's arrest in November. Diplomats and rights groups have warned of protracted clashes in the wake of a campaign that has seen the administration jail lawyers, prosecute election monitors and violently muzzle opposition leaders. On Tuesday, the government also blocked all social-media channels.

The contest embodies a generational clash across Africa, where entrenched older leaders are grappling with increasingly restless youthful populations demanding improved economic opportunities. Mr. Museveni disparagingly calls Mr. Wine, "my grandson" while the rapper taunts the president as "an aging dictator," who should leave power to avoid the fate of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe or Libya's Moammar Gadhafi.

"I am the representative of the future," Mr. Wine said. "The struggle is Africa's generational cause and we shouldn't retreat."

Similar battles have played out across the continent, where the median age is 20. Youth-led protests forced from power Sudan's 77-year-old President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 and Mali's 75-year-old President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August last year. In Nigeria, protests against police brutality plunged Africa's most populous nation into its worst violence in decades in October.

Mr. Museveni, who swept to power as a rebel commander after years of civil war, has for decades pivoted between alliances with the erstwhile Communist bloc, the West and more recently, China, with which he has hugely increased security and surveillance cooperation. The increase in repression ahead of the election has startled Western governments, with the U.S. warning last month of "consequences for those who undermine democracy."

Mr. Museveni, who is ahead in the polls, has already declared victory, but his government's response suggests he is far from secure. The president has redeployed units of battle-hardened troops to the capital, with orders to crack down on any postelection protests.

Uganda's telecom regulator ordered internet-service providers on Tuesday to block all social-media platforms and messaging applications until further notice, according to a confidential letter seen by The Wall Street Journal. This came after the administration blocked Facebook on Monday after accusing the social-media platform of interfering in the election by removing pro-government accounts.

Facebook said it had removed a network of pages that used fake and duplicate accounts to manage pages, comment on other peoples' content, impersonate users and re-share posts to make them appear more popular.

"Given the impending election in Uganda, we moved quickly to investigate and take down this network. We found this network to be linked to the Government Citizens Interaction Center at the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology in Uganda," a Facebook spokeswoman said. She couldn't comment immediately on Uganda's social-medial shutdown.

Repeatedly beaten, arrested and harassed by security forces, Mr. Wine now campaigns in a bulletproof vest after a spate of attacks killed two of his campaign members. Government officials accuse him of violating restrictions on mass gatherings to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Last week, police hauled Mr. Wine from a vehicle as he told a press conference he had petitioned the International Criminal Court for an investigation into rights abuses in Uganda. On Tuesday, soldiers raided his home and arrested his security guards.

Mr. Museveni has said that Mr. Wine is an agent of foreign influence, backed by "Western elements," especially Europeans from countries he declines to specify. "He gets a lot of encouragement from foreigners and homosexuals," Mr. Museveni said on national television.

Mr. Museveni is only eligible to run for a sixth term after changing the constitution twice—removing term limits in 2005 and a clause capping a presidential candidate's age at 75 in 2017. The growing criticism of his rule is a far cry from the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton and other leaders praised him for restoring stability to the coffee- and oil-producing East African nation, boosting economic growth and combating HIV/AIDS.

Many Ugandans, like construction worker Ivan Magombe, say the president still has their support.

"Uganda will remain peaceful with Museveni as the leader," said the 45-year old. "We don't want chaos."

However, his popularity is waning, especially among younger voters. While nearly one million Ugandans reach the age of 18 each year, only 75,000 jobs are created annually, according to the World Bank. Hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the economy contracted by

1% in 2020, after growing by 7.5% in 2019.

Mr. Wine has harnessed the swelling discontent, gaining a large following in a country where nearly 70% of registered voters are under 30 years old. Vast crowds, many sporting wearing Mr. Wine's trademark red beret, continue to flock to his rallies, braving tear gas, rubber bullets and sometimes live rounds.

"The regime thinks they can break us, but they are simply sowing seeds of even greater resistance," Mr. Wine said.

Critics of Mr. Wine say his promises of "change" lack specifics. But the musician's popularity is growing, and Mr. Museveni's tactics are becoming more repressive. The European Union said it wouldn't deploy election observers for the first time in over 20 years, because the government had ignored its advice from previous missions. The United Nations said the government had repurposed restrictions used to contain coronavirus to muzzle the opposition.

Many younger voters say the economic impact of the coronavirus is falling disproportionately on them, pushing a youth unemployment rate of 60% even higher.

"We need young leaders who understand our problems," said 25-year-old Ambrose Bukonya. "Voting for Bobi Wine is the only chance to secure our future."

[Uganda] Ugandan Pop Star Bobi Wine Pins Election Hopes on Tech, Youth (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [1/12/2021 5:47 AM, David Malingha and Fred Ojambo, 6400K, Neutral]

A Ugandan pop star-turned-politician is banking on technology and a high voter turn-out to help him unseat one of Africa's longest-serving leaders.

Bobi Wine is the main challenger to President Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled since seizing power in a coup in 1986. The lead-up to the vote has been marred by the deaths of at least 54 people following protests that erupted after the musician's arrest in November, and allegations that there are moves afoot to rig the outcome in the incumbent's favor.

To counter that threat, Wine's party, the National Unity Platform, has helped develop an internet-based application that will facilitate the tallying of votes as they are posted at polling stations. It can be downloaded via Google Playstore or a WhatsApp link, and will enable people to input the results or upload documents reflecting them – providing a cross-check against the official count.

The Electoral Commission threw a potential spanner in the works last week when it announced restrictions on the use of phones and cameras at polling stations – although it remains unclear whether pictures may be taken of the tally sheets. Wine said the unprecedented curbs are unlawful, a position echoed by the nation's biggest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change.

"There is no law that bars people from observing the election, there is no law that bars cameras from the polling station," Wine, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi, said in an

interview. "We will have every right to demand a transition that people will have democratically and legally voted for."

The victor in the Jan. 14 election will oversee the implementation of about \$20 billion of projects, including an oil pipeline, refinery, airport and roads as the east African nation prepares to produce and export crude starting in 2024. A contested outcome that sparks civil unrest could jeopardize the investments and derail efforts to revive the coronavirus-battered economy.

Wine, 38, who has pledged to uphold the rule of law and tackle corruption if elected, has relied extensively on digital technology to get his message across to the electorate and bypass the state-controlled media. He sees the political landscape being fundamentally altered if the nation's tech-savvy youth turn out in large numbers to vote. More than 80% of Uganda's 42 million people are under the age of 40, and almost half have Internet access.

"Museveni represents the past and I represent the future," Wine said. "A Uganda under a different leadership will mean a government that is accountable to the people."

While Museveni's share of the vote dropped to 61% in the last elections in 2016, from 74% in 1996, he still commands strong support in rural areas and especially among older citizens.

Despite mounting calls for the 76-year-old Museveni to be replaced by a younger leader, Zaynab Mohamed, an analyst at NKC African Economics expects him to retain power. The president's edge stems from the considerable control he wields over the state, and the fact that opposition supporters have been suppressed and intimidated, Mohamed said.

Opposition Arrests

Wine started wearing a bullet-proof vest after his car was shot at and an explosive device was detonated near him while on the campaign trail. He and his team said they spent several nights sleeping in their vehicles after officials prevented them from booking into hotels.

"The regime is on rampage, arresting all our members," Wine said. "Right now all my campaign team is in prison."

Ongoing divisions within the ranks of the opposition that will result in their share of the vote being diluted between several candidates, will work in Museveni's favor. Besides Wine, the other presidential hopefuls include the FDC's Patrick Amuriat, former army commander Mugisha Muntu and ex-security chief Henry Tumukunde.

Museveni has won five consecutive elections over the past quarter century, and rejected prior opposition allegations of rigging. The United Nations and Amnesty International are among several organization that have voiced concern about the integrity of the coming vote.

"We have increasingly observed that the Covid-19 restrictions have been enforced more strictly to curtail opposition electoral campaign activities," Ravina Shamdasani, a spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a Jan. 8 statement.

Don Wanyama, the president's spokesman, denied that there was an attempt to steal the election.

"Museveni doesn't have to rig to win," Wanyama said. "His track record on peace and development is what will compel Ugandans to overwhelmingly re-endorse him."

[Uganda] Uganda's leader says social media shut down ahead of polls (AP)

AP [1/12/2021 2:45 PM, Rodney Muhumuza, Neutral]

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said Tuesday that his government has shut down social media ahead of a tense election on Thursday, accusing Facebook and unnamed outside groups of "arrogance" after the social network this week removed Ugandan accounts linked to his reelection campaign.

"That social channel you are talking about, if it is going to operate in Uganda, it should be used equitably by everybody who wants to use it," Museveni said of Facebook in a national address. "If you want to take sides against the (ruling party), then that group will not operate in Uganda."

Museveni, dressed in a military jacket, said he was "sure the government has closed social media" and apologized to Ugandans for what he called an inconvenience.

Facebook on Monday said it had removed a network of accounts and pages that "used fake and duplicate accounts to manage pages, comment on other people's content, impersonate users, re-share posts in groups to make them appear more popular than they were." The network was linked to a government ministry, it said.

There was no immediate Facebook statement in response to the president's comments.

Many Ugandans said Tuesday that Facebook and WhatsApp were not working. Twitter also appears to have been affected.

There are fears the internet will be shut down on polling day.

"This is unfortunate but it is unavoidable. There is no way anybody can come around and play with our country, to decide who is good, who is bad. We cannot accept that," Museveni said, adding that he "cannot tolerate this arrogance."

Museveni, who has ruled Uganda since 1986, has alleged repeatedly that foreign groups are trying to meddle in Uganda's election, without providing evidence. He has accused his main challenger, the popular singer and opposition lawmaker known as Bobi Wine, of being "an agent of foreign interests." Wine denies this.

The atmosphere in Uganda is increasingly charged ahead of voting. Police and military personnel now patrol the streets in parts of the capital, Kampala, and the military is in charge of all security operations in the Kampala metropolitan area.

Wine, who insisted Tuesday that his campaign is nonviolent, urged his supporters not to be

intimidated by the security forces.

Wine, whose real name is Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, earlier on Tuesday joined other opposition figures in criticizing widespread violence by security forces. He told reporters that soldiers raided his home Tuesday morning, arrested a security guard and beat two gardeners badly.

"The terror, frankly, is unprecedented," said Kizza Besigye, a veteran opposition leader who challenged Museveni in four elections. "Violence, terror seem to be scaled up with every coming election. This election has witnessed untold violence. It gets worse and worse by the day."

The army spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment. The police spokesman was unavailable.

At least 54 people were killed in Kampala and other parts of the country in November as security forces put down riots provoked by the arrest of Wine for allegedly violating campaign regulations aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Those deaths form a critical part of Wine's petition to the International Criminal Court to investigate alleged acts of torture, mutilation and murder of civilian protesters by security forces.

The leading opposition candidates said they had launched a concerted effort to protect against vote-rigging at polling stations. They are urging their supporters to stay within 100 meters of polling stations rather than return home as the electoral commission is demanding. That means potential confrontations with security forces.

Ugandan authorities have asserted an urgent need to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in imposing restrictions on presidential candidates, including a ban on campaigns in Kampala and other urban areas.

Many among Wine's campaign team are now in detention. Wine has been arrested many times and sometimes beaten in the past year for alleged offenses such as disobeying lawful orders. He has not been convicted of any charges.

Uganda's 76-year-old president has defied calls for his retirement, saying he has been elected many times by Ugandans who love him.

Ugandan polls are often marred by allegations of rigging. The country has never seen a peaceful transfer of power since independence from Britain in 1962.

As concerns rise, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Tuesday that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "urges the Ugandan authorities, particularly the security forces, to act in a manner that respects international human rights standards, and he also encourages all political actors and their supporters to publicly commit to conduct their political activities peacefully and refrain from incitement to violence or hate speech."

[Uganda] Uganda bans social media ahead of presidential election (Reuters)

Reuters [1/12/2021 2:40 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Uganda banned social media and beefed up security in the capital on Tuesday, two days ahead of a presidential election pitting Yoweri Museveni, one of Africa's longest-serving leaders, against opposition frontrunner Bobi Wine, a popular singer.

Campaigning ahead of the vote has been marred by brutal crackdowns on opposition rallies that have left scores dead and the repeated intimidation and arrest of some opposition candidates, their supporters and campaign staff.

Videos posted on social media on Tuesday showed a convoy of armoured military vehicles heading towards Kampala and then moving slowly through various streets in the heart of the capital, which typically votes against Museveni.

In a television address on Tuesday evening, the 76-year-old leader who took power in 1986, said he had met with the security forces and they were ready to defend any Ugandans worried about coming out to vote because of intimidation by the opposition.

"There is no threat we cannot defeat," said Museveni, wearing a military camouflage jacket. "We have got all sorts of means, simple and complex."

The European Union said on Tuesday it expected Uganda to provide a level-playing field for all voters to exercise their democratic rights without fear of intimidation or violence.

"The excessive use of force by law enforcement and security agencies has seriously tarnished this electoral process," said Josep Borrell, the EU's top diplomat. He said the bloc's offer to deploy a small team of electoral experts was not taken up.

Museveni apologised for the inconvenience caused by the ban on social media and messaging apps but he said Uganda had no choice after Facebook took down some accounts which backed his ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party.

"If you want to take sides against the NRM, then that group should not operate in Uganda," he said. "We cannot tolerate this arrogance of anybody coming to decide for us who is good and who is bad."

SOCIAL MEDIA BLACKOUT

In a letter seen by Reuters to internet service providers dated Jan. 12, Uganda's communications regulator ordered them to block all social media platforms and messaging apps until further notice.

Internet monitor NetBlocks said its data showed that Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Skype, Snapchat, Viber and Google Play Store were among a lengthy list of sites unavailable via Uganda's main cell network operators.

Facebook said on Monday it had taken down a network linked to Uganda's ministry of information for using fake and duplicate accounts to post ahead of this week's election.

At 38, Wine is half Museveni's age and he has attracted a large following among young

people in a nation where 80% of the population are under 30.

Wine is considered the frontrunner among 10 candidates challenging Museveni, who brought stability to the country after the murderous reigns of dictators Milton Obote and Idi Amin.

While security forces have intimidated the opposition at previous elections, the run up to this year's vote has been especially violent. In November, 54 people were killed as soldiers and police quelled protests after Wine was detained.

The authorities say opposition rallies break COVID-19 curbs on large gatherings in some parts of the country. Rights groups say the restrictions are a pretext for muzzling the opposition.

On Tuesday, Wine said soldiers raided his home in Kampala and arrested his guards while he was giving an interview to a Kenyan radio station. He also said a team member who works mainly as a mechanic was shot dead by the military overnight.

Reuters was not immediately able to verify the claims and a military spokesman did not respond to a call seeking comment.

Patrick Onyango, police spokesman for Kampala, denied Wine's home had been raided or that anyone was arrested.

'UNACCEPTABLE BREACHES'

The International Press Institute, a global media watchdog, called on Uganda to reinstate social media networks.

"Any efforts to block online access to journalists or members of the public are unacceptable breaches of the right to information," it said in a statement.

South African telecoms company MTN Group, the leading mobile operator in Uganda with 60% of the market, said it had complied with the blocking order and was working with the authorities to limit the scope and duration of the disruption.

Wine has been using Facebook to relay live coverage of his campaigns and news conferences after he said many media outlets had declined to host him. Most radio and TV stations are owned by government allies and Uganda's leading daily is state-run.

Museveni has won every election since the first under his presidency in 1996, though they have been tarnished by intimidation of the opposition and accusations of vote rigging.

Uganda is a Western ally, a prospective oil producer and is considered a stabilising force in a region where war has plagued some neighbours. It also contributes the biggest contingent of an African Union force fighting Islamist insurgents in Somalia.

[Uganda] Twitter condemns Uganda for blocking social media apps and censoring internet before key election (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [1/12/2021 3:55 PM, Andrew Mark Miller, Neutral]

Twitter is openly condemning internet service providers blocking social media apps in the run-up to an election in Uganda as it takes criticism for alleged censorship on its own platform.

"Ahead of the Ugandan election, we're hearing reports that Internet service providers are being ordered to block social media and messaging apps," the social media giant posted in a statement on Tuesday.

"We strongly condemn internet shutdowns – they are hugely harmful, violate basic human rights and the principles of the #OpenInternet," the statement continued.

The company argued that "access to information and freedom of expression, including the public conversation on Twitter, is never more important than during democratic processes, particularly elections."

Last year, Twitter was widely criticized for censorship on its platform, including the spiking of a bombshell New York Post story on President-elect Joe Biden's son Hunter's business dealings.

In recent weeks, the social media platform was slammed by conservatives after the company permanently banned President Trump and appeared to purge tens of thousands of followers from many prominent conservative accounts.

Additionally, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey appeared to recently celebrate the news that Parler, a conservative response to Twitter, was banned from Apple's app store. Conservatives on Twitter quickly blasted the social media company in response to the Uganda statement. "are there no mirrors at twitter," Blaze social media editor Jessica O'Donnell tweeted. "You don't say..." Spectator USA contributor Stephen L. Miller sarcastically responded. "What kind of monsters would block the right to free speech!!!" policy writer and commentator Anuraag Saxena tweeted. "Oh wait!"

Twitter declined to answer a request for comment from the Washington Examiner.

Uganda has banned social media and stepped up security days before the presidential election between President Yoweri Museveni and his challenger Bobi Wine. Museveni apologized for the move but claimed he had "no choice" after Facebook removed several posts supporting his party.

Network TV News Coverage

Minnesota Finds New COVID Strain while Britain Struggles with More Contagious Virus (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/12/2021 9:49 AM, Staff]

The new, more contagious strain of COVID-19 is turning up now in Minnesota. Health officials there say five cases have been identified in four different counties in the Twin Cities

metro area. The new strain has also been identified in several other U.S. states and several other countries around the world. Britain has been hit especially hard by the new strain. Hospitals there are being overwhelmed by new COVID cases, and many of those new cases are being identified as the new, more contagious coronavirus.

Amazon Follows Apple and Google in Dropping App Used to Spread Extremism (CBS Overnight News)

(B) CBS Overnight News [1/12/2021 3:51 AM, Anna Werner, 328K]

The backlash from the assault on the Capitol includes pulling the plug on an online forum used to spread far-right extremist viewpoints. Amazon suspended Parler from its web-hosting service, saying violent content on the site violated its terms of service. Apple and Google have already moved to cut off Parler, and the company's CEO said the site may be dark indefinitely. Before, during, and even after the violent attack, the social media site Parler was a megaphone for Trump supporters. "We need to start systematically assassinating #liberal leaders," read one post. In another message, which is now deleted, posted after the attack, pro-Trump lawyer Lin Wood called for Vice President Mike Pence's execution, writing, "Get the firing squads ready. Pence goes FIRST." Kevin Roose, a tech columnist from the New York Times, says, "These are things that mainstream social networks have policies against, and so if you get kicked off Twitter for saying them, a lot of the time your next step was to make a Parler account and just move your followers over there." Over the weekend, Amazon became the latest tech giant to notify Parler it was suspending its account. In an email obtained by BuzzFeed News, an Amazon web services safety team told Parler, "Recently, we've seen a steady increase in... violent content on your website, all of which violates our terms." Roose says that Parler losing both its app store privileges and its web host "is about as close to a kiss of death as you can get in the world of apps." In a phone interview with FOX News, Parler's CEO John Matze defended the platform and said the move from Amazon could put the company out of business. "It's obvious delusion, and they are doing it to stifle free speech and competition in the marketplace. It can happen to literally anyone." Amazon's decision comes after Apple and Google banned Parler from its platforms. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have suspended President Donald Trump's accounts, citing the risk of further incitements of violence. The moves received criticism from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who tweeted, "Silencing speech is dangerous. It's un-American." Roose says Trump's accounts were suspended because he "said something mean or called someone a name," but there was "bloodshed" and "real violence" that could potentially be repeated in the future. A pro-Trump demonstration is expected to be held Tuesday morning at Twitter headquarters even though most of the company's employees are working from home. Late Monday night, Parler's CEO said the site will be offline longer than expected because other vendors have dropped them following Amazon, Apple, and Google's actions.

Pope Expands Role of Women in Catholic Church (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [1/12/2021 1:05 AM, Sabina Castelfranco]

The pope expands the role of women in the Catholic Church but stops short of allowing them to become priests. In a new decree titled "Spiritus Domini," Pope Francis took another step towards greater equality for women in the Catholic Church while reaffirming that women cannot be priests. He changed Church law to explicitly allow women to have more roles during Mass. Women can be installed as lectors, read the Scriptures, and serve on the altar as Eucharist Ministers. In the past, these roles were reserved for men, with exceptions.

[Indonesia] Flight Data Recorder from Boeing 737 Crash Found (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [1/12/2021 10:40 AM, Staff]

Divers have now recovered the flight data recorder from the Boeing 737-500 jet that went down in the Java Sea over the weekend, and Indonesia's military chief says he expects they'll find the cockpit voice recorder soon. The plane disappeared shortly after takeoff on Saturday. Heavy rain was falling at the time. Emergency responders have found wreckage and human remains, but no survivors. Authorities hope the black box will shed light on what brought the plane down. The plane is believed to have made a sudden nosedive into the sea. 62 people were aboard the aircraft. About two years ago, a 737 MAX went down in the Java Sea. It was the first of two deadly accidents involving that airplane that ultimately resulted in it being grounded for nearly two years. The plane involved in this crash was not a 737 MAX jet, but an older 737 model.

[Cuba] Cuba Slams Terrorism Tag (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

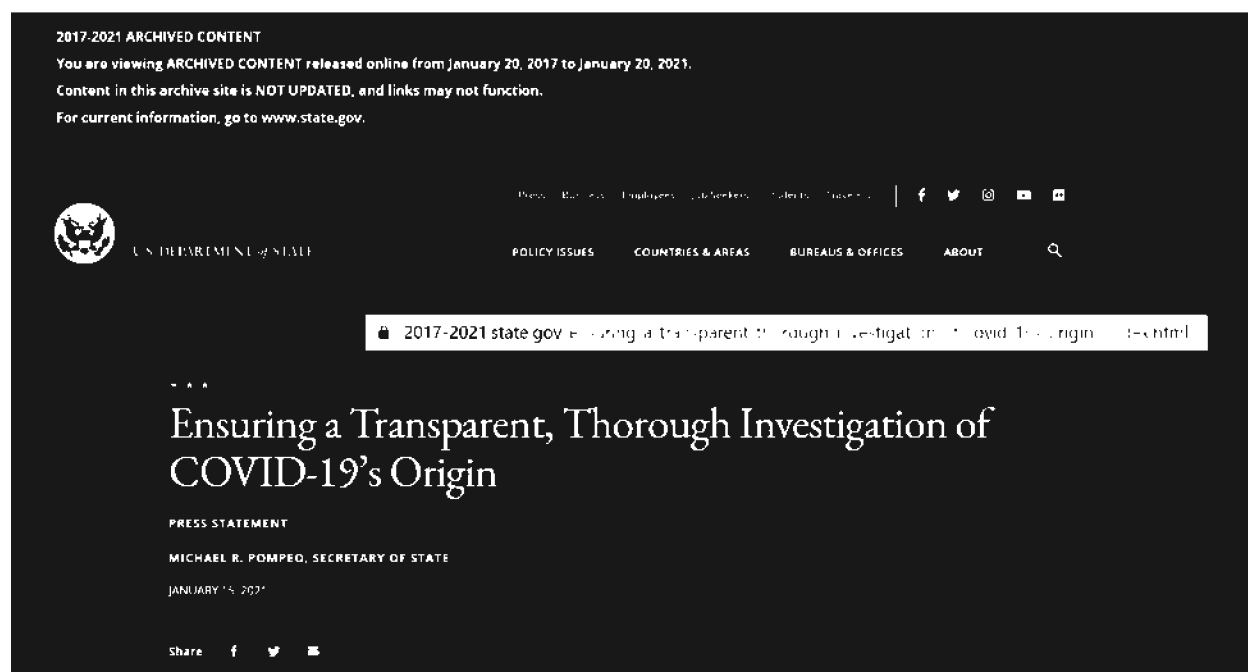
(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [1/12/2021 7:57 AM, Staff, 896K]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has announced the U.S. is placing Cuba back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. A Cuban diplomat calls the move "hypocritical" and "cynical."

{End of Report}

Sender: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>

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The United States has repeatedly called for a transparent and thorough investigation into the origin of COVID-19. Understanding the origin of this pandemic is essential for global public health, economic recovery, and international security.

To assist the vital work of the World Health Organization (WHO) investigative team that arrived in China this week, the United States government is today sharing new information concerning the activities inside China's government laboratories in 2019.

In particular, we urge the WHO to press the government of China to address the following:

1. **Illnesses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):** The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was "zero infection" among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
2. **WIV Research on "RaTG13" and "gain of function":** Starting in at least 2016, WIV researchers studied RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible "gain of function" experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality.
3. **Secret WIV Links to Military Research:** Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

The COVID-19 pandemic was avoidable. Any responsible country would have invited world health investigators to Wuhan within days of an outbreak. China instead refused offers of help – including from the United States – and punished brave Chinese doctors, scientists, and journalists who tried to alert the world to the dangers of the virus. Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one.

The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report. Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world.

Fact Sheet: Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology

TAGS

Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs China Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Health Office of the Spokesperson The Secretary of State World Health Organization

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/ensuring-a-transparent-thorough-investigation-of-covid-19s-origin//index.html>

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/coronavirus/releases/index.html>

From: (b)(6)
To: Laura Gross (b)(6) @state.gov>
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
CC: David Feith (b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: Rethinking Gain-of-Function Experiments in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Date: Fri, 4 Dec 2020 02:46:15 +0000

From the most noted gain of function critic in the bio-medical world.

<https://mbio.asm.org/content/mbio/11/4/e01868-20.full.pdf>

EDITORIAL

Rethinking Gain-of-Function Experiments in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michael J. Imperiale,^a Editor in Chief, mSphere, Arturo Casadevall,^b Editor in Chief, mBio
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ABSTRACT Proponents of the use of gain-of-function (GOF) experiments with pathogens with pandemic potential (PPP) have argued that such experiments are necessary because they reveal important facets of pathogenesis and can be performed safely. Opponents of GOF experiments with PPP have argued that the risks outweigh the knowledge gained. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the vulnerability of human societies to a new PPP, while also validating some arguments of both camps, questioning others, and suggesting the need to rethink how we approach this class of experiments.

KEY WORDS biosafety, bioterrorism, policy

At the turn of the 21st century, scientists and public health officials were concerned about a possible pandemic, with the greatest worry being the emergence of a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus. A number of human cases of infection with an avian influenza virus H5N1 strain had been reported in China, all of which appeared to be the result of direct contact between birds and people. The major reason for concern was that the mortality rate of those infected was extremely high, approximately 60%. However, those H5N1 viruses could not spread from person to person. Thus, if the H5N1 virus acquired the ability to transmit from human to human, the potential consequences could have been disastrous.

Two laboratories, the Kawaoka laboratory at the University of Wisconsin in the United States and the Fouchier laboratory at Erasmus Medical Center in the Netherlands, decided to test experimentally whether this H5N1 virus could evolve to transmit in such a way, using the well-established ferret model for transmission. Both laboratories, using different approaches, were able to isolate viruses that could spread via aerosols from one ferret to another (1, 2).

Their attempts to publish their results initiated a major debate about so-called gain-of-function (GOF) experiments with pathogens that have pandemic potential. Here, the GOF was the ability to spread from one mammalian host to another. The history of this debate has been described and analyzed extensively by us and others, and will not be repeated here (3, 4). What is relevant in

2020, however, is that one of the major concerns raised about these experiments has been that if there were an accidental release of a highly transmissible, highly pathogenic pathogen from a laboratory, it could spread very rapidly and cause significant morbidity and mortality. One analysis predicted an extremely high level of spread while another, from one of the laboratories involved in this research, reached a very different conclusion (5–7).

The arguments of that debate are relevant during the current COVID-19 pandemic because the spread of SARS-CoV-2 has uncovered a significant gap in global preparedness to handle a pathogen of this type, be it natural or laboratory derived. Most experts who have been studying and discussing preparedness agree that the source of the pathogen does not significantly change the nature of the response. Does this deficiency

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The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the journal or of ASM.

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in handling the COVID-19 pandemic change how we as a research community should think about these GOF experiments? Our answer is yes, as follows.

We preface this discussion with the key point that we are not concerned with the notion of gain-of-function experiments writ large: many experiments in many biological systems confer an additional function on a gene or a protein or an organism. Rather, we are specifically talking about experiments involving pandemic pathogens, the experiments to which we refer with the uppercase GOF moniker.

We have argued previously that GOF experiments are sometimes the only way to address important questions about the biology of a pathogen (8). In the H5N1 situation, public health officials, including from the WHO, made the argument that it was critical to know whether this influenza virus could acquire a human-to-human transmission trait. We have therefore proposed an important criterion for proceeding with such experiments, namely, that there be a compelling medical reason to do so (4). That has not changed: one should not be performing GOF experiments simply to “see what would happen” without strong evidence that it could happen naturally. In other words, just because an experiment can be done does not mean that it should be done. We also argued that it is incumbent upon the scientific community to perform these experiments using strict biocontainment infrastructure and procedures, and we even admonished the community a few years ago after a rash of accidents with less pathogenic organisms (9).

In recent months, the argument was raised that SARS-CoV-2 may have accidentally escaped from a high-containment laboratory in Wuhan, China (10). At this time, the scientific consensus is that the virus emerged as a zoonosis whereby it jumped from an animal host, possibly bats or pangolins, to humans (11), and arguments about a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 are more akin to a conspiracy theory than to a scientifically credible hypothesis. In the very unlikely event

that SARS-Cov-2 had emerged by accidental escape from a lab, however, that would be a great cause for concern because the Wuhan facility was state of the art and presumably operating with a high degree of care.

Regardless of how SARS-CoV-2 found its way into humans, what is certain is that the world's governments were caught off guard about how to respond. The ubiquitous ability of people to travel around the globe allowed the virus to spread rapidly before we knew what hit us, and even once we became aware, many countries reacted either too late or in arguably inappropriate ways, leading to many thousands of avoidable deaths.

Taking all of this into consideration, we posit three solutions moving forward. First, we reinforce our call for transparent review of all GOF experiments prior to their being commenced, to ensure that they are indeed addressing medically important questions and that GOF is the best way to obtain the answers. These discussions must be public, and decisions cannot be made behind closed doors, as it appears was the case for decisions late last year by the NIH to allow new GOF experiments on H5N1 to resume (12). A lack of openness only breeds distrust and suspicion and, if something untoward were to occur, might result in a draconian response that could have far-reaching implications for the future of all research involving pathogens.

Second, we call once again for a rededication of effort and attention to biosafety. All laboratories that carry out experiments on highly pathogenic organisms should be required to adhere to a common set of protocols and procedures, including appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Again, in the interest of transparency, the results of regular inspections should be made publicly available. Some may argue that following these first two recommendations might require disclosure of proprietary information, such as what is found in an application for funding from the NIH or any other agency. However, we would argue that the stakes here are high enough that some form of transparency is necessary. Most importantly, laboratories must institute strict screening measures for their workers that regularly evaluate exposure, and protocols must be in place to ensure that exposed workers do not transmit to others.

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Our third solution requires a concerted effort, in the United States and worldwide, to enhance our capability to mitigate the risks posed by GOF experiments. This must be part of a broader effort to be prepared for biosecurity threats and future zoonotic threats from nature. With respect to the former, it is concerning to us that a bad actor may see the way COVID-19 has been (mis)handled as evidence that a bioweapon can be used to inflict a great degree of damage. We must have strong mitigation efforts in place, starting with the ability to detect and prevent planned attacks. Similarly, we must have a strong surveillance program that watches for zoonotic events. Such a program will require goodwill and cooperation with other countries and the WHO.

It is also essential that we develop better ways to respond to any future events. For any transmissible disease, first and foremost one would like to have a containment process in place that uses surveillance, testing, isolation, and contact tracing to prevent spread. The utility of this approach was evident and successful during the first SARS outbreak in 2003. That success has been more difficult (or, some might argue, impossible) to achieve with SARS-CoV-2 because this virus is highly contagious and can be spread prior to the appearance of symptoms. Despite this, some countries have been able to achieve an equivalent outcome by quickly locking down

while the number of confirmed cases was very low (e.g., New Zealand) or extensive testing coupled with use of big data (e.g., South Korea).

Another important part of the response is the ability to test and produce therapeutics and vaccines. The global efforts to do this for COVID-19 have been extensive and impressive. Drugs that have already been approved for other indications are being tested for their ability to treat the disease: if one is efficacious, it would save a significant amount of time obtaining regulatory approval. Dozens of vaccine candidates are in development, including tried-and-true approaches such as inactivated and subunit vaccines, and new technologies such as adenovirus and RNA platforms. One of us has helped to organize an effort to use convalescent-phase serum, which contains antibodies that neutralize the virus (13).

One way to bolster these efforts would be to create a civilian equivalent of the U.S. military reserve system. The members of this reserve force could be drawn from various communities including scientists, public health experts, health care workers, ethicists, and anyone with an interest in serving society when there is a future infectious disease crisis. Like military reservists, they could dedicate time each year to train for responding as necessary and be deployed to assist federal, state, and local authorities with the numerous tasks required to contain an outbreak. So, almost a decade after the great GOF debate of 2011 to 2012, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the arguments from both sides had merit. The anti-GOF camp's central argument that these experiments were too dangerous to conduct because humanity was too vulnerable to a pandemic proved correct in the sense that the world was unprepared for COVID-19. On the other hand, the pro-GOF camp's central argument that these experiments were necessary because we needed information on mechanisms of virulence and transmission also proved correct as humanity faced a new coronavirus with scant knowledge of how it spread and caused disease. Going forward, we need the humility to recognize that both sides had important points and find ways to obtain the information that we need to know while minimizing risks.

Humans are always going to be faced with new infectious threats. We live in an interconnected world in which deadly pathogens with the right traits have the ability to spread very rapidly. As a society, we must invest in (i) basic research to understand the biology of these microorganisms and how they interact with their hosts; (ii) applied research to develop new diagnostics, therapeutics, and preventative measures; (iii) better training for individuals working with dangerous pathogens and guidelines for monitoring potential laboratory exposures; (iv) transparent review of proposed experiments for their benefits and risks; (v) public health capacity to monitor for potential new species jumps and outbreaks; and (vi) the ability to respond more rapidly and nimbly to events when they occur. A holistic approach such as this will provide the maximum benefits to society.

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From: (b)(6) (Geneva)"
To: Feith, David (b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: Re: Wuhan statement
Date: Wed, 13 Jan 2021 15:28:27 +0000

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From: Feith, David (b)(6) @state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, January 13, 2021 4:05:56 PM
To: (b)(6) (Geneva) <(b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: FW: Wuhan statement

Thanks as ever. Drafts language here/attached. (b)(5)

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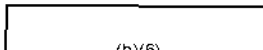
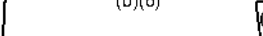
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Sender:  (Geneva)"
Recipient:  @state.gov>

From: "Gibbs, Jeffrey J" (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: RE: WSJ Editorial: Who Are the Covid Investigators? (Full Text)
Date: Tue, 16 Feb 2021 21:17:27 +0000

A little late for this type of piece (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Jeff Gibbs
Senior Advisor
AVC Bureau
Department of State
(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, February 16, 2021 2:24 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: WSJ Editorial: Who Are the Covid Investigators? (Full Text)

Full text: https://www.wsj.com/articles/who-are-the-covid-investigators-11613401955?mod=opinion_lead_pos2

Who Are the Covid Investigators?
Members of a WHO origin probe have conflicts of interest.

By The Editorial Board
Feb. 15, 2021 10:12 am ET

The world needs to learn all it can about the origins of the novel coronavirus, and the World Health Organization has been investigating. But there's increasing reason to question the effort due to China's lack of cooperation and conflicts of interest on the WHO team.

A Beijing-approved WHO delegation recently concluded a 12-day visit to Wuhan, where the virus emerged more than a year ago. The group visited local hospitals and sites like the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and Huanan Seafood Market. But such field trips aren't very helpful without unhindered access to raw data. The Chinese government, which controls research into Covid-19's origin, has limited WHO access to such information.

Chinese officials are spinning that Covid-19 came from outside China. Some Communist Party functionaries have suggested the virus was imported through frozen food, but few scientists take the idea seriously. Many believe it arrived through “zoonotic spillover,” passing perhaps from bats, through another species, to humans. Another theory is that the virus came from a laboratory such as the one in Wuhan.

The WIV has conducted controversial “gain of function” research on coronaviruses. Such experiments can provide viruses with new capabilities—such as the ability to infect a different species. The U.S. State Department has said “several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019” and had “symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses.” This is important to investigate.

Yet the recent WHO trip ended with a propaganda coup for Beijing. Peter Ben Embarek, head of the WHO team, declared the lab hypothesis “extremely unlikely” and “not in the hypotheses that we will suggest for future studies.” Mr. Embarek said he had spoken with lab personnel extensively, and “they’re the best ones to dismiss the claims.” But apparently the frozen-food theory was worth looking into.

This was too much even for WHO director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus. “The expert team is still working on its final report,” he clarified last week. “All hypotheses remain open and require further study.” But who ensures that?

One prominent member of the WHO team is zoologist Peter Daszak. Also part of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission, Mr. Daszak has vowed to investigate “with an open mind” and “not be bound by preconceived ideas.”

Yet emails obtained by the nonprofit U.S. Right to Know show that Mr. Daszak long ago made up his mind about the lab-leak theory. In February 2020, he helped organize a statement in the Lancet condemning “conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.” In one email, Mr. Daszak wrote that the document should “not be identifiable as coming from any one organization or person.” But EcoHealth Alliance, the global nonprofit he leads, played an outsize role.

His interest is understandable. The British-born U.S. citizen has deep ties with the WIV. Millions of U.S. government dollars went to his organization to fund research at the Chinese institution. Mr. Daszak, who has consistently defended the Chinese government, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

“You’re looking for small clusters of outbreaks that went to a clinic because they were severe and their symptoms were just like Covid,” Mr. Daszak said during a CNN interview from Wuhan earlier this month. “That didn’t happen. We didn’t see that in the data earlier than December.” Never mind that Washington said it found exactly that at the WIV.

While Mr. Daszak touted the “really remarkable openness from China,” other experts from the WHO committee complained about political pressure and uncooperative hosts blocking access to important data. The Australian team member Dominic Dwyer in particular deserves credit for speaking candidly.

Also of concern is Marion Koopmans, who oversees the viroscience department at the Erasmus University Medical Center in Rotterdam, Netherlands. A decade ago Ms. Koopmans’s deputy, Ron Fouchier, made international news by modifying a deadly flu virus to spread between ferrets. If an investigation finds it likely that the Covid-19 pandemic was caused by gain-of-function research, that would have repercussions for labs around the world, including at Erasmus MC. A spokesman for the organization didn’t respond to a request for comment.

A WHO spokesman told us that “we wanted to ensure a well-represented international team with geographic and topic area expertise balance.” That makes sense, and such a team would consult scientists like Ms. Koopmans and Mr. Daszak. But their critical role as investigators undermines confidence in the probe.

Donald Trump’s criticism of WHO was often dismissed as politically self-interested, but the inquiry has unnerved the organization’s supporters as well. “We have deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the COVID-19 investigation were communicated and questions about the process used to reach them,” U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in a Saturday statement. Deep concerns? Such as?

“Please don’t rely too much on US intel: increasingly disengaged under Trump & frankly wrong on many aspects,” Mr. Daszak tweeted last week. Making as much of the intelligence as possible available, and vocally and clearly raising U.S. concerns, is the best way for the White House to respond to this spin from China and its apologists.

(b)(6)

*Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
U.S. Department of State*

(b)(6)

From: "Feith, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: RE: WIV Document Declass
Date: Tue, 19 Jan 2021 17:32:00 +0000

Yep. Sensible as ever. But demands for access/answers is where we've been for a year. Was crucial to get out the new info, and then demand access/answers about it too...

From: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 19, 2021 12:24 PM
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: FW: WIV Document Declass

Just getting to this; here's Beigun's take. (b)(5)

From: Biegun, Stephen E (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, January 14, 2021 11:00 PM
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Palladino, Robert J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: WIV Document Declass

OK. (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 14, 2021, at 8:59 PM, Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:

Sir

Thank you for your consideration and apologies for adding to the last-minute close-out thrash. We had this ready before Christmas, but it keeps getting pushed.

After POTUS and then S statements on WIV origins in April were savaged by the media, we're very sensitive to the question of credibility. (b)(5)

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the goal is

to make clear that any investigation that does not include the most obvious possible origin of the outbreak would be incomplete. The ultimate goal is to prevent this from ever happening again.

Best

Dave

Among scientists, suspicions about the WIV have been ongoing since January—this article lays out the sequence well. It also paints a disturbing picture of supposedly objective scientists actively supporting a theory they know is false:

When word spread in January that a novel coronavirus had caused an outbreak in Wuhan—which is a thousand miles from where the bats that carry this lineage of viruses are naturally found—many experts were quietly alarmed. There was no proof that the lab was the source of the virus, but the pieces fit.

Despite the evidence, the scientific community quickly dismissed the idea. Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, which has funded the work of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other labs searching for new viruses, called the notion “preposterous,” and many other experts echoed that sentiment.

That wasn’t necessarily what every scientist thought in private, though. “They can’t speak directly,” one scientist told me confidentially, referring to the virology community’s fear of having their comments sensationalized in today’s politically charged environment. “Many virologists don’t want to be hated by everyone in the field.”

This researcher, Alina Chan, was too young and too idealistic to be cowed by the scientific apparatus—her persistence helped change the narrative in the scientific world. Dr Peter Dazsak (that name keeps coming up) tried to undermine her research, but she held her ground and he eventually had to concede.

Our task isn’t to sit in judgment of Fauci or Dazsak or the Virology world. It’s to get them to admit that the WIV was the most likely cause of the pandemic. This article suggests the following outcome:

Antonio Regalado, biomedicine editor of *MIT Technology Review*, put it more bluntly. If it turned out COVID-19 came from a lab, he tweeted, “it would shatter the scientific edifice top to bottom.” That’s a pretty good incentive to simply dismiss the whole hypothesis, but it quickly amounted to a global gaslighting of the media—and, by proxy, the public. An unhealthy absolutism set in: Either you insisted that any questions about lab involvement were absurd, or you were a tool of the Trump administration and its desperation to

blame China for the virus. I was used to social media pundits ignoring inconvenient or politically toxic facts, but I'd never expected to see that from some of our best scientists.

Could COVID-19 Have Escaped from a Lab?

The world's preeminent scientists say a theory from the Broad Institute's Alina Chan is too wild to be believed. But when the theory is about the possibility of COVID being man-made, is this science or censorship?

by **ROWAN JACOBSEN**, 9/9/2020, 9:29 a.m.

PRINT

Get a compelling long read and must-have lifestyle tips in your inbox every Sunday morning — great with coffee!

<image001.jpg>

Illustration by Benjamin Purvis

In January, as she watched the news about a novel virus spreading out of control in China, Alina Chan braced for a shutdown. The molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT started stockpiling medicine and supplies. By the time March rolled around and a quarantine seemed imminent, she'd bought hundreds of dollars' worth of fillets from her favorite fishmonger in Cambridge and packed them into her freezer. Then she began to ramp down her projects in the lab, isolating her experimental cells from their cultures and freezing them in small tubes.

As prepared as she was for the shutdown, though, she found herself unprepared for the frustration of being frozen out of work. She paced the walls of her tiny apartment feeling bored and useless. Chan has been a puzzle demon since childhood, which was precisely what she loved about her work—the chance to solve fiendishly difficult problems about how viruses operate and how, through gene therapy, they could be repurposed to help cure

devastating genetic diseases. Staring out her window at the eerily quiet streets of her Inman Square neighborhood, she groaned at the thought that it could be months before she was at it again. Her mind wandered back to 2003, when she was a teenager growing up in Singapore and the first SARS virus, a close relative of this coronavirus, appeared in Asia. It hadn't been anything like this. That one had been relatively easy to corral. *How had this virus come out of nowhere and shut down the planet? Why was it so different?* she asked herself.

Then it hit her: The world's greatest puzzle was staring her in the face. Stuck at home, all she had to work with was her brain and her laptop. Maybe they were enough. Chan fired up the kettle for the first of what would become hundreds of cups of tea, stacked four boxes on her kitchen counter to raise her laptop to the proper height, pulled back her long dark hair, and began reading all of the scientific literature she could find on the coronavirus.

It wasn't long before she came across an article about the remarkable stability of the virus, whose genome had barely changed from the earliest human cases, despite trillions of replications. This perplexed Chan. Like many emerging infectious diseases, COVID-19 was thought to be zoonotic—it originated in animals, then somehow found its way into people. At the time, the Chinese government and most scientists insisted the jump had happened at Wuhan's seafood market, but that didn't make sense to Chan. If the virus had leapt from animals to humans in the market, it should have immediately started evolving to life inside its new human hosts. But it hadn't.

On a hunch, she decided to look at the literature on the 2003 SARS virus, which had jumped from civets to people. *Bingo*. A few papers mentioned its rapid evolution in its first months of existence. Chan felt the familiar surge of puzzle endorphins. The new virus really wasn't behaving like it should. Chan knew that delving further into this puzzle would require some deep genetic analysis, and she knew just the person for the task. She opened Google Chat and fired off a message to Shing Hei Zhan. He was an old friend from her days at the University of British Columbia and, more important, he was a computational god.

"Do you want to partner on a very unusual paper?" she wrote.

Sure, he replied.

One thing Chan noticed about the original SARS was that the virus in the first human cases was subtly different—a few dozen letters of genetic code—from the one in the civets. That meant it had immediately morphed. She asked Zhan

to pull up the genomes for the coronaviruses that had been found on surfaces in the Wuhan seafood market. Were they at all different from the earliest documented cases in humans?

Zhan ran the analysis. Nope, they were 100 percent the same. Definitely from humans, not animals. The seafood-market theory, which Chinese health officials and the World Health Organization espoused in the early days of the pandemic, was wrong. Chan's puzzle detectors pulsed again. "Shing," she messaged Zhan, "this paper is going to be insane."

In the coming weeks, as the spring sun chased shadows across her kitchen floor, Chan stood at her counter and pounded out her paper, barely pausing to eat or sleep. It was clear that the first SARS evolved rapidly during its first three months of existence, constantly fine-tuning its ability to infect humans, and settling down only during the later stages of the epidemic. In contrast, the new virus looked a lot more like late-stage SARS. "It's almost as if we're missing the early phase," Chan marveled to Zhan. Or, as she put it in their paper, as if "it was already well adapted for human transmission."

That was a profoundly provocative line. Chan was implying that the virus was already familiar with human physiology when it had its coming-out party in Wuhan in late 2019. If so, there were three possible explanations.

Perhaps it was just staggeringly bad luck: The mutations had all occurred in an earlier host species, and just happened to be the perfect genetic arrangement for an invasion of humanity. But that made no sense. Those mutations would have been disadvantageous in the old host.

Maybe the virus had been circulating undetected in humans for months, working out the kinks, and nobody had noticed. Also unlikely. China's health officials would not have missed it, and even if they had, they'd be able to go back now through stored samples to find the trail of earlier versions. And they weren't coming up with anything.

That left a third possibility: The missing phase had happened in a lab, where the virus had been trained on human cells. Chan knew this was the third rail of potential explanations. At the time, conspiracy theorists were spinning bioweapon fantasies, and Chan was loath to give them any ammunition. But she also didn't want to play politics by withholding her findings. Chan is in her early thirties, still at the start of her career, and an absolute idealist about the purity of the scientific process. Facts were facts.

Or at least they used to be. Since the start of the pandemic, the Trump administration has been criticized for playing fast and loose with facts—denying, exaggerating, or spinning them to suit the president’s political needs. As a result, many scientists have learned to censor themselves for fear that their words will be misrepresented. Still, Chan thought, if she were to sit on scientific research just to avoid providing ammunition to conspiracy theorists or Trump, would she be any better than them?

Chan knew she had to move forward and make her findings public. In the final draft of her paper, she torpedoed the seafood-market theory, then laid out a case that the virus seemed curiously well adapted to humans. She mentioned all three possible explanations, carefully wording the third to emphasize that if the novel coronavirus did come from a lab, it would have been the result of an accident in the course of legitimate research.

On May 2, Chan uploaded the paper to a site where as-yet-unpublished biology papers known as “preprints” are shared for open peer review. She tweeted out the news and waited. On May 16, the *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid, picked up her research. The very next day, *Newsweek* ran a story with the headline “Scientists Shouldn’t Rule Out Lab as Source of Coronavirus, New Study Says.”

And that, Chan says, is when “shit exploded everywhere.”

<image002.jpg>

Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute, says we can’t rule out the possibility that the novel coronavirus originated in a lab—even though she knows it’s a politically radioactive thing to say. / Photo by Mona Miri

Chan had come to my attention a week before the *Newsweek* story was published through her smart and straightforward tweets, which I found refreshing at a time when most scientists were avoiding any serious discussion about the possibility that COVID-19 had escaped from a biolab. I’d written a lot about genetic engineering and so-called gain-of-function research—the fascinating, if scary, line of science in which scientists alter viruses to make them more transmissible or lethal as a way of assessing how close those viruses are to causing pandemics. I also knew that deadly pathogens escape from biolabs with surprising frequency. Most of these accidents end up being harmless, but many researchers have been infected, and people have died as a result.

For years, concerned scientists have warned that this type of pathogen research was going to trigger a pandemic. Foremost among them was Harvard epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch, who founded the Cambridge Working Group in 2014 to lobby against these experiments. In a series of policy papers, op-eds,

and scientific forums, he pointed out that accidents involving deadly pathogens occurred more than twice a week in U.S. labs, and estimated that just 10 labs performing gain-of-function research over a 10-year period would run a nearly 20 percent risk of an accidental release. In 2018, he argued that such a release could “lead to global spread of a virulent virus, a biosafety incident on a scale never before seen.”

Thanks in part to the Cambridge Working Group, the federal government briefly instituted a moratorium on such research. By 2017, however, the ban was lifted and U.S. labs were at it again. Today, in the United States and across the globe, there are dozens of labs conducting experiments on a daily basis with the deadliest known pathogens. One of them is the Wuhan Institute of Virology. For more than a decade, its scientists have been discovering coronaviruses in bats in southern China and bringing them back to their lab in Wuhan. There, they mix genes from different strains of these novel viruses to test their infectivity in human cells and lab animals.

When word spread in January that a novel coronavirus had caused an outbreak in Wuhan—which is a thousand miles from where the bats that carry this lineage of viruses are naturally found—many experts were quietly alarmed. There was no proof that the lab was the source of the virus, but the pieces fit.

Despite the evidence, the scientific community quickly dismissed the idea. Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, which has funded the work of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other labs searching for new viruses, called the notion “preposterous,” and many other experts echoed that sentiment.

That wasn’t necessarily what every scientist thought in private, though. “They can’t speak directly,” one scientist told me confidentially, referring to the virology community’s fear of having their comments sensationalized in today’s politically charged environment. “Many virologists don’t want to be hated by everyone in the field.”

There are other potential reasons for the pushback. There’s long been a sense that if the public and politicians really knew about the dangerous pathogen research being conducted in many laboratories, they’d be outraged. Denying the possibility of a catastrophic incident like this, then, could be seen as a form of career preservation. “For the substantial subset of virologists who perform gain-of-function research,” Richard Ebright, a Rutgers microbiologist and another founding member of the Cambridge Working Group, told me, “avoiding restrictions on research funding, avoiding implementation of

appropriate biosafety standards, and avoiding implementation of appropriate research oversight are powerful motivators.” Antonio Regalado, biomedicine editor of *MIT Technology Review*, put it more bluntly. If it turned out COVID-19 came from a lab, he tweeted, “it would shatter the scientific edifice top to bottom.”

That’s a pretty good incentive to simply dismiss the whole hypothesis, but it quickly amounted to a global gaslighting of the media—and, by proxy, the public. An unhealthy absolutism set in: Either you insisted that any questions about lab involvement were absurd, or you were a tool of the Trump administration and its desperation to blame China for the virus. I was used to social media pundits ignoring inconvenient or politically toxic facts, but I’d never expected to see that from some of our best scientists.

Which is why Chan stood out on Twitter, daring to speak truth to power. “It is very difficult to do research when one hypothesis has been negatively cast as a conspiracy theory,” she wrote. Then she offered some earnest advice to researchers, suggesting that most viral research should be done with neutered viruses that have had their replicating machinery removed in advance, so that even if they escaped confinement, they would be incapable of making copies of themselves. “When these precautions are not followed, risk of lab escape is exponentially higher,” she explained, adding, “I hope the pandemic motivates local ethics and biosafety committees to think carefully about how they can reduce risk.” She elaborated on this in another tweet several days later: “I’d also—personally—prefer if high biosafety level labs were not located in the most populous cities on earth.”

How Safe Are Boston’s Biolabs?

As one of the world centers of biotech, the Hub is peppered with academic and corporate labs doing research on pathogens. Foremost among them is Boston University’s National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL), the only lab in the city designated as BSL-4 (the highest level of biosafety and the same level as the Wuhan Institute of Virology). It is one of just a dozen or so in the United States equipped to work with live versions of the world’s most dangerous viruses, including Ebola and Marburg. Researchers there began doing so in 2018 after a decade of controversy: Many locals objected to the risks of siting such a facility in the center of a major metropolitan area.

The good news? Before opening, NEIDL undertook one of the most thorough risk assessments in history, learning from the mistakes of other facilities. Even Lynn Klotz, a senior science fellow at the Washington, DC–based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, who advised local groups that opposed NEIDL, told the medical website Contagion that the lab likely has the best possible security protocols and measures in place.

But the reality, Klotz added, is that most lab accidents are caused by human error, and there is only so much that can be done through good design and protocols to proactively prevent such mistakes. (Or to guard against an intentional release by a disgruntled researcher, as allegedly happened in the anthrax attacks of 2001.) Rutgers molecular biologist Richard Ebright, a longtime critic of potentially dangerous pathogen research, says the risks introduced by NEIDL are not low enough and “definitely not” worth the negligible benefits.

Still, risk is relative. Klotz has estimated the chance of a pathogen escape from a BSL-4 lab at 0.3 percent per year, and NEIDL is probably significantly safer than the typical BSL-4 lab. And if catching a deadly pathogen is your fear, well, currently you run a good risk of finding one in your own neighborhood. Until that gets cleared up, the city's biolabs are probably among the safer spaces in town.

Chan had started using her Twitter account this intensely only a few days earlier, as a form of outreach for her paper. The social platform has become the way many scientists find out about one another's work, and studies have shown that attention on Twitter translates to increased citations for a paper in scientific literature. But it's a famously raw forum. Many scientists are not prepared for the digital storms that roil the Twitterverse, and they don't handle it well. Chan dreaded it at first, but quickly took to Twitter like a digital native. "Having Twitter elevates your work," she says. "And I think it's really fun to talk to nonscientists about that work."

After reading her tweets, I reviewed her preprint, which I found mind-blowing, and wrote her to say so. She thanked me and joked that she worried it might be "career suicide."

It wasn't long before it began to look like she might be right.

Speaking her mind, it turns out—even in the face of censure—was nothing new for Chan, who is Canadian but was raised in Singapore, one of the more repressive regimes on earth. Her parents, both computer science professionals, encouraged free thinking and earnest inquiry in their daughter, but the local school system did not. Instead, it was a pressure-cooker of a system that rewarded students for falling in line, and moved quickly to silence rebels.

That was a bad fit for Chan. "You have to bow to teachers," she says. "Sometimes teachers from other classes would show up and ask me to bow to them. And I would say, 'No, you're not my teacher.' Back then they believed in corporal punishment. A teacher could just take a big stick and beat you in front of the class. I got whacked so many times."

Still, Chan rebelled in small ways, skipping school and hanging out at the arcade. She also lost interest in her studies. "I just really didn't like school. And I didn't like all the extracurriculars they pack you with in Singapore," she says. That changed when a teacher recruited her for math Olympiads, in which teams of students compete to solve devilishly hard arithmetic puzzles. "I really loved it," she says. "You just sit in a room and think about problems."

Chan might well have pursued a career in math, but then she came up against teams from China in Olympiad competitions. "They would just wipe everyone else off the board," she says. "They were machines. They'd been trained in

math since they could walk. They'd hit the buzzer before you could even comprehend the question. I thought, *I'm not going to survive in this field.*"

Chan decided to pursue biology instead, studying at the University of British Columbia. "I liked viruses from the time I was a teen," she says. "I remember the first time I learned about HIV. I thought it was a puzzle and a challenge." That instinct took her to Harvard Medical School as a postdoc, where the puzzle became how to build virus-like biomolecules to accomplish tasks inside cells, and then to Ben Deverman's lab at the Broad Institute. "When I see an interesting question, I want to spend 100 percent of my time working on it," she says. "I get really fixated on answering scientific questions."

Deverman, for his part, says he wasn't actively looking to expand his team when Chan came along, but when "opportunities to hire extraordinary people fall in my lap," he takes them. "Alina brings a ton of value to the lab," he explains, adding that she has an ability to pivot between different topics and cut to the chase. Nowhere was that more on display than with her coronavirus work, which Deverman was able to closely observe. In fact, Chan ran so many ideas past him that he eventually became a coauthor. "She is insightful, determined, and has the rare ability to explain complex scientific findings to other scientists and to the public," he says.

Those skills would prove highly useful when word got out about her coronavirus paper.

If Chan had spent a lifetime learning how to pursue scientific questions, she spent most of the shutdown learning what happens when the answers you come up with are politically radioactive. After the *Newsweek* story ran, conservative-leaning publications seized on her paper as conclusive evidence that the virus had come from a lab. "Everyone focused on the one line," Chan laments. "The tabloids just zoomed in on it." Meanwhile, conspiracists took it as hard evidence of their wild theories that there had been an intentional leak.

Chan spent several exhausting days putting out online fires with the many people who had misconstrued her findings. "I was so naive," she tells me with a quick, self-deprecating laugh. "I just thought, *Shouldn't the world be thinking about this fairly?* I really have to kick myself now."

Even more troubling, though, were the reactions from other scientists. As soon as her paper got picked up by the media, luminaries in the field sought to censure her. Jonathan Eisen, a well-known professor at UC Davis, criticized the study in *Newsweek* and on his influential Twitter account, writing, "Personally, I do not find the analysis in this new paper remotely convincing."

In a long thread, he argued that comparing the new virus to SARS was not enough to show that it was preadapted to humans. He wanted to see comparisons to the initial leap of other viruses from animals to humans.

Moments later, Daszak piled on. The NIH had recently cut its grant to his organization, EcoHealth Alliance, after the Trump administration learned that some of it had gone to fund the Wuhan Institute of Virology's work. Daszak was working hard to get it restored and trying to stamp out any suggestion of a lab connection. He didn't hold back on Chan. "This is sloppy research," he tweeted, calling it "a poorly designed phylogenetic study with too many inferences and not enough data, riding on a wave of conspiracy to drive a higher impact." Peppering his tweets with exclamation points, he attacked the wording of the paper, arguing that one experiment it cited was impossible, and told Chan she didn't understand her own data. Afterward, a Daszak supporter followed up his thread with a GIF of a mike drop.

It was an old and familiar dynamic: threatened silverback male attempts to bully a junior female member of the tribe. As a postdoc, Chan was in a vulnerable position. The world of science is still a bit medieval in its power structure, with a handful of institutions and individuals deciding who gets published, who gets positions, who gets grants. There's little room for rebels.

What happened next was neither old nor familiar: Chan didn't back down. "Sorry to disrupt mike drop," she tweeted, providing a link to a paper in the prestigious journal *Nature* that "does that exact experiment you thought was impossible." Politely but firmly, she justified each point Daszak had attacked, showing him his mistakes. In the end, Daszak was reduced to arguing that she had used the word "isolate" incorrectly. In a coup de grâce, Chan pointed out that actually the word had come from online data provided by GenBank, the NIH's genetic sequence database. She offered to change it to whatever made sense. At that point, Daszak stopped replying. He insists, however, that Chan is overinterpreting her findings.

With Eisen, Chan readily agreed to test her hypothesis by finding other examples of viruses infecting new hosts. Within days, a perfect opportunity came along when news broke that the coronavirus had jumped from humans to minks at European fur farms. Sure enough, the mink version began to rapidly mutate. "You actually see the rapid evolution happening," Chan said. "Just in the first few weeks, the changes are quite drastic."

Chan also pointed out to Eisen that the whole goal of a website such as bioRxiv (pronounced "bioarchive")—where she posted the paper—is to elicit feedback that will make papers better before publication. Good point, he replied.

Eventually he conceded that there was “a lot of interesting analysis in the paper” and agreed to work with Chan on the next draft.

The Twitter duels with her powerful colleagues didn’t rattle Chan. “I thought Jonathan was very reasonable,” she says. “I really appreciated his expertise, even if he disagreed with me. I like that kind of feedback. It helped to make our paper better.”

With Daszak, Chan is more circumspect. “Some people have trouble keeping their emotions in check,” she says. “Whenever I saw his comments, I’d just think, *Is there something I can learn here? Is there something he’s right about that I should be fixing?*” Ultimately, she decided, there was not.

By late May, both journalists and armchair detectives interested in the mystery of the coronavirus were discovering Chan as a kind of Holmes to our Watson. She crunched information at twice our speed, zeroing in on small details we’d overlooked, and became a go-to for anyone looking for spin-free explications of the latest science on COVID-19. It was thrilling to see her reasoning in real time, a reminder of why I’ve always loved science, with its pursuit of patterns that sometimes leads to exciting revelations. The website CNET featured her in a story about “a league of scientists-turned-detectives” who were using genetic sequencing technologies to uncover COVID-19’s origins. After it came out, Chan added “scientist-turned-detective” to her Twitter bio.

She’s lived up to her new nom de tweet. As the search for the source of the virus continued, several scientific teams published papers identifying a closely related coronavirus in pangolins—anteater-like animals that are heavily trafficked in Asia for their meat and scales. The number of different studies made it seem as though this virus was ubiquitous in pangolins. Many scientists eagerly embraced the notion that the animals might have been the intermediate hosts that had passed the novel coronavirus to humans. It fit their preexisting theories about wet markets, and it would have meant no lab had been involved.

As Chan read the pangolin papers, she grew suspicious. The first one was by a team that had analyzed a group of the animals intercepted by anti-smuggling authorities in southern China. They found the closely related virus in a few of them, and published the genomes for that virus. Some of the other papers, though, were strangely ambiguous about where their data was coming from, or how their genomes had been constructed. Had they really taken samples from actual pangolins?

Once again, Chan messaged Shing Hei Zhan. “Shing, something’s weird here,” she wrote. Zhan pulled up the raw data from the papers and compared the genomes they had published. Individual copies of a virus coming from different animals should have small differences, just as individuals of a species have genetic differences. Yet the genomes in all of the pangolin papers were perfect matches—the authors were all simply using the first group’s data set. Far from being ubiquitous, the virus had been found only in a few pangolins who were held together, and it was unclear where they had caught it. The animals might have even caught it from their own smuggler.

Remarkably, one group of authors in *Nature* even appeared to use the same genetic sequences from the other paper as if it were confirmation of their own discovery. “These sequences appear to be from the same virus (Pangolin-CoV) that we identified in the present study.”

Chan called them out on Twitter: “Of course it’s the same Pangolin-CoV, you used the same dataset!” For context, she later added, “Imagine if clinical trials were playing fast and loose with their patient data; renaming patients, throwing them into different datasets without clarification, possibly even describing the same patient multiple times across different studies unintentionally.”

She and Zhan posted a new preprint on bioRxiv dismantling the pangolin papers. Confirmation came in June when the results of a study of hundreds of pangolins in the wildlife trade were announced: Not a single pangolin had any sign of a coronavirus. Chan took a victory lap on Twitter: “Supports our hypothesis all this time.” The pangolin theory collapsed.

Chan then turned her Holmesian powers on bigger game: Daszak and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Daszak had been pleading his case everywhere from *60 Minutes* to the *New York Times* and has been successful in rallying sympathy to his cause, even getting 77 Nobel laureates to sign a letter calling for the NIH to restore EcoHealth Alliance’s funding.

In several long and detailed “tweetorials,” Chan began to cast a cloud of suspicion on the WIV’s work. She pointed out that scientists there had discovered a virus that is more than 96 percent identical to the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2013 in a mineshaft soon after three miners working there had died from a COVID-like illness. The WIV didn’t share these findings until 2020, even though the goal of such work, Chan pointed out, was supposedly to identify viruses with the potential to cause human illnesses and warn the world about them.

Even though that virus had killed three miners, Daszak said it wasn't considered a priority to study at the time. "We were looking for SARS-related virus, and this one was 20 percent different. We thought it was interesting, but not high risk. So we didn't do anything about it and put it in the freezer," he told a reporter from *Wired*. It was only in 2020, he maintained, that they started looking into it once they realized its similarity to COVID-19. But Chan pointed to an online database showing that the WIV had been genetically sequencing the mine virus in 2017 and 2018, analyzing it in a way they had done in the past with other viruses in preparation for running experiments with them. Diplomatic yet deadpan, she wrote, "I think Daszak was misinformed."

For good measure, almost in passing, Chan pointed out a detail no one else had noticed: COVID-19 contains an uncommon genetic sequence that has been used by genetic engineers in the past to insert genes into coronaviruses without leaving a trace, and it falls at the exact point that would allow experimenters to swap out different genetic parts to change the infectivity. That same sequence can occur naturally in a coronavirus, so this was not irrefutable proof of an unnatural origin, Chan explained, "only an observation." Still, it was enough for one Twitter user to muse, "If capital punishment were as painful as what Alina Chan is doing to Daszak/WIV regarding their story, it would be illegal."

Daszak says that indeed he had been misinformed and was unaware that that virus found in the mine shaft had been sequenced before 2020. He also says that a great lab, with great scientists, is now being picked apart to search for suspicious behavior to support a preconceived theory. "If you believe, deep down, something fishy went on, then what you do is you go through all the evidence and you try to look for things that support that belief," he says, adding, "That is not how you find the truth."

Many of the points in Chan's tweetorials had also been made by others, but she was the first reputable scientist to put it all together. That same week, London's *Sunday Times* and the BBC ran stories following the same trail of breadcrumbs that Chan had laid out to suggest that there had been a coverup at the WIV. The story soon circulated around the world. In the meantime, the WIV has steadfastly denied any viral leak. Lab director Yanyi Wang went on Chinese television and described such charges as "pure fabrication," and went on to explain that the bat coronavirus from 2013 was so different than COVID that it could not have evolved into it this quickly and that the lab only sequenced it and didn't obtain a live virus from it.

To this day, there is no definitive evidence as to whether the virus occurred naturally or had its origins in a lab, but the hypothesis that the Wuhan facility was the source is increasingly mainstream and the science behind it can no longer be ignored. And Chan is largely to thank for that.

In late spring, Chan walked through the tall glass doors of the Broad Institute for the first time in months. As she made her way across the gleaming marble foyer, her sneaker squeaks echoed in the silence. It was like the zombie apocalypse version of the Broad; all the bright lights but none of the people. It felt all the weirder that she was wearing her gym clothes to work.

A few days earlier, the Broad had begun letting researchers back into their labs to restart their projects. All computer work still needed to be done remotely, but bench scientists such as Chan could pop in just long enough to move along their cell cultures, provided they got tested for the virus every four days.

In her lab, Chan donned her white lab coat and took inventory, throwing out months of expired reagents and ordering new materials. Then she rescued a few samples from the freezer, took her seat at one of the tissue-culture hoods—stainless steel, air-controlled cabinets in which cell engineers do their work—and began reviving some of her old experiments.

She had mixed emotions about being back. It felt good to free her gene-therapy projects from their stasis, and she was even more excited about the new project she and Deverman were working on: an online tool that allows vaccine developers to track changes in the virus's genome by time, location, and other characteristics. "It came out of my personal frustration at not being able to get answers fast," she says.

On the other hand, she missed being all-consuming by her detective work. "I wanted to stop after the pangolin preprint," she says, "but this mystery keeps drawing me back in." So while she waits for her cell cultures to grow, she's been sleuthing on the side—only this time she has more company: Increasingly, scientists have been quietly contacting her to share their own theories and papers about COVID-19's origins, forming something of a growing underground resistance. "There's a lot of curiosity," she says. "People are starting to think more deeply about it." And they have to, she says, if we are going to prevent future outbreaks: "It's really important to find out where this came from so it doesn't happen again."

That is what keeps Chan up at night—the possibility of new outbreaks in humans from the same source. If the virus emerged naturally from a bat cave, there could well be other strains in existence ready to spill over. If they are

closely related, whatever vaccines we develop might work on them, too. But that might not be the case with manipulated viruses from a laboratory.

"Someone could have been sampling viruses from different caves for a decade and just playing mix-and-match in the lab, and those viruses could be so different from one another that none of our vaccines will work on them," she says. Either way, "We need to find where this came from, and close it down."

Whatever important information she finds, we can be sure Chan will share it with the world. Far from being shaken by the controversy her paper stirred, she is more committed than ever to holding a line that could all too easily be overrun. "Scientists shouldn't be censoring themselves," she says. "We're obliged to put all the data out there. We shouldn't be deciding that it's better if the public doesn't know about this or that. If we start doing that, we lose credibility, and eventually we lose the public's trust. And that's not good for science." In fact, it would cause an epidemic of doubt, and that wouldn't be good for any of us.

From: Biegun, Stephen E (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, January 14, 2021 8:24 PM
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Palladino, Robert J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: WIV Document Declass

I brought the latest draft home and will try to complete my read through once I am done with my Korea and Japan calls tonight — or by tomorrow morning at the latest.

During the course of my work on COVID-19 since January, I have had numerous opportunities to review the intelligence and also to discuss this very question with both Dr. Fauci and Dr. Redfield, head of the CDC. Well there is much that we still do not know about this virus, our leading medical experts were quite definitive in conversations with me as late as June that they simply could not draw any solid conclusions as to the origin of this virus.

After this statement was drafted, I took calls this week expressing deep concerns from counterparts at DNI and HHS, — and I received a lengthy memcon from the former acting T with a very contrarian view.

I agree with your objective, and I think the the concerns I heard were that early drafts miscast this as if it were an intelligence assessment, called out actions that we ourselves are doing, and demanded access that we would never ourselves provide. I asked my DNI and HHS counterparts to look again at the statement today and they got back to me late today. That is what I need to review once more.

The worst outcome is that we issue a statement that is impeached by anonymous press leaks and expert analysts. I see every indication that this outcome is likely.

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 14, 2021, at 7:30 PM, Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov wrote:

Secretary Biegun

S briefed his SEYES counterparts on the declassified information no 4 Jan, and announced that he would release a statement in the near future. The partners were interested and at least one has made a public statement of their own encouraging China to give the WHO Investigation Team full access. The Team landed today and has generated media chatter as to whether they'll get access. Anything we can do to keep pressure on China to cooperate would be good.

We'd like to release the statement tomorrow morning if at all possible, while the subject is still warm.

V/R

Dave

DAVID R. STILWELL

Assistant Secretary, East Asia Pacific

(b)(6)

<mime-attachment>

Sender: "Feith, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>

Recipient: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: WHO advisor: COVID-19 pandemic likely started via lab leak

Date: Sat, 23 Jan 2021 23:11:59 +0000

Thanks!

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, January 23, 2021 6:08 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: WHO advisor: COVID-19 pandemic likely started via lab leak

[Thanks to (b)(6) for the heads up]

<https://torontosun.com/news/world/who-advisor-covid-19-pandemic-started-via-a-lab-leak>

WHO advisor: COVID-19 pandemic likely started via lab leak

Calls wet market origin story a lie

Author of the article: Jane Stevenson

Publishing date: Jan 23, 2021 • 7 hours ago • 2 minute read

One year after the pandemic started, World Health Organization advisor Jamie Metzl wants China to come clean about the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

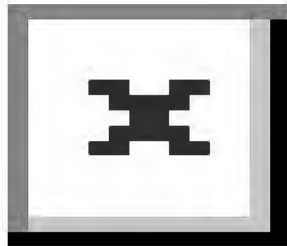
The Kansas City-born, New York-based Metzl, who served as Deputy Staff Director of the Foreign Relations Committee under then Senator Joe Biden (2001-2003) and before that on the National Security Council (1997-99) and the State Department (1999-01) under President Bill Clinton, theorizes it was most likely an accidental lab leak in Wuhan.

WHO advisor: COVID-19 pandemic likely started via lab leak

"There's no irrefutable evidence," said Metzl, who was appointed to the WHO's expert advisory committee on human genome editing in 2019 and is also the author of Hacking Darwin.

"There's just more evidence and as more evidence arrives, the case for accidental lab leak, in my view, increases."

We caught up with Metzl down the line from San Miguel de Allende:



Jamie Metzl/Postmedia files Photo by Files

/Postmedia

What about the original theory that this all started in a wet market in Wuhan?

That was a lie. And the Chinese government knew very early on that that was a lie. And so in the face of overwhelming evidence in May of last year, the Chinese government shifted its position.

Do you get the idea of scary viruses being created in a lab may seem a little sci-fi?

It may feel like sci-fi to people but what's happening is sci. There is a field of study called "gain of function" research, which is highly controversial in which some scientists amplify the virility of viruses. We know that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was involved in gain of function research on bat coronaviruses.

Is it because this specifically started in China that we still don't know how COVID-19 started?

If there had been an outbreak in Congo or some country in Africa and that country, in the earliest days of the pandemic, prevented World Health Organization investigators from going onto the scene of the outbreak, for nearly a month, the world would have gone berserk.

Will a change of the U.S. administration help find an answer?

Biden will be tougher on China than President Trump because President Biden is very smart and strategic and he understands that American power and American strength doesn't rest on bluster, it rests on principles, it rests on partnerships, and alliances and accountability. And the Trump administration unfortunately gave China a pass by over politicizing the question of the origin of the virus by alienating America's partners and allies.

(b)(6)



From: "Fritz, Jonathan D" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
CC: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: STATEMENT BY SECRETARY MICHAEL R. POMPEO: Ensuring a Transparent,
Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin
Date: Sat, 16 Jan 2021 01:52:18 +0000

Indeed. This was an important and difficult achievement. You da man, DF, though I still need to beat you in ping pong, and badly!

Get Outlook for iOS

From: Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, January 15, 2021 7:51:00 PM
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Fritz, Jonathan D (b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: STATEMENT BY SECRETARY MICHAEL R. POMPEO: Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin

Mazel

Sent from Workspace ONE Boxer

----- Forwarded message -----

From: State Department Press Office <usstatebpa@public.govdelivery.com>
Date: January 15, 2021 at 19:18:43 EST
Subject: STATEMENT BY SECRETARY MICHAEL R. POMPEO: Ensuring a Transparent,
Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin
To: Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Office of the Spokesperson

STATEMENT BY SECRETARY MICHAEL R. POMPEO

January 15, 2021

Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin

The United States has repeatedly called for a transparent and thorough investigation into the origin of COVID-19. Understanding the origin of this pandemic is essential for global public health, economic recovery, and international security.

To assist the vital work of the World Health Organization (WHO) investigative team that arrived in China this week, the United States government is today sharing new information concerning the activities inside China's government laboratories in 2019.

In particular, we urge the WHO to press the government of China to address the following:

1. **Illnesses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):** The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was "zero infection" among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
2. **WIV Research on "RaTG13" and "gain of function":** Starting in at least 2016, WIV researchers studied RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible "gain of function" experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality.
3. **Secret WIV Links to Military Research:** Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

The COVID-19 pandemic was avoidable. Any responsible country would have invited world health investigators to Wuhan within days of an outbreak. China instead refused offers of help – including from the United States – and punished brave Chinese doctors, scientists, and journalists who tried to alert the world to the dangers of the virus. Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one.

The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report. Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world.

Fact Sheet: Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology

###

Stay connected with the Office of Press Relations:



This email was sent to BuanganRL@state.gov using GovDelivery Communications Cloud on behalf of: U.S. Department of State ·
2201 C Street NW · Washington, DC 20520



(b)(6)

A large rectangular redacted area, likely containing sensitive information.

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@gmail.com>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: Possible Track 1 inquiry?
Date: Sat, 14 Nov 2020 03:11:29 +0000

(b)(6)

Very helpful. When did the first Chinese vaccine go into production? Where?

We also are trying to ascertain what USG assistance went to WIV for gain of function and why. Did people consider the NAS report from 2018 and the Livermore 2014 report that both warned about the thin line between biodefense and offense in the era of synthetic biology. Did State approve of this activity? Did anyone know what was going on at the WIV?

The purpose is not to look backward and blame people but to ensure this stupidity does not continue, especially without audit and verification and compliance.

It also will be invaluable to get help from Taipei on what they knew, when, and how they interpret the data on zoonotic versus possible synthetic origins. Thanks for your advice.

(b)(6)

PS- Note the below:

~~(SBU)~~ **U.S. Designated Laboratory Analyses of OPCW Samples:** Besides passing proficiency tests, designated laboratories must have in place technical and safety agreements with the OPCW Technical Secretariat (TS). Of the four U.S. designated laboratories **only Laurence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) has such agreements in place.** CBW (Clagett) queried the other three U.S. designated laboratories about their progress in establishing necessary agreements. Both CCDC (Edgewood) and The U.S Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense (USAMRICD) indicated work on the agreements that is under review by their legal advisors with no submissions as yet to the TS. **CDC has not yet responded.** CCDC, LLNL and USAMRICD have indicated interest in analyzing biomedical samples.

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Thursday, November 12, 2020 10:55 AM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: Possible Track 1 inquiry?

Should folks be interested in a Track 1 discussion on the vaccines, China actually has three vaccines already entered Phase 3 trials:

1. Ad5-nCoV (by Tongji Hospital, No.2 on FDA list, Phase 3),

2. CoronaVac (by Sinovac, No.4, Phase 3),
3. ____ (by Sinopharm, No.8, Phase 3),
4. BBIBP-CorV (by Sinopharm, No.14, Phase 1/2),
5. DeINS1-2019-nCoV-RBD-OPT1 (Xiamen U./Wantai Bio, No. 27, Phase 1),

The first 1 has 3 million doses being distributed in Brazil, but news has it someone got sick and died. Mile once mentioned that China (or Chen Wei alone?) tends to test vaccines on foreign soil first, regardless how safe it is...

- The pro-CCP KMT (in Taiwan) has been pushing Taiwan's government to accept China-made vaccine, namely, this Ad5-nCoV. But Taiwan's HHS minister (Chen Shi-chung) has refused, citing safety concerns.
- A separate, unrelated note: today's KMT in Taiwan is totally opposite to the old KMT under Chiang Kai-shek or his son Chiang Ching-Kuo or Lee Teng-Hui...

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, November 11, 2020 5:23 PM
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: Re: Taiwan intro on COVID origins

Have we asked the Chinese formally to illuminate on their extraordinary success with vaccine development? I'd also request their zoonotic disease development timeline and how and why there were cases at the PLA hospitals in December. Happy to help knock out a demarche tomorrow. Would be fun to be in the room if and when Cui gets summoned. He always seemed to respect and possibly fear me in the 6PT.

From: (b)(6)
Date: November 10, 2020 at 21:33:45 EST
To: David Asher (b)(6)@vitalfin.com>
Subject: Re: China vaccine

(b)(6)

The diplomatic approach to China might be this:

"In the US it takes 1 to 2 years or more to develop a vaccine. You did it in a few months. It appears we have a lot to learn from you. Let us come and study to learn how you did this."

If such a request is made, first privately and then publicly, how could they possibly say

no?

(b)(6)

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 10, 2020 7:35 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: Re: Taiwan intro on COVID origins

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6) (o)
(b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov

----- Forwarded message -----

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Date: November 10, 2020 at 7:29:26 PM EST

Subject: Re: Taiwan intro on COVID origins

To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov>, Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov>, Stilwell, David R
(b)(6)@state.gov>

David,

Thanks for flagging. Will huddle with our team to discuss making the connection with Dr. Lai at AS. They both do seem to be following a similar line of inquiry.

(b)(6)

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From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Wednesday, November 11, 2020 7:33:21 AM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov>, Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov>, Stilwell, David R
(b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Taiwan intro on COVID origins

(b)(6) please see below. Hope of interest. Dr. Quay has an impressive background and gives an interesting presentation on COVID origins.

Thanks much.

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6) (o)
(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

From: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Tuesday, November 10, 2020 6:07 PM

To: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>; Steven Quay, MD, PhD <steven@drquay.com>

Cc: (b)(6)@atossainc.com; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;

(b)(6) DiNanno, Thomas G

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: AVC Chief of Staff (b)(6) Video/Voice/Chat Meeting Request

Thanks, (b)(6)

In addition to the researchers, (b)(6) recommends, I recommend Dr. Quay reach out to Dr. Michael Lai at Academia Sinica. He could be a splendid collaborator. I have not seen him in many years but hold him in high regard. The American Institute in Taiwan hopefully can help facilitate. I ask our EAP colleagues to make the intro and, if agreeable to both Dr. Quay and Dr. Lai, have a State officer join in a discussion between them so that we can get that put into an email or cable. I copy Bill Fiens in EAP since he, undoubtedly, will wish to be looped in our discussions as we move forward and is well placed along with David Feith to facilitate.

All the best,

David

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_M._C._Lai

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Tuesday, November 10, 2020 11:18 AM

To: Steven Quay, MD, PhD (b)(6)@drquay.com>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@atossainc.com; (b)(6)@atossainc.com>; Wright, Janey F

(b)(6)@state.gov>; Pease, Michael (b)(6)@state.gov>; Yu, Miles (b)(6)@state.gov>;

Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@gmail.com

(b)(6)@gmail.com>; Richard Muller (b)(6)@lbl.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: AVC Chief of Staff (b)(6) Video/Voice/Chat Meeting Request

Dear Dr. Quay:

Thanks for talking to us yesterday. A few days ago, our colleagues (b)(6) pointed us to your paper "Where did the 2019 Coronavirus Pandemic begin and how did it spread? The PLA

Hospital in Wuhan China and Line 2 of the Wuhan Metro System are compelling answers". I read it with great interest (though not as one familiar with biology per se), and hope it gets published soon in peer-reviewed journal, to trigger additional discussions across the research and BW/CW community. A couple of editorial suggestions first; more to follow.

1. Pages 3 and 4 mention "*Hunan Seafood Market*". This is a typo - it should be *Huanan* (華南) Seafood Market.
 1. Hunan (湖南) is a province, to the south of Dong-Ting Lake (洞庭湖). Wuhan (武漢) is the capital of Hubei (湖北), which is to the north of the same Dong-Ting Lake.
 2. Historically, Wuhan people consider themselves as representing the Greater Han (漢). They probably won't open up a market just to represent a single neighboring province like Hunan or Jianxi.
 3. Huanan means "southern China" – which covers (loosely) Hunan, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Fujian.
2. Paragraph 3 of Page 4 suggests a lack of information about the hospital where the first 41 patients were treated. You cited a *Lancet* article. I would suggest you give the full citation, as this paper, titled "*Clinical features of patients infected with 2019 novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China*" (*Lancet*, Volume 395, Feb 15, 2020) and authored by Chaolin Huang (黃超林) et al. would be a very important reference to your study.
 1. Dr. Huang himself is the lead physician at Jin-Yin-Tan (金銀潭) Hospital where the first 41 patients were treated. ***Of those 41 patients, 13 did not visit the wet market. Among the first four patients, three never exposed to the wet market.***
 2. Their paper strongly hints the origin (i.e., the initial jump to human) of COVID-19 is not the Huanan wet market as the local Hubei authority had attempted to portrait. See also the *Science Magazine* article by Jon Cohen on January 31, 2020. The paper by Huang et al. cannot be neglected/downplayed in making your case, especially when your paper undergoes a peer review.

Since you are currently in Taiwan, perhaps you might consider talking to Drs. Chuang Yin-ching (莊銀清) and Hong Min-nan (洪敏男) at your convenience.

- These two MDs were dispatched to Wuhan January 12-16 (by Chen Chi-mai, 陳其邁, then Vice Prime Minister, now Mayor of Kaoshiung City) when Taiwan was unable to get adequate information from WHO or China about the possible outbreak of a new, strange pneumonia in Wuhan.
- They were not allowed to visit the Huanan Wet Market, but they did interview local Chinese medical crew and realized that the first several patients in Wuhan must have attracted the virus via human-to-human transmission.

- Based on their trip report, Taiwan promptly decided to elevate the alert to Level 2, and established an interagency COVID-19 team led by Taiwan's HHS Minister Chen Shichung (陳時中). I am attaching a Taiwan CDC's press release of January 16, 2020, which describes Taiwan's COVID-19 actions upon the two inspectors' return.
- Obviously, during this pandemic, it turns out that people in Taiwan benefitted from their own government's lack of confidence in the information (if any) shared by WHO or China. Dispatching an independent inspection team – albeit the access could still be limited – is an important part of the verification business. (This is also a philosophy we in this AVC Bureau truly embrace and operate under...)

Many thanks, and look forward to follow-up discussions with you.

V/R, Rongsong

Rongsong Jih
AVC/S&T Advisor (Explosion Seismologist)

From: Steven Quay, MD, PhD (b)(6)@drquay.com>
Sent: Tuesday, November 10, 2020 1:01 AM
To: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@atossainc.com (b)(6)@atossainc.com>; Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>; Pease, Michael (b)(6)@state.gov>; Yu, Miles (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@gmail.com (b)(6)@gmail.com>; Bryant, Andre K (b)(6)@state.gov>; Richard Muller (b)(6)@lbl.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: AVC Chief of Staff Janey Wright Video/Voice/Chat Meeting Request

Dear David et al.:

The pleasure was mine and I look forward to providing my thoughts and insights in any forum that will be helpful to uncovering the origin of SARS-CoV-2, with the hope that the learnings can be used to reduce the risk of such an event ever happening in the future.

Thank you for your interest in my work.

Regards, Steve

On Tue, Nov 10, 2020 at 11:28 AM Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:
Dr. Quay,

Thanks for a very enlightening and thoroughly important exploratory discussion with great analytical precision. Means a lot to us to have Larry and your personal input. We will follow up ASAP.

All the best,

David

From: Steven Quay, MD, PhD (b)(6)@drquay.com>
Sent: Sunday, November 8, 2020 11:35 PM
To: Cherry, Thomas E (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@atossainc.com
(b)(6)@atossainc.com>; Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>; Pease, Michael
(b)(6)@state.gov>; Yu, Miles (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@gmail.com (b)(6)@gmail.com>; Bryant, Andre K
(b)(6)@state.gov>; Steven Quay, MD, PhD (b)(6)@drquay.com>
Subject: Re: AVC Chief of Staff Janey Wright Video/Voice/Chat Meeting Request

Folks-

Attached are four of the many documents I have put together on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 (CoV-2). I am sorry they are not more organized so they give the '30,000 foot' view of all the reasons this pandemic began at the Wuhan Institute of Virology as a gain-of-function experiment, starting with RaTG13 or a highly similar virus.

I now have about 2000 files collected or in various stages of work but these are the most complete:

1. Seroconversion PowerPoint. A hallmark of zoonotic infections, as documented by SARS-CoV-1 and MERS, is pre-epidemic, abortive jumps from an animal host into the human population. Without the 'epidemic' mutations, these infections don't transmit. But what they do provide is a historical record, using reagents developed after the epidemic emerges, of the infection in archived specimens. With MERS and CoV-1, the prevalence of so-called seroconversion in over 12,000 specimens was about 0.6%. With CoV-2, there has not been a single seroconversion in over 1200 specimens. The probability CoV-2 is from nature based on this fact is one in 14,881; the same as the lifetime risk of being struck by lightning.

2. May 13 article. My work-in-progress collection of all the reasons CoV-2 is not from nature. The other side of the coin of seroconversion is what is called 'posterior diversity' the finding among a human epidemic of viruses that do not trace every mutation back to the Patient Zero. In other words, with a zoonotic host, the virus circulates for months/years and accumulates a lot of random mutations. Then when it gets the 'human jumping' mutation it shares that among its host species. So with both MERS and CoV-1 after the first case, most cases don't have a mutation pattern that shows they went back through a single virus, a 'grandfather' virus, in 'Patient Zero' but instead show a diverse background of 'uncles and aunts' from the host. CoV-2 is a pandemic

in which every single sequenced virus, all 170,000 all go back through the PLA4 patient I identified in my paper. So this pandemic began with a single human infection and there has not been another single infection out of a theoretical host reservoir. That is because there is no reservoir. The paper also discusses why the furin site did not come from nature and identifies the many labs around the world, including WIV but also including the US, in which synthetic biologists put furin sites into RNA viruses and watched them become more infective.

3. RaTG13 manuscript. Dr. Zhengli-Li Shi's publication of the RaTG13 paper in Feb 2020 is the foundational brick on which the zoonotic theory is built. It has been cited over 2700 times since publication. Here I show that the bat feces specimen has a composition of eukaryotic, bacterial, and viral genes that is highly unusual for a true bat feces specimen. Using another paper from Feb 2020 from Dr. Shi's lab at the WIV, the probability that the RaTG13 specimen is authentic bat feces is one in 13 million. The paper also shows a pattern of mutations that are commonly constructed in the lab but has a one in 100 billion chance of coming from nature. A month ago I sent an email to Dr. Shi at the WIV asking about these apparent anomalies but I have not received a response yet. By documenting Dr. Shi published a paper with false information her credibility for everything is destroyed.

4. An example of human codon optimization. This is an example of what could have been done in the WIV to create CoV-2 from RaTG13.

These are all provided as a confidential disclosure.

Regards, Steve

On Mon, Nov 9, 2020 at 12:46 AM Cherry, Thomas E (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:
Please see the meeting request for Monday 9 Nov 2020 at 1800hrs EST. Please add documents if needed to this Team meeting. If you need assistance in any technical way please call (b)(6) (b)(6), email (b)(6)@state.gov.

Thank you. Be safe!

Microsoft Teams meeting

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--

Steven Quay, MD, PhD

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ORCID 2-D iD

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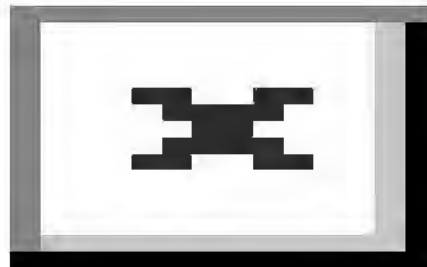
Flens, William (Bill) <FlensW@state.gov>;
Wright, Janey F <WrightJF@state.gov>

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

Date: Wed, 18 Nov 2020 12:55:27 +0000

Thanks (b)(6) Wiley (the publisher) has a simple cartoon that depicts the main point of this paper as follows:



From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 17, 2020 5:53 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey (b)(6)@state.gov>

Re: [redacted] from [redacted]

Just out, (below and attached) a report that comes highly recommended from a very reliable source:

From the conclusion:

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned^[66] and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature^[62] affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[68]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[62] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^[xxii]

The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

SARS-COV-2 chimeric structure and furin cleavage site might be the result of genetic manipulation

Rossana Segreto

Yuri Deigin

17 November 2020

<https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.202000240>

Abstract

Severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (SARS-CoV)-2's origin is still controversial. Genomic analyses show SARS-CoV-2 likely to be chimeric, most of its sequence closest to bat CoV RaTG13, whereas its receptor binding domain (RBD) is almost identical to that of a pangolin CoV. Chimeric viruses can arise *via* natural recombination or human intervention. The furin cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 confers to the virus the ability to cross species and tissue barriers, but was previously unseen in other SARS-like CoVs. Might genetic manipulations have been performed in order to evaluate pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-derived CoVs that were originally unable to bind to human receptors? Both cleavage site and specific RBD could result from site-directed mutagenesis, a procedure that does not leave a trace. Considering the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2 and importance of preventing future pandemics, researchers have a responsibility to carry out a thorough analysis of all possible SARS-CoV-2 origins.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a year has passed since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Wuhan, China, and its origin is still controversial. Despite the international research effort conducted, a natural host, either direct or intermediate, has not yet been identified. The hypothesis that the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was the first source for animal-human virus transmission has now been conclusively dismissedⁱ and the few market samples that were collected showed only human-adapted SARS-CoV-2, with no traces of zoonotic predecessor strainsⁱⁱ. Almost all scientific papers published to date purport that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin, and the only published paper considering possible a lab origin^[1] focuses on serial passage as the technique that could justify SARS-CoV-2 special adaptation to human cells. We here describe how the two main SARS-CoV-2 features, (1) the presence of a furin cleavage site missing in other CoVs of the same group and (2) an receptor binding domain (RBD) optimized to bind to human cells^[2] might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site-directed mutagenesis. The acquisition of both unique features by SARS-CoV-2 more or less simultaneously is less likely to be natural or caused only by cell/animal serial passage.

SARS-COV-2'S CLOSEST RELATIVES ARE BAT AND PANGOLIN CORONAVIRUSES

Zhou et al.^[3] from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) were the first to identify and characterize a new coronavirus (CoV), SARS-CoV-2. The genomic sequences obtained from early cases shared 79% sequence identity to the CoVs that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV) in 2002–2003 and 96.2% sequence identity to RaTG13 (MN996532), a CoV sequence detected from a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat. RaTG13 is currently the closest phylogenetic relative for SARS-CoV-2 found,^[4] but its complete genomic sequence was not published before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and the original sample was collected in the Yunnan province (China) by the same group of WIV researchers in 2013. Zhou et al.^[3] stated to have found a match between SARS-CoV-2 and a short region of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp) of a CoV in their database and then fully sequenced the original sample collected in 2013, which they called RaTG13.

We discovered that the RdRp of RaTG13 has 100% nucleotide identity with the sequence BtCoV/4991 (KP876546), which was identified by Ge et al.^[5] in a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat in the Yunnan province in 2013, same location and year as RaTG13. BtCoV/4991 was collected in a mine colonized by bats near Tongguanzen, Mojiang, Yunnan. The WIV researchers were invited to investigate the mine after six miners there had contracted severe pneumonia in 2012ⁱⁱⁱ, and three of the miners have died.^[6] The miners have been tasked with clearing out bat droppings in the mine, and the severity of their pneumonia correlated with the duration of exposure to the mine.^[7] Four miners' samples subsequently underwent testing at WIV, where Immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies against SARS were identified in all samples.^[8] Considering that only about 5300 people were infected in mainland China during the SARS outbreak of 2002–2004, most of whom resided in Guangdong, the odds of four miners in Yunnan retaining antibodies from the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak are negligible. On the other hand, it is possible that the SARS antibody test administered to the miners cross-reacted with a novel SARS-like bat virus that the miners had acquired at the mine. Ge et al.^[5] have identified a number of CoVs in the mine, but based on the phylogenetic analysis, BtCoV/4991 was the only SARS-related strain, clearly separated from all known alpha- and beta-CoVs at that time. BtCoV/4991 was also different from other bat CoVs in the phylogenetic analysis carried out by Wang et al. in 2019.^[9] Chen et al.^[10] identified BtCoV/4991 as the closest sequence to SARS-CoV-2 because RaTG13 had not yet been published at that time. BtCoV/4991 and RaTG13 have been later asserted to be two different coding names of the same strain, as their original authors at WIV registered the two strains as one entry in the Database of Bat-associated Viruses (DBatVir).^{iv}

In late July 2020, Zhengli Shi, the leading CoV researcher from WIV, in an email interview ^[11] asserted the renaming of the RaTG13 sample and unexpectedly declared that the full

sequencing of RaTG13 has been carried out as far back as in 2018 and not after the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, as stated in Zhou et al.^[1] The reversal in WIV's stance on when exactly RaTG13 was fully sequenced could have been due to the discovery by independent researchers into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 that the filenames of the raw sequencing reads deposited by WIV on May 19, 2020^v seem to indicate that sequencing for RaTG13 was done in 2017 and 2018.^{vi} However, no formal erratum about year of sequencing and sample renaming from the authors of Zhou et al. ^[1] has yet appeared, or as far as is currently known, has been submitted.

The second non-human RdRp sequence closest to BtCoV/4991 (91.89% nucleotide identity) is the CoV sequence MP789 (MT084071) isolated in 2019 in a Malaysian pangolin (*Manis javanica*) from the Guangdong province (GD), China.^[12] The envelope protein of MP789 shows surprisingly 100% aminoacidic identity with the corresponding protein in RaTG13, in bat-SL-CoVZXC21 (MG772934.1), in bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and in some early SARS-CoV-2 isolates (e.g. YP_009724392).^[13] The envelope protein of CoVs is involved in critical aspects of the viral lifecycle, such as viral entry, replication and pathogenesis.^[14]

BAT COVS HAVE BEEN THOROUGHLY STUDIED AND GENETICALLY MANIPULATED

Many studies have reported that bats are natural reservoirs for a broad diversity of potentially pathogenic SARS-like CoVs.^[15, 16] Some of these viruses can potentially directly infect humans^[17], whereas others need to mutate their spike protein in order to effectively bind to the human angiotensin 1-converting enzyme 2 (hACE2) receptor and mediate virus entry.^[18] In order to evaluate the emergence potential of novel CoVs, researchers have created a number of chimeric CoVs, consisting of bat CoV backbones, normally unable to infect human cells, whose spike proteins were replaced by those from CoVs compatible with human ACE2. These chimeras were meant to simulate recombination events that might occur in nature.^[19, 20] Such gain-of-function experiments have raised a number of biosafety concerns and stirred controversy among researchers and the general public. One of the main arguments in favor of gain-of-function studies is the need to be prepared with an arsenal of drugs and vaccines for the next pandemic.^[21] By contrast, one of the main arguments against them is that the next pandemic itself could be caused by those experiments, due to the risk of lab escape.^[22, 23]

In recent years, the field of corona-virology had been focused on pan-CoV therapies and vaccines, as evident from research conducted in the past 5 years,^[24-27] as well as from media reports.^{vii} Synthetically generating diverse panels of potential pre-emergent CoVs was declared

a goal of active grants for the EcoHealth Alliance, which funded some of such research at WIV, in collaboration with laboratories in the USA and other international partners.^{viii}

CREATING CHIMERIC COVS WITH NOVEL RBDS HAS GONE ON FOR DECADES

Researchers have been generating chimeric CoVs for over two decades, long before the advent of modern sequencing or genetic engineering techniques. For example, in 1999, a group from Utrecht University used targeted RNA recombination to create a “cat-and-mouse” CoV chimera: the RBDs of a feline and murine CoV were swapped, demonstrating that this exchange swapped also species tropism during *in vitro* experiments.^[28]

In 2007, the Shi group at WIV created a series of “bat-man” CoV chimeric spike proteins while trying to determine what exactly confers CoVs the ability to jump from one species to another. The researchers used different segments of the spike protein of the human SARS virus to replace corresponding segments in the spike protein of a bat viral backbone. It was concluded that a relatively short region (aa 310 to 518) of the spike protein “was necessary and sufficient to convert Rp3-S into a huACE2-binding molecule,”²⁹ that is to provide the bat CoV spike protein with a novel ability of binding to a human ACE2 receptor.

In 2008, the Baric group at the University of North Carolina (UNC) took the WIV research one step further: instead of using human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) pseudo-viruses with bat CoV spike proteins, a live chimeric CoV was created. Following the experiments of their 2007 WIV colleagues, the Baric group used a bat SARS-like CoV as a backbone and replaced its RBD with the RBD from human SARS.^[30]

In 2015, the Shi and Baric groups joined forces and published probably the most famous gain-of-function virology paper, which described the creation of another synthetic chimeric virus.^[19] This time the RBD of a mouse-adapted SARS backbone (SARS-MA15) was replaced by the RBD of RsSHC014, a bat strain previously isolated from Yunnan bats in 2011 by the Shi group. In 2016, the Baric group repeated their 2015 experiment using the same SARS-MA15 backbone and the RBD from Rs3367,^[31] a close relative of RsSHC014 also previously found in Yunnan by WIV and renamed “WIV1” after live culturing.^[17]

Probably the largest reported number of novel chimeric viruses created was described in a 2017 paper from the Shi group at WIV,^[15] in which the authors reported creating eight chimeric viruses using WIV1 as a backbone and transplanting into it various RBDs from bat SARS-like viruses.

These viruses were collected over a span of 5 years from the same cave near Kunming, Yunnan Province, where the Shi group originally found Rs3367 and RsSHC014. Only two of the eight live chimeric viruses were successfully rescued, and those two strains were found to possess the ability to bind to the human ACE2 receptor, as confirmed by experiments in hACE2-expressing HeLa cells and RT-PCR quantification of viral RNA.

SARS-COV-2 SHARES ITS RBD WITH A PANGOLIN COV

The possibility that pangolins could be the intermediate host for SARS-CoV-2 has long been under discussion.^[32-34] The biggest divergence between SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 is observed in the RBD of their spike proteins.^[4] Although its overall genome similarity is lower to SARS-CoV-2 than that of RaTG13, the MP789 pangolin strain isolated from GD pangolins has an almost identical RBD to that of SARS-CoV-2. Indeed, pangolin CoVs and SARS-CoV-2 possess identical amino acids at the five critical residues of the RBD, whereas RaTG13 only shares one amino acid with SARS-CoV-2.^[35] ACE2 sequence similarity is higher between humans and pangolins than between humans and bats. Intriguingly, the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 has a higher predicted binding affinity to human ACE2 receptor than to that of pangolins and bats.^{ix} Before the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, pangolins were the only mammals other than bats documented to carry and be infected by SARS-CoV-2 related CoV.^[12] Recombination events between the RBD of CoV from pangolins and RaTG13-like backbone could have produced SARS-CoV-2 as chimeric strain. For such recombination to occur naturally, the two viruses must have infected the same cell in the same organism simultaneously, a rather improbable event considering the low population density of pangolins and the scarce presence of CoVs in their natural populations.^x Moreover, receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 showed that it does not bind to pangolin ACE2.^{xi}

THE FURIN CLEAVAGE SITE: THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SARS-COV-2 AND ITS CLOSEST RELATIVE RATG13

SARS-CoV-2 differs from its closest relative RaTG13 by a few key characteristics. The most striking difference is the acquisition in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 of a cleavage site activated by a host-cell enzyme furin, previously not identified in other beta-CoVs of lineage b^[36] and similar to that of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) coronavirus.^[35] Host protease processing plays a pivotal role as a species and tissue barrier and engineering of the

cleavage sites of CoV spike proteins modifies virus tropism and virulence.^[37] The ubiquitous expression of furin in different organs and tissues have conferred to SARS-CoV-2 the ability to infect organs usually invulnerable to other CoVs, leading to systemic infection in the body.^[38] Cell-cultured SARS-CoV-2 that was missing the above-mentioned cleavage site caused attenuated symptoms in infected hamsters,^[39] and mutagenesis studies have confirmed that the polybasic furin site is essential for SARS-CoV-2's ability to infect human lung cells.^[40]

The polybasic furin site in SARS-CoV-2 was created by a 12-nucleotide insert TCCTCGGCGGGC coding for a PRRA amino acid sequence at the S1/S2 junction (Figure 1). Interestingly, the two joint arginines are coded by two CGGCGG codons, which are rare for these viruses: only 5% of arginines are coded by CGG in SARS-CoV-2 or RaTG13, and CGGCGG in the new insert is the only doubled instance of this codon in SARS-CoV-2. The CGGCGG insert includes a *FauI* restriction site, of which there are six instances in SARS-CoV-2 and four instances in RaTG13 (and two in MP789). The serendipitous location of the *FauI* site could allow using restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) techniques ^[41] for cloning ^[42] or screening for mutations, ^[43] as the new furin site is prone to deletions *in vitro*.^[39, 44]

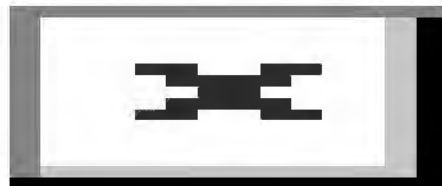
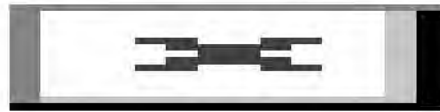


FIGURE 1

Open in figure viewerPowerPoint

Nucleotide sequence of the S protein at the S1/S2 junction in SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) showing the furin cleavage site (in blue) that includes a *FauI* enzyme restriction site

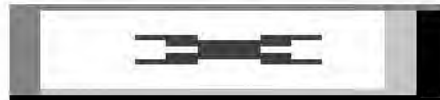
A study by Zhou et al.^[45] reported the discovery of a novel CoV strain RmYN02, which the authors claim exhibits natural PAA amino acid insertions at the S1/S2 cleavage site where SARS-CoV-2 has the PRRA insertion. However, upon close examination of the underlying nucleotide sequence of RmYN02 in comparison with its closest ancestors bat-SL-CoVZC45 and bat-SL-CoVZXC21, no insertions are apparent, just nucleotide mutations (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and RmYN02 at the S1/S2 junction site. No insertions of nucleotides possibly evolving in a furin cleavage site can be observed (in blue)

Therefore, SARS-CoV-2 remains unique among its beta CoV relatives not only due to a polybasic furin site at the S1/S2 junction, but also due to the four amino acid insert PRRA that had created it. The insertion causes a split in the original codon for serine (TCA) in MP789 or RaTG13 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA) in SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from RaTG13 (MN996532), MP789 (MT084071) and SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) at the S1/S2 site. The common nucleotides and amino acids are given in black, SARS-CoV-2 unique nucleotides and amino acids in red, RaTG13 unique nucleotides and amino acids in green and common nucleotides and amino acids in SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 that differ in MP789 in blue. The codon for serine (TCA) in RaTG13 and MP789 is split in SARS-CoV-2 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA)

The insertion of the furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is not in frame with the rest of the sequence, when compared with the MP789 and the RaTG13 sequences (Figure 3). Therefore, it is possible to exclude that such insertion could have originated by polymerase slippage or by releasing and repriming, because insertion mutations generated by these mechanisms have been postulated to maintain the reading frame of the viral sequence.^[46] The possibility that the furin cleavage site could have been acquired by recombination has been recently questioned by Seyran et al.,^[47] because the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein seems to lack any further recombination event in contrast with the recombination model of other CoVs.

CRITIQUE OF “THE PROXIMAL ORIGIN OF SARS-COV-2”

Due to the broad-spectrum of research conducted over almost 20 years on bat SARS-CoVs justified by their potential to spill over from animal to human,^[48] a possible synthetic origin by laboratory engineering of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be excluded. The widely cited article of Andersen et al.^[2] stated that SARS-CoV-2 has most likely a natural origin. The main argument brought by the authors is that the high-affinity binding of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein to hACE2 could not have been predicted by models based on the RBD of SARS-CoV. Based on the structural analysis conducted by Wan et al.,^[49] SARS-CoV-2 has the potential to recognize hACE2 more efficiently than the SARS-CoV, which emerged in 2002. Moreover, generation of CoV chimeric strains has recently demonstrated that bat CoV spikes can bind to the hACE2 receptor with more plasticity than previously predicted.^[15] All amino acids in the RBD have been extensively analyzed and new models to predict ACE2 affinity are available.^[50] In this regard, BatCoV Rs3367 (99.9% identity to WIV1) has been shown to share with SARS-CoV-2 four out of six critical residues in the RBD. Considering that WIV1 was shown to directly bind to hACE2, the same assumption could easily have been made about SARS-CoV-2 RBD.^[51]

As described above, creation of chimeric viruses has been carried out over the years with the purpose of studying the potential pathogenicity of bat CoVs for humans. In this context, SARS-CoV-2 could have been synthesized by combining a backbone similar to RaTG13 with the RBD of CoV similar to the one recently isolated from pangolins^[12], because the latter is characterized by a higher affinity with the hACE2 receptor. Such research could have aimed to identify pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-CoV potentially pathogenic for humans. Subsequent serial cell or animal passage, as described by Sirotkin & Sirotkin^[1] could have provided the perfect adaptation of the RBD to the hACE2.

Regarding the furin cleavage site, Andersen et al.^[2] state that “the functional consequence of the polybasic cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is unknown.” New studies from several groups have lately identified this activation site as possibly enabling the virus to spread efficiently between humans and attack multiple organs.^[52] Experiments on proteolytic cleavage of CoV spike proteins have been recently suggested as future key studies to understand virus transmissibility in different hosts.^[50]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state, based on the work of Almazan et al.^[53] that “the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone.” In the last 6 years before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 the number of potential bat backbones has been undeniably increased by several bat CoV screenings, last but not least bringing RaTG13 to scientific attention in January 2020. Other possible backbones could, as well, still wait for publication.

Andersen et al.^[2] affirm that “the acquisition of both the polybasic cleavage site and predicted O-linked glycans also argues against culture-based scenarios.” Methods for insertion of a polybasic cleavage site in infectious bronchitis CoV are given in Cheng et al.^[54] and resulted in increased pathogenicity. Concerning the predicted O-linked glycans around the newly inserted polybasic site, it should be noted that this prediction was not confirmed by Cryo-EM inquiry into the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein.^[55] Nevertheless, while it is true that O-linked glycans are much more likely to arise under immune selection, they could be added in the lab through site-directed mutagenesis^[56] or arise in the course of *in vivo* experiments, for example, in BLT-L mice with human lung implants and autologous human immune system^[57] or in mice expressing the hACE2 receptor.^[11] To overcome problems of bat CoV isolation, experiments based on direct inoculation of bat CoV in suckling rats have been carried out.^[58] Humanized mice, ferrets, primates and/or other animals with similar ACE2 conformation could have all been used for serial passage experiments, as described in detail by Sirotkin and Sirotkin.^[1]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state that “subsequent generation of a polybasic cleavage site would have then required repeated passage in cell culture or animals with ACE2 receptors similar to those of humans, but such work has also not previously been described.” It should not be excluded that such experiments could have been aborted due to the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, before a possible publication of the results or that the results were never intended to be published.

It is important to mention that RaTG13 and the pangolin CoV sequences from smuggled pangolins confiscated in the GD province in March 2019, and to which most of published papers supporting a natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 refer,^[2] have recently been questioned as to the accuracy of their assembly data^{xii} and require further analyses to prove their correctness.^[xiii-xiv] It should also be noted that *in vitro* receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 yielded some peculiar results.^[59] The most surprising observation was that RaTG13, unlike SARS-CoV-2, is unable to bind ACE2 in *R. macrotis* bats, a close relative of RaTG13's purported host, *R. affinis*^[59] (whose ACE2 receptor has not yet been tested). At the same time, RaTG13 was observed to bind hACE2^[60], but not as well as ACE2 of rats and mice, to which SARS-CoV-2 did not bind at all. Is it possible that just as SARS-M415 was a mouse-adapted strain of SARS, RaTG13 is actually a mouse-adapted version of a CoV extracted from the Mojiang cave, rather than a strain obtained from a bat fecal swab? Unfortunately, the RaTG13 sample has been exhausted and it is no longer available for external examination,^[11] which is unfortunate given a number of inconsistencies in its sequencing raw data. Also, the status and availability of the Mojiang miners' samples remain as well an open and highly relevant question.

Several samples from the miners have been collected^[7,8] and likely stored, and it would be of great value to test them for the presence of SARS-CoV-2-like CoVs.

Another open question is the reason for modification and subsequent deletion of WIV's own viral database. In May 2020, several media outlets have reported that the change tracking system of WIV's internal database showed that the database was renamed from "Wildlife-borne viral pathogen database" to "Bat and rodent-borne viral pathogen database," and its description was edited to replace instances of "wild animal" by "bat and rodent"; in addition, mention of "arthropod vectors" was deleted.^{[xv](#)} The database description reported that it contained over 60 Mb of data in structured query language (SQL) format, but as of early May 2020 the download link no longer worked.^{[xvi](#)} Subsequently, the database page was taken down in its entirety but its snapshot is still available on Web Archive.^{[xvii](#)} It is possible that other international CoV labs might have downloaded the SQL archive of the WIV database before it was taken down, in which case such groups should make those data publicly available.

HOW COULD THE VIRUS HAVE ESCAPED FROM A LAB?

The leak of highly dangerous pathogens from laboratories is not a rare event and occurrences have been documented in several countries. The most notable lab leak known is the 1977 H1N1 lab escape from China that caused a worldwide pandemic.^[61] The most recent one is the November 2019 outbreak of brucellosis that occurred in two research centers in Lanzhou, China, infecting over 100 students and staff members.^[62] Several lab escapes of the first SARS virus have been reported as well: in the summer of 2003 in Singapore,^[63] then in December 2003 in Taiwan,^{[xviii](#)} and in the spring of 2004 twice in China.^{[xix](#)}

Concerns about WIV's lab safety were raised in 2018 by U.S. Embassy officials after visiting the Institute and having an interview with Zhengli Shi. The lab auditors summarized their worries in subsequent diplomatic cables to Washington.^{[xx](#)} Chinese experts have also raised concerns about lab safety in their own country, lamenting that "lab trash can contain man-made viruses, bacteria or microbes" and that "some researchers discharge laboratory materials into the sewer after experiments without a specific biological disposal mechanism."^{[xxi](#)}

American labs have also had their share of safety issues. Recently, research operations in the Biosafety level (BSL)-4 United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) facility in Fort Detrick were interrupted in August 2019 following safety

violations, in particular, relating to the disposal of infective materials.^{xxii} Other US labs have been cited for safety issues as well.²²¹

A number of scenarios causing SARS-CoV-2 to leak from a lab can be hypothesized. For example, an infected animal could have escaped from a lab or it could have scratched or bitten a worker (a concern raised in 2017 about the establishment of a BSL-4 primate vaccine testing facility in Kunming, Yunnan^[64]), or a researcher could have accidentally stuck themselves with inoculate (as happened in two cases in Russia^{xxiii}). Until 2020, CoVs were not considered particularly deadly or virulent. SARS-like CoVs did not require BSL-4 and could be manipulated under BSL-2 and BSL-3^[42] conditions, making an accidental leak more likely. Aerosol experiments with CoVs^[65] could result in lab leak as well, because a failure in the equipment used could go unnoticed for a long time before infection of lab workers is detected. Finally, the virus could potentially have leaked through the sewage system if proper waste disposal and/or decontamination procedures were not followed.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned^[66] and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature^[62] affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[68]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[67] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^{[xxii](#)}

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Prof. Allan Krill (NTNU) for proof reading the manuscript, all the valuable comments and being open-minded about controversial hypotheses; Prof. Heribert Insam (Head of the Department of Microbiology; University of Innsbruck) for his support and Dr. Lawrence Sellin for all the useful information. A special thanks goes to Dr. Fernando Castro-Chavez (former Post-Doc at the New York Medical College) for his support with Research Gate. We are very thankful to René Bergelt, for having discovered the database that confirmed our finding that BtCoV4991 and RaTG13 refer to the same sample. Finally, we are extremely grateful to members of the D.R.A.S.T.I.C. (Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) Twitter group for all their work in uncovering many previously unpublished facts about SARS-CoV-2 and its relative strains. In particular, we are grateful to Luigi Warren for continuously probing the possible connection of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak to WIV and SARS-CoV-2, to @TheSeeker268 for finding Chinese-language 2013 Xu MSc and 2016 Huang PhD theses, which have confirmed the SARS-like viral nature of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak and have elucidated WIV's role in investigating that outbreak,^{[xxiv](#)} including WIV's collection of the 4991/RaTG13 strain from the Mojiang mine, and to Francisco de Asis de Ribera Martin for providing us the English translation of the two theses, and also discovering the RaTG13 amplicon dates.

(b)(7)(E)

From: "Paulopol, Andreea I" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>
CC: Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: RE: RE: (b)(6) summary of post cables/Nature Medicine re COVID19
Date: Mon, 14 Dec 2020 22:43:54 +0000

(b)(6)

Lot was said last Thursday that also included cheap shots directed at me, which were also disappointing. However, I left that meeting with the understanding of two things of me:

1. Work on language related to Article I
2. And new language related to Article X

I have done so and circulated to the group the unclassified version.

(b)(5)

Finally, I am not familiar with this authors or Division and took note from our IC meeting weeks ago that they too, were not compelled by the paper.

Hope this helps.

Thanks,
Andreea

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, December 14, 2020 12:08 PM
To: Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: RE: (b)(6) summary of post cables/Nature Medicine re COVID19

Andrea

This response is disappointing (b)(5)

(b)(5)

I asked you last week if you disagree with the Livermore piece that all conditions existed for a lab release of sars/cov-2. A reasoned and professional debate/dissent is welcome.

Thanks

(b)(6)

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>
Date: December 14, 2020 at 11:04:09 AM EST
Subject: RE: (b)(6) summary of post cables/Nature Medicine re COVID19
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>, Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)
 (b)(6)@state.gov>, (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)
 (b)(6)@state.gov>, Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov>

I understand that some folks here may not be interested in the science, but the attached article from Nature Medicine may be worth reviewing.

Also, <https://sciencebusiness.net/covid-19/international-news/china-was-slammed-initial-covid-19-secrecy-its-scientists-led-way>

China was slammed for initial COVID-19 secrecy, but its scientists led the way in tackling the virus
 “The Chinese have been leading the way in publishing open-access evidence on case management, genomics and numerous areas of public health and epidemiology, which has been vital in informing the response in more or less every country.”

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 6:30 PM
To: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)
 (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I
 (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: (b)(6); summary of post cables

Many of you may have read this article but it remains important as reminder of several inconvenient facts. Don't underestimate cognitive dissonance and wishful disbelief in science and government. The level of groupthink on the COVID19 origins issue is ridiculous. I personally pray it came straight out of Mother Nature but, thus far, have found no objective scientific analysis to explain it. So where did it

come from—how, who, and why? The VCAWG should be a straight forward evidence based discussion, not supposition, imposition, or borderline superstition level theories.

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2020/09/09/alina-chan-broad-institute-coronavirus/>

RESEARCH

Could COVID-19 Have Escaped from a Lab?

The world's preeminent scientists say a theory from the Broad Institute's Alina Chan is too wild to be believed. But when the theory is about the possibility of COVID being man-made, is this science or censorship?

by ROWAN JACOBSEN. 9/9/2020, 9:29 a.m.

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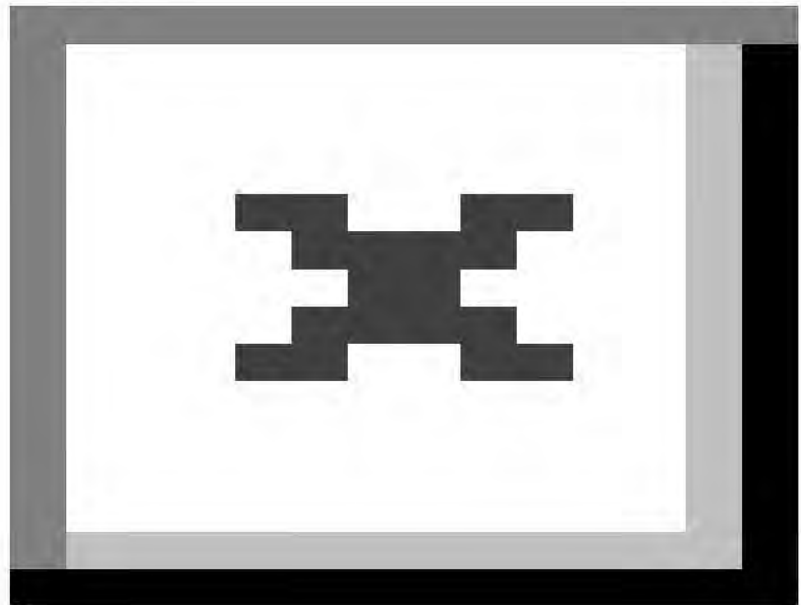


Illustration by Benjamin Purvis

In January, as she watched the news about a novel virus spreading out of control in China, Alina Chan braced for a shutdown. The molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT started stockpiling medicine and supplies. By the time March rolled around and a quarantine seemed imminent, she'd bought hundreds of dollars' worth of fillets from her favorite fishmonger in Cambridge and packed them into her freezer. Then she began to ramp down her projects in the lab, isolating her experimental cells from their cultures and freezing them in small tubes.

As prepared as she was for the shutdown, though, she found herself unprepared for the frustration of being frozen out of work. She paced the walls of her tiny apartment feeling bored and useless. Chan has been a puzzle demon since childhood, which was precisely what she loved about her work—the chance to solve fiendishly difficult problems about how viruses operate and how, through gene therapy, they could be repurposed to help cure devastating genetic diseases. Staring out her window at the eerily

quiet streets of her Inman Square neighborhood, she groaned at the thought that it could be months before she was at it again. Her mind wandered back to 2003, when she was a teenager growing up in Singapore and the first SARS virus, a close relative of this coronavirus, appeared in Asia. It hadn't been anything like this. That one had been relatively easy to corral. *How had this virus come out of nowhere and shut down the planet? Why was it so different?* she asked herself.

Then it hit her: The world's greatest puzzle was staring her in the face. Stuck at home, all she had to work with was her brain and her laptop. Maybe they were enough. Chan fired up the kettle for the first of what would become hundreds of cups of tea, stacked four boxes on her kitchen counter to raise her laptop to the proper height, pulled back her long dark hair, and began reading all of the scientific literature she could find on the coronavirus.

It wasn't long before she came across an article about the remarkable stability of the virus, whose genome had barely changed from the earliest human cases, despite trillions of replications. This perplexed Chan. Like many emerging infectious diseases, COVID-19 was thought to be zoonotic—it originated in animals, then somehow found its way into people. At the time, the Chinese government and most scientists insisted the jump had happened at Wuhan's seafood market, but that didn't make sense to Chan. If the virus had leapt from animals to humans in the market, it should have immediately started evolving to life inside its new human hosts. But it hadn't.

On a hunch, she decided to look at the literature on the 2003 SARS virus, which had jumped from civets to people. *Bingo*. A few papers mentioned its rapid evolution in its first months of existence. Chan felt the familiar surge of puzzle endorphins. The new virus really wasn't behaving like it should. Chan knew that delving further into this puzzle would require some deep genetic analysis, and she knew just the person for the task. She opened Google Chat and fired off a message to Shing Hei Zhan. He was an old friend from her days at the University of British Columbia and, more important, he was a computational god.

"Do you want to partner on a very unusual paper?" she wrote.

Sure, he replied.

One thing Chan noticed about the original SARS was that the virus in the first human cases was subtly different—a few dozen letters of genetic code—from the one in the civets. That meant it had immediately morphed. She asked Zhan to pull up the genomes for the coronaviruses that had been found on surfaces in the Wuhan seafood market. Were they at all different from the earliest documented cases in humans?

Zhan ran the analysis. Nope, they were 100 percent the same. Definitely from humans, not animals. The seafood-market theory, which Chinese health officials and the World Health Organization espoused in the early days of the pandemic, was wrong. Chan's puzzle detectors pulsed again. "Shing," she messaged Zhan, "this paper is going to be insane."

In the coming weeks, as the spring sun chased shadows across her kitchen floor, Chan stood at her counter and pounded out her paper, barely pausing to eat or sleep. It was clear that the first SARS evolved rapidly during its first three months of existence, constantly fine-tuning its ability to infect humans, and settling down only during the later stages of the epidemic. In contrast, the new virus

looked a lot more like late-stage SARS. "It's almost as if we're missing the early phase," Chan marveled to Zhan. Or, as she put it in their paper, as if "it was already well adapted for human transmission."

That was a profoundly provocative line. Chan was implying that the virus was already familiar with human physiology when it had its coming-out party in Wuhan in late 2019. If so, there were three possible explanations.

Perhaps it was just staggeringly bad luck: The mutations had all occurred in an earlier host species, and just happened to be the perfect genetic arrangement for an invasion of humanity. But that made no sense. Those mutations would have been disadvantageous in the old host.

Maybe the virus had been circulating undetected in humans for months, working out the kinks, and nobody had noticed. Also unlikely. China's health officials would not have missed it, and even if they had, they'd be able to go back now through stored samples to find the trail of earlier versions. And they weren't coming up with anything.

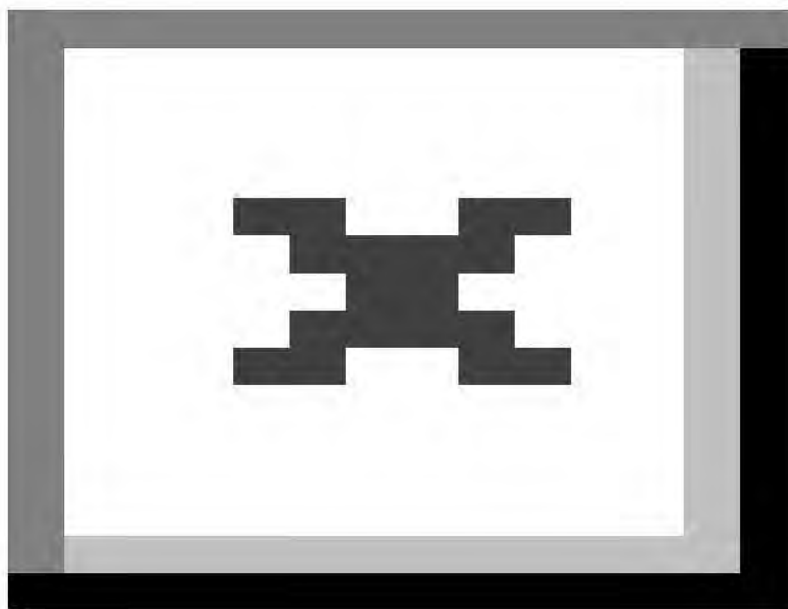
That left a third possibility: The missing phase had happened in a lab, where the virus had been trained on human cells. Chan knew this was the third rail of potential explanations. At the time, conspiracy theorists were spinning bioweapon fantasies, and Chan was loath to give them any ammunition. But she also didn't want to play politics by withholding her findings. Chan is in her early thirties, still at the start of her career, and an absolute idealist about the purity of the scientific process. Facts were facts.

Or at least they used to be. Since the start of the pandemic, the Trump administration has been criticized for playing fast and loose with facts—denying, exaggerating, or spinning them to suit the president's political needs. As a result, many scientists have learned to censor themselves for fear that their words will be misrepresented. Still, Chan thought, if she were to sit on scientific research just to avoid providing ammunition to conspiracy theorists or Trump, would she be any better than them?

Chan knew she had to move forward and make her findings public. In the final draft of her paper, she torpedoed the seafood-market theory, then laid out a case that the virus seemed curiously well adapted to humans. She mentioned all three possible explanations, carefully wording the third to emphasize that if the novel coronavirus did come from a lab, it would have been the result of an accident in the course of legitimate research.

On May 2, Chan uploaded the paper to a site where as-yet-unpublished biology papers known as "preprints" are shared for open peer review. She tweeted out the news and waited. On May 16, the *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid, picked up her research. The very next day, *Newsweek* ran a story with the headline "Scientists Shouldn't Rule Out Lab as Source of Coronavirus, New Study Says."

And that, Chan says, is when "shit exploded everywhere."



Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute, says we can't rule out the possibility that the novel coronavirus originated in a lab—even though she knows it's a politically radioactive thing to say. / Photo by Mona Miri

Chan had come to my attention a week before the *Newsweek* story was published through her smart and straightforward tweets, which I found refreshing at a time when most scientists were avoiding any serious discussion about the possibility that COVID-19 had escaped from a biolab. I'd written a lot about genetic engineering and so-called gain-of-function research—the fascinating, if scary, line of science in which scientists alter viruses to make them more transmissible or lethal as a way of assessing how close those viruses are to causing pandemics. I also knew that deadly pathogens escape from biolabs with surprising frequency. Most of these accidents end up being harmless, but many researchers have been infected, and people have died as a result.

For years, concerned scientists have warned that this type of pathogen research was going to trigger a pandemic. Foremost among them was Harvard epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch, who founded the Cambridge Working Group in 2014 to lobby against these experiments. In a series of policy papers, op-eds, and scientific forums, he pointed out that accidents involving deadly pathogens occurred more than twice a week in U.S. labs, and estimated that just 10 labs performing gain-of-function research over a 10-year period would run a nearly 20 percent risk of an accidental release. In 2018, he argued that such a release could “lead to global spread of a virulent virus, a biosafety incident on a scale never before seen.”

Thanks in part to the Cambridge Working Group, the federal government briefly instituted a moratorium on such research. By 2017, however, the ban was lifted and U.S. labs were at it again. Today, in the United States and across the globe, there are dozens of labs conducting experiments on a daily basis with the deadliest known pathogens. One of them is the Wuhan Institute of Virology. For more than a decade, its scientists have been discovering coronaviruses in bats in southern China and bringing them back to their lab in Wuhan. There, they mix genes from different strains of these novel viruses to test their infectivity in human cells and lab animals.

When word spread in January that a novel coronavirus had caused an outbreak in Wuhan—which is a thousand miles from where the bats that carry this lineage of viruses are naturally found—many experts were quietly alarmed. There was no proof that the lab was the source of the virus, but the pieces fit.

Despite the evidence, the scientific community quickly dismissed the idea. Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, which has funded the work of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other labs searching for new viruses, called the notion “preposterous,” and many other experts echoed that sentiment.

That wasn’t necessarily what every scientist thought in private, though. “They can’t speak directly,” one scientist told me confidentially, referring to the virology community’s fear of having their comments sensationalized in today’s politically charged environment. “Many virologists don’t want to be hated by everyone in the field.”

There are other potential reasons for the pushback. There’s long been a sense that if the public and politicians really knew about the dangerous pathogen research being conducted in many laboratories, they’d be outraged. Denying the possibility of a catastrophic incident like this, then, could be seen as a form of career preservation. “For the substantial subset of virologists who perform gain-of-function research,” Richard Ebright, a Rutgers microbiologist and another founding member of the Cambridge Working Group, told me, “avoiding restrictions on research funding, avoiding implementation of appropriate biosafety standards, and avoiding implementation of appropriate research oversight are powerful motivators.” Antonio Regalado, biomedicine editor of *MIT Technology Review*, put it more bluntly. If it turned out COVID-19 came from a lab, he tweeted, “it would shatter the scientific edifice top to bottom.”

That’s a pretty good incentive to simply dismiss the whole hypothesis, but it quickly amounted to a global gaslighting of the media—and, by proxy, the public. An unhealthy absolutism set in: Either you insisted that any questions about lab involvement were absurd, or you were a tool of the Trump administration and its desperation to blame China for the virus. I was used to social media pundits ignoring inconvenient or politically toxic facts, but I’d never expected to see that from some of our best scientists.

Which is why Chan stood out on Twitter, daring to speak truth to power. "It is very difficult to do research when one hypothesis has been negatively cast as a conspiracy theory," she wrote. Then she offered some earnest advice to researchers, suggesting that most viral research should be done with neutered viruses that have had their replicating machinery removed in advance, so that even if they escaped confinement, they would be incapable of making copies of themselves. "When these precautions are not followed, risk of lab escape is exponentially higher," she explained, adding, "I hope the pandemic motivates local ethics and biosafety committees to think carefully about how they can reduce risk." She elaborated on this in another tweet several days later: "I'd also—personally—prefer if high biosafety level labs were not located in the most populous cities on earth."

How Safe Are Boston's Biolabs?

As one of the world centers of biotech, the Hub is peppered with academic and corporate labs doing research on pathogens. Foremost among them is Boston University's National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL), the only lab in the city designated as BSL-4 (the highest level of biosafety and the same level as the Wuhan Institute of Virology). It is one of just a dozen or so in the United States equipped to work with live versions of the world's most dangerous viruses, including Ebola and Marburg. Researchers there began doing so in 2018 after a decade of controversy: Many locals objected to the risks of siting such a facility in the center of a major metropolitan area.

The good news? Before opening, NEIDL undertook one of the most thorough risk assessments in history, learning from the mistakes of other facilities. Even Lynn Klotz, a senior science fellow at the Washington, DC-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, who advised local groups that opposed NEIDL, told the medical website Contagion that the lab likely has the best possible security protocols and measures in place.

But the reality, Klotz added, is that most lab accidents are caused by human error, and there is only so much that can be done through good design and protocols to proactively prevent such mistakes. (Or to guard against an intentional release by a disgruntled researcher, as allegedly happened in the anthrax attacks of 2001.) Rutgers molecular biologist Richard Ebright, a longtime critic of potentially dangerous pathogen research, says the risks introduced by NEIDL are not low enough and "definitely not" worth the negligible benefits.

Still, risk is relative. Klotz has estimated the chance of a pathogen escape from a BSL-4 lab at 0.3 percent per year, and NEIDL is probably significantly safer than the typical BSL-4 lab. And if catching a deadly pathogen is your fear, well, currently you run a good risk of finding one in your own neighborhood. Until that gets cleared up, the city's biolabs are probably among the safer spaces in town.

Chan had started using her Twitter account this intensely only a few days earlier, as a form of outreach for her paper. The social platform has become the way many scientists find out about one another's work, and studies have shown that attention on Twitter translates to increased citations for a paper in scientific literature. But it's a famously raw forum. Many scientists are not prepared for the digital storms that roil the Twitterverse, and they don't handle it well. Chan dreaded it at first, but quickly took to Twitter like a digital native. "Having Twitter elevates your work," she says. "And I think it's really fun to talk to nonscientists about that work."

After reading her tweets, I reviewed her preprint, which I found mind-blowing, and wrote her to say so. She thanked me and joked that she worried it might be “career suicide.”

It wasn’t long before it began to look like she might be right.

Speaking her mind, it turns out—even in the face of censure—was nothing new for Chan, who is Canadian but was raised in Singapore, one of the more repressive regimes on earth. Her parents, both computer science professionals, encouraged free thinking and earnest inquiry in their daughter, but the local school system did not. Instead, it was a pressure-cooker of a system that rewarded students for falling in line, and moved quickly to silence rebels.

That was a bad fit for Chan. “You have to bow to teachers,” she says. “Sometimes teachers from other classes would show up and ask me to bow to them. And I would say, ‘No, you’re not my teacher.’ Back then they believed in corporal punishment. A teacher could just take a big stick and beat you in front of the class. I got whacked so many times.”

Still, Chan rebelled in small ways, skipping school and hanging out at the arcade. She also lost interest in her studies. “I just really didn’t like school. And I didn’t like all the extracurriculars they pack you with in Singapore,” she says. That changed when a teacher recruited her for math Olympiads, in which teams of students compete to solve devilishly hard arithmetic puzzles. “I really loved it,” she says. “You just sit in a room and think about problems.”

Chan might well have pursued a career in math, but then she came up against teams from China in Olympiad competitions. “They would just wipe everyone else off the board,” she says. “They were machines. They’d been trained in math since they could walk. They’d hit the buzzer before you could even comprehend the question. I thought, *I’m not going to survive in this field.*”

Chan decided to pursue biology instead, studying at the University of British Columbia. “I liked viruses from the time I was a teen,” she says. “I remember the first time I learned about HIV. I thought it was a puzzle and a challenge.” That instinct took her to Harvard Medical School as a postdoc, where the puzzle became how to build virus-like biomolecules to accomplish tasks inside cells, and then to Ben Deverman’s lab at the Broad Institute. “When I see an interesting question, I want to spend 100 percent of my time working on it,” she says. “I get really fixated on answering scientific questions.”

Deverman, for his part, says he wasn’t actively looking to expand his team when Chan came along, but when “opportunities to hire extraordinary people fall in my lap,” he takes them. “Alina brings a ton of value to the lab,” he explains, adding that she has an ability to pivot between different topics and cut to the chase. Nowhere was that more on display than with her coronavirus work, which Deverman was able to closely observe. In fact, Chan ran so many ideas past him that he eventually became a coauthor. “She is insightful, determined, and has the rare ability to explain complex scientific findings to other scientists and to the public,” he says.

Those skills would prove highly useful when word got out about her coronavirus paper.

If Chan had spent a lifetime learning how to pursue scientific questions, she spent most of the shutdown learning what happens when the answers you come up with are politically radioactive. After the *Newsweek* story ran, conservative-leaning publications seized on her paper as conclusive evidence that the virus had come from a lab. “Everyone focused on the one line,” Chan laments. “The tabloids just

zoomed in on it." Meanwhile, conspiracists took it as hard evidence of their wild theories that there had been an intentional leak.

Chan spent several exhausting days putting out online fires with the many people who had misconstrued her findings. "I was so naïve," she tells me with a quick, self-deprecating laugh. "I just thought, *Shouldn't the world be thinking about this fairly?* I really have to kick myself now."

Even more troubling, though, were the reactions from other scientists. As soon as her paper got picked up by the media, luminaries in the field sought to censure her. Jonathan Eisen, a well-known professor at UC Davis, criticized the study in *Newsweek* and on his influential Twitter account, writing, "Personally, I do not find the analysis in this new paper remotely convincing." In a long thread, he argued that comparing the new virus to SARS was not enough to show that it was preadapted to humans. He wanted to see comparisons to the initial leap of other viruses from animals to humans.

Moments later, Daszak piled on. The NIH had recently cut its grant to his organization, EcoHealth Alliance, after the Trump administration learned that some of it had gone to fund the Wuhan Institute of Virology's work. Daszak was working hard to get it restored and trying to stamp out any suggestion of a lab connection. He didn't hold back on Chan. "This is sloppy research," he tweeted, calling it "a poorly designed phylogenetic study with too many inferences and not enough data, riding on a wave of conspiracy to drive a higher impact." Peppering his tweets with exclamation points, he attacked the wording of the paper, arguing that one experiment it cited was impossible, and told Chan she didn't understand her own data. Afterward, a Daszak supporter followed up his thread with a GIF of a mike drop.

It was an old and familiar dynamic: threatened silverback male attempts to bully a junior female member of the tribe. As a postdoc, Chan was in a vulnerable position. The world of science is still a bit medieval in its power structure, with a handful of institutions and individuals deciding who gets published, who gets positions, who gets grants. There's little room for rebels.

What happened next was neither old nor familiar: Chan didn't back down. "Sorry to disrupt mike drop," she tweeted, providing a link to a paper in the prestigious journal *Nature* that "does that exact experiment you thought was impossible." Politely but firmly, she justified each point Daszak had attacked, showing him his mistakes. In the end, Daszak was reduced to arguing that she had used the word "isolate" incorrectly. In a coup de grâce, Chan pointed out that actually the word had come from online data provided by GenBank, the NIH's genetic sequence database. She offered to change it to whatever made sense. At that point, Daszak stopped replying. He insists, however, that Chan is overinterpreting her findings.

With Eisen, Chan readily agreed to test her hypothesis by finding other examples of viruses infecting new hosts. Within days, a perfect opportunity came along when news broke that the coronavirus had jumped from humans to minks at European fur farms. Sure enough, the mink version began to rapidly mutate. "You actually see the rapid evolution happening," Chan said. "Just in the first few weeks, the changes are quite drastic."

Chan also pointed out to Eisen that the whole goal of a website such as bioRxiv (pronounced "bioarchive")—where she posted the paper—is to elicit feedback that will make papers better before publication. Good point, he replied. Eventually he conceded that there was "a lot of interesting analysis in the paper" and agreed to work with Chan on the next draft.

The Twitter duels with her powerful colleagues didn't rattle Chan. "I thought Jonathan was very reasonable," she says. "I really appreciated his expertise, even if he disagreed with me. I like that kind of feedback. It helped to make our paper better."

With Daszak, Chan is more circumspect. "Some people have trouble keeping their emotions in check," she says. "Whenever I saw his comments, I'd just think, *Is there something I can learn here? Is there something he's right about that I should be fixing?*" Ultimately, she decided, there was not.

By late May, both journalists and armchair detectives interested in the mystery of the coronavirus were discovering Chan as a kind of Holmes to our Watson. She crunched information at twice our speed, zeroing in on small details we'd overlooked, and became a go-to for anyone looking for spin-free explications of the latest science on COVID-19. It was thrilling to see her reasoning in real time, a reminder of why I've always loved science, with its pursuit of patterns that sometimes leads to exciting revelations. The website CNET featured her in a story about "a league of scientists-turned-detectives" who were using genetic sequencing technologies to uncover COVID-19's origins. After it came out, Chan added "scientist-turned-detective" to her Twitter bio.

She's lived up to her new nom de tweet. As the search for the source of the virus continued, several scientific teams published papers identifying a closely related coronavirus in pangolins—anteater-like animals that are heavily trafficked in Asia for their meat and scales. The number of different studies made it seem as though this virus was ubiquitous in pangolins. Many scientists eagerly embraced the notion that the animals might have been the intermediate hosts that had passed the novel coronavirus to humans. It fit their preexisting theories about wet markets, and it would have meant no lab had been involved.

As Chan read the pangolin papers, she grew suspicious. The first one was by a team that had analyzed a group of the animals intercepted by anti-smuggling authorities in southern China. They found the closely related virus in a few of them, and published the genomes for that virus. Some of the other papers, though, were strangely ambiguous about where their data was coming from, or how their genomes had been constructed. Had they really taken samples from actual pangolins?

Once again, Chan messaged Shing Hei Zhan. "Shing, something's weird here," she wrote. Zhan pulled up the raw data from the papers and compared the genomes they had published. Individual copies of a virus coming from different animals should have small differences, just as individuals of a species have genetic differences. Yet the genomes in all of the pangolin papers were perfect matches—the authors were all simply using the first group's data set. Far from being ubiquitous, the virus had been found only in a few pangolins who were held together, and it was unclear where they had caught it. The animals might have even caught it from their own smuggler.

Remarkably, one group of authors in *Nature* even appeared to use the same genetic sequences from the other paper as if it were confirmation of their own discovery. "These sequences appear to be from the same virus (Pangolin-CoV) that we identified in the present study."

Chan called them out on Twitter: "Of course it's the same Pangolin-CoV, you used the same dataset!" For context, she later added, "Imagine if clinical trials were playing fast and loose with their patient data; renaming patients, throwing them into different datasets without clarification, possibly even describing the same patient multiple times across different studies unintentionally."

She and Zhan posted a new preprint on bioRxiv dismantling the pangolin papers. Confirmation came in June when the results of a study of hundreds of pangolins in the wildlife trade were announced: Not a single pangolin had any sign of a coronavirus. Chan took a victory lap on Twitter: "Supports our hypothesis all this time." The pangolin theory collapsed.

Chan then turned her Holmesian powers on bigger game: Daszak and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Daszak had been pleading his case everywhere from *60 Minutes* to the *New York Times* and has been successful in rallying sympathy to his cause, even getting 77 Nobel laureates to sign a letter calling for the NIH to restore EcoHealth Alliance's funding.

In several long and detailed "tweetorials," Chan began to cast a cloud of suspicion on the WIV's work. She pointed out that scientists there had discovered a virus that is more than 96 percent identical to the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2013 in a mineshaft soon after three miners working there had died from a COVID-like illness. The WIV didn't share these findings until 2020, even though the goal of such work, Chan pointed out, was supposedly to identify viruses with the potential to cause human illnesses and warn the world about them.

Even though that virus had killed three miners, Daszak said it wasn't considered a priority to study at the time. "We were looking for SARS-related virus, and this one was 20 percent different. We thought it was interesting, but not high risk. So we didn't do anything about it and put it in the freezer," he told a reporter from *Wired*. It was only in 2020, he maintained, that they started looking into it once they realized its similarity to COVID-19. But Chan pointed to an online database showing that the WIV had been genetically sequencing the mine virus in 2017 and 2018, analyzing it in a way they had done in the past with other viruses in preparation for running experiments with them. Diplomatic yet deadpan, she wrote, "I think Daszak was misinformed."

For good measure, almost in passing, Chan pointed out a detail no one else had noticed: COVID-19 contains an uncommon genetic sequence that has been used by genetic engineers in the past to insert genes into coronaviruses without leaving a trace, and it falls at the exact point that would allow experimenters to swap out different genetic parts to change the infectivity. That same sequence can occur naturally in a coronavirus, so this was not irrefutable proof of an unnatural origin, Chan explained, "only an observation." Still, it was enough for one Twitter user to muse, "If capital punishment were as painful as what Alina Chan is doing to Daszak/WIV regarding their story, it would be illegal."

Daszak says that indeed he had been misinformed and was unaware that that virus found in the mine shaft had been sequenced before 2020. He also says that a great lab, with great scientists, is now being picked apart to search for suspicious behavior to support a preconceived theory. "If you believe, deep down, something fishy went on, then what you do is you go through all the evidence and you try to look for things that support that belief," he says, adding, "That is not how you find the truth."

Many of the points in Chan's tweetorials had also been made by others, but she was the first reputable scientist to put it all together. That same week, London's *Sunday Times* and the BBC ran stories following the same trail of breadcrumbs that Chan had laid out to suggest that there had been a coverup at the WIV. The story soon circulated around the world. In the meantime, the WIV has steadfastly denied any viral leak. Lab director Yanyi Wang went on Chinese television and described such charges as "pure fabrication," and went on to explain that the bat coronavirus from 2013 was so different than COVID that it could not have evolved into it this quickly and that the lab only sequenced it and didn't obtain a live virus from it.

To this day, there is no definitive evidence as to whether the virus occurred naturally or had its origins in a lab, but the hypothesis that the Wuhan facility was the source is increasingly mainstream and the science behind it can no longer be ignored. And Chan is largely to thank for that.

In late spring, Chan walked through the tall glass doors of the Broad Institute for the first time in months. As she made her way across the gleaming marble foyer, her sneaker squeaks echoed in the silence. It was like the zombie apocalypse version of the Broad; all the bright lights but none of the people. It felt all the weirder that she was wearing her gym clothes to work.

A few days earlier, the Broad had begun letting researchers back into their labs to restart their projects. All computer work still needed to be done remotely, but bench scientists such as Chan could pop in just long enough to move along their cell cultures, provided they got tested for the virus every four days.

In her lab, Chan donned her white lab coat and took inventory, throwing out months of expired reagents and ordering new materials. Then she rescued a few samples from the freezer, took her seat at one of the tissue-culture hoods—stainless steel, air-controlled cabinets in which cell engineers do their work—and began reviving some of her old experiments.

She had mixed emotions about being back. It felt good to free her gene-therapy projects from their stasis, and she was even more excited about the new project she and Deverman were working on: an online tool that allows vaccine developers to track changes in the virus's genome by time, location, and other characteristics. "It came out of my personal frustration at not being able to get answers fast," she says.

On the other hand, she missed being all-consuming by her detective work. "I wanted to stop after the pangolin preprint," she says, "but this mystery keeps drawing me back in." So while she waits for her cell cultures to grow, she's been sleuthing on the side—only this time she has more company: Increasingly, scientists have been quietly contacting her to share their own theories and papers about COVID-19's origins, forming something of a growing underground resistance. "There's a lot of curiosity," she says. "People are starting to think more deeply about it." And they have to, she says, if we are going to prevent future outbreaks: "It's really important to find out where this came from so it doesn't happen again."

That is what keeps Chan up at night—the possibility of new outbreaks in humans from the same source. If the virus emerged naturally from a bat cave, there could well be other strains in existence ready to spill over. If they are closely related, whatever vaccines we develop might work on them, too. But that might not be the case with manipulated viruses from a laboratory. "Someone could have been sampling viruses from different caves for a decade and just playing mix-and-match in the lab, and those viruses could be so different from one another that none of our vaccines will work on them," she says. Either way, "We need to find where this came from, and close it down."

Whatever important information she finds, we can be sure Chan will share it with the world. Far from being shaken by the controversy her paper stirred, she is more committed than ever to holding a line that could all too easily be overrun. "Scientists shouldn't be censoring themselves," she says. "We're obliged to put all the data out there. We shouldn't be deciding that it's better if the public doesn't know about this or that. If we start doing that, we lose credibility, and eventually we lose the public's trust. And that's not good for science." In fact, it would cause an epidemic of doubt, and that wouldn't be good for any of us.

From: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 2:42 PM
To: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>; Pease, Michael (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)@state.gov>; Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: Mike's summary of post cables

Great. Points 2, 4, and 5 are key and form a basis for raising concerns about adherence to Article X at least, questions under Article V, and separately, possible concerns about compliance with Article V. I will to get a copy of the WHO regs as well.

Jeff Gibbs
Senior Adviser AVC
SSD/AVC
c: (b)(6)

From: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 12:43 PM
To: Pease, Michael (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)@state.gov>; Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>; Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Mike's summary of post cables

Thanks, Mike.

Inclined to think we can cite some of these in the CR as sources of concerns...

(BTW, Bullets 1, 4, and 5 (especially 5) have been widely reported on Taiwan TV.)

From: Pease, Michael (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 11:46 AM
To: DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)@state.gov>; Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>; Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: response from CDC/NIH

I have found over 90 Embassy Beijing cables dealing with COVID-19 from 7 Jan to present. As luck would have it, we had consulate personnel on the scene in Wuhan. I have harvested about half of the cables -- I am almost up to March. So far, these cables document:

- Gross corruption and ineptitude by the local government officials (some of whom were later fired). Arguably, these officials enabled COVID-19 to go from outbreak to epidemic to pandemic.
- Frequent requests from USG via multiple channels to try to assist, scientifically collaborate, and more importantly, attempt to obtain critical data on the epidemiological and medical aspects of the outbreak as it was spreading throughout China and to other countries.
- Private PPE and other donations from the US.
- Consistent stonewalling by the PRC as the epidemic grows into a global pandemic.
- The WHO publicly saying what the PRC wanted, and privately/unofficially/candidly complaining about the utter lack of transparency and cooperation.
 - Note: On multiple occasions WHO leaders publicly praised the PRC leadership for adhering to international health standards and aggressively attacking the virus.

(b)(6)