Office of Information Governance and Privacy

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
500 12th St., SW
Washington, D.C. 20536

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

November 22, 2022

Hart Wood
American Oversight
1030 15th St. NW, B255
Washington, DC 20005
Hart.wood@americanoversight.org

RE: AMERICAN OVERSIGHT v. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY-1:21-cv-01171-TNM
ICE FOIA Case Number 2021-ICLI-00064
Tenth Release

Dear Mr. Hart:

This letter is the tenth interim response to your client's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), dated July 16, 2021. Your FOIA request seeking records related to all final talking points prepared for Secretary Nielsen regarding the MPP and issues related to it, such as plans for lodging asylum seekers in Tijuana, plans for transporting migrants to and from Tijuana, expansion of the protocol to additional ports of entry, etc.

ICE has considered your request under the FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552.

A total of 500 pages of records were reviewed for this interim production. These 500 pages of records were located pursuant to a search of the Director's Office. After review of these documents, ICE has determined that 367 pages were duplicates and 133 pages will be released in full. The responsive 133 pages of records are attached and have been marked 2021-ICLI-00064 2145 to 2021-ICLI-00064 2277.

If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Assistant United States Attorney Sean Michael Tepe at sean.tepe@usdoj.gov.

Sincerely,

MERONICA D STONEY Digitally signed by MERONICA D STONEY Date: 2022.11.22 09:58:47 -05'00'

Meronica D. Stoney
(A) Deputy FOIA Officer

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Enclosure(s): 133 pages

cc: Sean Michael Tepe
Assistant United States Attorney
sean.tepe@usdoj.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

the provocative test of a weapon-like projectile from a satellite threatening the peaceful use of space", Wallace wrote in The Sunday Telegraph newspaper, adding that China also posed a threat.

"China, too, is developing offensive space weapons and both nations are upgrading their capabilities. Such behaviour only underlines the importance of the review the (UK) government is currently conducting", he added bit.ly/2ZZQ5Ri.

Tensions between Britain and Russia have been high in recent weeks, as Britain has targeted Russians with new sanctions, accused Russian actors of trying to meddle in last year's election and said Moscow has tried to hack into vaccine research.

Separately, Britain announced on Monday it would suspend its extradition treaty with Hong Kong in an escalation of a dispute with China over its introduction of a national security law for the former British colony.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered equipment from China's Huawei Technologies to be purged completely from Britain's 5G network by the end of 2027.

China - once courted as the prime source of investment in British infrastructure projects - has accused Britain of pandering to the United States.

The Mail on Sunday newspaper reported that Johnson was also set to overhaul the United Kingdom's treason laws to counter threats posed by China and Russia, with the step likely to see a new Treason Act, a new Espionage Act and a rewriting of the Official Secrets Act.

[China] Beijing Slams Forced U.S. Entry to China's Houston Consulate (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [7/25/2020 10:50 AM, Staff, 6400K]
U.S.-China diplomatic tensions continued to simmer on Saturday as Beijing slammed the "forced entry" to its Houston consulate by U.S. personnel hours earlier and vowed to respond "as necessary."

Federal agents and local law enforcement authorities broke into the consulate building late Friday, according to the Houston Chronicle and CNN, after issuing an order on July 21 that it must close within 72 hours.

The newspaper reported that among the personnel on site were some wearing shirts carrying the words "U.S. Department of State." Agents tried three different entrances at the compound before prying open a back door, the Chronicle reported.

Beijing said that U.S. had broken diplomatic conventions by entering "China's national property."

"According to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and the Sino-U.S. Consular Treaty, the United States must not infringe on the premises of the Chinese Consulate in Houston in any way," Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said in an a Q&A posted on the ministry's website late on Saturday.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Beijing has already expressed “firm opposition” to the move and will respond as “proper and necessary,” Wang said.

On Friday, China ordered the U.S. to close its consulate in the southwestern city of Chengdu, retaliating for the Trump administration’s decision to shutter the Chinese mission in Houston.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Friday that the consulate’s closure was a “legitimate and necessary response to the unjustified act by the U.S.”

The widely anticipated retaliation came hours ahead of the U.S.’s deadline for Chinese diplomats to vacate the Houston facility, which the State Department said had served as a hub for spying and influence operations.

Beijing’s decision will not only oust American diplomats from the capital of Sichuan province -- a region with a population rivaling Germany -- it will close a key listening post for developments in neighboring Tibet. The move will probably have a bigger impact than shutting the U.S. consulate in Wuhan, but less than closing U.S. missions in the key financial centers of Hong Kong or Shanghai.

Wang, the foreign ministry spokesman, told a regular news briefing in Beijing that some consulate staff had “engaged in activities inconsistent with their capacity, interfered in China’s internal affairs and harmed China’s national security interests.” By Friday afternoon, dozens of police, plainclothes officers and People’s Liberation Army personnel were seen patrolling the street outside the building, searching phones and ordering people to delete photos.

While police ordered most reporters and pedestrians to leave the area, China’s state broadcaster began live-streaming footage of the consulate’s entrance.

U.S. stocks have been hit by the tensions, and spot gold topped $1,900 an ounce for the first time since 2011. China’s CSI 300 Index slumped 4.4% at the close on Friday, while the ChiNext Index dropped 6.1%, the most since Feb. 3.

“It’s not possible to carry out an entirely equivalent action, but choosing Chengdu shows China wants to reduce the harm made to bilateral relations,” said Wang Yiwei, a former Chinese diplomat and director of China’s Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University in Beijing. “The operations out of Chengdu are not the most high profile of the U.S. mission in China, compared to say Shanghai.”

In another potential sign of a deescalation, U.S. officials said a Chinese researcher wanted by law enforcement who had taken refuge in China’s San Francisco consulate was now in custody. The researcher, Juan Tang, is expected to have a court appearance on Friday, official said on a briefing call for reporters.

Yet the Chengdu and Houston consulate closures illustrate the alarming degree to which relations between the world’s two largest economies have worsened in recent years, as China assumes a more assertive posture on the world stage and the U.S. seeks to check its rise. President Donald Trump and his aides have stepped up attacks on China ahead of the

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

U.S. election in November, accusing Beijing of spying, cybertheft and causing the coronavirus pandemic.

In a speech Thursday at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo accused President Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership of attempting to “tyrannize inside and outside China forever” in pursuit of global hegemony. “Securing our freedoms from the Chinese Communist Party is the mission of our time,” Pompeo said.

In the first U.S. reaction to the Chengdu decision, a spokesman for the National Security Council said the closure of the Houston consulate was justified after years of espionage activity.

“For years, the CCP has undertaken a whole-of-society effort to steal American technology and intellectual property for commercial gain, and many of these activities are directed from PRC diplomatic facilities,” NSC spokesman John Ullyot said in a statement Friday. “Our action to direct the closure of PRC Consulate General in Houston was taken to protect American intellectual property and Americans’ private information.”

A commentary published by China’s official Xinhua News Agency moments after the Chengdu announcement said the Chengdu closure was “aimed at a few extremist forces in the U.S. government, not the American people.” “The U.S. has stirred up trouble in bilateral relations to the point of hysteria,” the commentary said.

In a sign things could deteriorate further, Wang, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, answered a question on Thursday about the future of the U.S.-China trade deal by saying the American side should think “carefully” about where the relationship was heading. Trump also said that his “phase one” deal meant “much less” to him in the wake of the pandemic.

The Chengdu mission, which opened in 1985, covers Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan, as well as Sichuan. The consulate has also served as a key U.S. perch to follow events in Tibet, where Communist Party efforts to suppress dissent have long been a focus of tensions between China and the West.

In 2012, former Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun sought refuge in the Chengdu consulate with evidence linking the family of his then boss, former Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai, to the death of a British businessman. The episode exposed a scandal that would see Bo ousted and his wife convicted of murder, leading Xi to launch a nationwide anti-corruption campaign.

“They wanted to make it hurt a little bit more so they picked Chengdu,” said James Green, a former State Department official who is now a senior adviser for geopolitical consulting firm McLarty Associates. “What the Chinese care about more -- and what we care about more -- is what we do out of Chengdu, which is follow Tibet. And shutting that down kind of cuts our link to Tibet, which is a political blow to us.”

Global Times Editor-in-Chief Hu Xijin, who had earlier reported the timing of the decision on his Twitter feed, said U.S. diplomats were given the same 72-hour notice as their Chinese counterparts in Houston, meaning they must leave by Monday morning. The Wall Street

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Journal separately reported, citing unidentified people briefed on the matter, that China had given the affected diplomats 30 days to leave the country.

Wang Wenbin repeatedly sidestepped questions about when the diplomats would have to leave, saying only “we always talk about reciprocity in diplomacy.”

“The current situation in China-U.S. relations is not what China desires to see, and the U.S. is responsible for all this,” the Foreign Ministry said earlier Friday. “We once again urge the U.S. to immediately retract its wrong decision and create necessary conditions for bringing the bilateral relationship back on track.”

{End of Report} **RETURN TO TOP**

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

DHS MORNING BRIEFING

Prepared for the Office of Public Affairs (OPA)
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
By TechMIS
www.TechMIS.com

Mobile User Copy

TO: Homeland Security Secretary & Staff

DATE: Saturday, May 16, 2020 8:00 AM ET

Top News

House approves $3 trillion coronavirus relief package (Politico) 4

House narrowly passes $3 trillion coronavirus aid bill (Roll Call) 7

House Passes $3 Trillion Democratic Stimulus With No Path to Law (Bloomberg) 10

Congress Has Approved $3 Trillion For Coronavirus Relief So Far. Here's A Breakdown (NPR) 12

Operation Warp Speed sets 'goal' of 300 million coronavirus vaccines by January 2021 (Washington Examiner) 16

Wolf calls out China for trying to steal US coronavirus vaccine research: 'We need to stay on it' (FOX News)..... 18

House defeats effort to prevent stimulus checks for undocumented immigrants (The Hill)..... 18

Dems narrowly defeat GOP motion to bar undocumented immigrants from receiving coronavirus payments (Washington Times) 20

Out-of-work Americans still waiting for jobless aid as states struggle to process claims (FOX News)..... 20

The Pandemic's Impact On The Latino Community (NPR) 22

Top intelligence official to take charge of briefing candidates on election threats (CNN) 23

ODNI to offer election security briefings for both parties in run-up to November (FOX News)..... 24

Grenell: Top counterintel official will take charge of 2020 campaign briefings on election interference (Washington Examiner)..... 25

House Poised to Adopt New Remote Voting Rules Amid Coronavirus Pandemic (US News & World Report)28

Apple and Google are building a virus-tracking system. Health officials say it will be practically useless. (Washington Post)..... 29

[MD] Montgomery County Sued For Doling Out Coronavirus Money To Illegal Aliens (Daily Caller)..... 33

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

[TX] U.S. Attorney's Aide Accused of Leaking Information to Mexican Cartel (Breitbart) 34

[CA] USNS Mercy leaves Los Angeles after treating 77 patients (The Hill) 35

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

DHS begins collecting DNA from undocumented immigrants after whistleblower complaints (Politico) 36

ICE is seeking to deport these migrant girls during the pandemic, alarming advocates (CBS News) 38

[NY] Gruesome Murders Lead To Major Bust Of Alleged MS-13 Gang Members (Daily Caller) 40

[NY] Ten suspected MS-13 gang members charged in murder and crime plots in New York (Washington Examiner) 41

[NJ] 'Everybody Was Sick': Inside an ICE Detention Center (New York Times) 42

[TX] ICE Program Collects DNA Samples Of Illegal Aliens (Daily Caller) 44

[CA] "My son is in danger": Fear mounts over largest coronavirus outbreak in ICE detention (CBS News) 45

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Citizenship agency faces 'drastic' coronavirus cash crunch, begs Congress for $1.2 billion (Washington Times) 49

[MA] The US has allowed just two migrants to stay under tougher border measures (CNN) 50

[MA] Judge allows 5 Central American asylum seekers to enter US (San Francisco Chronicle) 51

[MN] DOJ: Pakistani Doctor on H-1B Visa Wanted to Attack U.S. for ISIS (Breitbart) 52

Customs and Border Protection

Number of migrants in CBP custody at border plummets amid coronavirus crisis (FOX News) 53

[TX] Two Criminal Alien Sex Offenders Busted After Crossing Border into Texas (Breitbart) 54

[Canada] Freeland won't say if U.S. wants border agreement extended beyond June 21 (Bloomberg) 55

Transportation Security Administration

TSA May Soon Start Screening Airline Passengers for Fever (Bloomberg) 55

TSA to begin checking passengers' temperatures at several airports: report (The Hill) 57

TSA working on plan to check temperatures at some American airports (CNN) 57

[NV] Las Vegas airport offering PPE in vending machines (The Hill) 58

[NV] Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport 'first' to add PPE vending machines (FOX News) 59

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Trump administration winds down 'Project Airbridge' effort to import medical supplies (CNN) 60

Post-9/11 public safety network tapped for COVID-19 response (Roll Call) 61

Subtropical storm Arthur is likely to form on Saturday, but Florida, Louisiana already drenched (Washington Post) . 63

[NV] 6.4 magnitude earthquake hits western Nevada; shaking reportedly felt in California (Los Angeles Times) 65

[NV] Strong Quake Hits Rural Nevada, Shuts Las Vegas-Reno Highway (Nevada Public Radio) 65

[NV] Largest area Nevada earthquake in 65 years cracks main highway between Las Vegas and Reno (Chicago Tribune) 66

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

[NV] 6.5 magnitude earthquake strikes near California-Nevada border (San Francisco Chronicle) 67

Secret Service

Secret Service interviewed Infowars' Alex Jones over claim of plot to kill Trump (Washington Times) 68

Secret Service interviewed Alex Jones after he claimed to have details on plots to assassinate Trump (Washington Examiner) 70

[ME] Ogunquit police say they busted a counterfeit printing operation in a hotel (WABI TV) 70

[NJ] Secret Service signs $179,000 contract to rent golf carts in Bedminster, N.J., this summer (Washington Post) 71

[NJ] Secret Service to pay $179,000 to rent golf carts in New Jersey this summer (The Hill) 72

[NJ] Feds: Secret Service Busts NJ Man With 5,126 Fake Credit Cards, DLs (Daily Voice) 73

[TN] Staggering woman tries to use phony $100 bill (Advocate and Democrat) 74

[AR] Benton police searching for person who tried to use counterfeit money (KATV) 75

[IA] Police looking for woman accused of using counterfeit money in East Moline (WOC 1420) 75

[CA] McCloud woman arrested for passing counterfeit bills at Dunsmuir Dollar General (Mount Shasta Herald) 75

CISA/Cybersecurity

Federal watchdog finds chemical facilities vulnerable to cyberattacks (The Hill) 76

The Cybersecurity 202: Commission that pushed a cybersecurity overhaul hopes coronavirus boosts the effort (Washington Post) 77

Microsoft warns on COVID-19 cyber-scams (FOX News) 79

Zoom planning to hire hundreds of software engineers in U.S. amid growing hostility with China (Washington Times) 80

Coronavirus crisis: Online church services attacked by hackers using child pornography (FOX News) 81

Hackers double ransom demand to $42M from Lady Gaga, Madonna's attorney, threaten Donald Trump (FOX News) 84

Law Firm Hackers Claim to Have Dirt on Donald Trump, Up Data Ransom to $42M (San Francisco Chronicle) 85

National Security News

Intelligence Chief Reduces Size of Counterterrorism Office (New York Times) 87

FISA overhaul could be an early test of House voting by proxy (Roll Call) 90

Justice Department signals opposition to Senate's surveillance bill (The Hill) 91

Military faces another potential coronavirus toll: Budget cuts (Washington Post) 92

Pentagon confirms development of hypersonic weapons after Trump talks up 'super duper missiles' (FOX News) 95

NASA unveils new rules on behavior in space and on the lunar surface (Washington Post) 96

[Egypt] Withdrawing US troops from the Sinai could break a fragile peace (The Hill) 98

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan breaks with US and blames Taliban for deadly maternity ward attack (Washington Examiner) 99

[Afghanistan] U.S. Urges Afghanistan to Stay the Course With Peace Deal as

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Violence Resurges (New York Times) 101

[Afghanistan] Troop withdrawal, peace process on track in Afghanistan despite violence, U.S. says (Los Angeles Times) 102

[Afghanistan] U.S. remains committed to Afghan peace process despite ongoing violence, Khalilzad says (Washington Times) 104

[Afghanistan] Afghan peace talk delays raise specter of Syria-style multiparty civil war: US diplomat (Washington Examiner) 105

[Afghanistan] Drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan continuing: Pentagon (Reuters) 106

[China] China Brings Fighter Jets to Illegal South China Sea Base (Breitbart) 106

[China] China Gives Fresh Details of Virus Response, Denies Cover Up (Bloomberg) 108

[China] China Admits Destruction of Early Coronavirus Samples (Breitbart) 109

[China] Senate approves bill to sanction China over Uyghur rights (The Hill) . 111

[China] U.S. Delivers Another Blow to Huawei With New Tech Restrictions (New York Times)..... 112

[China] U.S. tries to close loophole that allowed China's Huawei to skirt export ban (Washington Post) 114

[China] U.S. Tightens Rules to Crack Down on Huawei's Chip Supply (Bloomberg)..... 115

[China] US seek to cut off China's Huawei from global chip suppliers (Breitbart) 117

[China] Commerce Department cracks down on Huawei's access to chips (The Hill) 118

[China] GOP senator calls to 'strangle' Huawei in wake of new sanctions (FOX News) 120

[China] U.S. moves to cut Huawei off from global chip suppliers (Reuters) 121

[China] US adds new sanction on Chinese tech giant Huawei (AP)..... 123

[China] China tells US to stop 'unreasonable suppression' of Huawei (Breitbart) 125

[Taiwan] U.S. gave no assurances to Taiwan's TSMC for license to sell to Huawei: official (Reuters)..... 126

[Japan] Japan, U.S. to set up economic security dialogue: Yomiuri (Reuters) 127

Presidential Tweets

Editorial Note: The DHS Daily Briefing is a collection of news articles related to Department's mission. The inclusion of particular stories is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse the political viewpoints or affiliations included in news coverage.

Top News

House approves $3 trillion coronavirus relief package (Politico)
Politico [5/15/2020 10:32 PM, Heather Caygle, Sarah Ferris, and John Bresnahan, 4207K] The House passed a $3 trillion coronavirus relief package Friday evening, with Speaker Nancy Pelosi working late into the day to shepherd the behemoth bill to passage, overcoming opposition from almost all Republicans and some Democrats.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The massive bill was approved via a 208-199 vote, with only one Republican — moderate Rep. Peter King of New York — joining most Democrats in backing the legislation.

"Crazy day, crazy day. But it passed because it needed to pass," Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) said shortly before leaving the Capitol after 9 p.m. "Now the Senate needs to act."

The final vote capped off a busy day for the House, which also adopted a historic rules change to allow members to vote and convene committee hearings remotely. The change, while temporary, will allow House lawmakers to cast their votes via proxy for the first time in U.S. history.

The GOP-controlled Senate is not expected to take up the coronavirus aid bill, which Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has dismissed as a “totally unserious effort.”

Since early March, Congress has passed four coronavirus bills totaling nearly $3 trillion in federal funds to address the ongoing pandemic. But most Republicans have refused to negotiate further, saying they would like to see how those dollars are spent before taking more action.

“Mitch McConnell has tried to bluff his way into the Senate guiding the manner in which we are going to work on behalf of the American people and he’s repeatedly failed,” House Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.) said Friday, dismissing the GOP strategy. “But at the end of the day, the president is likely to recognize the need to get relief to the American people sooner rather than later.”

This was only the third time since mid-March that the full House has met but the chamber is not done with its work this month. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) announced immediately after the stimulus vote that the House would next be in full session on May 27-28 to take up the amended Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act passed by the Senate on Thursday. That will be the first major piece of legislation considered under the new proxy voting procedure for the House floor.

But Minority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.) suggested that Republicans may mount a legal challenge to the rule change, arguing it violated the Constitution’s requirement for a majority of the chamber to be present for a vote. The House would actually have to use proxy votes before a lawsuit can be mounted, so that may take several weeks to unfold.

The coronavirus passage vote ends a hectic week for Pelosi and her leadership team as they worked feverishly — including on Friday — to corral Democratic support for the relief bill. Pelosi stood sentry at the entrance of the chamber for hours leading up to the vote, clutching a list of members and grabbing certain lawmakers as they entered.

Still, more than a dozen Democrats opposed the package – mostly moderates who complained of partisan gamesmanship and the bill’s hefty price tag. One liberal lawmaker, Congressional Progressive Caucus Co-Chair Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.), also voted against the bill after an unsuccessful effort to get Pelosi to delay the vote to continue negotiations into next week.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Jayapal and other liberals were upset that some of their top priorities — including Jayapal's "Paycheck Guarantee" proposal that would allow the government to cover payrolls for struggling businesses for several months — were left out of the final bill.

Many other Democrats made clear they were holding their nose and supporting the bill despite their concerns. "This begins and ends with being there for New York," said Rep. Max Rose (D-N.Y.), one of the many moderates who was unhappy with the scope and process. "This doesn't pass, we don't get those funds."

Just before the vote, Pelosi and her leadership team were forced into a last-minute whipping operation to prevent moderate Democrats from defecting on a GOP procedural vote, which would have jeopardized passage of the $3 trillion bill.

Republicans attempted to split the Democratic caucus by forcing a vote related to undocumented immigrants — a tough issue for those in Trump districts.

But the gambit didn't work after a personal lobbying effort by Pelosi, who buttonholed more than a dozen centrist Democrats on the floor ahead of the vote. In the end, only 14 Democrats joined with Republicans and the GOP motion was defeated.

In some ways, Pelosi took a huge gamble by pushing through a massive messaging bill that will be ignored by the GOP-controlled Senate, while opening up the most vulnerable Democrats to nasty attacks from Republicans over some of the bill's most controversial provisions.

Pelosi has countered that it is Republicans — not Democrats — who should worry about the response back home after they vote against this latest aid bill, which would deliver nearly $1 trillion in relief to struggling state and local governments, expand food assistance and unemployment benefits, offer student debt relief for some Americans and provide another round of stimulus payments.

"Some of the members say, 'Let's take a pause.' Let's take a pause? Do you think this virus is taking a pause?" Pelosi said in a floor speech, making a final pitch to her caucus ahead of the vote.

"Do you think that the rent takes a pause? Do you think that putting food on the table or the hunger that comes if you can't takes a pause?"

Pelosi has worked hard to soothe discontent within her caucus, fielding complaints from members about changes to pension programs and from members who wanted to provide greater financial security for the 36 million people out of work.

In one particularly tense moment earlier this week, Jayapal confronted Pelosi on a caucus-wide call, decrying the fact that her popular proposal was left out of the final package.

Progressive leaders also debated a floor strategy that would temporarily block the bill from coming to the floor, but did not ultimately use the tactic. In a sign of Pelosi's hold over her caucus, most Democrats have relegated their complaints to private calls with colleagues and leadership, declining to criticize the speaker publicly.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

House Ways and Means Chairman Richard Neal (D-Mass.) said he understood members' critiques but added the uniqueness of the current situation makes drafting bills even more complicated.

Neal's staff worked with Jayapal to try to turn her idea into legislative text but say they ran out of time to incorporate it into this bill. Still, Democratic leaders haven't ruled out adding Jayapal's proposal to a future coronavirus relief bill.

"We're just up against this pandemic and we're all doing the social distancing, we're all doing the zooming," Neal said.

"I invited all members to talk to either me or the Ways and Means staff and many of them didn't take advantage of it. I understand the critique but there's also a competing reality here and we're living in it."

House narrowly passes $3 trillion coronavirus aid bill (Roll Call)
Roll Call [5/15/2020 9:39 PM, Jennifer Shutt, 72K]
Speaker Nancy Pelosi muscled a $3 trillion aid package through the House late Friday, overcoming defections from her party's moderate wing who would have preferred to vote for a bipartisan measure.

The near party-line tally was 208-199, with 14 Democrats voting against sending the bill to the Senate. Rep. Peter T. King, R-N.Y., was the lone Republican to support the measure, citing robust aid for states and localities like his suffering from revenue shortfalls and high numbers of COVID-19 cases.

Among the Democrats who announced in advance they'd vote against the package were Cindy Axne of Iowa, Joe Cunningham of South Carolina, Kendra Horn of Oklahoma, Ben McAdams of Utah and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia. All are moderates in GOP-leaning districts.

"I think it's something that should have had more broad bipartisan support," said Cunningham. He argued that aid legislation "needs to be more narrowly focused on the people who are suffering as a result of the pandemic."

Cunningham won his seat in 2018 in a major upset; he's considered a top GOP target in November in a district that backed President Donald Trump in 2016 by nearly 11 points. Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales rates the contest a Toss-up.

Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chairwoman Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., was the sole member of the party's more liberal wing to vote against the bill. She told reporters the measure didn't go far enough to help workers and businesses.

"At the end of the day, what I'm talking about is protecting the economy and protecting people from dying, because businesses and workers feel too much pressure to go back to work too quickly because they don't have money," said Jayapal.

Jayapal said she wished the legislation included the paycheck guarantee proposal she released in early April that would have ensured workers receive 100 percent of their salaries up to $100,000 and provided businesses with funding to cover "essential" expenses such as

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

rent.

Democratic Rep. Katie Porter, who represents a moderate district in Orange County, Calif., voted against the rule that cleared the way for debate but later announced on the floor she'd vote for the bill.

"I know our states and local governments and our frontline workers cannot wait for federal help," she said. "I therefore support this bill."

The bill includes dozens of key Democratic priorities and has elicited sharp criticism from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who on Thursday called the 1,815-page package a "liberal wish list." The White House issued a veto threat on the measure.

The bill includes nearly $1 trillion in aid to local and state governments, which are facing steep budget shortfalls following a drop off in income tax revenue due to skyrocketing unemployment, as well as a reduction in sales tax revenue after businesses mostly shut down due to stay-at-home orders.

The bill would provide $435 billion, according to the Joint Committee on Taxation, to send out more direct payments to households and fill in gaps from the previous round, estimated in March to cost $293 billion.

Families with adult children who are full-time students up to age 24 could now receive $500 from the previous round, which had cut off at age 17; the age limit would be raised for the new round as well, and up to three children per household would be eligible for the full $1,200 amount allotted to adults.

Immigration debate

It would also make individuals with a taxpayer identification number eligible for payments, even if they don't have a Social Security number. Critics said that would open the door to undocumented immigrants getting payments, and Republicans were nearly successful on a procedural vote to strip that provision.

The House rejected the motion to recommit on a 198-209 vote, despite 13 Democrats crossing the aisle to support it. Rep. Justin Amash, I-Mich., voted against the motion.

Pelosi and other Democratic leaders worked hard during the vote to persuade party moderates in tough races to oppose the GOP motion.

The legislation would also establish a nearly $200 billion grant program for employers to provide a pay increase for "essential workers," such as first responders and employees at hospitals, grocery stores and meat processing plants.

And expanded unemployment insurance benefits worth an extra $600 per week on top of regular state allotments would be extended from August through the end of January, and through March if regular state eligibility hadn't been used up yet.

Many Republicans oppose the higher weekly benefit because in many states it would pay unemployed workers more than they made before they were laid off, which they say will

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

cripple firms' ability to reopen once lockdowns are lifted.

Panoply of aid

Democrats' bill would also provide:

$100 billion for a public health fund for hospitals and other health care providers.

$100 billion to help states address long-term school closures.

$100 billion in rental assistance for low-income households.

$75 billion to help homeowners pay their mortgages, property taxes or utilities.

$25 billion to help the Postal Service survive a steep drop off in revenue.

$10 billion to bolster the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program as more and more people seek out federal food aid assistance.

One bipartisan proposal would beef up a tax credit in the March law to cover up to $5,000 of wages for employers experiencing sharp revenue declines. The House Democrats' bill would expand that provision to cover up to $36,000 of wages, as well as making employer health benefit expenses eligible, in line with recent Treasury guidance. The JCT said the so-called "employee retention credit" expansion would cost $164 billion over a decade.

Another costly tax provision doesn't enjoy the same bipartisan support, however: eliminating the $10,000 cap on state and local tax deductions for this year and next, at a $137 billion cost.

Republicans have mostly spent the last few days blasting the "SALT" cap removal as a sop to richer households in blue states that has nothing to do with pandemic relief.

The Senate won't take up the legislation in its current form, though key senators will begin discussions with Democratic leaders and the Trump administration. McConnell, however, hasn't yet said when that will be.

"I think there is a high likelihood we'll do another bill," he said on Fox News. "I'm not prepared today to put a precise date on when that will be."

The Kentucky Republican said that bill must include liability protections for businesses that reopen while the virus is still active, calling it a "red line."

White House officials have also said additional legislation is likely but that the negotiations should be put on hold while the effectiveness of the $2 trillion March aid package is reviewed.

"Some of the members say let's take a pause," Pelosi said on the floor. "Do you think this virus is taking a pause? Do you think that the rent takes a pause? Do you think that putting food on the table — or the hunger that comes if you can't — takes a pause?"

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Rep. Rodney Davis, R-Ill., said he backed some of the bill's provisions, despite voting against it.

"It's a 3 trillion-dollar bill; there's bound to be good shit in it somewhere," Davis said. "But the bottom line was, there was no bipartisanship."

House Passes $3 Trillion Democratic Stimulus With No Path to Law (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/15/2020 9:27 PM, Erik Wasson and Billy House, 6400K]
The House passed a $3 trillion Democratic economic stimulus bill Friday that Republicans and President Donald Trump have already rejected and isn't likely to trigger bipartisan negotiations any time soon.

The measure, passed 208-199, would give cash-strapped states and local governments more than $1 trillion while providing most Americans with a new round of $1,200 checks. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said it should be the basis of talks with the GOP-controlled Senate and White House, which have called for a "pause" to allow earlier coronavirus recovery spending to work.

"A horrible virus has made a vicious attack on the lives and livelihoods of the American people, and indeed on the life of our democracy," Pelosi said on the House floor before the vote. "It's always interesting to see how much patience some people have with the pain and suffering of other people."

Pelosi this week has repeatedly invoked Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, who has said Congress will have to inject more fiscal stimulus into the economy to prevent a prolonged recession. The U.S. has more than 1.4 million coronavirus cases, and more than 86,000 have died.

But Republicans also cite the Fed chief, with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell saying Powell hasn't explicitly said how quickly Congress must act. He and other Republicans have dismissed the House Democrats' bill as a liberal wish list and are using it to attack Democrats, whom polls give an increasing chance of holding the House and taking the Senate in November's election.

"This is much more about political messaging than effective legislating," Republican Representative Tom Cole of Oklahoma said.

Powell Warns of Broad Virus Danger, Bats Down Negative Rates

GOP members said some provisions don't belong in a virus bill, such as reductions in immigration enforcement, providing stimulus checks to undocumented immigrants, money for the troubled U.S. Postal Service and a national requirement to hold elections by mail.

Trump and Republican congressional leaders have acknowledged, however, that some sort of further economic stimulus will likely be necessary as the economy continues to shed jobs. The number of people filing for unemployment benefits since March now exceeds 36 million.

"Phase four is going to happen but it's going to happen in a much better way for the American people," Trump old reporters Friday. He said he holds leverage over Democrats

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

in any future talks.

“We have all the cards because we have the cards of the American people. I know what they want,” the president said.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy said he anticipates another bill eventually.

Senate to Evaluate

“I would not wait for December,” McCarthy told reporters. “But I would not pass a bill without having any hearings, from the standpoint, without any feedback.”

The Senate plans to ignore the House proposal next week, focusing instead on confirming Trump administration nominees. Aides say that in June, the chamber may consider legislation to give businesses protection from virus-related lawsuits, and that bill could be combined with some limited economic aid.

McConnell said Thursday it will take time to evaluate the nearly $3 trillion in spending already enacted by Congress to combat the virus and its economic effects.

“The chairman of the Fed is correct and we do anticipate having to act again at some point,” McConnell said in an interview on Fox News. “I do think though in terms of timing, the chairman of the Fed didn’t say how quickly, and we need to verify how we have done so far and make sure whatever mistakes we have made we don’t want to repeat.”

Democratic Qualms

A group of the most vulnerable Democrats in swing districts voted against the bill, arguing that they preferred a bipartisan approach to the virus.

“I could not in good conscience vote to accept this Washington gamesmanship, or vote to approve unrelated wastes of taxpayer dollars, while Iowa sees its Covid-19 case rates climbing and parts of my district become a national hot spot,” said Iowa freshman Democrat Cindy Axne.

Oklahoma’s Kendra Horn said in an interview that in addition to opposing the inclusion of provisions such as those on immigration, she objected to spending $3 trillion without committee hearings and being given an 1,800-page bill only three days before a vote.

“I know there are many of us who are concerned about the size of this package and the scope that goes beyond direct response,” Horn said. “We need to have a transparent process that allows for bipartisan agreement.”

Horn said Congress should work out a compromise bill focused on state and local aid, fixing small business loans and defeating the virus.

SALT Deduction

Other Democrats, though, backed Pelosi’s decision to expand the plan’s reach to include priorities such as eliminating the tax code’s cap on state and local deductions for

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

individuals, as well as expanded employee-retention tax credits.

But the speaker decided against several costly items sought by progressives including recurring stimulus payments to Americans linked to future unemployment. She said Congress could vote on more rounds of aid later if necessary.

Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chairwoman Pramila Jayapal opposed the bill, citing its lack of funds to guarantee paychecks. She had proposed direct federal payments to employers to rehire furloughed workers.

“At the core, our response from Congress must match the true scale of this devastating crisis. The Heroes Act — while it contains many important provisions — simply fails to do that,” Jayapal said in a statement.

Congress Has Approved $3 Trillion For Coronavirus Relief So Far. Here’s A Breakdown (NPR)
NPR [5/15/2020 1:53 PM, Kelsey Snell, 7267K]
Congress has authorized roughly $3 trillion in coronavirus relief in four separate measures over the last two months. These bills attempt to protect the American economy from long-term harm caused by stay-at-home orders and respond to the overall impact of the virus.

The House is preparing to vote on a Democrats-only bill to spend another $3 trillion. Republicans have rejected the proposal, known as the HEROES Act, and are calling for a pause on new aid. But House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., says the latest legislation is her starting point for any new negotiations.

In several cases, Congress voted on the relief spending with little time to review the proposals and without an official cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office. But now CBO has released estimates showing that the costs of some programs are expected to outpace early projections — driving up the total cost of the bills.

These long-term expenses will be added on top of recent projections from the CBO that the U.S. deficit would be more than $3.7 trillion in 2020.

NPR reviewed data and estimates reported by the CBO to break down how Congress allocated money to respond to the pandemic. Those estimates, known as scores, detail how much the agency expects programs will cost and how those measures will impact the debt, deficit and government revenue.

In some cases, Congress approved a fixed amount of money for a program, like the Paycheck Protection Program loans for small businesses.

In other cases, like the expanded unemployment insurance and tax credits for emergency paid family and sick leave, Congress approved the credits and their values but did not put a cap on the expenditures. When that happens, the CBO estimates the number of people and companies that may take advantage of the program. The CBO often provides those estimates in two-year figures, in part because it may take time for businesses and individuals to file claims.

Here’s how the coronavirus relief money breaks down.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The bulk of the support for individuals was approved in the second and third packages, known as the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Stability Act, also known as CARES.

The biggest expenditures on individuals have been on cash relief payments, expansions to unemployment assistance, emergency family and medical leave.

Cash relief payments: $293 billion (estimated)

Many people have already started to receive direct deposits totaling as much as $1,200 under the program known as recovery rebates. Individuals earning less than $75,000 can expect a one-time cash payment of $1,200. Married couples would each receive a check and families would get $500 per child. That means a family of four earning less than $150,000 can expect $3,400.

The checks start to phase down after that and disappear completely for people making more than $99,000 and couples making more than $198,000.

The cash payments are based on most recent tax filings. People who receive Social Security payments, people experiencing homelessness and others who don't typically need to file tax return are still eligible, too.

Expanded unemployment insurance: $268 billion (estimated).

The third piece of legislation included temporary changes to federal unemployment benefits, including a supplemental benefit for all workers and new protections for gig workers.

Under the legislation, states will still pay base unemployment to people who qualify. That amount varies state by state, as does the amount of time people are allowed to claim it. Congress added $600 per week from the federal government on top of whatever base amount a worker receives from the state. That boosted payment will last through the end of July.

For example, if an out-of-work person is receiving the national average of about $340 per week, under the new federal program their take-home pay will be $940.

The legislation also adds 13 weeks of unemployment insurance. People nearing the maximum number of weeks allowed by their state would get an extension. New filers would also be allowed to collect the benefits for the longer period.

The estimated cost also includes a new, temporary Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program through the end of this year to help people who lose work as a direct result of the public health emergency.

The Congressional Budget Office made their predictions based on a model projecting an unemployment rate reaching 14% in the second quarter of this year and remaining at 10% at the end of 2021.

Administration officials have admitted in recent weeks that the rate could continue rise in the

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

immediate term before recovering. The scorekeepers specifically noted that this is just a projection and the numbers could change, which would in turn change the overall cost of the changes to unemployment insurance.

Emergency family and medical leave: $105 billion (estimated).

The second bill congress approved included new tax credits for businesses to support emergency family and medical leave.

Under the bill, certain employers are required to give up to 80 hours of fully paid sick leave if the employee is unable to work because they are in quarantine and/or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 and seeking medical care. Those employers would also have to approve up to 80 hours of partially paid leave for people caring for someone under the same conditions or to care for a child under 18 whose regular child care facility or school is closed.

The Congressional Budget Office projects that offering employers fully refundable credits against payroll taxes to compensate employees for the leave will cost the government about $105 billion. This cost is unlike a program where the federal government pays for the benefit directly. Instead, the cost is based on the expectation that the Treasury Department will lose revenues as a result of the policies.

Cost reductions for individuals on federal health insurance programs: $8.6 billion (estimated two-year cost)

The second coronavirus relief bill eliminates any cost-sharing for people seeking testing and treatment for COVID-19 under Medicare, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP. This was intended to make it easier for low-income people to get tested.

The total amount available to big businesses is well over $500 billion. The CARES Act includes a section described as Economic Stabilization and Assistance to Severely Distressed Sectors of the U.S. Economy. That is the long way of describing aid for big businesses. This includes emergency lending from the federal reserve, credit assistance to airlines and pandemic relief for airline workers.

Extra lending authority for the Federal Reserve: $454 billion (this money is expected to be fully recouped with fees and repayments)

This portion of the bill has a big price tag up front, but the CBO estimates that the repayment, fees and other economic activity will make up for the initial spending. They do not consider it a true cost to the federal budget or the deficit. The chart includes the money because it is an approved expenditure, but it is considered in a separate category than the remaining spending. The Federal Reserve has also taken separate actions that don't involve Congress.

Airlines: $58 billion

This money is allocated to help airlines stay open. One portion of that money is set aside to help cover employee wages, salaries and benefits divided up as up to $25 billion for

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

passenger air carriers, up to $4 billion for cargo air carriers, and up to $3 billion for airline contractors.

There is more than $800 billion in small business aid spread across the four bills that have passed so far. The biggest portion of that sum is dedicated to the forgivable loans in the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). The first round of PPP — $349 billion — ran out in less than two weeks. Congress approved another $321 billion that is still being spent.

Small businesses also have access to $21 billion in disaster grants plus some additional loan subsidies. There's also a tax credit for keeping employees on payroll that is estimated to cost about $52 billion.

Some elements of the CARES act support a wide range of businesses without the size limitations included in the PPP. The legislation establishes a fully refundable tax credit for businesses of all sizes that are closed or distressed to help them keep workers on the payroll. The credit is expected to cost about $52 billion.

The goal is to help businesses re-hire employees that have already been laid off or furloughed. The credit covers to 50% of payroll on the first $10,000 of compensation, including health benefits, for each employee.

For employers with more than 100 full-time employees, the credit is for wages paid to employees when they are not providing services because of the coronavirus. Eligible employers with 100 or fewer full-time employees could use the deduction even if they aren't closed.

Other broader business supports include a delay in when payroll taxes are due, which the CBO estimates will cost $352 billion up front but will be largely repaid years in the future. There are also tax changes increasing the cap on net operating losses and changing the rules for interest deductibility.

All four bills include money to help support hospitals and public health systems. The most expensive items include funding for research and development, direct aid to hospitals and care centers, and money to offset more of the cost of treating Medicare patients.

The first bill focused primarily on public health and global health. It was passed in the weeks before it was clear how deeply the coronavirus would affect the U.S. It included $3.1 billion for vaccine and treatment research, $3.2 billion for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and $1.2 billion for the State Department to carry out global health programs.

The CARES Act provided $1.32 billion for community health centers that provide health care for roughly 28 million people.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention got another $4.3 billion from CARES and the Strategic National Stockpile received $16 billion.

Congress has set aside roughly $28 billion to help pay for testing and access to testing. Other spending areas, including funding for the CDC, Food and Drug Administration, and National Institutes of Health have been used to boost testing capacity and speed up the process of approvals.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

States and local governments have access to funds in a number of programs, particularly public health funding and money for publicly run hospitals and community health centers.

The Families First Coronavirus Response bill included $1 billion for state and local administrative costs, and CARES included $150 billion in direct aid to states for the coronavirus response.

There is long list of miscellaneous programs including those that shore up social safety net programs but do not pay money directly to individuals. In many cases, the funding helps support existing federal programs that have been stretched during the coronavirus response.

Child nutrition: There is $8.8 billion in the CARES Act to give schools more flexibility to provide meals for students.

Food stamps: CARES also included $15.5 billion for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP. The money will help cover the expected cost of new applications to the program as a result of the coronavirus. That bill also included $450 million more for food banks and other community food distribution programs.

Government administration: CARES included $10 billion in lending for the Postal Service, the Families First Coronavirus bill gave the IRS $15 million to implement programs – the filing date was extended to July 15.

Operation Warp Speed sets 'goal' of 300 million coronavirus vaccines by January 2021 (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 5:03 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 727K]
The Defense Department took pains Friday to emphasize that President Trump's promise to produce 300 million coronavirus vaccines by January 2021 is a "goal," while a spokesman also told the Washington Examiner that a shake-up of the Pentagon team acquiring medical equipment did not signify a change in direction.

President Trump on Friday morning promised the development and delivery of coronavirus vaccines for all U.S. residents by January 2021.

"That means the full power and strength of military, the military," Trump said alongside Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar at a White House announcement of "Operation Warp Speed," a plan to develop, manufacture, and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics.

"We're looking for a full vaccine for everyone that wants to get it," Trump added.

When asked by the president to clarify, Azar said that meant a vaccine for everyone nationwide in just over seven months.

"The answer is yes, we're working for a fully approved vaccine," he said. "We use all of our regulatory tools to [make a] vaccine available for the entire American population by January."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Pentagon reframed the president and secretary's promises as a "goal" later on Friday.

"He set a goal, and then you work back from there," Defense Department spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said at a Pentagon press briefing. "You set a goal. You have confidence that you're going to put the resources to it to obtain that goal. And I think that's what the secretary and that's what the president are saying, is that we have a goal, we've got the team together, we've committed to putting the resources to it, and we're going to obtain that goal."

Hoffman later added: "Great announcement today — having Operation Warp Speed and the goal of getting to 300 million vaccines by January of next year."

But Secretary of Defense Mark Esper gave little room for movement in his White House comments earlier in the day, adding the vaccine would be ready for partners abroad as well.

"Winning matters, and we will deliver by the end of this year a vaccine at scale, to treat the American people and our partners abroad," he said. "We will get the job done."

The joint White House program will be headed by the Pentagon and the Department of Health and Human Services and will be led by Army Gen. Gustave F. Perna.

The initiative will also draw on efforts already underway by the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Food and Drug Administration.

The Pentagon released a statement explaining how Operation Warp Speed would use $10 billion allocated by Congress as part of the CARES Act, $6.5 billion designated for COVID-19 countermeasures, and $3 billion for NIH research to fund the program.

So far, 14 vaccine candidates are being studied with the goal of narrowing them down to eight candidates for early stage clinical trials.

Large-scale randomized trials will proceed for three to five of the candidates, the statement said. Once a vaccine is ready, the Pentagon will help with distribution and administration.

The major announcement to obtain a vaccine comes the day after the Pentagon fired Jen Santos, the acquisitions and sustainment official leading Defense Production Act measures to ramp up domestic production capacity of urgently needed medical supplies.

Hoffman told the Washington Examiner that firing the Defense Logistics Agency official was not a sign of a shift in strategy.

"I wouldn't say it's moving in a new direction. It was just a personnel change," he said, noting her reassignment to a role in Navy acquisitions. "We're going to take advantage of it to bolster the team at Navy, as well as find a different skill set within the A&S portfolio."

The Washington Examiner also asked Hoffman for an update on the department's acquisition of testing materials and testing kits while states still face gross shortages, according to experts.

"Our testing capabilities continue to increase," he said of the capacity to meet military

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

testing needs outlined recently.

“What we have seen nationwide is that testing capacity and the testing infrastructure has grown organically as the demand has increased, and so, the industry has stepped up in that case," he added.

Wolf calls out China for trying to steal US coronavirus vaccine research: ‘We need to stay on it’ (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 6:22 PM, Victor Garcia, 12006K]
Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf told "Your World with Neil Cavuto" Friday that China is trying to steal information about COVID-19 vaccine research by American entities "so that they can be ... at the cutting edge of that research."

"What our Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, along with the FBI, did this week [is] to put out an advisory making sure that individuals, when it comes to COVID-19 research, understand that we have some bad actors," Wolf said. "China specifically, cyber actors.

"Also some nontraditional actors, such as journalists and other researchers ... are targeting our intellectual property when it comes to that research, targeting individuals such as our own researchers when it comes to this."

The agencies recommend that organizations assume that press attention will lead to increased activity from nefarious actors, patch their relevant systems, suspend access by users engaging in “unusual activity” and scan for unauthorized access or “anomalous activities.”

The warning comes amid an escalating standoff between Beijing and Washington over the coronavirus pandemic, which originated in Wuhan, China. U.S. officials are investigating whether the naturally occurring virus came from a wet market or escaped from a Wuhan lab where sources have said it was being studied.

Wolf told Cavuto that the United States was also trying to address visa fraud by Chinese citizens and have imposed 90-day limits on work visas for Chinese journalists employed by non-U.S. media outlets. Journalists can apply for extensions, which are also capped at 90 days and require the applicant to undergo a reassessment and an interview.

"And I think overall what we’ve seen, Neil, is as this pandemic has gone on and on, we see more targeting of our health care industry and specifically when it comes to China," Wolf said. "This isn’t a surprise. We know that China for a very long time have been very bad actors in the cyber space cyberspace.

"So this isn’t news to us, but we need to stay on it. We need to stay engaged with our other partners in the United States government and make sure that our private sector partners, the health care industry and others are aware of this and have their shields up as well."

House defeats effort to prevent stimulus checks for undocumented immigrants (The Hill)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Hill [5/15/2020 10:21 PM, Juliegrace Brufke, 3408K]
The House on Friday evening defeated a Republican effort to prevent undocumented immigrants from retroactively receiving stimulus payments amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Thirteen Democrats broke party lines and voted in favor of the GOP effort to strip language about the payments from Democrats' $3 trillion coronavirus relief bill. The effort to amend Democrats' broader HEROES Act at the eleventh hour failed in a 198-209 vote.

Congressional Democrats have pushed for the next coronavirus bill to grant economic relief to American citizens who filed taxes jointly with spouses who don't have a Social Security number, after the Cares Act passed in March excluded those adults.

The HEROES Act would make those with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) eligible for the payments. ITINs, which are issued by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), are used by immigrants to pay taxes and also foreign nationals abroad who have to file taxes in the U.S.

Republicans have argued that the $1,200 stimulus payments sent to Americans, aimed at alleviating the impact of the pandemic, should not go to workers who do not have Social Security numbers.

Rep. Denver Riggleman (R-Va.), who offered the motion to prevent the payments for undocumented individuals, argued during floor debate ahead of the vote that Congress should be prioritizing legislation helping U.S. citizens stay afloat amid the health crisis.

"Hidden amongst these poison pills is a provision that will change the ID requirement for the CARES Act rebate checks from Social Security number to taxpayer identification number. This switch will allow illegal immigrants and non-citizens to get checks they aren't eligible for," he said.

"I didn't think a global pandemic meant it was time to stop helping American citizens who are desperate for assistance. Now, more than ever, we need to make sure these rebate checks go to Americans who need it," he added.

Proponents of the payment provision have argued that the pandemic has affected all U.S. residents, regardless of immigration status, and have noted that individuals must have a taxpayer number to receive the money.

"There will be more cases tomorrow, more deaths this weekend, more economic hardship next week, but instead of worrying about these concerns the only thing Republicans can offer is regurgitated talking points about immigration," said House Appropriations Chairwoman Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.). "Right now, the American people have focused on their own survival, and that of their families."

"I want to make it very clear: COVID-19 does not discriminate or differentiate on immigration status," she added.

Top Democrats whipped against the measure before it was voted down, voicing concerns to the caucus that its passage could derail the passage of the final relief measure, which passed later Friday evening.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Republicans have repeatedly used procedural moves to force vulnerable Democrats in swing districts to take difficult votes.

While Democratic leaders have blasted the procedural tactic as a partisan attempt to make Democrats look divided on certain issues, GOP lawmakers say that the votes are legitimate, noting they have successfully used the tool six times during the 116th Congress.

While the $3 trillion Heroes Act has passed the Democratic-led House, it faces an unlikely path in the Republican-controlled Senate, with GOP lawmakers railing against the measure, saying Democrats failed to negotiate with members across the aisle while drafting the bill.

Dems narrowly defeat GOP motion to bar undocumented immigrants from receiving coronavirus payments (Washington Times)
Washington Times [5/15/2020 4:38 PM, Gabriella Muñoz, 496K]
House Democrats on Friday narrowly rejected a GOP-led motion to prevent illegal immigrants from getting coronavirus stimulus checks.

The provision, known as a motion to recommit, failed on a 198-209 basis, and 13 Democrats joined Republicans to try and pass it.

Republicans said this particular portion of the bill, as written, would allow these immigrants to retroactively receive the $1,200 stimulus checks they were excluded from in the $2.2 trillion CARES package.

Had the motion passed, it could have endangered the final passage of the $3 trillion coronavirus bill, given how important the immigration issue was to Democrats, particularly the large progressive block.

Earlier this month, they had called for payments to go through the Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, which many illegal immigrants use to file taxes, or at least to mixed-status families.

Out-of-work Americans still waiting for jobless aid as states struggle to process claims (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 12:23 PM, Tyler Olson, 12006K]
With unemployment claims surging to unprecedented levels amid lockdown measures meant to stem the coronavirus' spread, states are struggling to process all the claims flooding their systems -- leaving many who are out of work or furloughed still without access to aid despite lawmakers all along touting their efforts to support hard-hit families.

In Maryland, an updated online portal struggled to speed up the processing of claims and was plagued by errors, according to Rep. Anthony Brown, D-Md. Brown wrote a scathing op-ed in the Baltimore Sun earlier this month claiming that "more than 100,000 residents still could not file as of last week for unemployment and barely half of those who have successfully applied for unemployment since March 15 have received their benefits."

A press release from Brown this week indicates that just 36 percent of Marylanders who filed initial unemployment claims in March and April received payments.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

In New Jersey, a group of leaders in the state Senate sent a letter to Gov. Phil Murphy and the state's labor commissioner asking for any way the legislature could help reduce that state's backlog, which, the letter said, has "thousands of people eligible for unemployment benefits ... being asked to wait [until] July to receive the checks they need desperately."

"The residents of New Jersey have waited far too long and are enduring too much hardship," the Senate leaders wrote. "The failure to provide this support in a timely way is making circumstances worse. We all have an obligation to protect our residents from any further suffering."

Congress expanded the unemployment aid program and tacked on an additional $600 per week for several months in the recent coronavirus relief package -- provisions House Democrats are now trying to extend in their latest bill.

But at the state level, logistical problems persist.

The Florida unemployment website displays an outdated layout along with a message on the front page warning potential benefits-seekers that the system "is currently experiencing higher than average wait times when contacting the Reemployment Assistance Program."

It continues: "We apologize for this inconvenience, Thank you for your patience during this time."

For those who might want additional information on how long the coronavirus might delay their unemployment benefits, there's a link at the bottom of the page that purports to answer FAQs. It takes site users to a 404 page as of Friday morning.

Florida's unemployment office claims that about 95 percent of eligible claims have been paid after a more severe initial backlog when claims first started coming in, but anecdotal evidence shared online by state legislators and local reporters indicate that the system is still plagued with issues.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo last month addressed delays in that state's unemployment system, saying in a press briefing that "there were so many unemployment claims that it collapsed."

"We have one thousand people who are now working on that unemployment website and phone call system," he said. "I mean, it's unbelievable. A thousand people just to take the incoming unemployment calls. That's how high the volume is. And they still can't keep up with the volume. "

Cuomo did mention that the state would allow unemployment seekers to qualify retroactively, saying, "you're going to get the same benefit. It's not costing you any money."

New Jersey similarly promises to eventually give qualifying residents backpay for benefits missed due to these delays. As of Thursday, the state reported that it saw 1.1 million claims since mid-March, with more than 725,000 now collecting state and federal benefits. That still leaves hundreds of thousands waiting, though some of them may not be eligible or only just filed.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Of course, many laid-off workers are faced with bills that are due immediately, whether or not they eventually get their full benefits from the state.

There have been reports of similar issues in Oregon, Kentucky and elsewhere.

States' issues distributing unemployment insurance -- which is largely funded by the federal government but managed by states -- to millions of Americans who are losing income during the coronavirus pandemic comes as governors are pleading with Congress for more money to handle budget shortfalls. Specifically, in a joint statement on behalf of the National Governors Association, Maryland Gov. and NGA Chairman Larry Hogan and NGA co-Chair Cuomo asked for billions to bolster state budgets.

The governors asked for a half-trillion dollars "in fiscal support for state budgetary shortfalls resulting from the pandemic, enhanced FMAP funding to provide healthcare to our most vulnerable, and 100 percent federal cost share for FEMA response and recovery efforts."

Congressional Democrats have been receptive to such calls, but some Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., have said they don't want to bail out states, saying that they should have been more fiscally responsible before the coronavirus crisis hit.

But as leaders scramble to direct unemployment assistance where it's needed and governors worry about their bottom lines, Americans looking to financially tide themselves over to the end of the crisis struggle.

"You can call thousands and thousands of times and be unable to get through," said Marylander Beth Bell, who was laid off in mid-March. "If you do get through to one of them, you'll end up in a circle and then get disconnected. It's soul crushing."

The Pandemic's Impact On The Latino Community (NPR)
NPR [5/15/2020 2:15 PM, Felix Contreras and Marisa Penaloza, 7267K]
Occasionally, Alt.Latino looks beyond the world of music, though the intersection of the pandemic, politics and the arts is never far from mind. This week, we host a roundtable with reporters covering the coronavirus and how infections have adversely impacted communities of color in the U.S.

Dianne Solis is a Senior Writer for the Dallas Morning News who normally covers immigration for the paper. She tells us about the spread of the coronavirus in immigration detention centers in Texas.

We're going to hear from my NPR colleague Marisa Peñaloza. She's been reporting on the plight of undocumented workers and their fight for personal protection equipment and economic aid when they can't do the work that has been categorized as "essential" by the federal government.

When the pandemic started, many Latinos from the U.S. and Latin American countries were in Europe. For Palabra, a publication run by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, Barbara Estrada spoke to the folks who chose to stay there and ride it out.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Dallas Morning News reporter Alfredo Corchado recently wrote an editorial for the New York Times op-ed section that called for changes to our immigration laws. These changes could have a positive impact on food chains and manufacturing supply routes, which could contribute to the economic recovery of not just the U.S. but the entire North American region.

This will not be the last time we change our focus from music to the pandemic and we hope you embrace this coverage as intimately as you do our musical offerings. Be careful out there, gente. — Felix Contreras

[Editorial note: consult source link for audio]

Top intelligence official to take charge of briefing candidates on election threats (CNN)
CNN [5/15/2020 5:57 PM, Alex Marquardt and Zachary Cohen, 12317K]
The top US counterintelligence official, Bill Evanina, has been tapped to provide "intelligence-based threat briefings" for Republican and Democrat candidates, campaigns and political organizations in the run-up to the 2020 election, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence announce Friday.

The move reflects a shift in how briefings about threats against campaigns are conducted. Previously, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security had been charged with briefing campaigns and political organizations, ODNI told CNN.

For example, in February, then-Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders was briefed by intelligence officials about Russian efforts to help his campaign. That briefing was from the FBI, an ODNI official told CNN.

But now, these briefings will be led by the intelligence community, with Evanina taking the lead.

Evanina serves as the director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center and was confirmed by the Senate earlier this month after serving in an acting capacity since 2014. Evanina and NCSC are in charge of the National Counterintelligence Strategy.

"US elections are the foundation of our nation's democracy. We are committed to supporting this Administration's whole-of-government effort to secure the 2020 election," Evanina said in a statement released by ODNI.

The move does not change the role of Shelby Pierson, ODNI's Election Threats Executive, the ODNI official said.

Pierson's job security was thrust into doubt earlier this year after she told members of the House Intelligence Committee in a February 13 briefing that Russia is meddling in the 2020 campaign and intelligence indicated it had once again developed a preference for Trump as well as Sanders.

Three national security officials told CNN at the time that Pierson had omitted important nuance and expanded beyond the intelligence community's formal assessment, which does not include evidence that Russia's interference in this election cycle is aimed at reelecting

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Trump.

"Ambassador Grenell has not asked me to leave. In fact, he has encouraged and affirmed his support for my position here in the organization. I have not asked to depart nor discussed resignation in any way," Pierson said in a February statement amid speculation that she could be on her way out.

According to the national security officials, the US intelligence community has assessed that Russia is interfering in the 2020 election and has separately assessed that Russia views Trump as a leader they can work with, but the US does not have evidence that Russia's interference this cycle is aimed at reelecting Trump.

After Richard Grenell was named the Acting Director of National Intelligence, he had been expected to brief lawmakers on the latest elections threats in a pair of briefings in March to the House and Senate intelligence committees. Instead, Grenell was switched out with Evanina at the last minute, as CNN first reported.

Rep. Adam Schiff, the Democratic chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, wrote to Grenell last month about election security and reports that the acting DNI's staff "may be inappropriately interfering with the production and briefing of intelligence information", including the March 10 briefing led by Evanina.

Schiff requested "any and all communications" around the assessment that was presented during that briefing.

ODNI to offer election security briefings for both parties in run-up to November (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 3:30 PM, Brooke Singman, 12006K]
Acting Director of National Intelligence Richard Grenell on Friday announced that the U.S. intelligence community will lead new election security threat briefings for presidential candidates, their campaigns and major political parties ahead of the 2020 election, Fox News has learned.

A senior administration official told Fox News the newly-Senate confirmed director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center inside ODNI, Bill Evanina, will serve as the intelligence community's leader of the "critical effort."

"U.S. elections are the foundation of our nation's democracy," Evanina said Friday. "We are committed to supporting this administration's 'whole of government' effort to secure the 2020 election."

The senior administration official told Fox News that the change "represents an important improvement in simplification to the threat notification process."

The briefings, which the official said would "begin in the near future," will be delivered to candidates themselves, and their campaigns: President Trump's and presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's campaigns.

The official also told Fox News that the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee would also receive briefings.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The official told Fox News that the briefing would be given “in a fashion where they receive actual details of the intelligence” related to them.

“The Intelligence Community will continue to work in partnership with the FBI and Department of Homeland Security to identify and integrate threat information,” the official said. “The elections team will act swiftly to deliver the timely and thorough assessments to those affected by potential malicious influence.”

The official stressed that the FBI retains “all of their law enforcement responsibilities and capabilities” in terms of election security, as does “DHS maintain all of their state and local election responsibilities.”

"This was not a unilaterial ODNI decision," the official said, adding that the new process was "coordinated and approved by all agencies involved," including the FBI, DHS and other agencies inside the intelligence community.

A senior White House official told Fox News that “the biggest complaint from the 2016 election was the lack of, and insufficiency, of briefings to campaigns and candidates,” referring to then-candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

“The last election speaks to itself, in terms of how much was going on, and how poorly the campaigns and candidates were kept abreast in order to protect their campaigns,” the White House official told Fox News.

The changes in defensive briefings from the intelligence community come after it was determined from U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the 2016 election.

Intelligence officials have said that Russia interfered through social media campaigns and stealing and distributing emails from Democratic accounts. The intelligence community has long-maintained that Russia was trying to boost Trump’s campaign and add chaos to the American political process.

Special counsel Robert Mueller concluded that Russian interference was “sweeping and systematic,” but he did not find a criminal conspiracy between Russia and the Trump campaign.

Meanwhile, the senior administration official told Fox News that the change in briefings from the ODNI will also apply to members of Congress, but noted that the lawmaker would only be briefed if the intelligence community received intelligence suggesting “sufficient malicious influence.”

Grenell: Top counterintel official will take charge of 2020 campaign briefings on election interference (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 9:19 PM, Jerry Dunleavy, 727K]
The Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced Friday that its top counterintelligence official would carry out all election security intelligence briefings to 2020 candidates and campaigns instead of the FBI or Department of Homeland Security.

The nation’s top spy office, which oversees all 17 spy agencies and is currently led by

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

acting spy chief Richard Grenell, said that the intelligence community "will lead all intelligence-based threat briefings to candidates, campaigns, and political organizations under the U.S. government's notification framework." ODNI said William Evanina, the director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center since 2014, will "serve as the IC's leader to this critical effort." The ODNI also announced reforms to the National Counterterrorism Center on Friday.

"U.S. elections are the foundation of our nation's democracy," Evanina said in a statement. "We are committed to supporting this Administration's whole-of-government effort to secure the 2020 election."

Evanina, a former FBI special agent, has led the NCSC since 2014, and, in February 2018, was nominated by President Trump to be the first Senate-confirmed director of the center. He was confirmed by the Senate last week when a two-year standoff ended after Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley said Grenell and Attorney General William Barr had provided long-sought transparency for the Trump-Russia congressional investigations.

The intelligence community press release stated that having Evanina provide all the campaign briefings on intelligence threats "represents an important improvement and simplification to the threat notification process," and "the IC will continue to work in partnership with FBI and DHS to identify and integrate threat information." ODNI said Evanina and the elections team "will act swiftly to deliver the timely and thorough assessments to those affected by potential malicious influence."

An intelligence official told the Washington Examiner that intelligence community leaders believed it made sense for the intelligence community to lead intelligence briefings while noting that election security broadly is about more than just threat briefings. The ODNI official said election security efforts such as the FBI's Protected Voices initiative and DHS's cybersecurity and infrastructure protection plans would continue full steam, and the biggest change is that Evanina would lead the 2020 briefings for campaigns to help them guard against foreign interference.

National security officials, including Evanina, told lawmakers in March that the intelligence community has not concluded Russia is backing any particular 2020 candidate and warned about interference from multiple countries.

The information appeared in an unclassified ODNI fact sheet, which rejected a stream of media reports on classified briefings on election security.

"The IC has not concluded that the Kremlin is directly aiding any candidate's reelection or any other candidates' election. Nor have we concluded that the Russians will definitely choose to try to do so in 2020," the fact sheet read. "This is not a Russia-only problem. China, Iran, other countries like North Korea and Cuba, and non-state actors all have the opportunity, means, and potential motive to interfere in the 2020 elections as a way to achieve their goals."

This statement countered anonymously sourced media reports, which said the intelligence community concluded Russia was helping Trump with reelection and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont win the Democratic primaries.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Rep. John Ratcliffe of Texas, who was renominated by Trump earlier this year to be the permanent director of national intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee earlier this month that, if confirmed, he would keep the Senate informed if the intelligence community concludes the Russians are promoting a specific candidate in 2020. The spy chief nominee also said he had no intention of making changes to the leadership running ODNI's election security efforts, including promising to keep on Election Threats Executive Shelby Pierson.

Ratcliffe also weighed in on Russian election interference during his testimony.

"My views are Russia meddled or interfered with active measures in 2016, they interfered in 2018, and they will attempt to do so in 2020. They have a goal of sowing discord, and they have been successful in sowing discord, fortunately, based on the good work of this committee, we know they may have been successful in that regard, but they have not been successful in changing any votes or in changing the outcome of any election," Ratcliffe testified. "I'm for safe, secure, credible elections, and I will do everything that I can as DNI to ensure they are not successful."

Special counsel Robert Mueller's two-year investigation concluded "the Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion" but "did not establish" any criminal conspiracy between Trump and Russia.

Grenell, who is serving concurrently as the U.S. ambassador to Germany, also announced several organizational changes to the National Counterterrorism Center on Friday, which were "based on the recommendations of career Intelligence Community officers." In March, Grenell picked Lora Shiao, a longtime counterterrorism intelligence veteran, to be the National Counterterrorism Center's acting deputy director, and Clare Linkins, who has spent years in the counterterrorism arena, was picked as the NCTC's next executive director at the same time.

"We are facing a time in our nation's history where the threat picture is far broader than terrorism, and the IC needs to shift resources to address a wide range of complex, sophisticated adversaries," Shiao said. "In consultation with our entire NCTC senior leadership team, Executive Director Clare Linkins and I will be shifting some elements within NCTC to address previous studies and recommendations, and we will work in collaboration with our IC partners to best position NCTC and the wider CT community for the future."

The biggest changes were made within the NCTC's Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning and its Directorate of Terrorist Identities.

Democratic House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, who has clashed with Grenell repeatedly, released a statement claiming that "our Committee did not authorize these latest changes — announced, once again, late on a Friday — by a temporary and unqualified Acting Director of National Intelligence."

"Only in Washington, D.C. would one be appointed to a job but not expected to DO the job," Grenell quipped Friday evening.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

House Poised to Adopt New Remote Voting Rules Amid Coronavirus Pandemic (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [5/15/2020 6:08 PM, Lisa Hagen, 3832K]

The House is poised to adopt a historic rules change on Friday that would bring sweeping, but temporary changes to allow remote voting and work during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Leadership in both parties sought to strike an agreement on remote working options for the duration of the health crisis – and if there's a second wave in the fall – but Republicans plan to rally in opposition to the resolution. The unprecedented measure is expected to pass on a party-line vote.

Since the pandemic hit the U.S., the House has been largely sidelined for the past two months and has only come back to the Capitol a few times for votes on coronavirus relief bills. Democrats have been pushing for remote options so the House can keep operating and formally conduct hearings and oversight without putting members, staffers and other Capitol employees at risk.

House Rules Committee Chairman Jim McGovern of Massachusetts crafted a resolution that would allow a member of Congress to vote on behalf of other members who are unable to travel back to Washington due to health and safety concerns caused by the novel virus. A member who is designated as a proxy can only act as one for up to 10 lawmakers and must follow "exact written instructions" on how the member would like the proxy to vote.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland has also been one of the biggest proponents of remote voting and work and has argued that Congress can incorporate video conferencing platforms, which has already started to be utilized by lawmakers during the extended recess.

Under the rules change, proxy voting will be authorized for 45 days during the novel coronavirus. If the public health emergency continues beyond that period of time, the House speaker in consultation with the minority leader could extend remote work for another 45 days.

The measure also allows committees to conduct official hearings remotely and allow committee members to "cast a vote or record their presence while participating remotely." During virtual proceedings, witnesses who are called to testify can also appear remotely. And committee chairs with subpoena power can issue subpoenas "for return at a hearing or deposition to be conducted remotely."

"Remote legislating will only be utilized so long as this pandemic continues," McGovern said during floor debate of the rules change. "This is the type of adapting that this House has always done. Our founders did not vote by electronic device, but we do. Constituents decades ago couldn't watch floor proceedings live on C-SPAN or listen to them on the radio, but ours can."

Republicans vehemently oppose the rules change and would like to return to Congress in person. They argue that if truck drivers, grocery store employees and other essential workers must go to work every day, then the House should also physically assemble to do its job.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

GOP members lamented that the rules change would bring unprecedented change to a body that has always convened in-person regardless of tragedy and disasters. They argued that remote voting would dilute individual members' voting powers and bring unconstitutional change to a body steeped in tradition.

"The Speaker is on the brink of launching the most significant power grab in the history of Congress," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California said. He worked with Democrats to try and achieve a bipartisan agreement on remote options, but stood in opposition to the current proposal.

"It runs counter to 230 years of House rules and even the Constitution. Our founders would be ashamed that we aren't assembling," McCarthy said.

Apple and Google are building a virus-tracking system. Health officials say it will be practically useless. (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 3:22 PM, Reed Albergotti and Drew Harwell, 18460K]
Apple and Google's announcement last month of a joint effort to track the coronavirus by smartphone sparked a wave of excitement among public health officials hoping the technology would help alert them to potential new infections and map the pandemic's spread.

But as the tech giants have revealed more details, officials now say the software will be of little use. Due to strict rules imposed by the companies, the system will notify smartphone users if they've potentially come into contact with an infected person, but it won't share any data with health officials or reveal where those meetings took place.

Local health authorities in states like North Dakota, as well as in countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom, say they've pleaded with the companies to give them more control over the kinds of information their apps can collect. Without the companies' help, some worry their contact tracing systems will remain dangerously strained.

But Apple and Google have refused, arguing that letting the apps collect location data or loosening other smartphone rules would undermine people's privacy. The companies are also concerned that easing the restrictions around apps' Bluetooth use would drain phone battery life, which could irritate customers. That unbending stance has led some health authorities to abandon hopes of building a fully functioning contact-tracing app.

The struggle for effective digital contact tracing is reshaping the debate over the trade-offs between privacy and public health when lives are immediately at stake. Public officials say the need to understand how the virus is spreading is urgent, informing decisions about whether communities can reopen and detecting future outbreaks.

But the tech giants' resistance to letting public health officials access people's data has a long precedent of keeping personal information out of the hands of governments. Apple and Google said they reached out to hundreds of public health officials for input on the software before it was announced.

Though the companies first debuted the effort by calling it a "contact tracing" system, company executives now say it is designed to do no such thing. They said they intend to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

fully release the system in the middle of this month.

Company officials said public health authorities had asked for assistance because contact tracing apps that relied on Bluetooth would run into technical challenges without their help. They said their effort was not built to digitize contact tracing or to replace the human element of public health.

But Helen Nissenbaum, a professor of information science and director of the Digital Life Initiative at Cornell University, called Apple and Google's use of privacy to defend their refusal to allow public health officials access to smartphone technology a "flamboyant smokescreen." She said it was ironic that the two companies had for years tolerated the mass collection of people's data but were now preventing its use for a purpose that is "critical to public health."

"If it's between Google and Apple having the data, I would far prefer my physician and the public health authorities to have the data about my health status," she said. "At least they're constrained by laws."

The Apple-Google system uses the short-range Bluetooth antennas in smartphones to log when two people come into contact for a short period of time, but not where that contact took place. An alert is sent if one of the people tests positive for a coronavirus infection, but that information is not shared with public health officials or contact-tracing teams.

That limitation has led some health authorities to attempt to build their own apps outside of the Apple-Google design. But developers around the world who have tried to build their own systems have run into functionality issues. For example, Apple restricts all apps not made by Apple from tracking Bluetooth in the "background" to avoid battery drain and privacy issues.

That means that a user must keep one of the apps built by health departments open for it to work — something most users would find incredibly inconvenient. Any time, for example, a user took a phone call, read an email or put their phone in their pocket, the app would not be running.

The tension over virus-tracking apps reflects a major power imbalance between the tech giants and state and local health officials, who argue that Apple and Google's technical decisions have undermined their response to a global health emergency. It also highlights the tech giants' ability to exert unfettered control over how billions of smartphones work.

"They are exercising sovereign power. It's just crazy," said Matt Stoller, the director of research at the American Economic Liberties Project, a Washington think tank devoted to reducing the power of monopolies. Apple and Google have "decided for the whole world," he added, "that it's not a decision for the public to make. … You have a private government that is making choices over your society instead of democratic governments being able to make those choices."

Some developers who had run into the functionality issue in their own contact-tracing apps asked the companies for help. But they were told they could only get around that rule if they used the Apple-Google system, which would prohibit them from recording location data or sharing information with contact-tracing teams.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

In North Dakota, developers had built a contact-tracing app, Care19, that logged people's smartphone location data as a memory tool: If the person tested positive, a public health worker could ask for their permission to review that data over the previous two weeks to piece together where they had gone. They had been hopeful that the Apple-Google system would further refine its accuracy.

But Apple's restrictions against sharing data with health authorities have forced developers there to start from scratch. They are now building two separate apps — one for contact-tracing teams, the other on Apple and Google's system — even though they fear that will lead to lower public adoption, greater confusion and longer delays for lifesaving data.

"Every minute that ticks by, maybe someone else is getting infected, so we want to be able to use everything we can," said Vern Dosch, the contact-tracing liaison for North Dakota. "I get it. They have a brand to protect. I just wish they would have led with their jaw."

The coronavirus represents a massive challenge for contact tracing around the world, and some experts have said public health teams need all the help they can get. Researchers at Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security have estimated that the U.S. will need to recruit and train 100,000 contact tracers to help identify the sick and quarantine the exposed.

Contact tracers today use phone calls and interviews to track people's movements, and rely almost entirely on people's memory. Minute-by-minute location logs recorded by people's phones, some officials have argued, could ease that burden by providing a more precise and automated way to track new outbreaks.

"We're sort of at the point where we just can't do traditional contact tracing. There's just not the manpower," said Tyler Shelby, a graduate student at Yale's medical and public health schools who is working on contact-tracing software.

But state teams that have tried to use apps to help with contact tracing have been stymied by the tech giants' rules. Developers in Alberta, Canada, had built their own contact-tracing app that struggled with reliability on iPhones due to Apple's Bluetooth restrictions. Quinn Mah, executive director of information management at Alberta Health, said he pleaded with Apple for help, but the company refused. Alberta health officials now are debating whether to give up on those plans and go with Apple's contact-tracing system, even though it could greatly reduce their ability to track infections.

"A segment of our population has said, 'Well, Google and Apple have done this, so why aren't you guys adopting this?'" Mah said. "'Why would government think they could do something better than Apple and Google?'"

The companies have argued that limiting the data the apps use could bolster their adoption rate, because people may not trust or use an app that logs their location for later use by public health authorities. A Washington Post-University of Maryland poll found last month that a larger group of Americans said they trusted public health agencies more than Apple and Google to keep their information secure.

Some privacy advocates have applauded the companies' stance around anonymity and security concerns. Amos Toh, an artificial intelligence and technology researcher at Human

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Rights Watch, said he worries that authoritarian governments might compel the companies to change the terms so that data can be scooped up and used to suppress human rights.

“It opens up a dangerous new front,” Toh said. “These technologies are unproven and we have questions about their accuracy and repercussions for the most vulnerable groups.”

But some parts of the U.S., including Apple and Google’s home state, say the restrictions have rendered the apps effectively useless. In California, epidemiologists in charge of contact tracing are ignoring the Apple-Google approach and have decided the best course for contact tracing is to train thousands of people to do the work.

“The limitations of those kind of apps are extensive,” said Mike Reid, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco, who is leading the effort to train contact tracers in the state. “I don’t think they have an important role to play for most of the population.”

The contact tracers, he said, will be using software made by Salesforce and Accenture to help reach patients by phone and are trained on how to protect sensitive patient information.

“We go to pains to minimize the amount of data we take from people and we ask consent from people we’re talking to on the phone. We go to considerable lengths to ensure there are strong technical controls to ensure the anonymization of our platforms,” he said. “Can you say the same thing about these big tech companies? I’m not sure.”

Some security researchers have also questioned whether the companies’ restrictions on public health officials and technical methods have posed their own challenges.

With the Apple and Google approach, “We’ve overcompensated for privacy and still created other risks and not solved the problem,” said Ashkan Soltani, the former chief technologist of the Federal Trade Commission. “I’d personally be more comfortable if it were a health agency that I trusted and there were legal protections in place over the use of the data and I knew it was operated by a dedicated security team.”

Countries such as Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have said they will use the Apple-Google system, though other nations, including Norway and the U.K., are building and testing more centralized apps they hope will work around the companies’ restrictions. France’s digital minister, Cédric O, said in a TV interview last week that it was deeply regrettable how Apple had failed to help the country’s efforts during the crisis, and that officials would remember the slight.

But some public health experts believe the push toward unproven virus-tracing apps has wasted time and missed the point. Tom Frieden, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now working with the health organization Vital Strategies, said the proximity-tracing system as proposed by Apple and Google has “been largely a distraction.”

“There are very serious questions about its feasibility and its ability to be done with adequate respect for privacy, and it has muddied the water for what actually needs to happen,” Frieden said in an interview Wednesday. “This was an approach that was done

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

with not much understanding and a lot of overpromising."

His group is now working with New York state officials to build three smartphone apps tackling more basic problems: assisting quarantined people with remote health-care visits and food deliveries, and helping contact tracers do their jobs. He said developers grappling with the Apple-Google system would have a greater impact focusing on simpler struggles for local health departments as opposed to pursuing "magical thinking."

The proximity-tracing systems are "a bright shiny object," he said, "but right now they're doing nothing to stop the pandemic."

[MD] Montgomery County Sued For Doling Out Coronavirus Money To Illegal Aliens (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [5/15/2020 12:47 PM, Jason Hopkins, 339K]
Two residents in Montgomery County, Maryland, sued the county government on May 8 for a coronavirus relief program that provides millions in direct cash assistance to illegal aliens.

The Democrat-controlled Montgomery County Council approved a $5 million program that distributes financial assistance to those without a Social Security number, which would include those living in the United States unlawfully.

Montgomery County has faced national scrutiny for its sanctuary policies after a litany of rape allegations against illegal aliens engulfed the county.

Montgomery County, Maryland, a sanctuary jurisdiction that garnered national attention in 2019 for a string of alleged rapes by illegal aliens, is being sued for allotting millions in coronavirus relief funds to its undocumented community.

Two residents in Montgomery County sued county executive Marc Elrich, a Democrat, and the director of the Department of Health and Human Services for green-lighting a program that provides direct financial assistance to illegal aliens who live in the county, but are not eligible for any federal or state relief, according to The Washington Post.

In a lawsuit filed May 8, plaintiffs Richard Jurgena and Sharon Bauer said that Montgomery County's Emergency Assistance Relief program violates federal law. The two residents are being represented by Judicial Watch, a conservative legal organization.

The Montgomery County Council, made up entirely of Democrats, unanimously approved a $5 million program in April that provides direct cash assistance to low-income residents. The Emergency Assistance Relief Payment program, a response to the economic turmoil caused by coronavirus, was introduced at the request of the county executive.

The funds dole out a one-time assistance check of up to $1,450 to low-income households that don't otherwise qualify for state or federal benefits. Notably, eligible recipients include those who do not have a Social Security number, which would qualify certain illegal aliens.

Jurgena and Bauer argue that this program violates federal law, which forbids illegal aliens from obtaining local and state benefits unless state law specifically allows it. The lawsuit pointed out that the Maryland government has not given Montgomery County explicit permission to implement this program.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"Montgomery County Executive Elrich and the Montgomery County Council have no legal authority on their own to spend taxpayer money for cash payments to illegal aliens," Tom Fitton, the president of Judicial Watch, said in a statement.

The lawsuit marked the latest public ire Montgomery County's government has received for how it deals with those living in the country unlawfully. The county is widely regarded as a "sanctuary county" for its refusal to completely work with federal immigration authorities.

Elrich signed "The Promoting Community Trust Executive Order" in July 2019, an order that barred county police from asking individuals about their immigration status and largely prohibited them from cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. The county had already refused to honor ICE detainer requests, and the new order was the latest sanctuary measure enacted by a deep-blue locality in response to the Trump administration's crackdown on illegal immigration.

However, Montgomery County and its new sanctuary policy soon became the focus of national media attention after a string of illegal aliens were accused of rape or sexual abuses — some of them had even been released back into the public after Montgomery County authorities refused to honor ICE detainer requests placed on them.

Amid the backlash, Elrich ultimately backpedaled on the order. In November, a county representative said ICE agents would be allowed to pick up wanted illegal aliens in the Montgomery County jail, but only in "identified areas."

However, local authorities are being accused of not fully committing to this policy.

A person familiar with the new process told the Daily Caller News Foundation that Montgomery County is, in fact, notifying ICE when a wanted illegal alien is due to be released from their jail, but that these calls are taking place at the last minute, giving agents no realistic timeframe to arrive at the jail and make an apprehension. The source spoke off the record to discuss the matter more freely.

Beyond its refusal to help ICE agents, Montgomery County has also expanded a pilot program that provides legal representation for foreign nationals challenging deportation orders. The county has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the program.

As for the lawsuit, Elrich said Montgomery County is prepared to "defend what it has done," according to WaPo. In another comment, Montgomery County Council President Sidney Katz said that "it is disgraceful that any group would seek to deny essential assistance for children and families who are struggling to make ends meet."

The plaintiffs are seeking an injunction to stop the county from moving forward with the program. A remote hearing is planned for Friday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland.

[TX] U.S. Attorney's Aide Accused of Leaking Information to Mexican Cartel (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/15/2020 10:15 AM, Ildefonso Ortiz and Brandon Darby, 1711K]
A staffer at the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Antonio faces charges for her alleged role in

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

providing intelligence briefs and investigative notes to allies of a faction of Los Zetas Cartel.

Known as the Cartel Del Noreste (CDN), the organization supplies drugs to allied gangs in the San Antonio area. The paralegal reportedly had access to sensitive information about CDN operatives.

In recent days, the FBI arrested Jennifer Loya, an employee of the U.S. Western District of Texas. The aide was released earlier this week on a $50,000 bond.

According to a criminal complaint, Loya's sister and brother-in-law are drug traffickers connected with CDN-Los Zetas in Monterrey, Mexico and Laredo, Texas. Laredo serves as a critical CDN trafficking point to U.S. underground markets.

Loya reportedly had access to phone taps, investigators' notes, and intelligence briefs about street gang and cartel operations between San Antonio and Mexico.

In May 2019, DEA agents arrested a cartel-connected gang leader identified as Frankie Martinez. During the arrest, Martinez reportedly told agents he knew the arrest was forthcoming. While serving a search warrant in the case, agents found that drugs were moved overnight before raids. Months later, agents spoke with suspects who revealed that one of the dealers had an inside source in the federal prosecutor's office.

During the investigation, agents learned Loya allegedly printed restricted documents like search warrants and court petitions for phone taps, despite the fact that her typical duties would never require such actions.

[CA] USNS Mercy leaves Los Angeles after treating 77 patients (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 12:16 PM, Ellen Mitchell, 3408K]
The Navy's USNS Mercy hospital ship on Friday left Los Angeles after treating several dozen patients since being docked at the city port since March.

The 1,000-bed ship, which will return to its home port in San Diego, had arrived in Los Angeles on March 27 in an effort to relieve local hospitals during the coronavirus pandemic by taking on patients not infected with COVID-19.

Video of the ship leaving on Friday morning flooded social media channels.

The Mercy, which treated just 77 individuals, scaled back its mission when it stopped receiving patients on April 30 at the direction of FEMA and U.S. Northern Command and discharged its last patient on May 5, according to the command.

Mark Ghilarducci, the director of the California Office of Emergency Services, said in a statement that having the Mercy in LA "was critical to our ability to respond in the first stages of the pandemic."

The office noted that the vessel will leave behind 60 medical personnel to support California's response to the pandemic, including 40 medical staffers and five-member medical support teams "to be deployed as needed within the region."

Another of the Navy's two hospital ships, the USNS Comfort, was sent to New York City to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

treat non-coronavirus patients. However, after treating only a few dozen patients, the Comfort changed its rules to allow coronavirus-positive patients on the ship.

The Comfort had been docked in New York Harbor in Manhattan since March 30 but departed last month for its Norfolk, Va., home port after treating just 182 patients.

Both ships were designated to remain non-coronavirus zones, with protocols in place to test patients and staffers. But at least seven crew members on the Mercy and at least one crew member on the Comfort tested positive for the illness.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

DHS begins collecting DNA from undocumented immigrants after whistleblower complaints (Politico)
Politico [5/15/2020 4:30 AM, Betsy Woodruff Swan and Daniel Lippman, 4207K]
The Department of Homeland Security is inching toward implementation of a decades-old law directing it to collect DNA from the undocumented immigrants arrested by its officers.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has started a small pilot project in Dallas to collect DNA samples of undocumented immigrants who are arrested. And Customs and Border Protection started another pilot program months ago.

It's a far cry from the robust implementation Congress envisioned when the DNA Fingerprint Act became law in 2005. And the moves, which may seem small, come after years of pushback from senior officials in the department, who argued the requirement was cumbersome and unhelpful.

DHS' steps toward implementation of the law come after harsh criticism from whistleblowers and a government oversight office, and after a bit of arm-twisting from the Justice Department. The move will concern civil liberties advocates, who have long said a massive database of immigrants' DNA could be ripe for abuse.

On May 1, ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations arm began the pilot program as ICE ramps up to fully implement a Department of Justice rule authorizing it to gather DNA under the 2005 law. They're using DNA collection kits that the FBI have given them, according to a statement, and will upload data of those arrested into a national DNA system to see whether they match with crimes that are in the system. ICE had previously received a 30 day extension to comply with the regulation, and it lapsed earlier this month.

As with fingerprints, ICE said it won't collect DNA samples from anyone age 13 or younger.

ICE has long resisted collecting DNA samples from people they arrest. One former DHS official called it "a very burdensome activity" that hasn't been adequately funded.

The former official said that the benefits for ICE aren't as concrete as they are for DOJ, which handles prosecutions.

"It's just one of those mandates that it looks good on paper and there's a net benefit to them, but all the work gets done by ICE and there's not a big upside for them," the former

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

official said.

Customs and Border Protection, the DHS component that includes Border Patrol, offered less detail on its current approach to implementation. When reached for comment on this story, a spokesperson for DHS headquarters flagged a Jan. 6 news release from the agency describing “a limited, small-scale pilot program.”

After the law passed, as part of a larger legislative package that had broad bipartisan support, it was soon put on ice. In 2010, then-Attorney General Eric Holder granted a waiver to then-DHS Sec. Janet Napolitano exempting her department from most DNA collection requirements. Napolitano had argued that since the law pushed for DNA collection on such a huge number of people, it would “severely strain the resources of the agency to perform its broader mission.”

The status quo persisted well into the Trump administration. But DHS drew flack for it. Last August, the Office of Special Counsel — a government watchdog office that focuses on whistleblowers and the federal workforce — sent a letter to President Donald Trump lambasting the department for not having implemented the law.

The letter cited whistleblower complaints about the department’s slow approach. Two months later, the Justice Department proposed a rule requiring the department to more fully implement the law — noting in its announcement that the FBI had made it easier for other agencies to use its system to process the DNA samples.

The rule was finalized earlier this year, and the department extended DHS’ deadline for compliance in the midst of the pandemic. That extension expired earlier this month.

That long resistance to implementation from DHS generated concerns in some corners of the Trump administration. And despite the incremental shifts from ICE and CBP, those concerns persist.

“There are people, including at the leadership levels of DHS, CBP and ICE, who are determined to prevent the DNA Fingerprint Act from ever going into effect,” one senior administration official told POLITICO. “These individuals are willing to continue to ignore the law and put the safety of the American people at risk. The Obama administration is alive and well at DHS.”

But others cheer the move. Henry Kerner, the special counsel who sent the letter about implementation, said in a statement that the moves are welcome.

“I am pleased to see that CBP has taken steps to initiate a DNA collection pilot program,” he said. “This issue only came to light because of the diligence of whistleblowers who worked with OSC to ensure the law, as written, is followed. After OSC alerted the president, Congress and CBP leadership, the Department of Justice took action mandating collection of DNA samples from criminal detainees. This law will allow agencies to work with the FBI to get criminals off the streets and bring justice to victims of violent crime.”

But others will find it troubling. Groups like the American Civil Liberties Union have opposed the 2005 law since its inception, calling it a “radical departure from the original intent and purpose of the forensic DNA databanking system.”

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

More recently, Saira Hussain of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a left-leaning group that advocates for digital rights, called the DHS move to begin taking DNA samples a dangerous effort “to weaponize biometrics in order to surveil vulnerable communities.”

ICE is seeking to deport these migrant girls during the pandemic, alarming advocates (CBS News)
CBS News [5/15/2020 5:23 PM, Graham Kates and Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2803K]
The scramble began on May 6: Two sisters from El Salvador, ages 8 and 11, in U.S. government custody had just been approved for reunification with their Houston-based mom, when ICE stepped in and moved to deport them.

That same day, in McAllen, Texas, a teenage girl from Guatemala completed a sworn asylum declaration, claiming she would be persecuted because of her race, indigenous identity and refusal to join a gang if returned to her home country. Hours later, ICE picked her up.

The sisters and the teenage girl have three things in common. They all previously sought asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border alongside parents. They were sent to Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP, program. And they reentered the U.S. a second time — without their parents.

Minors are not supposed to be returned to Mexico under MPP if unaccompanied by their parents or legal guardians, so some families have allowed their children to seek asylum in the U.S. alone. Between October 2019 and this month, at least 577 unaccompanied migrant children in the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, or ORR, have reported having their parents in Mexico, according to the agency.

Under a landmark court settlement, the U.S. government is obligated to make "prompt and continuous efforts" to unite unaccompanied migrant children with relatives or other sponsors in the U.S. while their immigration cases proceed.

But the government argues that children who have already been ordered removed with their families under the Remain in Mexico policy should be deported — even if they last entered the U.S. unaccompanied. Attorneys for the minors, however, say they should be treated like other unaccompanied migrant children.

Both the sisters and the teen girl have been fighting their case in court. A federal judge barred the government from immediately deporting the Salvadoran sisters, and they were released to their mother in Houston, according to attorneys. Their deportation proceedings are ongoing. Their father, with whom they were originally sent to Mexico, remains in Matamoros, Mexico.

The Guatemalan teen was transported by the government first to a motel in McAllen, then moved to another one in Alexandria, Louisiana, according to her attorneys. ICE was prepared to deport her on a flight Friday afternoon, according to Neha Desai, a lawyer who is part of the team representing all children in U.S. immigration custody. But her flight was postponed to Monday after the Guatemalan government said it would not receive the plane because of coronavirus cases among migrants recently deported by the U.S.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Judge Dolly Gee of the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles ruled on April 24 that deportation orders under the Remain in Mexico program do not change the government's obligation to seek the prompt release of migrant children to relatives and other sponsors in the U.S. under the landmark 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement.

"That policy just like any other pending proceedings or participation in class action proceedings or anything like that, if it results in a prolonged detention where deportation is not imminent, then it is causing unnecessary delay," Gee said during a hearing before issuing her order, which said the administration's "opaque policies" surrounding children with pending MPP cases violate the Flores settlement.

Advocates say ICE has seized on Gee's use of the word "imminent" to move to deport children in ORR care who have pending removal orders under the Remain in Mexico policy.

ICE said migrant children are only deported when "their immigration case is complete and there are no legal impediments to removal."

"If a minor received a final order of removal from an immigration judge as part of a family unit enrolled in the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) — prior to entering the U.S. as (an unaccompanied migrant child) — then they are subject to the final order of removal," an ICE spokeswoman said in a statement Friday.

The agency did not comment on specific cases or say how deporting migrant children from shelters overseen by the U.S. government conforms with the adjusted "enforcement posture" it announced in March as a result of the pandemic. In its announcement, ICE said its agents would only focus on detaining "public safety risks," as well as immigrants whose criminal records require the agency to apprehend them. For everyone else, the agency said it would "delay enforcement actions" until the crisis abated.

Mark Weber, a spokesman for ORR, said his office does not determine which children in its custody are deported, calling it a child welfare agency.

Desai said she is concerned that the government's actions are related to Gee's decision that children who were previously returned to Mexico and came back unaccompanied should be released to sponsors.

"We can't concretely say it's retaliation, but it sure feels like it," Desai said, adding that she believed the government had intensified attempts to deport these children after Gee's ruling was made.

Asra Syed, who represents the sisters in Houston, said that in addition to being so near to their mother, there were no relatives in El Salvador who the children could be safely returned to. A redacted filing reviewed by CBS News included descriptions of abuse and gang threats during the girls' youth.

"Our clients are the only detained children we know of who ICE is insisting on deporting even though: 1) they have a parent in the U.S. who ORR recommends they be reunified with, 2) they have no parent or other relative in their home country who can take care of them, and 3) they are really, really young — only 8 and 11," Syed said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

ORR currently has roughly 1,600 migrant children in its custody, a low population level not seen since 2011. The agency has been receiving few minors since late March from border officials, who are expelling most unauthorized migrants, including unaccompanied children, under an emergency public health order.

[NY] Gruesome Murders Lead To Major Bust Of Alleged MS-13 Gang Members (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [5/15/2020 3:01 PM, Jason Hopkins, 339K]

Federal authorities on Thursday handed down murder, attempted murder and other charges against 10 people believed to be associated with the MS-13 gang, following the grisly murders of three people.

An investigation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the New York City Police Department and the FBI led to four unsealed complaints within the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, ICE announced on Thursday. The complaints charged 10 members and associates of La Mara Salvatrucha, better known as MS-13, with murder in-aid-of racketeering, attempted murder, murder conspiracy and other offenses.

The men were apprehended for their alleged connection to three murders and other crimes, U.S. Attorney Richard Donoghue of the Eastern District stated. The killings were conducted "public execution" style, according to authorities.

One individual was arrested Wednesday in Maryland, five were arrested on Thursday in New York and California and four were already arrested and will be transferred to federal custody on Friday.

"The murders and crimes of violence allegedly committed by these defendants are trademark MS-13 offenses — cold-blooded, senseless and brutally violent — and pose a grave danger to the residents of our communities," Donoghue said in a prepared statement.

On the night of April 23, 2018, according to the complaints, 17-year-old Andy Peralta was confronted by several MS-13 associates in a park in Flushing, a neighborhood in Queens, who confused the crown tattoo on his chest as a symbol of the rival Latin Kings gang. The assailants fatally beat, stabbed and strangled him and slashed his tattoo.

Alleged MS-13 associate Juan Amaya-Ramirez was charged with Peralta's murder.

During the early morning of Nov. 4, 2019, Victor Alvarenga was shot and killed close to his home in Flushing, Queens. Alleged MS-13 associates are accused of waiting outside for Alvarenga, and then shooting him multiple times in the head and body after he emerged from his home.

Douglas Melgar-Suriano and Jairo Martinez-Garcia were charged with his murder.

The third individual to be murdered was Abel Mosso. In the afternoon of Feb. 3, 2019, three men followed Mosso, whom they believed was a member of the rival 18th Street gang, onto a subway car in Flushing and assaulted him, dragging him out onto the platform.

The assailants pulled out a gun and warned onlookers in Spanish: "Nobody get involved, we're MS-13, we're going to kill him." After a brief skirmish for the gun, Mosso was shot

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

multiple times. Ramiro Gutierrez and alleged gang associates Tito Martinez-Alvarenga and Victor Lopez have been charged with Mosso's murder.

"Public executions are just another sobering example of the savagery that MS-13 engages in with the alleged criminal mayhem caused by those charged today," Peter C. Fitzhugh, special agent in charge of [Homeland Security Investigations] New York, said in a statement.

Other alleged associates stand accused of plotting to murder an MS-13 gang member who failed to carry out an execution against a rival gang member.

If convicted, Donoghue said six of the men face mandatory life sentences and are eligible for death row. Another three men could face up to life in prison.

New York, which refuses to cooperate with federal immigration authorities, has long suffered from a major MS-13 presence. In December 2019, state authorities announced charges against nearly 100 MS-13 gang members, one of the largest busts of the gang in New York history.

The murders in New York by gang members have even attracted the attention of the White House. President Donald Trump invited the mother of Kayla Cuevas to his 2018 State of the Union address. Cuevas at age 16 was brutally murdered by MS-13 gang members in a wooded area in Suffolk County, New York.

[NY] Ten suspected MS-13 gang members charged in murder and crime plots in New York (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 1:09 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 727K]
A U.S. attorney in New York is bringing a slew of federal charges against 10 suspected MS-13 gang members who were allegedly involved in the deaths of three people in Queens in 2018 and 2019, according to a federal agency involved in the investigation.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations worked with the FBI and the New York Police Department to investigate three killings, including a 17-year-old boy mistakenly viewed by the gang as a rival gang member who was beaten and fatally stabbed in a park, a second man shot while walking down the street near his home, and another man attacked while riding the subway, then dragged out onto the platform and killed as onlookers watched.

The 10 suspects were arrested or transferred from local jail custody into federal custody across Maryland, New York, and California on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The HSI statement did not specify whether any of the suspects were illegally residing in the United States.

"The murders and crimes of violence allegedly committed by these defendants are trademark MS-13 offenses — cold-blooded, senseless and brutally violent — and pose a grave danger to the residents of our communities," said Richard P. Donoghue, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

In addition to murder, charges include murder-in-aid-of racketeering, attempted murder, murder conspiracy, firearms offenses, and marijuana distribution conspiracy.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Government documents state that in April 2018, teenager Andy Peralta was lured into Kissena Park in Flushing, Queens, by Juan Amaya-Ramirez and two other associates. Peralta had a tattoo of a crown on his chest that Amaya-Ramirez believed was a symbol of the Latin Kings gang, a rival to MS-13. The men beat, stabbed, and strangled Peralta, then slashed his tattoo. They took the victim's phone and took a picture of his dead body while flashing the MS-13 hand signs next to it. Police found the image in the victim's iCloud account during their investigation.

In February 2019, victim Abel Mosso was attacked by alleged gang members Ramiro Gutierrez and Tito Martinez-Alvarenga, as well as Victor Lopez, on a subway train. The men followed him onto the train because they thought he was a member of a rival gang, the 18th Street. Mosso was attacked on the train, then dragged out onto the platform when the train stopped at the 90th Street station in Jackson Heights. Mosso fought them as onlookers watched. One attacker yelled in Spanish, "Nobody get involved, we're MS-13, we're going to kill him." Gutierrez shot Mosso multiple times, killing him.

"MS-13 members do all they can to propagate a violent, deadly image as a gang. Their calculation that shouting the gang's name out in front of people on a subway platform will prevent anyone from interfering with a man being brutally beaten and murdered boggles the mind," FBI Assistant Director-in-Charge William F. Sweeney, Jr. said in a statement.

A third killing in November 2019 involved two alleged MS-13 members, Douglas Melgar-Suriano and Jairo Martinez-Garcia, who supposedly killed Victor Alvarenga. The victim was fatally shot after being approached by the two men on the sidewalk near his home in Flushing, Queens.

Other alleged gang members are charged with conspiring to murder a fellow MS-13 associate after he failed to kill a rival gang member and others for attempting to kill another rival gang member.

The suspects facing murder charges face life in prison and are eligible for the death penalty if they are convicted. Those facing lesser charges face a minimum of 10 years in prison.

[NJ] 'Everybody Was Sick': Inside an ICE Detention Center (New York Times)
New York Times [5/15/2020 5:00 AM, Tammy La Gorce, 40577K]
Last month, Makalay Tarawally propped her 2-month-old in front of her phone so that his father could meet him for the first time, virtually. As a blood technician for a Covid-19 hospital unit, Ms. Tarawally knew how careful she needed to be.

From her aunt's house in Edison, N.J., she called a room at the Red Roof Inn. The father of her two children, Abdul Massaquoi, was isolating there because of possible exposure to the coronavirus. He waved through the phone screen.

Mr. Massaquoi, 44, was stuck at the hotel because he had been detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement last fall while on his way to work as a truck driver for Macy's. Accused of forging his green card in 2018, Mr. Massaquoi was arrested after missing a court date in 2019. According to his lawyer, a summons had been sent to his old address and not forwarded to his new home.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Mr. Massaquoi had just been released from the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey, where 18 people had tested positive for the virus; a nonprofit was paying for his stay at the Red Roof so he could make sure he had not been infected.

The environment at the detention center, said Mr. Massaquoi, a native of Sierra Leone, was stressful. “Everybody was sick,” he said, “and we were all right next to each other.”

ICE detention facilities are hotbeds for the virus, with 85 cases already discovered in New York and New Jersey. As of May 11, 36 people tested positive in New Jersey. Four staff members at the Hudson County Correctional Facility in Kearny, one of the state’s four detention centers, have died from Covid-19.

The American Civil Liberties Union has referred to the country’s detainee population as “sitting ducks.” The nonprofit Government Accountability Project recently estimated that almost all of those held in ICE facilities could be infected by the 90th day of a Covid outbreak.

Like jails, detention centers are faced with tough decisions as to how to keep their dense populations safe. Since the coronavirus outbreak in March, ICE has suspended social visits and staggered meals and recreation times, and is monitoring detainees for Covid-19 regularly at all of its facilities, a spokesman said. One of the agency’s “highest priorities is the health and safety of those in our custody,” he continued.

To that end, ICE has also released about 900 people since March. Detention bookings are down by 60 percent compared to last year’s data. About 30,000 people are currently being held nationwide, the lowest number since the beginning of the Trump administration.

But that number is still too high, according to the more than 4,000 physicians who sent a letter to ICE demanding the release of even more people “to avoid preventable deaths.” As of May 11, ICE reported that of the almost 1,700 detainees who had been tested, roughly half had received positive results for the virus.

The pandemic has become a new front in the debate over immigration, pitting opponents of President Trump’s policies against an administration trying to curtail migration, both illegal and legal, and more aggressively enforce immigration laws.

In New York and New Jersey, activists are working to protect and, ideally, release all ICE detainees. Some are writing letters to Gov. Phil Murphy, demanding that he issue an emergency order to vacate all facilities. Others are participating in regular drive-by protests all over New Jersey, honking their horns in front of the jails from cars plastered with homemade #FreeThemAll posters.

“It’s always been a crisis, but I would say now it’s much worse,” said Rosa Santana, the program director of First Friends of New Jersey and New York, a nonprofit.

Two of New Jersey’s detention centers, the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack and the Hudson County Correctional Facility, house ICE detainees mostly found in New York. The other two, the Elizabeth Detention Center in Elizabeth and the Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark, mainly hold immigrants detained in New Jersey. All four jails receive people apprehended at the United States/Mexico border or at points of entrance like

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

airports. Some are transferred in from other states.

Before the virus hit, about 2,200 detainees were held in New Jersey's four facilities, sleeping in bunk beds and sharing bathrooms, Ms. Santana said. Now, following new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and several lawsuits, about 1,100 remain. They stay in cells up to 23 hours a day to reduce time spent in communal areas, with sick detainees sent to separate units to be quarantined.

Edwin Tineo, who spent 13 months in the Hudson County Correctional Facility, witnessed a hunger strike before he was released in March. The protest was in response to a lack of supplies like hand soap and toilet paper, but also a lack of information.

"Nobody was telling us nothing" when the pandemic started, said Mr. Tineo, 30, a husband and father of two who lives in Fresh Meadows, Queens, and worked as an HVAC installer before ICE detained him in 2019. "Being there was the most stressful thing I've ever experienced in my life," he said. "It was like being blindfolded."

In March, ICE started to evaluate its detained population for those who might be at "higher risk for severe illness as a result of Covid-19," a spokesman said, "to determine whether continued detention was appropriate." This resulted in the release of hundreds of detainees.

Until recently, Mr. Massaquoi, the Macy's truck driver, had somehow slipped through the cracks, despite exhibiting a number of underlying health conditions, according to his lawyer, John P. Leschak, who was hired to take on Mr. Massaquoi's case by the same nonprofit that paid for his quarantine at the hotel. "The man suffers from hypertension, which is the leading comorbidity in Covid cases in New York and New Jersey, and he also has asthma and is prediabetic," Mr. Leschak said. "And other than a minor offense from 20 years ago, he had nothing on his criminal record."

But Mr. Massaquoi was one of the lucky ones. He tested negative for the virus, and after an uneventful quarantine at the Red Roof Inn, was finally reunited with his family, in the flesh, this month. He was especially moved by his newborn.

"I had been thinking I wasn't ever going to be able to see him; I cried when I saw him," he said. "And my other son, he was so happy to have his Daddy back. I'm praying that everything is OK. I don't know what's going to come up. But I worry every day."

[TX] ICE Program Collects DNA Samples Of Illegal Aliens (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [5/15/2020 4:05 PM, Jason Hopkins, 339K]
A division of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has begun collecting DNA samples of illegal aliens in its custody and storing the information in a national database.

ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations launched a pilot program earlier in May in Dallas, Texas, that collects the DNA samples of individuals arrested and placed into its custody, the agency confirmed to the Daily Caller News Foundation on Friday. The launch of the pilot program followed backlash from critics who chastised the agency for not implementing it sooner.

"To comply with updated Department of Justice (DOJ) regulation requiring the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to collect DNA samples of everyone arrested and

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

fingerprinted, [ICE's] Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) began a pilot program on May 1 in Dallas, Texas, to create a process for full implementation," the agency said in a statement provided to the DCNF.

ICE officers will use DNA-sample collection kits provided by the FBI to swab the inside of an alien's cheek and deliver the kit to the FBI Laboratory Division for processing. This DNA information will also be uploaded into the National DNA Index System, a nationwide database of DNA information, to verify if it matches with other crimes in the system.

"ICE is implementing measures to ensure that the collection of DNA is conducted properly, in accordance with protections for an individual's privacy, and that all records and data are retained and disposed of in compliance with federal law and policy," the agency added.

Politico first reported on the implementation of the pilot program.

Not everyone will be subject to DNA collection. ICE will not gather DNA from any individuals 13 or younger — adhering to longstanding DHS policy that prohibits fingerprint collection of anyone in that age group. Legal permanent residents are also exempt from the pilot program.

The program puts DHS one step closer to a large-scale DNA collection of illegal aliens arrested by its agents, bringing to fruition a 15-year-old law that has yet to fully materialize.

Congress passed the DNA Fingerprint Act in 2005, directing DHS to collect DNA information of undocumented aliens arrested by its agents. However, the law was never fully implemented due to pushback from DHS. Namely, officials argued that the rules were overly burdensome and not properly funded.

After whistleblower complaints and pushback from the Department of Justice, the Trump administration has begun to implement the 2005 law. The ICE pilot program in Dallas is anticipated to pave the way for a much larger scale collection effort down the road.

ICE's efforts came months after Customs and Border Protection (CBP), another agency within DHS, has already launched a pilot program to collect DNA samples from aliens arrested by CBP and Border Patrol officers.

[CA] "My son is in danger": Fear mounts over largest coronavirus outbreak in ICE detention (CBS News)
CBS News [5/15/2020 3:01 PM, Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2803K]
Immigration attorney Deron Smallcomb emailed several U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials on Wednesday, imploring them to brief him on the medical condition of his client, who was hospitalized. His first question was simple: "Is my client alive?"

"I demand to speak with my client, today," Smallcomb continued. "That is, assuming he is still alive."

Smallcomb soon learned what he had suspected for days. In a brief call later that day, his client, 41-year-old Noe Perez, said he had contracted the coronavirus.

Perez, an immigrant from El Salvador, is one of at least 986 immigrants who have tested

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

positive for COVID-19 while in ICE custody, according to the agency's latest tally. He is also among at least 149 ICE detainees who have contracted the disease while detained at the Otay Mesa Detention Center, a prison in the San Diego area that is home to the largest coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. immigration detention system.

At least 11 ICE employees assigned to the facility and 24 staffers with the for-profit prison company that runs it have also tested positive for the virus, according to the immigration agency and CoreCivic, the private corrections firm. Additionally, at least 68 U.S. Marshals Service detainees awaiting criminal trial or sentencing at the facility have tested positive, according to a Justice Department official.

The facility housed the first and only known immigrant to have died of coronavirus complications while in ICE custody.

Perez's family in California, a mix of U.S. citizens and green card holders, fears for his life. Before he contracted the virus, he was suffering from pulmonary embolism, thrombosis, ulcers and a hernia. He also has to take daily blood thinners for the rest of his life.

"I'm very worried about my son. My son is in danger," his mother, Laura, told CBS News in Spanish. "We are all human beings. They are not animals. But they treat them like animals. They don't care about these boys."

Laura, the rest of the family and Smallcomb feel like they have been stonewalled by ICE as Perez's health has deteriorated. They said the agency did not inform them of Perez's hospitalization until they spent days demanding answers. In one of his numerous emails to ICE officials in the San Diego area, Smallcomb said he and the family only found out about Perez's hospitalization through an anonymous source.

Asked about the family's concerns, an ICE spokesperson said the agency could not comment on Perez's medical condition, citing state and federal privacy laws. The spokesperson said requests to call hospitalized detainees have to be reviewed and approved by an ICE official.

Though relieved that he was able to speak to Perez on Wednesday, Smallcomb said there's no sign ICE will release his client. On Tuesday, the parole request he submitted on behalf of Perez was denied. In its decision notice, which was reviewed by CBS News, ICE said Perez's "discretionary release" would not "conform to this agency's priority."

An ICE spokesperson did not elaborate on why the agency denied the parole request. Notices typically state whether the agency believes a detainee could be a flight risk or a threat to public safety if released.

Smallcomb believes ICE is not releasing his medically vulnerable client because of a conviction for assault with a semi-automatic firearm in 1998. But he said his client has already paid his debt to society by serving a 22-year prison sentence. Perez was convicted as a teenager, according to California court records.

ICE confirmed it arrested Perez in January after he finished his prison sentence and is seeking to deport him to El Salvador, which he fled with his family in 1986 because of the civil war there.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Like Perez's family, Smallcomb fears for his client's life, saying he should be working to prevent Perez's deportation — not his death.

"A 41-year-old male with serious underlying conditions and daily medications to stay alive, that's the first guy you test, that's the first guy you quarantine, that's the first guy you release," Smallcomb told CBS News.

During his phone call with Perez on Wednesday, Smallcomb said he learned his client has been transferred to two San Diego-area hospitals since last Friday, after days of complaining of pain in his chest and lower back, excessive sweating and trouble breathing. Perez had been tested for coronavirus earlier last week and received the positive result the day he was hospitalized, Smallcomb said.

Since then, Perez has been diagnosed with pneumonia and two "black clouds" on his lungs, Smallcomb said, recounting the conversation with his client. Perez has begun an antibiotic regimen and remains in serious pain, his lawyer added.

Laura has been distraught since her son's health deteriorated. Not being able to talk to him on Mother's Day was particularly difficult. She faults ICE for his current condition, saying he felt ill for days before being taken to a hospital. "If they had acted on time, my son would not be in the hospital."

"What is ICE doing? Letting people die?" she asked.

Laura has found some solace in talking to another immigrant family in California who recently faced a similar situation.

"My heart still hurts"

Rosa is still hurting from her brother's death. "My heart still hurts. I can't sleep at night because I'm desperate," she told CBS News. "I want to turn back time."

She called Laura after the advocacy group Pueblos Sin Fronteras told her about Perez's situation. "She's also devastated," Rosa said, referring to Laura.

Rosa, a Los Angeles resident who is also from El Salvador, lost her brother last week. Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejía died of coronavirus complications at a San Diego-area hospital after being transferred there in late April from the Otay Mesa detention center, where he had been held by ICE since January.

Like Perez, Escobar Mejía fled El Salvador as a child during the 1980s. They both had run-ins with the law that made them targets for deportation. Escobar Mejía also had preexisting medical conditions and U.S. citizen family members clamoring for his release.

Rosa said she does not want other immigrants detained at the Otay Mesa facility to meet her brother's fate.

"My heart still aches. I don't want that to happen to other families. Please free them," she said, in a plea to the U.S. government.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

According to an ICE spokeswoman, ICE has released more than 900 detainees it determined were at increased risk of severe illness if infected with the coronavirus because of their age or medical conditions. The agency has also been required to free more than 190 detainees under court orders stemming from lawsuits filed by advocates across the country.

Because of an order by a federal judge in San Diego, ICE has released 70 of the roughly 130 Otay Mesa detainees it identified as medically vulnerable, according to court filings. Last week, the same judge denied a separate request to order the release of at-risk U.S. Marshals detainees.

Bardis Vakili, an attorney with the San Diego branch of the American Civil Liberties Union working on both cases, said some immigrant detainees in the vulnerable categories are still waiting for medical clearance to be released. But he said the agency has indicated it does not intend to release about 35 medically at-risk detainees because of their criminal records.

Vakili said ICE needs to continue reducing the number of immigrants detained at the Otay Mesa facility, which stopped taking new detainees in April. ICE said it continues to hold roughly 544 detainees at the San Diego-area detention center.

"The main concern here is that these are buildings where everyone is in a congregate environment. They share bathrooms, showers, sleeping cells," Vakili told CBS News. "They are packed tightly together."

As coronavirus cases among detained immigrants have continued to grow consistently, advocates have urged ICE to further downsize its nationwide detainee population, which stood at nearly 28,000 last week, saying the agency is still detaining immigrants with medical conditions and others who don't pose a threat to the public.

In a letter Thursday, the House Oversight Committee accused ICE of not taking the crisis "seriously," urging the agency to release all asylum-seekers and "non-violent people" in its custody.

In a court filing last week, the agency said it had identified more than 4,400 detainees considered to be at increased risk of severe illness or death if contracting the coronavirus under guidelines set by a federal judge in California. The agency also continues to detain more than 4,800 asylum-seekers who have demonstrated credible fear of being persecuted or tortured in their home countries.

Elsy, who requested that her last name not be published so she could speak freely, is one of many asylum-seekers held by ICE at Otay Mesa. She said she fled El Salvador last year after been threatened and marginalized because of her identity as a lesbian woman. She was required to wait in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols program. She was only allowed into the U.S. after proving to an asylum officer that she had been persecuted while waiting in Mexico.

After the group representing her, the Immigrant Defenders Law Center, helped Elsy find a sponsor in the U.S., ICE granted her parole, but it conditioned her release on her paying a $15,000 bond. Because advocates have been unable to raise the funds, Elsy has been

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

detained at Otay Mesa for roughly eight months. She said she has grown increasingly frustrated during the pandemic, feeling powerless to protect herself from the coronavirus inside a facility plagued by the contagion.

"I came fleeing to prevent something from happening to me in my home country," Elsy told CBS News. "Now, I'm here in the U.S. in a detention center, but it's still very difficult because I don't know if I will come out of here alive or dead."

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Citizenship agency faces 'drastic' coronavirus cash crunch, begs Congress for $1.2 billion (Washington Times)
Washington Times [5/15/2020 8:06 PM, Stephen Dinan, 496K]
The federal agency that handles citizenship and other legal immigration applications is running out of money amid the coronavirus crisis, and warned Congress on Friday it needs a quick infusion of $1.2 billion in taxpayer money or else it will have to take "drastic actions" to keep the doors open.

Joseph Edlow, deputy director for policy at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, told employees in a memo Friday that they've already done some belt-tightening and are working on a new fee schedule that will bring in more money.

But it won't be enough and Congress will have to pony up.

"USCIS will exhaust its funding this summer, and without congressional intervention, we risk not being able to make payroll and will have to take drastic actions to keep the agency afloat," Mr. Edlow wrote.

The money would be a loan, and it would repay taxpayers through a 10% surcharge on future applications and petitions, Mr. Edlow said, adding that it was important not to add to the deficit or leave taxpayers in the lurch over the long term.

The warning was stunning for a government operation.

USCIS, which is part of the Homeland Security Department, is a rarity in the federal government because it's almost entirely funded by fees — in this case paid by immigrants and visa seekers when they apply for benefits.

But the agency's workload has plummeted during the coronavirus pandemic, cutting revenue in half. Without some new source of money, USCIS believes it will run out of money by July 13, and will have to furlough employees.

The agency says it needs $571.2 million for pay and operating expenses for the rest of fiscal year 2020, and wants $650 million more in carryover money in case the crisis extends into 2021. Even that will only maintain "limited operations," the agency told Congress.

The agency's fee-funded structure is usually a boon. During government shutdowns, when most other federal departments and agencies either shutter or continue working without pay, USCIS is able to operate as usual because it operates somewhat like a business and

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

its money comes directly from fees.

During the coronavirus crisis, the equation is reversed and, like businesses that depend on income, USCIS is facing a cash crunch. Meanwhile agencies that depend on taxpayers are able to chug along on the money Congress is borrowing.

USCIS does get about 4% of its funding each year from taxpayers to operate E-Verify, a voluntary program that lets businesses check to make sure new hires are legally able to work in the U.S.

And the agency has gotten direct infusions of cash from Congress before, including in the early 2000s, when a massive backlog of cases had built up and lawmakers sent over taxpayer money to staff up and cut into the backlog.

USCIS is fee-funded because there's long been a consensus that immigrants and businesses that want to bring in guest workers should pay their own way, rather than force taxpayers to foot the bill.

Every couple years, USCIS reviews its fees and can adjust them to bring in more income.

Some Democrats on Capitol Hill in recent years have complained about the increases, and suggested ending the fee-funding structure. That would make taxpayers subsidize immigrants, but it would also give Congress more control over the agency's decisions.

The Washington Times reached out Friday evening to the chairs of the House and Senate subcommittees that oversee USCIS's spending, but neither office had an immediate comment.

[MA] The US has allowed just two migrants to stay under tougher border measures (CNN)
CNN [5/15/2020 5:26 PM, Geneva Sands, 12317K]
Under the Trump administration's new stringent border control measures, implemented in March, two migrants seeking humanitarian protections at the border have been permitted to remain in the US, according to US Citizenship and Immigration Services data.

In March, as the coronavirus took hold in the western hemisphere, the administration largely sealed off the US-Mexico border and began the swift removal of migrants apprehended at the border.

The move was one in a series of recent immigration changes that appears to be part of a concerted effort to reshape the nation's immigration system amid the global pandemic.

Customs and Border Protection, the agency tasked with US border security, referred 59 migrants to US Citizenship and Immigration Services, which processes asylum claims, who expressed fear of torture if they were to be returned. Under the new policy barring most migrants at the border, the threshold to be exempted from expulsion is a claim under the Convention Against Torture, according to a Homeland Security official.

Previously, other asylum claims would be reviewed, but amid the pandemic, the administration has further limited access to humanitarian protections for migrants, claiming

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

it is in the interest of public health.

As of May 13, of the 59 cases, 54 migrants did not establish a likelihood of torture in their home countries and are subject to immediate expulsion from the US. Three cases are pending, according to the data, which was first reported by The Washington Post.

USCIS could not provide comparable data for previous months. Some migrants are still being processed under traditional border protocols and it's unclear how many, if any, of those people have had cases referred to USCIS for an asylum claim.

The new border policy gives "asylum applicants a negligible chance of receiving protection in the United States," under the current system, said Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst for the US Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute. "This administration has completely abandoned their responsibilities to protect vulnerable populations in favor of a policy that provides questionable safeguards against coronavirus."

The standard of proof differs for asylum claims vs. claims under the Convention Against Torture -- an international obligation. To make a claim under the torture convention, an applicant must demonstrate a more than a 50% chance they will be subject to torture, additionally, an applicant is trying to show that they will endure torture -- an extreme and inhumane punishment that must cause severe pain or suffering.

Typically if USCIS determines a migrant faces a likelihood of torture, immigration court proceedings will follow for a final determination on the case. In fiscal year 2018, the most recent year available, 1,334 Convention Against Torture applications were accepted by the Department of Justice Executive Office for immigration review and 25,964 were denied.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees US immigration agencies, will "promptly return aliens home in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 unless they express a fear of return to their home country," a DHS spokesperson said in a statement.

If a migrant expresses a fear of return home, "that claim will be promptly heard and considered in accordance with all applicable laws, policies, and regulations," the spokesperson added.

Earlier this month, acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan suggested the coronavirus-related measures would continue to stay in place, even as the United States moves toward re-opening.

"From a public health perspective, it has been determined that still is a risk from our borders," Morgan said, referring to the increasing numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths in Mexico.

[MA] Judge allows 5 Central American asylum seekers to enter US (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [5/15/2020 4:27 PM, Associated Press, 1891K]
Five Central American asylum seekers ordered to remain in Mexico by federal authorities will be able to reunite with their families in Massachusetts until their immigration cases are decided, a federal judge in Boston ruled Thursday.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts said the three women and two young children had been living in dangerous conditions in the Mexican border town of Matamoros.

The organization said the five people — four from Guatemala and one from El Salvador — were exposed to violence and persecution in Mexico and their immigration hearings in the U.S. have been severely delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Emails seeking comment were left Friday for spokespersons for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which is named in the lawsuit.

The ACLU previously reached a similar settlement on behalf of a Guatemalan family seeking asylum.

Tens of thousands of asylum-seekers from certain Spanish-speaking nations, including Guatemala and El Salvador, are waiting out the U.S. immigration court process in Mexico as part of the Trump administration's Migrant Protection Protocols, which took effect January 2019.

American authorities have said the "Remain in Mexico" policy has helped significantly reduce illegal border crossings. Civil rights groups complain it violates constitutional rights.

[MN] DOJ: Pakistani Doctor on H-1B Visa Wanted to Attack U.S. for ISIS (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/15/2020 9:31 PM, John Binder, 1711K]
A Pakistani doctor, admitted to the United States through the H-1B visa program, wanted to attack Americans for the Islamic State (ISIS), federal agents say in a criminal complaint.

Muhammad Masood, a 28-year-old Pakistani national, first arrived in the U.S. in February 2018 after he was able to secure an H-1B visa — the visa program whereby more than 100,000 foreign workers are brought to the U.S. every year and are allowed to stay for up to six years. There are about 650,000 H-1B visa foreign workers in the U.S. at any given moment.

Masood worked as an H-1B visa holder "research coordinator" at a medical clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

According to a criminal complaint by federal agents with the Department of Justice (DOJ), Masood repeatedly stated his wanting to commit terrorism on Americans for ISIS while in the U.S. on his H-1B visa.

"[Masood] indicated … because he was currently in the United States, 'sometimes I want to attack [the] enemy when I am behind enemy [lines] itself' because 'not many people [can] even reach here to attack,'" the criminal complaint states. "Discussing his travel to [commit jihad for ISIS], [Masood] noted that he will lose the chance to conduct an attack in the United States: 'I wonder if I will miss the opportunity of attacking the enemy when I was in the middle of it.'"

In another message through a messaging app, Masood said he had intended to attack Americans in the U.S. while on his H-1B visa but decided to make travel plans to fight for ISIS in Syria instead, according to federal agents.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"You know [brother] … there is so much I wanted to do here … [lone wolf] stuff you know… but I realized [I] should be on the ground helping brothers, sisters, kids inshAllah," Masood allegedly wrote in a message.

On February 21, federal agents said Masood bought a plane ticket from Chicago, Illinois, to Amman, Jordan, where he then planned to travel to Syria. After Masood was forced to cancel his trip to Jordan due to the Chinese coronavirus crisis, he bought a plane ticket from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Los Angeles, California.

On March 19, Masood was taken into custody by federal agents after arriving at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport to board his flight.

Masood has been charged with attempting to provide material support to ISIS.

Customs and Border Protection

Number of migrants in CBP custody at border plummets amid coronavirus crisis (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 4:10 PM, Adam Shaw, 12006K]
The number of migrants in custody at the border has plunged from the tens of thousands detained last year to just over 100 now, the head of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) told Fox News this week.

"As for our custody numbers, as of May 10, we now have approximately 117 people in our custody as opposed to the 20,000 individuals we had back in May of 2019," Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan said. "Can you imagine if we had 20,000 individuals in our custody today in the middle of this global health pandemic?"

The U.S. saw a surge of migrants at the border peaking in April and May last year, sparking a crisis that led to detention centers being overwhelmed. The administration introduced a number of policies to limit the number of migrants at the border, and to reduce pull factors bringing migrants north.

Perhaps the most significant was the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) -- known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy -- which saw migrants seeking asylum sent back to Mexico to await their immigration hearings. Agreements with Northern Triangle countries -- Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras -- and the border wall are also seen as factors, in turn lowering apprehensions and detentions.

When the coronavirus hit the U.S. earlier this year, the Trump administration introduced additional measures -- including travel restrictions at the land border and giving CBP the ability to immediately turn back illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers.

"This strategy has kept a potentially vast number of migrants from overwhelming our healthcare systems along the border," Morgan told Fox News in a response to written questions. "And our Border Patrol agents are seeing fewer people attempt to cross the border illegally. In fact, CBP's encounters with migrant individuals have dropped to approximately 500 a day."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

He added: “This not only limits the exposure of CBP employees and the American public to individuals with potentially infectious diseases, but it allows for U.S. medical facilities to focus on our population in need of medical care.”

The administration has faced calls from some Democrats, pro-immigrant activists and even the United Nations to limit or even suspend immigration detention as part of its response to the crisis.

The U.N. Network on Migration said this month: “The Network calls on States to introduce a moratorium on the use of immigration detention; to scale up and implement non-custodial community-based alternatives; to release all migrants in detention into alternatives, following strict safeguards and prioritizing children, families and other migrants in vulnerable situations; and to urgently improve overall conditions in places of immigration detention while we transition to alternatives."

But such calls come with risks that releasing migrants into the interior could encourage a new wave to travel to the border, amid ongoing concerns about containing the spread of the coronavirus. Last month, an illegal immigrant from India tested positive for the virus at the border.

Morgan said that CBP would not have been able to cope if the numbers were the same as they were in May 2019.

“CBP does not have the facilities or necessary medical services to confront the pandemic at that level of in-custody numbers. We rely on state and local healthcare systems that would then be overwhelmed and counter to the domestic ‘flatten-the-curve’ approach that we have been advised to take,” he said. “The administration’s travel restriction policies are working and have served to protect the migrants themselves, CBP agents and officers, and the American public.”

[TX] Two Criminal Alien Sex Offenders Busted After Crossing Border into Texas (Breitbart)

Breitbart [5/15/2020 10:36 AM, Bob Price, 1711K]

Rio Grande Valley Sector Border Patrol agents arrested two previously deported criminal aliens after they illegally re-entered the United States on Wednesday. The arrests came in separate incidents.

McAllen Border Patrol Station agents working the line near Hidalgo, Texas, encountered a Mexican national who illegally crossed the border. After an initial screening, the agents transported him to the McAllen Station for processing and a biometric background investigation, according to information obtained from Rio Grande Valley Sector Customs and Border Protection officials.

During a criminal records check, agents identified the mas as Santiago Alvarez Gonzalez, a Mexican national illegally present in the United States. His criminal history includes a “Sex offense — Against child — Fondling,” and marijuana and cocaine possession, officials stated. The arrest for the sex offense against a child occurred in McAllen, Texas — the same area where agents arrested him for illegal re-entry.

That same day, McAllen Station Border Patrol agents arrested another Mexican national

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

who illegally crossed the border near Penitas, Texas. The agents transported him to the station for processing and a biometric background investigation.

The investigation uncovered an extensive criminal history in California. His criminal history includes sexual battery (misdemeanor), burglary, and narcotics possession with intent to distribute, officials reported. A California judge sentenced the Mexican criminal alien to only 68 days in jail for the felony burglary charge in conjunction with the sexual battery.

Border Patrol agents processed both criminal aliens for immigration violations. They could be charged with illegal re-entry after removal as a sex offender. If convicted on the charges, each man could face up to 20 years in federal prison.

“Even with the spread of the COVID-19 virus, human smugglers continue to try these brazen attempts with zero regard for the lives they endanger nor to the health of the citizens of our great nation,” Rio Grande Valley Sector Border Patrol officials said in a written statement. “The U.S. Border Patrol agents of the Rio Grande Valley Sector will continue to safeguard the nation and community against these criminal elements.”

[Canada] Freeland won’t say if U.S. wants border agreement extended beyond June 21 (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/15/2020 2:08 PM, Staff, 257K]
Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland says Canada’s mutual border agreement with the United States is working well, but she won’t say if Canada’s largest trading partner is pushing to extend the deal beyond June 21.

Media reports suggest the U.S. wants to impose an indefinite timeline on existing border restrictions, but it’s not clear if that pertains to the ban on non-essential travel or is specifically aimed at curtailing immigration.

Freeland refuses to discuss the details of ongoing talks with the U.S., beyond saying they are cordial and constructive.

She does note, however, that both sides have been satisfied so far with the existing agreement, which permits trade, commerce and essential workers to continue to cross over and is likely to be extended into next month.

Freeland also says any decisions regarding the Canadian side of the border will be made by Canadians.

She says both Canada and the U.S. feel "very comfortable" with the fact that essential travel has been allowed to continue.

Transportation Security Administration

TSA May Soon Start Screening Airline Passengers for Fever (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/15/2020 8:44 PM, Alan Levin, 6400K]
The U.S. Transportation Security Administration is close to starting a pilot program to check airline passengers for fever as a new layer of protection against the coronavirus.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TSA Administrator David Pekoske supports the idea and the agency is awaiting approval from the White House, one person familiar with the discussions said. The person asked not to be named in discussing sensitive matters.

Not only would checking for sick passengers provide a potential health benefit, but it comes as a dramatic drop in passenger traffic has lowered the workload for the nearly 50,000 TSA screeners and devastated the airline industry.

“At this time, no decision has been made regarding specific health screening measures at airports,” the TSA said in a statement. The agency has seen 564 of its employees test positive for Covid-19, including six who died, according to its website.

The agency is continuing to consult with the Health and Human Services Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well and airport and industry officials, the agency said.

The White House did not immediately comment.

Earlier: U.S. Airport Screeners Now Must Wear Masks, Public May Be Next

Checking for feverish passengers would be the latest step to lower risk of infections and to reassure people that it’s safe to travel.

The number of people willing to fly has plunged as states ordered people to stay at home. In mid-April, passenger levels reached a low of about 4% compared to the same period in 2019. Since then, the levels gradually climbed, but are still less than 10% of a year earlier.

As a result, airlines are losing money even with a $50 billion federal aid package.

Large carriers in the U.S. in recent weeks have phased in requirements that passengers cover their faces, though several have informed employees that they shouldn’t demand compliance. Flight attendants are also required to wear masks.

But social media has been filled with complaints about packed flights and inconsistent protective measures. Airline unions have also said that disinfection of aircraft and other actions aren’t always consistent with CDC guidelines.

Airlines for America, a trade group representing large carriers, has been pushing TSA to screen temperatures for at least two weeks. The group endorsed such a move on May 9 in a press release. It declined to comment on Friday.

A powerful lawmaker Friday night said he opposes such an action. Representative Bennie Thompson, the Mississippi Democrat who is chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, said he couldn’t find a legal justification for TSA to check people’s health.

“The health and safety of our transportation security officers have already been put at great risk the past few months,” Thompson said in a press release. “The administration should not put these front-line workers in further danger in order to provide passengers a potential false sense of safety.”

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Wall Street Journal earlier reported that the administration is preparing to check passengers' temperatures.

TSA to begin checking passengers' temperatures at several airports: report (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 8:12 PM, Tal Axelrod, 3408K]
The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) will begin checking passengers' temperatures at around a dozen airports in the coming days as concerns grow over air travel during the coronavirus pandemic.

People familiar with the matter told The Wall Street Journal that the details of the plan are still being fleshed out, and it is as of yet unclear which airports will adopt the new scanning procedures. A government official told The Journal that the rollout of the proposal will cost under $20 million.

Airlines have been pushing for the government to adopt greater safety measures to reassure passengers who have grown jittery about flying. Demand for air travel has plummeted over 90 percent amid transportation restrictions.

Sources familiar with the matter told The Journal there have been concerns over the TSA's taking responsibility for the screening, with some saying the measures do not fall within its security mandate.

The TSA told The Hill it does not have any additional information "at this time."

The scanners are expected to be a mix of tripods that can scan a number of people at one time as well as handheld devices. Those with a temperature of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher will be flagged.

An administration official told The Journal that a pilot program for temperature checks was run at Washington Dulles International Airport outside of Washington, D.C. in April.

However, airport and airline officials have expressed concern over what to do with passengers who are flagged. An administration official told The Journal that they will be turned over to officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

TSA working on plan to check temperatures at some American airports (CNN)
CNN [5/15/2020 9:26 PM, Nick Valencia and Veronica Stracqualursi, 12317K]
The Transportation Security Administration is working to put in place a plan to check temperatures of passengers as they go through security at multiple American airports, a federal health official confirmed to CNN on Friday.

The Wall Street Journal first reported on the plan and said the TSA would take the temperatures at about a dozen unidentified airports. According to the newspaper, the program could begin as soon as next week.

The federal health official emphasized to CNN the plan was not yet final.

The TSA would not confirm it was planning on enacting such a program.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"At this time, no decision has been made regarding specific health screening measures at airports," the agency said in a statement Friday.

The agency went on to say it continues to rely on the health expertise of the Department of Health and Human Services and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Ongoing discussions with our (Department of Homeland Security) and interagency colleagues, as well as our airport and airline partners, will enable the agency to make informed decisions with regard to the health and safety of the aviation environment. The safety and security of the traveling public and our employees will always be our top priority," the agency said.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said he was not supportive of temperature checking.

"I cannot find any law that gives TSA the authority to perform temperature checks as reported. The health and safety of our Transportation Security Officers have already been put at great risk the past few months. The Administration should not put these frontline workers in further danger in order to provide passengers a potential false sense of safety," the Mississippi Democrat said.

This comes as US airline executives and an industry trade group, Airlines for America, have pushed for the TSA to conduct temperature checks as part of regular airport screening.

Frontier Airlines announced earlier this month that it plans to begin temperature screening all passengers and crew next month. Starting June 1, any individual with a temperature exceeding 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit "will be denied boarding," the airline said.

However, there's been debate over the usefulness of airport temperature checks.

In mid-February, CNN reported that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had screened more than 30,000 passengers on flights from China, but not a single US coronavirus case had been caught by the airport temperature checks.

TSA has already taken the precautionary measure of requiring its employees to wear facial protection while at screening checkpoints.

The agency reported on April 29 that 500 of its employees, majority of whom include officers who screen passengers, have tested positive for the coronavirus. As of Friday, six TSA employees had died due to Covid-19.

The airline industry has been hit especially hard during the coronavirus crisis due to stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions. The number of people traveling by plane has dramatically dropped by about 96% amid the pandemic.

[NV] Las Vegas airport offering PPE in vending machines (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 5:30 PM, Kaelan Deese, 3408K]
McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas announced Thursday that it would begin selling personal protective equipment (PPE) in vending machines.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

According to a tweet from the airport, the vending machines will allow travelers to purchase essential PPE, such as gloves and masks, sanitizer and alcohol wipes.

McCarran Airport spokeswoman Christine Crews told CNN, "The whole world is going through behavioral modification and learning new habits, so it's not unthinkable that someone could show up at the airport and not have the new necessities that are part of travel."

So far, the airport offers three vending machines, two near Terminal 1 ticketing areas and one near Terminal 3 TSA checkpoints, according to McCarran's tweet.

The vending machines are reportedly owned and operated by California-based company Prepango, which specializes in automated retail services.

Prices for goods in the machine range as low as $3.50 for tissues up to $14.50 for a reusable cloth mask. The machine also sells disposable KN95 masks for $8.25 each, the airport tweeted.

"I do believe we are the first in the nation to have these vending machines," Crews said, according to CNN.

[NV] Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport 'first' to add PPE vending machines (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 11:30 AM, Janine Puhak, 12006K]
There's nothing worse than realizing you forgot to bring something to the airport – but travelers passing through Las Vegas' busiest air hub need not fret about personal protective equipment (PPE.)

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, McCarran International Airport has installed a few vending machines to sell face masks, gloves, wipes and hand sanitizer. The Sin City air hub claims it was the "first" airport to debut such PPE vending machines, which can be found in T1 ticketing and near the T3 TSA checkpoint.

McCarran currently houses three of the unique vending machines, which were installed on Wednesday, USA Today reports.

Regarding sample prices, a spokesperson for the airport confirmed that three-packs of disposable masks are currently retailing for $7.50, while a reusable cloth mask will cost $14.50.

Though the Federal Aviation Administration has not yet mandated that passengers traveling by commercial air wear facial coverings amid the ongoing outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has urged members of the public to wear a "cloth face covering" in community settings, "including during travel if they must travel."

Both on the ground and in the air, air travel personnel have been recently ordered to wear face masks. Transportation Security Administration security screeners and flight attendants employed by all major American airlines must wear protective face coverings when interacting with the public as the COVID-19 crisis continues.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Though TSA officers and flight attendants are currently wearing face masks, the FAA has not mandated that commercial air travel passengers do the same.

Crew members employed by three of the largest airlines in the U.S. may be encouraging – but not forcing – passengers to wear face masks during various points of the travel journey amid the coronavirus pandemic, despite previous policies that seemed to indicate otherwise, a new report claims.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Trump administration winds down 'Project Airbridge' effort to import medical supplies (CNN)
CNN [5/15/2020 1:25 PM, Priscilla Alvarez, 12317K]
The Trump administration is winding down its effort to expedite critical medical supplies from overseas, known as "Project Airbidge," in the coming weeks, US Navy Rear Admiral John Polowczyk told reporters Friday.

President Donald Trump repeatedly heralded the initiative, calling it an "amazing success." But over time, the effort became a point of contention between the Trump administration and states desperate for supplies because of limited visibility into how many supplies came in and where they were ultimately going. Its success, therefore, has been difficult to measure.

"We are looking at a process to ramp down the Airbridge as we go through May into June. We believe we've gotten the volume that we've needed to effectively, what I call, prime the pump to get more supplies here to beat the ocean-going method," Polowczyk said, adding that there may be items needed in the future that they'll consider flying in on an individual basis.

The volume of supplies, cited by Polowczyk, includes all the ways personal protective equipment has been procured by the federal government and the private sector, combined, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

In late March, FEMA worked with six major medical distributors to shore up supplies in the US by helping the companies bring in equipment abroad at a faster pace on chartered flights, which average between $750,000 to $800,000 a flight, and then directing a portion of those supplies.

But while the supplies are flown in by FEMA, the allocation of supplies is split between the administration's designated hotspots and the distributors' customers, some of whom might also be in those critical areas.

FEMA has not provided details on allocation or prioritized hotspots, though, in recent weeks, states began receiving breakdowns of where supplies were delivered.

"Every week, we provide a report to every state, to the governor, of how much the distributors have provided to their state, down to the county level," Polowczyk said Friday. "They have great visibility on what this network is providing to their states."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

But not all states agree the program has been a success.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat, has been vocal in his criticism of the program.

"What they are taking credit for, the White House, is that the distributors have customers in Illinois that they are sending goods to because those customers ordered those items of PPE, so that's a far cry from delivering to the states so that we can distribute," Pritzker said.

Lawmakers have also sought details on the program, which has largely been shrouded in secrecy.

As of May 13, the administration has conducted 139 flights to bring in millions of supplies, including respirators, gloves, surgical gowns, and face shields, according to FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor.

While Project Airbridge is not the only federal endeavor to bolster supplies -- the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services are also assisting -- the initiative is one of many tests of private and government partnership at a critical time, but that type of partnership was not the original idea.

The framework was originally conceived in late March by an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and member of the Covid-19 Policy Alliance amid growing concerns over supply shortages.

The proposal, put together by Valerie Karplus and first reported by the Washington Post, outlined how employing US passenger and freight aircraft to bring in supplies would shorten the time it takes for them to arrive.

"Within four weeks, with doubled aircraft capacity relative to pre-virus levels and additional production ramp up in China, we could meet 50% of projected U.S. demand for masks and suits," the memo reads.

Karlpus sent the memo, titled "Proposal: A Medical Supply Airlift to Protect the U.S. from COVID-19," to airlines, lawmakers, and the administration.

"I spoke by phone with Admiral Polowczyk and we talked in detail through the elements of the plan and he sounded really receptive," she said. Five days later, Karplus learned the plan was being put in motion, but the allocation of product would be done by distributors, instead of the federal government working closely with states.

As Airbridge winds down, administration officials recognized a need to bolster domestic manufacturing of medical equipment. Similarly, states have doubled down on efforts to make more supplies in the United States in an attempt to become less dependent on the international market.

Post-9/11 public safety network tapped for COVID-19 response (Roll Call)
Roll Call [5/15/2020 6:00 AM, Gopal Ratnam, 72K]
The nationwide public safety wireless network that Congress created in 2012 because of failures seen during and after the 9/11 attacks is helping connect first-responders and public safety experts across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The law created an independent authority called FirstNet, provided $7 billion for it, and allocated 20 megahertz of bandwidth within the 700 MHz spectrum to create a nationwide interoperable broadband network. The network has been used since then to connect first-responders during natural disasters including wildfires, hurricanes and tornadoes.

Although the law gave states the freedom to choose FirstNet or build their own emergency communications network, all 50 states, territories and the District of Columbia chose to use FirstNet.

The network, operated by AT&T, connects nearly all urban and rural populations across the country and has been assisting the Federal Emergency Management Agency in connecting field hospitals, quarantine locations and testing centers, said Jason Porter, senior vice president of the FirstNet program at AT&T.

“We are the signal corps for public safety,” Porter said, referring to the military’s communications engineers who set up communications networks ahead of wartime operations. The company has been involved in planning for quarantine sites by providing either a cellphone tower on wheels or a blimp to “make sure they have the connectivity,” he said.

FEMA did not respond to a question seeking comment.

Before the Navy hospital ship Mercy arrived at the Port of Los Angeles to help deal with COVID-19 cases, FirstNet helped set up a land-to-ship circuit by deploying a cellphone tower on wheels, Porter said.

FirstNet also has teamed up with Centene, a health care provider, to provide high-speed broadband access to primary care physicians in rural areas to expand telehealth services. The pilot project is being rolled out in Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas and Mississippi, Porter said.

The goal is to provide care for elderly patients and others with preexisting conditions who cannot leave their homes without risking exposure to the pandemic, he said.

Lessons of 9/11 created FirstNet

FirstNet rose from the failures of the communications network in the aftermath of 9/11 when police, fire and other emergency personnel from all over the country couldn’t communicate with each other because each state, county and city sometimes had its own hardware, software and protocols. Commercial cellphone networks were overwhelmed and emergency personnel sometimes had to use physical couriers to deliver messages to each other.

First responders who sign up for service through FirstNet get a special chip or SIM card for their mobile phones and devices that routes their calls and messages through the dedicated network, Porter said.

“Our network recognizes that SIM and prioritizes them on our network,” he said. Although working from home, gaming and other uses have increased demand on commercial networks during the coronavirus shutdown, the public safety network was “operating without

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

congestion," he said.

Verizon, one of the largest providers of wireless and internet service, also has been deploying its mobile assets to boost coverage during the pandemic.

While the company has activated its disaster response teams regionally during previous crisis such as hurricanes or floods, this is the first time Verizon has activated its teams across the country, said Andres Irlando, senior vice president at Verizon and president of the company's public sector group.

The company is engaged in about 400 different locations ranging from military bases to emergency testing centers and quarantine sites, Irlando said.

The company also is helping to fill in the gaps caused by the pandemic — one of which is schools and colleges holding their commencement ceremonies online.

At the Army's training center at Fort Jackson, S.C., for example, which is home to the basic training program for enlisted soldiers and holds a graduation almost every week, Verizon has set up a mobile unit to help "transform their graduation from a physical to a virtual event," Irlando said.

Subtropical storm Arthur is likely to form on Saturday, but Florida, Louisiana already drenched (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 1:45 PM, Matthew Cappucci, 18460K]
Three separate weather systems are conspiring to produce a subtropical storm this weekend off the Southeast coast, jump-starting hurricane season and probably earning the name "Arthur" in the coming days. And while the storm will stay offshore and drift out to sea, the ingredients coming together to produce it are already causing significant impacts for many.

Torrential rains and flash flooding affected South Florida on Thursday and Friday beneath the disturbance that's likely to soon become Arthur. Meanwhile, parts of Texas and Louisiana received upward of eight inches of rain from an upper-level weather system that's racing east to meet its counterpart in the Sunshine State.

It all comes more than two weeks before the official start of hurricane season, which commences on June 1 and lasts through November. But preseason tropical cyclones are becoming increasingly common, and some atmospheric scientists believe this may be linked to warming ocean waters related to human-caused global warming.

Ingredient one: Florida downpours

All eyes were on a cluster of downpours over South Florida early Friday, where a reservoir of moisture lingers along a decaying front. Heavy rains and gusty squalls dropped nearly half a foot of rain on Lower Matecumbe Key on Thursday. More than five inches fell farther southwest on Marathon Key at the airport, its fifth-wettest day on record in the past 20 years.

More intermittent showers and downpours were moving across the island on Friday, with the National Weather Service warning that "visibility of 1 mile in blinding downpours [is]

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

expected.'

Those same heavy rains were targeting the Miami area on Friday, where between 3 and 5 inches had fallen in just three hours' time. A flash flood warning was issued for parts of the city.

The weather system affecting Florida is a key part of the weather disturbance that the National Hurricane Center estimates has an 80 percent chance of development, and "will likely become a tropical or subtropical storm on Saturday." An Air Force Reserve Hurricane Hunter Aircraft is scheduled to investigate the system on Saturday.

Ingredient two: Upper-level disturbance over Gulf Coast

Nearly 700 miles to the northwest, a second, more subtle component to the imminent subtropical or tropical storm was producing heavy rain and flash flooding over East Texas and parts of Louisiana.

Up to 8.5 inches of rain fell in Orange County, Tex., with 5.5 inches in Vermilion Parish, La., and 7.66 inches in Tangipahoa Parish. Nearby Saint Tammany Parish measured 6.12 inches.

The National Weather Service in New Orleans issued a flash flood warning, emphasizing a "considerable threat" of heavy rain. "

"Between 8 and 12 inches of rain have fallen," read the bulletin, with "additional rainfall amounts of 1 to 3 inches [possible.]"

That second batch of excessive rainfall stems from a weak lobe of upper-level support passing overhead that will eventually enhance rising motion over Florida, and contribute to the growth of the developing storm.

Ingredient 3: Upper low slips south

Ingredient three was over the Pacific Northwest on Friday morning, appearing as a rather harmless high-altitude wave of low pressure and cold air that will intensify dramatically as it moves over the Northern Plains on Saturday.

As it strengthens, it will take a turn somewhere over the East or Southeast, where it will get stuck for several days next week while bringing cool, unsettled conditions.

This area of low pressure in the upper atmosphere will help intensify the downstream surface disturbance east of South Florida. That increases the odds of a subtropical storm forming and moving to the northeast.

It will also probably affect the steering of any subtropical system, scooting it out to sea.

Subtropical system will probably head out to sea

The subtropical storm, which would have characteristics of a tropical storm and a traditional mid-latitude storm, is anticipated to head northeast, away from the Florida coast. However,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

it could bring choppy waves and dangerous rip currents from Florida to the Carolinas between Sunday and late Tuesday. Any showers or gusty winds from the storm would probably only reach as far west as the Outer Banks on Sunday night or Monday.

Many systems that form this early in the year are subtropical, since their internal structure and formative processes aren't fully tropical in origin. If conditions are right, though, they can transition into purely tropical storms over time.

[NV] 6.4 magnitude earthquake hits western Nevada; shaking reportedly felt in California (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [5/15/2020 9: 15 AM, Staff, 2343K]
A 6.5 magnitude earthquake struck a remote area of western Nevada close to the California border on Friday morning, producing shaking that was felt in Southern California.

The U.S. Geological Service reported the the temblor hit at 4:03 a.m. about 35 miles west of Tonopah, halfway between Reno and Las Vegas, and just east of the Sierra Nevada range. The quake was upgraded after being initially reported at 6.4-magnitude.

The main highway between Las Vegas and Reno was damaged and closed early Friday. Nevada Highway Patrol photos showed cracks on U.S. 95.

No injuries were reported and crews were working to reopen the highway.

The initial quake struck about 4.7 miles deep, the USGS said, and dozens of aftershocks were recorded in the next three hours, including two with estimated magnitudes of 4.9.

The quake occurred in a remote area of the state and people from Salt Lake City, Utah, to California's Central Valley tweeted that they felt it.

"It really shook a lot of groceries off the shelves," Keith Hasty, an employee at a gas station in Tonopah, told the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Hasty said residents who frequented the store were all talking about the quake.

"We have a lot of locals coming in saying their TVs were shaking, they felt it," said Hasty. "No damage that I've heard of. My boss just called and said his garage shook."

[NV] Strong Quake Hits Rural Nevada, Shuts Las Vegas-Reno Highway (Nevada Public Radio)
Nevada Public Radio [5/15/2020 3:52 PM, Doug Puppel, 10K]
A strong earthquake struck near Tonopah early Friday, causing no injuries but forcing the highway between Las Vegas and Reno to close for several hours.

The magnitude 6.5 earthquake — the strongest in decades for the state — hit just after 4 a.m. and was followed by two strong aftershocks, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

People from Salt Lake City to California's Central Valley tweeted that they felt it, according to the Associated Press.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

“It shook, but it wasn’t that much,” Nye County sheriff’s Capt. David Boruchowitz said in Pahrump. He told the AP there was no damage at the Mizpah Hotel and Clown Motel, two landmark businesses in Tonopah, a historic mining town about halfway between Las Vegas and Reno.

The quake did buckle the asphalt on U.S. Highway 95 in places west of Tonopah, forcing its closure until repairs were completed early Friday afternoon, according to the Nevada Department of Transportation.

Friday’s earthquake was apparently the strongest in the state since December 1954, when 7.1 and 6.8 magnitude earthquakes struck remote Fairview Peak and Dixie Valley just minutes apart.

[NV] Largest area Nevada earthquake in 65 years cracks main highway between Las Vegas and Reno (Chicago Tribune)
Chicago Tribune [5/15/2020 4:26 PM, Staff, 1426K]
The cracked main highway between Las Vegas and Reno reopened Friday, 10 hours after a predawn magnitude 6.5 earthquake that a researcher called the largest to strike the remote area of western Nevada in 65 years.

No injuries were reported, but officials said goods tumbled from market shelves, sidewalks heaved and storefront windows cracked shortly after 4 a.m. People from Salt Lake City to California’s Central Valley tweeted that they felt the quake.

Nevada Highway Patrol photos showed cracks on U.S. 95 before crews repaired them about 35 miles (56 kilometers) west of Tonopah. A detour to State Route 360 had added more than 20 miles (32 kilometers) to motorists’ trips.

The vast open range east of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada is seismically active, said Graham Kent, director of the Nevada Seismological Lab at the University of Nevada, Reno. He ranked Friday’s event with twin December 1954 earthquakes at Fairview Peak and Dixie Valley. Kent said those temblors were magnitudes 7.1 and 6.8, respectively.

The U.S. Geological Survey reported Friday’s temblor struck just east of the Sierra Nevada. It was initially reported at 6.4-magnitude.

It was centered about 4.7 miles (7.6 kilometers) deep, the agency said, and dozens of aftershocks were recorded. Kent said a 5.1 magnitude aftershock struck about 30 minutes after the initial quake.

State troopers and sheriff’s patrols from Esmeralda and surrounding Mineral and Nye counties checked highways for possible damage. A sheriff’s dispatcher in the historic mining boom town of Goldfield said the 112-year-old Esmeralda County Courthouse escaped damage.

Nye County sheriff’s Capt. David Boruchowitz reported no damage at the Mizpah Hotel and Clown Motel, two landmark businesses in Tonopah, a mining hub about halfway between Las Vegas and Reno.

Keith Hasty, a Tonopah gas station employee, told the Las Vegas Review-Journal that

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

groceries were shaken off shelves and that residents said their televisions shook.

Nye County spokesman Arnold Knightly reported broken storefront glass, stress cracks on asphalt streets, loose hanging signs, items knocked off shelves and minor lifting of sidewalks.

“Overall, everything appears to be sound at this point," Knightly said. ““However, we have learned that other than obvious earthquake damage some damage is discovered later."

Last July, a 56-year-old backyard mechanic was found dead in Pahrump four days after strong quakes struck near Ridgecrest, California, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) away. Investigators said it appeared a Jeep he was repairing wobbled off its support jacks.

State seismic network manager Ken Smith noted that Friday’s earthquake happened a few miles east of the site of a magnitude 6.2 temblor in July 1986 in California’s Chalfant Valley.

Larger earthquakes in the region in the last century included a 6.5-magnitude temblor in 1934 and a magnitude 6.8 quake in 1932, the state seismology lab said.

A 6-magnitude earthquake in February 2008 damaged hundreds of structures in the northeast Nevada town of Wells, including its historic El Rancho Hotel and Casino. Officials recently announced plans to restore the hotel.

[NV] 6.5 magnitude earthquake strikes near California-Nevada border (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [5/15/2020 6:31 PM, Michael Cabanatuan, 496K]
A 6.5 magnitude earthquake early Friday in the western Nevada desert sent vibrations that startled people as far away as the Bay Area, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The earthquake struck at about 4:03 a.m. in a remote area about 40 miles west of Tonopah, officials said. It originated at a depth of 1.7 miles as the result of a “strike slip faulting in the shallow crust of the North America plate,” USGS officials said.

No serious injuries were reported, and the biggest damage seems to have occurred on a Nevada highway.

Kate Scharer, a USGS research geologist in Pasadena, said the quake took place on an unknown and relatively uncommon fault running east to west in the Candelaria Hills. Most fault lines in the area run north-south.

Earthquakes are fairly common in that part of Nevada, Scharer said, and even a 6.5 quake was not unexpected. A quake occurred on an east-west fault nearby in 1934, and the area north of Friday’s epicenter was seismically active from 1915 to 1954. Much of the early earthquake research took place in this region.

“This is what we expect for this part of the world,” Scharer said.

The USGS received more than 16,000 “Did You Feel It?” reports from people who felt the original quake Friday, including dozens of Bay Area residents. The shaking could be felt in Sonoma County and even as far north as Eureka (Humboldt County) on the Northern

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

California coast.

More than three dozen aftershocks of lesser intensity have occurred since the main temblor. The largest was a 5.1 magnitude aftershock recorded 23 minutes after the main event, officials said.

As many as 700 aftershocks of lower intensity are possible over the next week, according to the USGS. There is a 4% chance of a quake stronger than 6.5 magnitude.

Measurements of the shaking indicated that major damage was unlikely, according to the USGS. However, Highway 95, the main route between Reno and Las Vegas, was closed because of large cracks in the pavement, officials said.

Tonopah residents were shaken up by the earthquake.

“It really shook a lot of groceries off the shelves,” Keith Hasty, an employee at a gas station in Tonopah, told the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Hasty said many residents who frequent the store were talking about the quake.

“We have a lot of locals coming in saying their TVs were shaking, they felt it,” Hasty said. “No damage that I’ve heard of. My boss just called and said his garage shook.”

The USGS is working with the Nevada Seismological Laboratory at the University of Nevada, Reno, on a report about the quake.

Secret Service

Secret Service interviewed Infowars’ Alex Jones over claim of plot to kill Trump (Washington Times)
Washington Times [5/15/2020 7:43 AM, Andrew Blake, 496K, Neutral, Secondary]
The U.S. Secret Service confirmed Friday that the agency interviewed right-wing media personality Alex Jones after he claimed to know about plots to assassinate President Trump.

Secret Service records obtained by The Washington Times revealed that Mr. Jones, a talk show host who also runs the website Infowars, was questioned by the agency in late 2017.

The records, provided in response to a request made under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), are redacted in parts and do not reveal what was discussed during the interview.

But in addition to confirming the conversation occurred, the records show that Mr. Jones has landed several times on Secret Service’s radar and that the agency is well aware of his history of spreading right-wing conspiracy theories through his talk show and Infowars site.

The Times filed the FOIA request after the Secret Service declined to comment when asked about a claim Mr. Jones made during an episode of his talk show aired on Dec. 6, 2017.

“I had the Secret Service call me yesterday, and it wasn’t a secret meeting, but they want to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

come here and — it's total twilight zone — and want me to brief them on all the data we've collated on whose setting up a plan to kill the president," Mr. Jones said at the time.

Indeed, the newly released Secret Service records show that Mr. Jones was interviewed by phone by an agent working out of the department's office in Austin, Texas, on Dec. 5, 2017. The entirety of a summary of the conversation that the interviewer provided afterward was redacted in the records released by the agency to protect personal and private information, however.

Nonetheless, the records show that a query of government databases — namely the Secret Service's Protective Threat Management System (PTMS), Criminal Investigative Division's Field Investigative Reporting System (FIRS) and Targeted Violence Information Sharing System (TAVISS) — found that the agency's Protective Intelligence Division has a record for Mr. Jones, and that he has come to the Secret Service's attention "multiple times due to conspiracy theory articles posted on his website and comments made during his broadcasts."

The records released by the Secret Service proceed to describe Mr. Jones as one of the first individuals to discuss the conspiracy surrounding former President Barack Obama's birth certificate, citing a movie he released in early 2009, "The Obama Deception."

"He has a history of referring to major terrorist attacks as hoaxes, including the attacks on 9/11 which he believed were orchestrated by globalists to further the U.S. Government's goal of enslaving the world," the records continue. "Jones also claimed the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting was staged with child actors and alleged there were no fatalities. Jones made similar statements regarding the Boston Marathon bombings, the movie theater shooting in Aurora, the Columbine school school and the San Bernardino shooting."

The Secret Service's records also note that Mr. Jones interviewed President Trump during his White House campaign in December 2015.

"Your reputation is amazing. I will not let you down," Mr. Trump said at the time.

Elsewhere records mention that, later during the 2016 presidential race, Mr. Jones offered to pay individuals thousands of dollars to appear on television proclaiming that former President Bill Clinton — the husband of Mr. Trump's rival in the election, former Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton — is a rapist.

"As a result, several individuals appeared at various campaign sites for candidate Hillary Clinton and attempted to appear on television as part of Jones' campaign," the Secret Service records say.

The records also connect Mr. Jones to the boosting the bogus "Pizzagate" conspiracy that erupted in late 2016 as well as several claims made the following year about Mr. Trump.

"Between March 2017 and December 2017, Jones made references to several assassination plots targeting President Trump, including a theory that the 'deep state' was planning to assassinate President Trump, a poisoning plot referencing the President's drinks, and a globalist plot evidenced through a plea agreement of former National Security

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Adviser Michael Flynn," the Secret Service's records state.

The records proceed to mention again that Mr. Jones was interviewed by the agency in December 2017, but the rest of that section is redacted as well.

Mr. Jones, 46, did not immediately return a message requesting comment.

Secret Service interviewed Alex Jones after he claimed to have details on plots to assassinate Trump (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 1:27 PM, Mike Brest, Neutral, Secondary]
The Secret Service interviewed InfoWars founder Alex Jones in 2017 after the media personality claimed to have knowledge of plots to assassinate President Trump.

Jones's conversation with the Secret Service, which is redacted in files given to the Washington Times after a Freedom of Information Act request published on Friday, was one part of the Secret Service's file on the conspiracy theorist.

The outlet filed its FOIA request back in December 2017, after Jones claimed he had a meeting with the agency dedicated to protecting the nation's leaders and their families regarding threats against President Trump.

"I had the Secret Service call me yesterday, and it wasn't a secret meeting, but they want to come here and — it's total twilight zone — and want me to brief them on all the data we've collated on whose setting up a plan to kill the president," he said at that time. A spokesperson for the Secret Service declined to comment at the time, noting that they "do not comment on protective intelligence matters."

The records also show that a search of government databases revealed that Jones has been on the Secret Service's radar "multiple times due to conspiracy theory articles posted on his website and comments made during his broadcasts."

The file on Jones included references to pushing the "birther" movement, which questioned Barack Obama's U.S. citizenship during his presidency, the "Pizzagate" conspiracy regarding Hillary Clinton, and the InfoWars founder's conspiracy theories about mass shootings.

"Between March 2017 and December 2017, Jones made references to several assassination plots targeting President Trump, including a theory that the 'deep state' was planning to assassinate President Trump, a poisoning plot referencing the President's drinks, and a globalist plot evidenced through a plea agreement of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn," the Secret Service's records said.

[ME] Ogunquit police say they busted a counterfeit printing operation in a hotel (WABI TV)
WABI TV [5/15/2020 7:31 AM, Staff, Positive, Secondary] Video: HERE
Ogunquit police are asking you to check your wallet after they arrested three people from New Hampshire for counterfeiting.

Police say William Sylvia and Kendra LeBlanc of Somersworth, NH and Nicole Ashline of

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Manchester, NH passed counterfeit bills at businesses in the Ogunquit area.

After securing a search warrant for two rooms at the Ogunquit Hotel, police say they found several suspected stolen items, weapons, drugs and evidence of a counterfeit money printing operation, with a printer, scanner and several cans of spray paint also found.

Police also say they found $1,500 in cut fake bills and $500 in uncut fake bills.

"In my time in law-enforcement I probably had dozens of counterfeit bills; sometimes you are able to track them back to the people who passed them, most of the time you're not, said Joseph Labier, of the Ogunquit Police Department. "This is the first time in my career we've uncovered the actual printing operation."

The three suspects were arrested Monday. Investigators found the trio passed bills with common denominations, $1, $5, $10, $20, $50, $100.

The investigation is ongoing and now involves the Secret Service.

If you believe you may have recently received a counterfeit bill, you are asked to call Ogunquit Police at 207-646-9362.

[NJ] Secret Service signs $179,000 contract to rent golf carts in Bedminster, N.J., this summer (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 1:35 PM, David A. Fahrenthold, 18460K, Neutral, Primary]
The Secret Service this week signed a $179,000 contract to rent golf carts and other vehicles this summer in Bedminster, N.J., according to federal spending records — a rental that in past years was made in advance of President Trump's visits to his golf club there.

The golf carts are being rented from a private vendor, New York-based Associates Golf Car Service, which has supplied similar equipment to the Secret Service in Bedminster every year of Trump's presidency.

The rental deal was signed Monday, went into effect Tuesday and lasts until Oct. 31, according to records posted online in a public database of federal spending.

The contract does not say whether Trump plans to visit the Bedminster club soon. The Secret Service also protects his family, and Trump's daughter Ivanka and her family have already visited the club this year, despite stay-at-home orders in Washington and New Jersey, as the New York Times reported.

The Secret Service and the golf-cart company both declined to comment. The White House, the Trump Organization and the general manager of the Bedminster club did not immediately respond to requests for comments.

Trump has visited his properties 250 times as president, including 22 visits to Bedminster, according to a tally by The Washington Post. But he has not been to any of them since March 8 — the longest absence of his term — as the coronavirus pandemic has shut down travel and consumed his presidency.

If Trump returned to the Bedminster club today, he would find it largely shut down because

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

of coronavirus measures imposed by New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D). The club had to close entirely for 46 days, then reopened only its golf courses on May 2 after Murphy allowed outdoor activities to resume.

Even after the golf courses reopened, the club warned its members against socializing.

“Under no circumstances will any type of congregating or gathering be allowed in parking lots or on the golf course,” the club cautioned members in an email, according to a copy obtained by The Post.

When he visits, Trump stays in a detached cottage on the club’s grounds, and Murphy’s order does not seem to prohibit him from visiting there. A spokesman for the governor declined to comment.

In the past, Trump has frequently left the cottage to visit the main clubhouse, socializing with members in the restaurant and dropping in on weddings in the ballroom. Those buildings are now closed.

In previous years the Secret Service has rented space from Trump’s company, paying $17,000 per month for a four-room cottage at the Bedminster club near Trump’s own.

Those payments are among more than $970,000 that the U.S. government has paid to Trump’s company since he took office, often to rent space for the aides and Secret Service agents that accompany the president.

It was unclear whether those rental payments to Trump’s company will continue this year. They are not listed in public databases, as the golf-cart rentals are.

The contract between the Secret Service and Associates Golf Car was spotted by American Bridge 21st Century, a super PAC that supports Democrats. Earlier this year, the same group identified a similar Secret Service contract, to rent golf carts to be used in the town that is home to Trump’s Northern Virginia golf club.

Trump has not visited that club in Sterling since the contract was signed in late March.

In Bedminster, this year’s contract between the Secret Service and Associates Golf Car is more than in past years. The Secret Service paid the company $118,000 in 2018 and $95,000 in 2019, according to federal records posted online.

Records in the federal spending database do not indicate why this year’s charge is higher.

[NJ] Secret Service to pay $179,000 to rent golf carts in New Jersey this summer (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 4:27 PM, Brooke Seipel, 3408K, Neutral, Secondary]
A $179,000 contract was signed by the Secret Service this week for golf carts and other vehicle rentals in the coming months in Bedminster, N.J., the site of one of President Trump’s golf clubs.

The contract, first reported by The Washington Post, went into effect on Tuesday of this week and is set to last through October 2020. Similar contracts have been struck ahead of

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Trump's visits to the golf club in the past, though this year's contract is larger.

According to the Post, the Secret Service's equivalent 2018 contract totaled $118,000 and dropped to $95,000 in 2019. All of the contracts were struck with the company Associates Golf Car Service, which is based in New York.

The new contract suggests Trump, who has been spending the vast majority of his time at the White House amid the coronavirus pandemic, or a member of his family may be visiting the golf club in the near future.

The Secret Service protects the president and vice president as well as their families, but the contract does not make clear for whom the golf carts will be used.

The Hill has reached out to the Secret Service and Trump Organization for comment.

New Jersey, a state hit hard by the pandemic, has just begun lifting some restrictions, and golf courses were allowed to reopen on May 2 with social distancing.

According to the Post, the Trump golf club in Bedminster has reopened its golf courses but is warning against socializing. It had closed its club for 46 days during the pandemic.

The Trump administration has paid more than $970,000 to the Trump Organization over the last four years, the Post reports, and Trump has visited his properties more than 250 times.

Trump's last visit to one of his properties was in early March.

[NJ] Feds: Secret Service Busts NJ Man With 5,126 Fake Credit Cards, DLs (Daily Voice)
Daily Voice [5/15/2020 11:31 AM, Jerry DeMarco, Positive, Secondary]
Secret Service agents seized 4,920 counterfeit credit cards, 206 counterfeit driver's licenses from 24 different states and a bank of forgery equipment while arresting a man who they said ran a massive ID-theft operation from his Teaneck home.

A federal judge released Michael Fulcher, 35, of Teaneck on $100,000 unsecured bond during a teleconferenced U.S. District Court appearance.

Teaneck police found the stash in March after Fulcher called to report a burglary in progress, authorities said.

Responding officers saw "several counterfeit driver's licenses with Fulcher's photograph as well as a book bag [that] was filled with fraudulent credit cards, fraudulent identification cards, U.S. currency, and parts of a firearm that two suspects took from Fulcher's residence," a complaint on file in U.S. District Court in Newark says.

Detectives obtained a search warrant, found more evidence and notified federal authorities.

U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito said Fulcher had:

4,920 counterfeit credit cards;

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

206 counterfeit driver's licenses from 24 different states containing victims' personal identifiable information;

unknown suspect photographs:

several state holograms for driver's licenses;

devices used to read the data that is encoded on the magnetic strip of a credit card;

devices used to re-encode data onto the magnetic strip of a credit card:

printers designed to print plastic cards.

He also had several laptops, hard drives, memory devices, and other electronic devices that were seized, the U.S. attorney said.

The hard drives of the devices held templates to create credit cards, currency, and identification documents, including driver's licenses, and spreadsheets containing thousands of unique credit card account numbers, he added.

Federal agents charged Fulcher with one count each of possession of 15 or more counterfeit access devices, possession of access device-making equipment and aggravated identity theft.

Carpenito credited special agents of the U.S. Secret Service with the investigation leading to the arrest and charges. He also thanked the Department of Homeland Security Homeland Security Investigations in Newark, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and Teaneck police for their assistance.

Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Kendall Randolph of his Organized Crime and Gangs Unit in Newark, the U.S. attorney said.

[TN] Staggering woman tries to use phony $100 bill (Advocate and Democrat)
Advocate and Democrat [5/15/2020 3:43 PM, Michael Thomason, Positive, Secondary]
An Athens woman was arrested May 10 after she allegedly tried to pass a counterfeit bill in Tellico Plains.

Tellico Police Officer Robert Moses said he went to the Hardee's parking lot on New Highway 68 on a call of a woman acting suspicious in the parking lot.

Moses said when he arrived he found a woman staggering around and when he talked to her, she had slow and slurred speech. When he asked if she had used an illegal substance, she said she'd use Heroin earlier in the day.

When Moses asked the woman, later identified as Savannah Jo Stanley, to empty her pockets, she shook her shirt and a $100 bill fell out. She then said the bill was fake and she'd tried to use it at the Tellico Pride convenience store next door.

Moses said he went into the store and asked the cashier about the bill. The cashier said Stanley had come in earlier, grabbed some items and tried to pay with the bill. When told it

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

was fake, Stanley grabbed the bill and ran out.

Stanley, 22, Congress Parkway, Athens, was charged with public intoxication and criminal simulation.

[AR] Benton police searching for person who tried to use counterfeit money (KATV)
KATV [5/15/2020 11:00 AM, Staff, Neutral, Secondary]
The Benton Police Department is asking for the public's help in finding a person who tried to use counterfeit money.

On April 27, the person tried to pass a fake $100 bill at the Goodwill in Benton, according to police. When the employee told the subject the bill was counterfeit, the person fled the area leaving behind the fake money.

If you know who the person is, call Benton police at 501-776-5947.

[IA] Police looking for woman accused of using counterfeit money in East Moline (WOC 1420)
WOC 1420 [5/15/2020 12:00 PM, Julia Bertino, Neutral, Secondary]
Law enforcement are searching for a woman they say was involved in a theft and the use of counterfeit money.

Crime Stoppers of the Quad Cities say the woman used the fake money at the 7-Eleven in East Moline. According to police, she passed a fake $50 bill on April 19th. While the clerk was checking the bill with a counterfeit detection pen, police say the woman grabbed the $20 Chime Card she was trying to purchase and ran out of the store.

Anyone with information is urged to call Crime Stoppers at 309-762-9500 or submit a Web Tip.

[CA] McCloud woman arrested for passing counterfeit bills at Dunsmuir Dollar General (Mount Shasta Herald)
Mount Shasta Herald [5/15/2020 10:32 AM, Staff, Positive, Secondary]
A McCloud woman was arrested on suspicion of passing counterfeit $100 bills at the Dollar General Store in Dunsmuir Saturday morning and was later found to be in possession of meth.

The Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office received a report from the store just before 10:30 a.m. on May 9 that a woman, later identified as Jamey L. Gregoire, age 32, had fled the store after being confronted by an employee about the legitimacy of two bills, according to a SCSO press release.

The suspect left the store in a Honda sedan with Oregon license plates, SCSO said. Sergeant Adam Crisci responded and requested dispatch broadcast the vehicle description to area law enforcement agencies.

Mount Shasta Police Department officer Dylan Quick located Gregoire's vehicle in Mount Shasta, initiated a traffic stop and detained Gregoire, the SCSO reported.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Gregoire was found to have a suspended or revoked driving privilege, according to the release. Crisci responded and placed Gregoire under arrest.

SCSO Deputy Josh Abel and California Highway Patrol Officer Rodney Richards also responded to assist with the investigation.

A search of Gregoire's vehicle revealed a "large amount" of suspected counterfeit currency totaling more than $2,000, the SCSO said.

In addition, a small amount of methamphetamine and a damaged smoking pipe were found in the car, SCSO said. "Legal currency was found in the vehicle and it is suspected it constituted change for a previous Dollar General purchase made on May 8. A handgun was also found in the vehicle," according to the release.

Gregoire was booked in the Siskiyou County Jail in Yreka for possession of counterfeit money, shoplifting, driving when privilege suspended or revoked, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia, the SCSO said. As of May 14, Gregoire was not listed as an inmate at the Siskiyou County Jail.

"This was a good case involving an observant store employee alerting law enforcement about a suspected use of counterfeit money," said Siskiyou County Sheriff Jon Lopey. "This was also a good example of three agencies ... working together."

Lopey added that merchants should be suspicious of currency that doesn't look right and to contact law enforcement if in doubt of a bill's legitimacy.

"Although we often can rely on our fellow citizens in a great county like Siskiyou to be honest, counterfeit money is passed often enough in our county, mostly victimizing small businesses, that we should always be alert for such unscrupulous transactions," said Lopey.

Those who have information about this case are asked to call the SCSO's dispatch center at (530) 841-2900.

CISA/Cybersecurity

Federal watchdog finds chemical facilities vulnerable to cyberattacks (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 5:27 PM, Maggie Miller, 3408K]
Chemical facilities are vulnerable to crippling cyberattacks due to outdated government cybersecurity guidance, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded in a report released this week.

The report released Thursday found that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which oversees the security of "high-risk" chemical facilities through the Chemical Facilities Anti-Terrorism Standards program, hasn't updated cybersecurity guidance for those facilities in more than a decade.

"A successful cyberattack against chemical facilities' information and process control systems can disrupt or shut down operations and lead to serious consequences, such as health and safety risks, including substantial loss of life," the GAO wrote.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The agency found that DHS does not collect data to track or assess the cybersecurity knowledge of inspectors in the program who evaluate the facilities, jeopardizing overall security.

The GAO said that the “inspectors that are evaluating a facility’s cybersecurity posture may not have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to fully support the program’s cybersecurity-related mission."

The watchdog agency said DHS should consider revising its cybersecurity guidance for chemical facilities, along with developing a plan to track and assess cybersecurity training for the inspectors.

DHS concurred with all six recommendations laid out in the GAO report.

“Cybersecurity is an integral part of DHS’s national approach to chemical security,” DHS official Jim Crumpacker wrote in response to GAO. “The Department remains committed to ensuring that high-risk chemical facilities are implementing appropriate physical and cyber security measures.”

The security vulnerabilities are complicated by the fact that the Chemical Facilities Anti-Terrorism Standards program is in danger of expiring in July. The House Homeland Security Committee approved a bill to renew it last year, but the legislation has not come to the floor for a vote.

Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.) pointed to the GAO report as evidence that Congress needed to “act quickly” to renew the program.

“GAO makes clear that cybersecurity vulnerabilities at chemical facilities could jeopardize the safety and security of surrounding communities — an unacceptable risk,” Thompson said in a statement on Friday. “Congress needs to act quickly to reauthorize [the program] and empower DHS officials to make long-term improvements to the program that will promote strong cybersecurity in the chemical sector.”

The GAO highlighted the risks involved in a successful cyberattack on a chemical facility.

DHS sent out an alert to companies operating critical systems in February warning that they were targets for hackers. The alert was put out after a successful cyberattack on a “natural gas compression facility” that forced the group to temporarily shut down operations.

The Cybersecurity 202: Commission that pushed a cybersecurity overhaul hopes coronavirus boosts the effort (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 7:42 AM, Joseph Marks, 18460K]
The lawmakers behind an ominous report about America’s lack of preparedness for a major cyberattack are hoping the coronavirus pandemic will boost their calls to overhaul the nation’s digital defenses.

The Cyberspace Solarium Commission on March 11 released its 182-page report calling for a far more muscular stance against U.S. digital adversaries such as Russia and China and new cybersecurity executives with broad powers to cut through red tape at the White House

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

and State Department.

But the commission's bold recommendations were largely lost in the shuffle two days later when President Trump declared the coronavirus a national emergency and official Washington rushed to deal with the pandemic. A planned media tour by the commission's congressional co-chairs, Sen. Angus King (I-Maine) and Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.), was also put on ice.

But now that lawmakers are returning to Washington, King and Gallagher hope the pandemic is hammering home the report's main message: The U.S. needs to prepare for a major cyberattack before it hits, not scramble after the fact.

"I think covid has taken public attention away [from cybersecurity], but for policymakers it's underlined the importance of having a comprehensive strategy in place and really strengthened the case for the actions we recommended," King told me. "We're in the middle of a crisis that has shaken people to say we can't go back to business as usual."

Other commission members include Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.), FBI Director Christopher A. Wray, former Department of Homeland Security cybersecurity chief Suzanne Spaulding and Tom Fanning, CEO of the Southern Company gas and electric utility.

Commissioners' pitch before the pandemic was that they wanted to make changes on the scale of the 9/11 Commission — but before a 9/11-level cybersecurity tragedy struck.

That argument has taken on added gravity now when Washington is hotly debating what the government was and wasn't prepared for before the pandemic and what it should do differently next time.

One Solarium Commission recommendation that was deemed controversial before the pandemic, for example, was to create a Senate-confirmed national cyber director in the White House controlling a large budget and dozens of staff members. Now, Republican and Democratic leaders on the Senate Homeland Security and Armed Services Committees are expressing interest in that role and may help shepherd it into law, King said.

"You look back on the 9/11 Commission and you realize how much good work was being done [before the attack] but it was all siloed at different agencies," Gallagher told me. "We want someone who's in charge and coordinating efforts across the government, forcing discussions across agencies about different scenarios and how we can prepare for an attack."

That's one of several proposals King and Gallagher are pushing to include in an annual defense policy bill now being crafted on the Hill.

The recommendation was one of several that won praise from Senate Homeland Security Committee members during a videoconference hearing about the report Wednesday.

They also praised a recommendation that the U.S. government should state more clearly the consequences adversaries will face if they hack vital U.S. infrastructure, such as airports and the electrical grid, and that those consequences should ratchet up in times of

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

crisis.

That would be particularly useful during the pandemic when the FBI and DHS are warning about Chinese government-linked hackers targeting U.S. research labs working on coronavirus vaccines.

Portions of the report also focus on making the United States less dependent on China for technology and other vital resources.

“I think if nothing else when the dust settles on coronavirus, it will harden the hawkish consensus on China and add energy to this effort to wean ourselves off our dependency on certain things produced in China,” Gallagher said.

More from King:

“There’s no one answer to improving America’s cyber defense – but by taking a number of steps in tandem, we can prepare our nation for the challenges ahead. In @HSGAC, I highlighted the @CyberSolarium recommendations on reorganization, resilience, and response.”

The commissioners are also preparing an addition to the report they hope to release by Memorial Day focused on lessons from the pandemic related to the report’s recommendations.

That new material will point out ways in which the pandemic has made the United States more vulnerable to a cyberattack. Most notably, with huge numbers of Americans teleworking now, a cyberattack that compromised electricity or Internet connectivity would be especially devastating.

“If the electric grid or our internet infrastructure was compromised, it would substantially increase the negative impact of what we’re going through,” King said. “The confluence of the virus and a potential cyberattack is truly frightening.”

Microsoft warns on COVID-19 cyber-scams (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 5:00 AM, Brooke Crothers, 12006K]
Microsoft is warning about new phishing scams that use COVID-19 as a lure to steal personal information.

The phishing campaigns attempt to deliver malware called Lokibot, “one of the first malware families to use COVID-19 lures,” Microsoft Security Intelligence said in a tweet this week.

Phishing, a widely-used tactic by scammers, uses an email that appears to be from a reputable source and attempts to trick recipients into handing over sensitive personal information like usernames, passwords, and credit card information.

The campaign cited by Microsoft shows how cybercriminals are adapting their strategies to exploit trending COVID-19 news, wrote Lawrence Abrams, who runs the cybersecurity news website BleepingComputer.

The emails, pretending to be from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), arrive with

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

subject lines such as "BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN ANNOUNCEMENT STARTING MAY 2020," according to Microsoft.

When a computer is infected, Lokibot will steal saved login credentials and then send that data back to the attackers' servers where it can be later retrieved, according to Abrams.

Microsoft said this is a variation on a theme of recent Lokibot campaigns and "signals their return to tried and tested lures … only slightly updated with COVID-19 reference," Microsoft said in a tweet.

Cybersecurity site Malwarebytes lists Lokibot as "a large family of spyware that primarily targets banking information."

F-Secure, a cybersecurity company, lists it under "data stealing" and says the "malware is notably known for stealing credentials from browsers, mail clients, file sharing programs, remote connection programs … It also contains a keylogger component, which can be utilized by the malefactor."

Keyloggers are particularly dangerous as they record a computer user's keystrokes in order to steal passwords and other confidential information.

The software giant says it is catching these campaigns through behavior-based machine learning detections.

"Microsoft was able to detect the attack with the help of Microsoft Threat Protection's machine learning algorithms, with all customers running Microsoft Defender being automatically protected," Bleeping Computer's Abrams wrote.

Microsoft Defender is an anti-virus program that comes with Windows 10.

Cybercriminals "pay close attention to current events and stories that are most concerning to a large amount of people. They then create lures that focus on these stories in order to trick people into opening what they perceive as important information for themselves or their businesses," Abrams told Fox News in an email.

"Lokibot is commodity malware used by a number of criminal organizations," Tanmay Ganacharya, director for security research of Microsoft Threat Protection, told Fox News.

"This is a continuation of the trend we've been seeing that attackers are capitalizing on our fears around COVID-19." he said, adding that Microsoft has been catching this and other "evolutions" of the malware via its Machine Learning.

Zoom planning to hire hundreds of software engineers in U.S. amid growing hostility with China (Washington Times)
Washington Times [5/15/2020 7:15 AM, Ryan Lovelace, 496K]
The Zoom video conferencing company is making plans to hire hundreds of new workers in the U.S. as the company looks to offset the security risks associated with the company's ties to China.

Zoom is based in California but has engineers working in China, which has contributed to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

security concerns expressed by U.S. officials. Now, the company wants to add as many as 500 software engineers for research and development operations to be located in Arizona and Pennsylvania. The company is looking to staff up near Arizona State University in the Phoenix area and near Carnegie Mellon University in the Pittsburgh area.

“Both Phoenix and Pittsburgh have incredibly well-educated, skilled, and diverse talent pools that are well-positioned to help support Zoom’s ongoing growth and continued success,” Eric S. Yuan, Zoom CEO, said in a statement. “We plan to hire up to 500 software engineers between these two cities in the next few years, drawing largely on the recent graduates of many universities.”

On Friday, President Trump took new action to block semiconductor shipments to China’s Huawei, by changing a Commerce Department export rule. The move is expected to put stress on the United States’ relationship with China and could cause internet and technology companies to also rethink how they do business.

The growing animosity between the U.S. and China has led to Republican senators’ new proposal this week to allow Mr. Trump the ability to sanction China because of its unwillingness to cooperate with investigations into the origins and spread of coronavirus.

Zoom was rejected by the Department of Defense for its official business last month because of safety concerns, which involve the company’s operations in China.

As videoconferencing and teleconferencing software has become a necessity amid the coronavirus pandemic, Zoom has become the premier platform for many industries and institutions in the public and private sectors. The company has grown rapidly in recent months to include hundreds of millions of users and a market capitalization nearing $49 billion on Friday.

Zoom has plenty of competitors, including Facebook which recently launched its Messenger Rooms feature to seize on the social video chat growth that has propelled Zoom during the coronavirus outbreak.

Coronavirus crisis: Online church services attacked by hackers using child pornography (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 4:16 PM, Hollie McKay, 12006K]
On Sunday, April 26, Pastor Kris Cervantes of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Waco, Texas, was partway through her Zoom church service when the unthinkable happened.

The screen featuring the main speaker was suddenly overtaken with a GIF of child pornography, an act that has been dubbed "zoombombing."

"It was so confusing for a split second, it just didn’t make sense to the brain – it was so out of the realm of normalcy," Cervantes told Fox News. "My first reaction was just to cover the screen, and I thought if I did that, none of my fellow congregants would see it either."

But the ensuing action was swift. The images, she said, lasted around 12 seconds onscreen before the shocked administrators were able to quickly pull them down.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"Afterwards, we all had to really take a deep breath. It was such a violation of that child, and there is this feeling that we were attacked physically," Cervantes explained of the aftermath, which continues to haunt the congregation, of which 20 families were exposed to the onslaught. "The image was so distressing and shocking; it has been hard to function."

The pastor explained that the user who "bombed" them with the illegal pornography went by the name "Kristina" and although they were not familiar with that person as they were admitting churchgoers into the Zoom session, their policy – like the open doors of their House of Worship – is to welcome all.

"While the larger churches are used to online services, for the smaller and midsized, it has been new," Cervantes continued. "We still want to be able to be a church with a door open to all."

However, the assault has brought about some changes. In the ensuing days, church officials have sought extra cybersecurity assistance, and learned how to improve their own privacy settings. Furthermore, the matter was immediately turned over to the authorities and remains under investigation by the Waco Police Department.

"This incident is truly devastating and appalling, and our user policies explicitly prohibit any obscene, indecent, illegal or violent activity or content on the platform. We are looking into this specific incident to ensure the appropriate action is taken," a Zoom spokesperson told Fox News. "Zoom strongly condemns such behavior and recently updated several features to help our users more easily protect their meetings."

As the protracted pandemic has prompted churches across the country to conduct their services online for the last two months, this fellowship is not the first congregation to have been infiltrated by such an online assailment.

"We aren't even the first Church in Waco I have heard of this happening to," Cervantes said.

Similarly, Billings First Congregational Church in Montana contacted the FBI in March after its video worship was overtaken by "someone who then broadcast a criminal act against a child," the Billings Gazette reported. Churchgoers in Oakland, Calif., have also alleged to have been victim to such incomprehensible hijackings, as have those in the United Kingdom.

Moreover, one of the oldest churches in San Francisco, Saint Paulus Lutheran Church, filed a lawsuit on Wednesday against Zoom, alleging that on May 6 a hacker overran a virtual Bible study class and played "sick and disturbing" videos of child abuse, disabling the computers' control systems while the graphic footage was displayed.

The church leadership claims in its suit that it reached out to the tech giant for assistance, but they failed to act and that the violator was a "known offender" who had already been reported to law enforcement on multiple occasions.

In a statement to the BBC, a Zoom spokesperson lamented the "horrific event" and insisted that after learning of the incident, they immediately "identified the offender, took action to block their access to the platform, and reported them to the relevant authorities."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

However, churchgoers – mostly pensioners – are said to be scarred by what happened, and have also sought external trauma counseling.

"Zoom's inadequate security allowed a known offender to Zoombomb Saint Paulus's weekly bible-study class with video footage of pornography and child abuse. This violation of the church's sanctity was a direct result of Zoom prioritizing profit over user security," a lawyer for the church, Albert Chang, told Fox News. "Saint Paulus looks forward to proving its case in court on behalf of all victims of Zoom's deceptive business practices and holding Zoom accountable for its misconduct."

The deeply disturbing – and rising – number of incidences come as much of the country has been compelled into lockdown and to interact more and more on Zoom. The platform has surged in popularity as a pivotal communication tool – but has also fallen under sharper scrutiny over its security.

The company says it has subsequently undertaken several steps to patch weaknesses in its defenses, and last week it announced the acquisition of Keybase, a company specializing in end-to-end encryption, to help in further securing its video chat.

The Zoom spokesperson also told Fox News that the company has enabled a host of changes, including making meeting passwords and virtual waiting rooms default for users enrolled in its K-12 program school program, as well as its Free Basic and Single Pro users, and for all users have made the Zoom Meeting ID less visible to help prevent unintended sharing, and it has added a new security icon to the meeting controls for hosts to quickly access in-meeting security features, including the ability to remove participants and lock meetings, among other actions.

"In the latest version of Zoom, there is a new 'report a user' feature in the Security icon for meeting hosts and co-hosts to flag users, who are misusing the platform, to our trust and safety team," the spokesperson continued. "We encourage users to report any incidents of this kind either to Zoom so we can take appropriate action or directly to law enforcement authorities."

Chris Hadnagy, the founder of Innocent Lives Foundation, which offers free cybersecurity training sessions for educators and nonprofits, pointed out that it is crucial to understand that Zoom and other video-conferencing technologies are reasonably secure for the average user.

"These attacks often happen not because of insecurities in the product, but rather because of 'user error,' like sharing the meeting link publicly," he explained. "Churches, universities, and schools are easy targets mostly because they have a large and public audience, and therefore they often post the connection details and links in public formats."

However, Hadnagy stressed that churches could also be a tempting target for ideological reasons.

"There is also a 'shock value' with attacking a church meeting, and forcing the meeting participants to view graphic pornography or abuse imagery, and that is what many of these attackers are looking for," he noted. "Some are doing it for the thrill while others are more

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

devious in their thinking and just want to create chaos and pain."

Edward Peters, founder and CEO of Data Discovery Sciences, concurred that not only can meetings be password protected but controls can be set to disallow anyone to join who has not been authenticated by the meeting host.

"Zoom allows a range of options here to make sure only those who are invited are allowed to enter the session, but this requires the host to perform some duties they may not be used to doing, especially if they are casual users," he explained.

And Topher Tebow, cyber security analyst at Acronis, cautioned that Zoom is hardly the only web platform being exploited by such alarming and illegal hacks.

"While Zoom is the platform that became known for the concept of Zoombombing, any video conferencing platform can be a target of this type of attack," he added. "Zoom is an attractive platform to attackers, due to its large user base; however, Zoom is definitely not the only widely used video collaboration platform out there. Any similar platform must take steps to protect its users from this type of attack."

Hackers double ransom demand to $42M from Lady Gaga, Madonna's attorney, threaten Donald Trump (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 8:44 AM, Emily Smith, 12006K]
The ransom demand for the secret files of a cyber-attacked lawyer to A-list stars has doubled to $42 million — as the hackers are now threatening to reveal "dirty laundry" on President Donald Trump in just a week if they are not paid in full.

Attorney Allen Grubman — the most prominent entertainment attorney in the world, whose firm represents stars including Lady Gaga, Madonna, Mariah Carey, U2, Bruce Springsteen, Priyanka Chopra and Bette Midler — was being shaken down by hackers who attacked his New York law firm for $21 million until today.

Hacking group REvil got into his firm's server and stole 756 gigabytes of confidential documents, including contracts and personal e-mails from a host of Hollywood and music stars. They also deleted or encrypted the firm's backups. The only way it can be decrypted is to pay the criminals for a key.

Grubman, we're told, is refusing to negotiate. A source said, "His view is, if he paid, the hackers might release the documents anyway. Plus the FBI has stated this hack is considered an act of international terrorism, and we don't negotiate with terrorists."

On Thursday, the hackers upped the ante by posting a chilling new message saying, "The ransom is now [doubled to] $42,000,000 … The next person we'll be publishing is Donald Trump. There's an election going on, and we found a ton of dirty laundry on time."

They added, "Mr Trump, if you want to stay president, poke a sharp stick at the guys, otherwise you may forget this ambition forever. And to you voters, we can let you know that after such a publication, you certainly don't want to see him as president … The deadline is one week.

"Grubman, we will destroy your company down to the ground if we don't see the money."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

It is not clear why the hackers connected Trump to Grubman. The president has never been a Grubman client, according to sources, either as a private businessman or during his administration.

On Thursday, the hackers claimed to have hacked another prominent US firm and also posted a file of stolen documents titled “Lady Gaga” on their site on the dark web.

The contents of the documents in the file were not immediately clear, but cybersecurity software company Emsisoft, which specializes in ransomware, spotted it.

An analyst at Emsisoft, Brett Callow, said, “Companies in this situation have no good options available … Even if they pay the ransom demand, there is no guarantee the criminals will destroy the stolen data if it has a high market value. The data may still be sold or traded … In these cases, it’s possible that the criminals will attempt to extort money directly from the people whose information was exposed.”

He added that the requested ransom from the hacker group — which has previously attacked Kenneth Cole and Travelex — “was one of the largest demands ever heard,” with the previous known record demand being $25 million to an unnamed company, which was not paid.

Grubman’s law firm, Grubman, Shire, Meiselas and Sacks, said in a statement to Page Six, “Our elections, our government and our personal information are under escalating attacks by foreign cybercriminals. Law firms are not immune from this malicious activity.

“Despite our substantial investment in state-of-the-art technology security, foreign cyberterrorists have hacked into our network and are demanding $42 million as ransom. We are working directly with federal law enforcement and continue to work around the clock with the world’s leading experts to address this situation.

“The leaking of our clients’ documents is a despicable and illegal attack by these foreign cyberterrorists who make their living attempting to extort high-profile U.S. companies, government entities, entertainers, politicians, and others. Previously, the United States Department of Defense, HBO, Goldman Sachs, as well as numerous state and local governments, have been victims of similar cybercriminal attacks.

“We have been informed by the experts and the FBI that negotiating with or paying ransom to terrorists is a violation of federal criminal law. Even when enormous ransoms have been paid, the criminals often leak the documents anyway.

“We are grateful to our clients for their overwhelming support and for recognizing that nobody is safe from cyberterrorism today. We continue to represent our clients with the utmost professionalism worthy of their elite stature, exercising the quality, integrity and excellence that have made us the number-one entertainment and media law firm in the world.”

Law Firm Hackers Claim to Have Dirt on Donald Trump, Up Data Ransom to $42M (San Francisco Chronicle)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

San Francisco Gate [5/15/2020 5:20 PM, Todd Spangler, provided by, 1891K]
The cyber-extortionists who stole a trove of private data from entertainment law firm Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks now have a new target in their sights: President Donald Trump.

In a blog post Thursday on the dark web viewed by Variety, the hacker collective that is holding thousands of the law firm's documents hostage — allegedly including private info on Lady Gaga, Madonna, Nicki Minaj, Bruce Springsteen, Mary J. Blige, Ella Mai, Christina Aguilera, and Mariah Carey — said they were increasing their demands for payment to $42 million. That's double their initial $21 million ask. The group is threatening to publicly release more data if they're not paid within a week.

The law firm, through a rep, said it is not negotiating with the hackers. The FBI is actively conducting a criminal investigation into the data breach and ransomware demands.

On Thursday, the hackers behind the attack shared 2.4 gigabytes of documents relating to Lady Gaga, including contracts and nondisclosure agreements.

Trump will be the next subject of a data dump, the unidentified ransomware attackers claimed. "The next person we'll be publishing is Donald Trump," the blog post said. "There's an election race going on, and we found a ton of dirty laundry on time." The hackers added, "And to you voters, we can let you know that after such a publication, you certainly don't want to see him as president. Well, let's leave out the details. The deadline is one week."

Variety has reached out to the White House for comment.

It isn't clear what info the hackers might have on Trump or how it pertains to Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks, which has never represented Donald Trump or the Trump Organization in any legal matter. The attackers might simply be bluffing; alternatively, they may have obtained material on Trump from some other source.

In a statement provided to Variety through a rep, Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks said, "Our elections, our government and our personal information are under escalating attacks by foreign cybercriminals. Law firms are not immune from this malicious activity. Despite our substantial investment in state-of-the-art technology security, foreign cyberterrorists have hacked into our network and are demanding $42 million as ransom. We are working directly with federal law enforcement and continue to work around the clock with the world's leading experts to address this situation."

The statement continued, "The leaking of our clients' documents is a despicable and illegal attack by these foreign cyberterrorists who make their living attempting to extort high-profile U.S. companies, government entities, entertainers, politicians, and others." According to the firm, other organizations and companies including HBO, Goldman Sachs and the Department of Defense have been victims of similar cyberattacks.

So far, according to the hackers' post, they have received payment of $365,000 in connection with the documents stolen from the New York-based law firm. The group complained that they didn't get the sum they first demanded, "So, the ransom is now $42,000,000. They have that's [sic] the kind of money. And even more."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

However, a rep for the law firm said it was categorically false that any payments have been made to the cybercriminals.

“We have been informed by the experts and the FBI that negotiating with or paying ransom to terrorists is a violation of federal criminal law,” Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks said in the statement. “Even when enormous ransoms have been paid, the criminals often leak the documents anyway.”

Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks this week confirmed its computer systems were hacked, an incident that allegedly resulted in the theft of 756 gigabytes of private documents and correspondence. “We are grateful to our clients for their overwhelming support and for recognizing that nobody is safe from cyberterrorism today,” the firm said in its statement.

News of the hack surfaced last week. The attack on the law firm — whose client list spans music artists, actors and TV personalities, sports stars, and media and entertainment companies — was carried out by a group called “REvil,” also known as “Sodinokibi,” according to New Zealand-based cybersecurity firm Emsisoft.

The REvil group has previously staged ransomware attacks on entities including Travelex, the U.K.-based currency-exchange company, which paid $2.3 million in bitcoin to hackers, the Wall Street Journal reported.

According to Emsisoft, a previous data dump by REvil included a letter from Donald Trump, stolen in an attack on management consulting company Brooks International — but that correspondence, dated Feb. 8, 2018, was simply an invitation sent to the firm’s CEO, Luigi Damasceno, to a fundraiser at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago compound.

National Security News

Intelligence Chief Reduces Size of Counterterrorism Office (New York Times)
New York Times [5/15/2020 7:03 PM, Julian E. Barnesand and Eric Schmitt, 40577K]
The acting intelligence chief announced a reorganization of the National Counterterrorism Center on Friday, part of an effort to reduce the size of the office overseeing the nation’s spy agencies.

Richard Grenell, the acting director of national intelligence, has been racing against the clock to make changes to his office before his appointment ends and he is replaced with a Senate-confirmed official.

The cuts to the counterterrorism center were far more moderate than some expected, according to current and former intelligence officials. Many of the reductions will be done by eliminating vacant positions; others will be done by attrition and by sending officers back to their home agencies. In all, the cuts will amount to about 15 percent of the center’s work force, an official said. The precise size of the agency is classified.

Officials said there will be no layoffs as a result of the cuts, and the end result will be more intelligence officers returning to work at their home agencies. The individual parts of the intelligence community — like the C.I.A., the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency — are best positioned to assign their people to emerging problems,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

intelligence officials said.

“We are facing a time in our nation’s history where the threat picture is far broader than terrorism, and the I.C. needs to shift resources to address a wide range of complex, sophisticated adversaries,” said Lora Shiao, the newly appointed acting director of the center, using an acronym for the intelligence community.

Congressional Democrats were upset that they were not consulted before the changes. Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said they would have to examine the details of the reorganization to “evaluate the wisdom of these cuts.”

The National Counterterrorism Center “plays a critical role in fighting terrorism and keeping Americans safe,” Mr. Warner said, adding that “we need to make sure that it continues to work as Congress intended, regardless of what the acting D.N.I. decides to do while he’s temporarily in the job.”

Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said that the center “was created in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, and preventing another catastrophic attack remains among our nation’s most solemn obligations.”

“Many recent former NCTC leaders expressed concerns about the potential for politicized changes” to it, he added, using an acronym for the center.

The creation of the counterterrorism center has been one of the success stories of the government’s overhauls after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, collecting and fusing information from across many government agencies. Ensuring that personnel cuts and the reorganization do not curb the center’s ability to detect and counter threats will be critical for the new leadership team, former officials said.

Although terrorism remains a real threat, it is less significant than it was a decade ago, officials said. Some of the resources allocated to the counterterrorism center would be better used to collect intelligence on China or other threats to the United States, former officials said.

“These moves are likely designed to reorient the center to future threats while also eliminating some redundancies in its mission,” said Javed Ali, a former senior counterterrorism center official who is now a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. “These resources could then be repurposed to focus other key priorities within O.D.N.I., like great power competition, cybersecurity or infectious diseases.”

Ms. Shiao, a career American intelligence officer whom Mr. Grenell appointed the counterterrorism center’s acting director last month, pushed against wider cuts. Ms. Shiao, who was the center’s third-ranking official, replaced Russell Travers, who was abruptly removed in March amid planned cutbacks by Mr. Grenell.

Ms. Shiao and Mr. Grenell devised a compromise plan, mostly focused on eliminating jobs that were already unfilled.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The announcement on Friday laid out a series of organizational changes in the counterterrorism center that will increase offices focused on border security, trim the center's human resources and support personnel as well as parts of its planning office.

Over the past month, Mr. Grenell has been reorganizing the national intelligence office.

He also announced on Friday that the counterintelligence and security center overseen by his office would take over election security briefings for political candidates.

William R. Evanina, the director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, will lead all intelligence-based election security briefings for the candidates this year. The change, said officials, was intended to make sure all campaigns get the same information.

Some Democrats had complained that F.B.I. security briefings have been inadequate, and privately expressed hope that Mr. Evanina's appointment would make the future sessions more robust.

Mr. Evanina will continue to work with the F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security to develop the intelligence assessments of "potential malicious influence," according to the national intelligence office.

The Friday announcement came after a series of other moves announced by Mr. Grenell in recent days. He has elevated the role of a three-star general assigned to the director's office to make that person a senior adviser to the director. He also created a senior cyberexecutive.

Mr. Grenell has come under intense criticism by Democrats and some former officials for politicizing the intelligence community. He has angered some former officials by ushering out Mr. Travers and Deirdre Walsh, who was the chief operating officer of the national intelligence office.

His decision to declassify documents related to the legal case around Michael T. Flynn have cheered conservatives but led to accusations that the decisions were made for the political benefit of President Trump. Mr. Flynn had pleaded guilty to lying to the F.B.I., but last week the Justice Department moved to drop the case against him.

But Mr. Grenell has been more judicious in who he has appointed to fill empty slots, tapping career officials with deep experience. His overhaul of his office has also avoided across-the-board cuts that some former officials feared were coming.

Mr. Grenell was made the acting director with a mandate to make changes. He has said he did not take the job with the intention of being a seat warmer, and immediately began examining existing plans to shrink the office, which was created after 9/11 to better coordinate intelligence.

But he has had a short timeline with which to make changes.

Mr. Trump has nominated Representative John Ratcliffe, Republican of Texas, to take over as the director of national intelligence. Although Mr. Ratcliffe's name was withdrawn from consideration after Mr. Trump first floated him last year, Senate Republicans now seem

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

largely united behind him. He is likely to be confirmed soon.

For the counterterrorism center, Mr. Trump tapped Christopher C. Miller, a former National Security Council aide now working at the Pentagon, as his permanent choice for the top counterterrorism job, but it could take several more weeks for the Senate to confirm him.

FISA overhaul could be an early test of House voting by proxy (Roll Call)
Roll Call [5/15/2020 3:23 PM, Niels Lesniewski, 72K]
The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee thinks House action on a Senate-passed surveillance overhaul bill could be the first test case for the remote voting protocols being considered by the House on Friday. The Senate passed the amended bill on Thursday.

House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold E. Nadler said Friday that he viewed the amended version of the bill that will be returning to the House as a step in the right direction.

“I regard the Senate amendment as an improvement to the bill, not huge but an improvement,” Nadler said at the Capitol. “I’m going to try to pass it again. If they had done it a couple of days earlier, we might have done it today.”

Members of the House were back in Washington on Friday for an unusual session to consider the latest coronavirus response legislation pushed by House Democrats, as well as a rules change that would allow lawmakers to record votes without being physically present in the House chamber.

Nadler said the House’s next action on legislation to revive three intelligence authorities and overhaul parts of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act could come during such a remote session.

“It may very well be that, you know, we’re changing the rules today so we can pass legislation by proxy voting,” Nadler said. “That may be the first bill.”

“I’m just speculating, but it may be, because there’s no reason we shouldn’t do it rapidly now. And we want to do it rapidly,” Nadler said.

The earlier House-passed version of the reauthorization was the product of negotiations involving congressional Democrats, Republicans and the Trump administration, led by Attorney General William Barr.

Still, President Donald Trump’s support of that earlier agreement was always in question. And now the new Senate version includes changes from Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah and Democratic Sen. Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont that has earned criticism from the Justice Department.

“As amended, however, H.R. 6172 would unacceptably degrade our ability to conduct surveillance of terrorists, spies and other national security threats,” Marc Raimondi, national security spokesman at the Justice Department, said in a Thursday statement.

House supporters of providing more stringent civil liberties protections will not be swayed by the Justice Department’s position. In fact, some of them want the House to do more in the next exchange.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"The Leahy-Lee amendment took us a step closer to properly protecting Americans' civil liberties, and it's clear we need to go farther," Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., said. "Specifically, most Americans know their web browsing history and search queries contain private, personal information, and yet the Senate failed to prohibit the Intelligence Community from taking your search history and web browsing history without a warrant. The Wyden-Daines amendment would have addressed that, and it's now the House's responsibility to curb this violation of Americans' rights."

Lofgren, a senior member of the House Judiciary panel, was referring to an amendment the Senate rejected on Wednesday by the narrowest of margins. Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., joined with Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden received 59 of the 60 votes needed for adoption.

"I know it's still within our grasp as lawmakers to push for the significant privacy reforms we need," Lofgren said.

The office of Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, one of the lawmakers who has been largely away from the Capitol during the coronavirus pandemic, said that she would have supported the Wyden-Daines amendment if she had been at the Capitol.

The amended bill ultimately sailed through the Senate 80-16 on Thursday, after 77 senators voted Wednesday to add the amendment from Leahy and Lee.

Republicans have been increasingly critical of the FISA court process given the now-public surveillance efforts against former Trump campaign foreign policy adviser Carter Page, as well as the issue of the unmasking of the identity of Michael Flynn, who was Trump's national security adviser.

"I support the FISA bill," Missouri Republican Rep. Ann Wagner said Friday. "However, what we're seeing now in terms of the unmasking of Americans is very concerning."

"This was designed after 9/11 to make sure that those foreign actors and terrorists that were trying to hurt us or do nefarious things, that we could track them and trace them," Wagner said. "It's not to spy on Americans. And, now there's a way to handle that … if you go to a court and you ask a judge through the proper U.S. court system for a wiretap or for surveillance or whatever, of Americans, but it's not through the FISA court."

There may be a bipartisan push to get the bill cleared through the House and on to the president's desk without any additional changes, however, since the Lee-Leahy amendment did broaden the mandate for appointment of amicus curiae to represent the interests of potential targets of individuals like journalists, religious entities and political figures during the secretive FISA court proceedings.

Until Congress comes to an agreement with the president on final legislation, the intelligence community authorities for new authorizations to go after lone wolf terrorists, as well as to use "roving wiretaps" not tied to a specific phone number and for collection of business records remain expired.

Justice Department signals opposition to Senate's surveillance bill (The Hill)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Hill [5/15/2020 10:21 AM, Jordain Carney, 3408K]
The Justice Department is raising a red flag over an intelligence reauthorization bill passed by the Senate, raising fresh questions about the fate of the legislation.

“We appreciate the Senate’s reauthorization of three expired national security authorities. As amended, however, [it] would unacceptably degrade our ability to conduct surveillance of terrorists, spies and other national security threats," a Justice Department spokesperson said in a statement.

The Senate voted 80-16 on Thursday to pass a bill that paired a reauthorization of three provisions of the USA Freedom Act, a 2015 intelligence reform bill, with some changes to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Court.

The bill initially passed the House in March as part of a deal negotiated by Attorney General William Barr and leadership in both parties. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) wanted to pass the House bill without changes.

But the Senate, during a two-day debate this week, made changes to the bill when they agreed to add an amendment from Sens. Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) that would increase the role of outside legal experts in FISA court hearings, including allowing them to weigh in on some FBI surveillance requests.

Opponents of the legislation warned that it would bog down the FISA process, while supporters countered that it would be manageable because it would only apply to a small subset of people.

The pushback from the Justice Department is only the latest sign that the intelligence bill could face hurdles to making it to the desk of President Trump, who has not said if he supports it.

Due to the Senate-made changes, the bill has to be passed by the House a second time.

A House Democratic leadership aide told The Hill that the Senate bill would not be taken up on Friday when the chamber will take up a rules change to allow voting by proxy and a mammoth coronavirus relief bill.

"Democratic leadership assessing next steps," the aide added.

And there are already calls from progressives to make broader changes to the bill before it passes the House.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is calling on the House to revive an amendment from Sens. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Steve Daines (R-Mont.) that would block law enforcement from being able to access web browsing data without a warrant.

Military faces another potential coronavirus toll: Budget cuts (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 12:44 PM, Missy Ryan, 18460K]
As the novel coronavirus has swept the globe, Pentagon officials have scrambled to adjust everything from basic training to submarine deployments to prevent the pandemic from taking a lasting toll on the military’s ability to respond to adversaries.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

But the covid-19 crisis could yield a different sort of long-term impact on the military, one outside the Pentagon's ability to control: a possible reduction in military spending resulting from the country's emerging economic meltdown.

Pentagon leaders are requesting a defense budget of $705 billion for fiscal 2021, representing half of the federal government's discretionary spending and probably once again ensuring that U.S. military spending is far greater than that of any other country.

But current and former officials say a sustained reduction, even if modest, could make it harder for the Pentagon to achieve its long-deferred goals of modernizing military operations and competing more effectively with China at a time when the United States remains tied down in insurgent conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Already, lawmakers have approved more than $2 trillion in emergency stimulus spending in measures that are designed to provide a lifeline to revenue-starved states and that have generated debt concerns among fiscal conservatives.

Robert Hale, who served as Pentagon comptroller during the Obama administration and is now an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, said widespread forecasting of a severe economic downturn — including high deficits and high unemployment — could result in a "modest decline" in defense spending in the order of 2 to 3 percent in real terms.

"That will still be very hard for the Pentagon to handle," Hale said, as it heads into what was already supposed to be a "bow wave" period of large outlays on next-generation bombers, tanker aircraft and other big-ticket items.

The Pentagon spending cuts are expected to be far smaller than those that followed the triggering of automatic budget caps in 2013, called sequestration. But even reductions of a smaller scale could disrupt the department's plans to implement a 2018 strategy that prioritizes retaining dominance over "great power" competitors.

Even before the pandemic, Pentagon leaders had warned of difficulties ahead as they projected a flattened budget following an increase of about 20 percent between fiscal years 2016 and 2020.

Making the case for the Pentagon's 2021 budget proposal in early March, Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper told lawmakers that the requested spending level required "many tough decisions to ensure our highest priorities were adequately funded."

Now, the situation looks far more dire. Speaking in a briefing hosted by the Brookings Institution last week, Esper said he was concerned that the stimulus spending would exacerbate the United States' debt problem and potentially "throw us off course" at the Defense Department.

"So there is concern there that that may lead to smaller defense budgets in the future at the critical time at which we need to continue making this adjustment, where we look at China, then Russia, as our long-term strategic competitors," he said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Reduced spending could represent what experts called a “double whammy” at a time when the military may also be facing a challenge to readiness resulting from the virus, which has delayed or precluded trainings worldwide and reduced the number of recruits.

According to Todd Harrison, director of defense budget analysis at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, fiscal patterns since the late 1970s show that periods of high deficits have been followed by cuts to defense budgets, from big reductions during President Ronald Reagan’s second term in office to the deep declines resulting from sequestration beginning in 2013.

“If we see 2 to 3 percent [cuts] a year over five years, then DOD is going to have to go back and take a new look at its strategy,” Harrison said. While China and Russia would remain top priorities, secondary missions in Africa or Latin America could face more significant cuts, he said.

Counting on a flattened budget, Esper in 2019 ordered a review to identify ways to streamline global military operations and make room for expanded emphasis on China. But potential trimming of U.S. activities in Africa have already raised objections on Capitol Hill, an indication that future attempts to cut missions or weapons programs are likely to encounter congressional resistance.

With less money, those trade-offs could become more dramatic. “They just have to be more ruthless,” Harrison said.

Mackenzie Eaglen, a former congressional adviser on defense matters who is now at the American Enterprise Institute, said there had already been some bipartisan support for constraining defense spending before the covid-19 crisis, potentially including from the president himself. Earlier this year in his State of the Union address, President Trump proclaimed that the military had been “completely rebuilt.”

While it’s not clear when lawmakers will make constraining high deficits a political imperative, Eaglen noted, “there are more than just debt pressures on the budget,” she said.

Sen. Jack Reed (R.I.), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he anticipates “acute pressure” on the defense budget, driven in part by sustained unemployment, increased savings and decreased consumption. “So you’ve got all these huge pressures that you’ll have on the budget, and that will translate to the defense budget,” he said in an interview.

That could be intensified by a possible shift among Americans’ priorities, who in recent decades have associated national security threats largely with terrorist threats overseas. Now, defense spending could become a renewed target.

“I think what you will see is much more of a focus by the American people on, you know, how will you protect me and my hometown,” Reed said. “Now, I think with the pressure on budgets, it’ll be more difficult probably to build as fast or as much as they wanted to do.”

Other lawmakers say defense cuts are not inevitable. “The world’s not going to be any safer after COVID,” Rep. Mac Thornberry (Tex.), the top Republican on the House Armed

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Services Committee, said in a call last week with reporters.

“I think it’s a mistake for DOD or anybody to just reflexively say, ‘Oh, my gosh, we’ve had to spend all this money on COVID, so I’m sure we’re going to get another 20 percent cut to our budget,’” he said. “That should not be the way they plan.”

Budget experts said that if lawmakers decide to trim military spending, the Pentagon could try, as it has done in the past, to allay the impact by slowing weapons procurement, potentially including decisions to purchase fewer of expensive items such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, or by attempting to accelerate plans to retire older jets or ships.

Hale said the economic situation could have financial silver linings for the military. For example, the military typically spends about $15 billion a year on fuel, but the global oil prices collapse could reduce those costs, he said.

Budget experts said the Pentagon is likely to stick with its pre-coronavirus projections for its fiscal 2022 budget proposal, which the department is now finalizing and which would be included in an overall administration request next year.

Pentagon confirms development of hypersonic weapons after Trump talks up ‘super duper missiles’ (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 7:26 PM, Alex Pappas, 12006K]
A Defense Department spokesman on Friday confirmed that the Pentagon is developing hypersonic weapons after President Trump, earlier in the day, claimed the existence of a “super duper missile.”

“The Department of Defense is working on developing a range of hypersonic missiles to counter our adversaries,” tweeted Jonathan Hoffman, the Defense Department press secretary.

During an Oval Office ceremony on Friday afternoon marking the newly unveiled official flag of the U.S. Space Force (USSF), Trump told reporters how the U.S. is building “incredible military equipment.”

“We have -- I call it the super duper missile,” the president said, “and I heard the other night 17 times faster than what they have right now, when you take the fastest missile we have right now.”

He added, “You’ve heard Russia has five times and China’s working on five or six times, we have one 17 times and it’s just gotten the go-ahead.”

It wasn’t immediately clear what the president was referring to, and White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany directed questions about the weapon to the Pentagon.

Trump on Friday was presented with the newly unveiled official flag of the USSF — the official flag of the first new U.S. military branch in 72 years.

“This is a very special moment,” Trump told reporters and gathered military leaders in the Oval Office. He also signed the 2020 Armed Forces Day Proclamation.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Trump directed the Pentagon to establish the Space Force in 2018, calling for "American dominance in space" — a theme he went back to on Friday.

"China and Russia, perhaps others, have started a lot sooner than us, we should have started this a long time ago but we've made up for it in spades," he said.

NASA unveils new rules on behavior in space and on the lunar surface (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 2:58 PM, Christian Davenport, 18460K]
NASA on Friday unveiled a legal framework that would govern the behavior of countries and companies in space and on the moon, including the creation of "safety zones" around sites where mining and exploration would take place on the lunar surface.

The United States has long held that nations and companies should be allowed to extract and use resources on the moon. The new legal framework, known as the Artemis Accords, comes as the U.S. space agency works to return people to the lunar surface by 2024.

NASA would make signing the accords a requirement for allied countries to participate in its lunar exploration program. The proposal, some aspects of which were first reported by Reuters, would "in no way change the 1967 Outer Space Treaty," which prohibits nations from laying claim to the moon and other celestial bodies, said NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine.

Rather, the series of principles would follow the tenets of the treaty and "promote peaceful purposes" that would allow nations "to participate safely in outer space," Bridenstine said in an interview.

The accords already have run into resistance from the head of Russia's space agency, Dmitry Rogozin, who called them an invasion that would lead to another "Iraq or Afghanistan."

NASA said it would be "premature to release" the accords ahead of sharing them with allied nations. But a copy obtained by The Post said parties would be required to publicly release "the extent and general nature of operations taking place within" the safety zones "while taking into account appropriate protection of business confidential, national security, and export controlled information."

Parties would also agree to use the zones "in a manner that encourages scientific discovery, technology demonstration, as well as the safe and efficient extraction and utilization of space resources." They would also be required to publicly reveal "the extent and general nature of operations taking place within" the zones.

The introduction of the accords comes as NASA is pushing to meet a White House mandate to return humans to the moon for the first time since 1972 under what it is calling the Artemis program. NASA is planning to establish a permanent presence in lunar orbit and on the surface. It is specifically interested in the moon's south pole where there is water in the form of ice.

Still, NASA is hopeful that Russia, its longtime partner on the International Space Station, would be a signatory, Bridenstine said. The accords are just being rolled out, he said, and

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

NASA would work with Russia, as well as many other countries.

“We encourage Russia to be a part of the Artemis accords,” Bridenstine said. “And we think it would be good for all the world to agree to the right approach to peacefully explore space.”

China, which last year landed a rover on the far side of the moon, also wants to reach the lunar south pole. NASA must get congressional approval before partnering with China in space, and that would make their participation in the accords difficult. Bridenstine said NASA would “follow the law, 100 percent." But he said that setting a standard of behavior could help influence the way countries operate in space even if they are not signatories.

In pushing for the accords, Bridenstine pointed to a spent Chinese rocket stage that plummeted to Earth this week, making it one of the largest uncontrolled objects to fall from low Earth orbit in nearly 30 years. Villages in West Africa found what they believe to be debris from the rocket. But Bridenstine said had the stage re-entered the atmosphere earlier “it could have hit New York."

“I can think of no better example of why we need the Artemis Accords,” he said. "It’s vital for the U.S. to lead and establish norms of behavior against such irresponsible activities. Space exploration should inspire hope and wonder, not fear and danger.”

Brian Weeden, the director of program planning for the Secure World Foundation and who had been briefed on the accords, said the creation of safety zones around mining sites would not lead to nation’s claiming control of lunar territory. “These zones do not establish ownership,” he said. “It is more about establishing safety and coordination, and that is really important.”

The size and scope of those sites would depend on the activity taking place, said Mike Gold, the acting associate administrator for NASA’s Office of International and Interagency Relations, who had a role in drafting the accords.

“We want to avoid conflict, we want to encourage communication,” Gold said. “It’s important for America to lead not just in technology but in policy, and that’s what the Artemis Accords are. It’s the U.S. laying out principals that will not only benefit NASA and its allies, but the whole world.”

The accords follow a law passed in 2015 that allows companies the rights to resources they extract from the moon.

The accords would require signatories to adhere to principles, laid out by the United States, that would help provide a framework for acceptable behavior in space.

Signatories would have to agree, for example, to help provide emergency assistance in the case of an injured astronaut. They would also agree to protect historic sites, such as the Apollo 11 landing area, and share scientific data.

“If you’re a country and you want to participate in the Artemis program back to the moon, this is the agreement you have to sign,” Weeden said. “The U.S. is using these accords to promulgate some specific norms of behavior with regard to space activity.”

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

[Egypt] Withdrawing US troops from the Sinai could break a fragile peace (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 2:00 PM, Eric R. Mandel, 3408K]
Secretary of Defense Mark Esper reportedly is considering ending America's 40-year peacekeeping presence in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. His impulse isn't new; the Obama administration also contemplated removing U.S. troops from harm's way in the Sinai because of escalating threats posed by ISIS and other Salafist militias. The idea was to replace soldiers with drone surveillance and other high-technology warning systems.

American troops have been stationed in the Sinai since the U.S.-mediated 1979 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, which returned the peninsula to Egypt in exchange for diplomatic relations with Israel. A cold peace has endured since, benefiting both countries.

The treaty called for a multinational force that has monitored the area since 1982, with the largest contingent from the United States. For many years this was an easy assignment, but after the Arab Winter of 2011 things began to change. First, the Egyptian people elected Mohamed Morsi as president, elevating the Muslim Brotherhood to power and destabilizing the relationship with Israel. The Brotherhood is an Islamist organization and the parent of Hamas, and the Israeli fear was that an open border between the Sinai and Gaza under Morsi's government would allow weapons and money to freely flow to terrorists.

Fortunately, the Egyptian people rose up against the Morsi government and returned the presidency to another authoritarian military leader who viewed the Brotherhood as a threat and saw Hamas as an enemy. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi values his nation's relationship with Israel and the United States, despite American criticism of his reported human rights abuses and U.S. financial punishment for his instigating the 2013 coup that ousted Morsi. Israel lobbied the Obama administration not to decrease aid to Egypt, because that would undermine the peace treaty.

In the wake of the failed Arab Winter, neighboring Arab regimes became vulnerable and into the vacuum stepped ISIS with its goal of worldwide jihad and hegemony. ISIS's brutal killings, misogyny and kidnappings stunned the world into action. As its caliphate grew, it propagated branches throughout the Muslim world, including the Sinai, where jihadists killed scores of Egyptian civilians and soldiers, making the territory a no-man's land. This destabilized Egypt and threatened Israel from its south.

In response, the United States withdrew into its two main bases, one in the northern Sinai and one in the south near Sharm el-Sheikh. This is similar to what the U.S. did last year in Iraq when it withdrew troops from more vulnerable outlying outposts to reposition them into more defensive positions at large bases. However, unlike in Iraq, American soldiers in the Sinai are not often targeted, especially in the south. And the U.S. presence plays an important intelligence and monitoring role for both Israeli and Egyptian security.

With the coronavirus pandemic, all branches of the U.S. government are under pressure to decrease spending, which may be why the Department of Defense would consider ending the U.S. presence in Sinai, despite a commitment to remain there indefinitely.

Does it still benefit the U.S. to keep peacekeeping forces in the Sinai? Unlike in Iraq, where the parliament voted for a complete American troop withdrawal after the U.S. assassinated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards leader Qassem Soleimani in January, both Israel and

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Egypt want the U.S. to remain in the Sinai as a force for stability. In the U.S., there has been bipartisan support for continuing the multinational force.

From an Israeli security perspective, withdrawal is disconcerting. This month, Israel Defense Forces chief Aviv Kochavi communicated this position to his American counterpart, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Israel counts on America's presence and is concerned about Egypt's military, despite the peace treaty. Egyptian military strategists still consider Israel the leading military threat, although Israel has allowed Egypt to move more military assets into the Sinai to fight ISIS and the continued Salafist insurgency. There is no assurance that a future Egyptian military leader will respect the treaty, or would ever consider demilitarizing the Sinai.

Middle East security can change in an instant. Egypt attacked Israel in three wars, and today's Egyptian people are still fed anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric. This can create fertile ground for future conflicts, as can the poverty in which many of Egypt's 90 million people live.

If the U.S. leaves the Sinai, it could empower Islamists to step up attacks not only there but in the Egyptian heartland. A collapsing Egypt would threaten not only Israel but also its neighbors and the world at large, because it could become a staging ground for terrorist operations, threaten international shipping through the Suez Canal, and make possible the Brotherhood's return to power.

It was a mistake for President Obama to withdraw troops from Iraq in 2011 and for President Trump to try to leave Syria's Kurds in 2019. It would similarly be a mistake to remove American forces from the Sinai because it would show the world that the U.S. is an unreliable ally.

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan breaks with US and blames Taliban for deadly maternity ward attack (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 12:39 PM, Zachary Halaschak, 727K]
The Afghan government said it disagrees with the U.S. assessment that Islamic State militants were behind an attack on a maternity ward that killed two dozen, including babies.

The disagreement comes as Afghan security forces launch a new offensive against the Taliban, which it claims was behind the Tuesday attack on the Kabul maternity ward. Three gunmen disguised as police officers stormed the maternity ward, which was run by Doctors Without Borders, and were killed after a lengthy gun battle with Afghan forces.

Peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad said Thursday evening on Twitter that the U.S. government has determined that the hospital had been targeted by ISIS through its Khorasan Province branch, which first began to establish operations in the region more than five years ago.

"The USG has assessed ISIS-K conducted the horrific attacks on a maternity ward and a funeral earlier this week in Afghanistan. ISIS has demonstrated a pattern for favoring these types of heinous attacks against civilians and is a threat to the Afghan people and to the world," Khalilzad said.

Khalilzad again emphasized that the United States believes ISIS was behind the attack during an on-the-record call with reporters on Friday.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"Based on the information we have and based on the pattern of ISIS attacks in the past, we believe, this is our assessment, that ISIS is responsible for the attack on the hospital," Khalilzad said. "We look forward to receiving — if the government has information to the contrary in terms of the attack — to receiving that. We, as I said before, understand the strong feeling among the Afghan people about this dastardly attack, but our assessment is that it was ISIS that did it."

Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh pushed back after the remarks over Twitter saying, “Neither the Taliban hands nor their stained consciousness can be washed of the blood of women, babies & other innocent in the latest senseless carnage.”

A senior Afghan official told Reuters that Khalilzad’s assessment was “premature” and claimed that evidence pointed to Taliban and Haqqani Network involvement. The Haqqani Network is a terrorist group that operates in Afghanistan and along the border of Pakistan. The group is closely intermeshed with the Taliban and its leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, was appointed as a deputy in the Taliban back in 2015.

Neither the Taliban nor IS-KP has claimed responsibility for the Kabul attack, and the Taliban has denied it was responsible for the carnage. Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said in two tweets that his group did not attack the maternity ward. The Taliban has also blamed IS-KP, which is reviled by both the Taliban and the Afghan government, for the violence.

“Attack in Dashti Barchi area of Kabul city has nothing to do with the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate,” Shaheen said. “Blast at a funeral in Khewa district #Nangarhar is not the work of the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate. The Islamic Emirate condemns such actions,”

The maternity ward attack took place in the Dashti Barchi part of Kabul, home to many in the Hazara ethnic group, who are largely Shiite Muslims. Hazara neighborhoods have been targeted by IS-KP in the past.

IS-KP did claim responsibility for another attack in Afghanistan that same day. A militant with the group detonated a suicide vest during a crowded funeral in Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province. The funeral was for the commander of the Kuz Kunar district’s police force, who died on Monday. At least 32 people were killed in the attack and dozens more injured.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Tuesday called for security forces to go on the “offensive” against the Taliban and other groups after the deadly attacks. Afghan forces have been in the crosshairs of the Taliban despite the peace accord that the U.S. signed with the group. Ghani’s declaration represents another escalation in the country that has long been fraught by war.

“In order to provide security for public places and to thwart attacks and threats from the Taliban and other terrorist groups, I am ordering Afghan security forces to switch from an active defense mode to an offensive one and to start their operations against the enemies,” Ghani said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Washington Examiner reached out to the State Department for comment.

[Afghanistan] U.S. Urges Afghanistan to Stay the Course With Peace Deal as Violence Resurges (New York Times)
New York Times [5/15/2020 4:52 PM, Lara Jakes, 40577K]
American officials scrambled on Friday to keep Afghanistan's tenuous peace process from falling apart, blaming the Islamic State for horrific attacks that have recently killed dozens of people and further inflamed tensions between the Taliban and the government in Kabul.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief U.S. negotiator for Afghan reconciliation talks, acknowledged "challenges and difficulties" in moving ahead with plans to create a power-sharing government that were outlined more than two months ago with American support.

But he urged the Taliban and Afghan officials to resist returning to violence that could threaten efforts to strike a peace deal and to withdraw American troops after more than 18 years of war.

"A political solution, a peace agreement among Afghans, is the only realistic option at the present time," Mr. Khalilzad told reporters during a State Department briefing.

He blamed the Islamic State's Afghan wing for stoking horrific attacks, including this week on a maternity hospital in Kabul, as the terrorist group seeks to inflame tensions.

"There are forces such as ISIS that doesn't see peace in Afghanistan in its interests and are trying to increase violence, to undermine the prospect for peace," Mr. Khalilzad said. "We're urging both sides not to fall into that trap."

Afghan officials have blamed the Taliban for both the hospital attack that killed at least 15 on Tuesday and a bombing, the same day and about 100 miles away, against a funeral procession of a police commander that killed at least 25. Taliban leaders have denied the shooting spree at the hospital, and the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the funeral attack.

The violence, and the accusations arising from it, has pushed both the Taliban and Afghan government back into their respective corners.

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan has vowed to resume military offensives against the Taliban, while the Taliban — who ramped up their attacks soon after signing the peace deal with the United States — have accused the Kabul government of falsely using the recent attacks as an excuse to abandon the peace agreement.

Mr. Khalilzad maintained that the Islamic State had targeted both the hospital and the funeral procession and said that he was eager to see any evidence that the Afghan government could provide that would indicate otherwise.

He acknowledged that the Taliban had not fully ended its attacks, including a truck bombing on Thursday that killed at least five people near a military court. But Mr. Khalilzad said the group had not explicitly violated an earlier agreement to ease hostilities that was a condition of opening direct peace talks with the government.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

“We are saying that they are violating the spirit if not the letter, given that commitment that all sides will try to reduce violence,” Mr. Khalilzad said.

It is not clear when talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government might begin. They were initially scheduled for March, after the Taliban signed a preliminary agreement with Washington that focused largely on withdrawing American troops in exchange for assurances that Afghanistan would not be used as a launching pad for terrorist attacks against the United States.

Since then, the Taliban and the Afghan government have sparred over the pace of releasing the other’s prisoners. Mr. Khalilzad said a new date for holding the talks was under discussion, but would not say when.

The American military is still on track to draw down its forces in Afghanistan to roughly 8,600 troops, Jonathan Hoffman, a Pentagon spokesman, said Friday. That benchmark was outlined in the deal with the Taliban but was also a longtime goal for Gen. Austin S. Miller, the commander of the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan. The current American troop number in the country is just under 12,000.

The surge in violence has called the peace deal into question — and with it, American credibility in Afghanistan, said Michael Rubin, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute policy center.

“No peace process can turn a blind eye to bombings at funerals, slaughters in maternity wards, or kidnappings for ransom,” Mr. Rubin wrote in an analysis this week.

[Afghanistan] Troop withdrawal, peace process on track in Afghanistan despite violence, U.S. says (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [5/15/2020 4:54 PM, Tracy Wilkinson and David S. Cloud, 2343K]
With violence surging in Afghanistan, and its government still deeply at odds with the Taliban, the Trump administration said Friday that a withdrawal of U.S. troops from the nation’s longest war was still on track.

The administration’s special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, said “challenges” were blocking progress on a U.S.-Taliban agreement signed earlier this year that was meant to clear the way for U.S. forces to leave. But he said both sides remained interested in ending a conflict that has gone on for decades.

Khalilzad said a horrific attack Tuesday on a maternity ward in Kabul that left newborn babies, their mothers and pregnant women dead, was the work of an offshoot of Islamic State and not the Taliban, the militant group that does not recognize the Afghan government. The Taliban has denied responsibility, but the Afghanistan government — which was not part of the withdrawal agreement — remains skeptical.

On Thursday, a truck bomb attack on an Afghan military base in the eastern part of the country was claimed by the Taliban, and prompted the Kabul government to announce it was resuming military operations against a rival group that controls large parts of the country. The U.S.-Taliban deal, Afghan government officials said, was near collapse.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Khalilzad, briefing reporters in Washington, acknowledged the deal he brokered Feb. 29 only obliged the Taliban to halt attacks on troops from the U.S.-led coalition, not on Afghan government forces or civilians.

“But we believe that they’re in violation of the spirit, given the number of attacks and Afghan casualties in those attacks,” he said. “We are saying that they are violating the spirit if not the letter, given that commitment that all sides will try to reduce violence.”

He also blamed outside actors like Islamic State, also known as ISIS, for attempting to torpedo the deal.

“There are forces such as ISIS that don’t see peace in Afghanistan in its interests and are trying to increase violence, to undermine the prospect for peace,” Khalilzad said. “We’re urging both sides not to fall into that trap, but indeed to cooperate against the terrorists, including ISIS.”

At the Pentagon on Friday, spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said the U.S. is proceeding with plans to reduce its troop count in Afghanistan to 8,600, from roughly 12,000, by early summer.

“We’re still moving forward with the force reduction levels that we’re committed to,” he said. “We expect to meet that.”

Under the deal, the Taliban was to commit to reducing terrorism, but terms were vague. In exchange, the U.S. agreed to a gradual withdrawal of troops who have been engaged in fighting in Afghanistan since shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. NATO troops would also be pulled out.

Khalilzad also said that setting a date for talks among all Afghan parties, another part of the deal, was under discussion. The talks were supposed to begin two months ago, but continued disagreement, chiefly between the Kabul government of President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban, has remained an obstacle.

Another lingering point of contention is prisoner swaps. The government was required to release 5,000 Talibs, and the Taliban agreed to free 1,000 government soldiers. So far, Khalilzad said, the government has freed only 1,011 Talibs, and the Taliban 253 soldiers.

President Trump promised to end the war in Afghanistan, and appears to be moving to make some progress on that pledge in advance of the November election. But critics, including many Afghan civil rights organizations, worry that in its haste to exit, the U.S. will abandon hard-fought gains in democracy, freedom of expression, women’s rights and education.

The attack at the hospital, regardless of who was responsible, was an especially shocking atrocity in a country long accustomed to them.

The Paris-based charity Doctors Without Borders, which operates the hospital in a Shiite neighborhood, said gunmen headed straight to the maternity ward and seemed to target women and infants.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

“They went through the rooms in the maternity, shooting women in their beds. It was methodical. Walls sprayed with bullets, blood on the floors in the rooms, vehicles burned out and windows shot through,” the organization’s head of programs in Afghanistan, Frederic Bonnot, said in a statement. “They came to kill the mothers.”

The attack left 16 dead. Khalilzad could not provide evidence that it was conducted by Islamic State, except to say it fit the group’s pattern.

Islamic State “has demonstrated a pattern for favoring these types of heinous attacks against civilians and is a threat to the Afghan people and to the world,” he said earlier Friday in a tweet.

On the same day as the hospital massacre, an attack on the funeral of a pro-government warlord in the eastern part of Afghanistan killed 34 people. Islamic State took responsibility.

[Afghanistan] U.S. remains committed to Afghan peace process despite ongoing violence, Khalilzad says (Washington Times)
Washington Times [5/15/2020 11:10 AM, Lauren Meier, 496K]
Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan, on Friday said the U.S. remains committed to the Afhgan peace process, despite repeated instances of the Taliban “violating the spirit” of the newly-minted peace deal with the U.S.

Since the Trump administration finalized its long-awaited Taliban peace deal in February, there have been an average of 55 Taliban attacks per day, according to figures from the Afghan government. The Pentagon has confirmed a strong uptick in the number of Taliban attacks against Afghan security forces in recent weeks.

“We recognize there are challenges but there is no better alternative to peace,” Mr. Khalilzad told reporters on a call Friday.

His comments come in the wake of two fatal attacks in Afghanistan that captured global headlines this week.

On Tuesday, gunmen stormed a maternity ward in Kabul that set off an hours-long shootout with police and left 19 women, nurses and newborns dead.

Days earlier, a suicide bomb was detonated on a funeral procession in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province that killed 26.

Mr. Khalilzad has attributed both attacks to ISIS, not the Taliban as previously believed by the Afghan government.

He said that the “key requirement” for the U.S. in the ongoing efforts to end 19 years of military involvement in Afghanistan is the comittment by the Taliban to reduce violence and terrorism.

“Violence and prisoners are the two obstacles at this point,” he said.

The U.S. has assessed that the Taliban has implemented their promise to not attack U.S. and coalition forces, despite the ongoing violence, and has not carried out attacks in major

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

cities, as part of the deal.

But, he said that the Taliban continues to violate the spirit of the agreement as violence has not been drastically reduced.

“We believe that they are in violation of the spirit given the number of casualties and violence,” Mr. Khalilzad said.

The agreement was expected to forge the way for inter-Afghan peace talks between the government and the Taliban, but not only have the two sides failed to make serious progress in their direct talks, but the two sides also are on the verge of even greater conflict amid evidence of increasingly violent attacks by Islamic State factions.

Mr. Khalilzad insisted, however, that under the current circumstances, “the peace process is the best option and therefore we will persist.”

“The sooner inter-Afghan negotiations begin the sooner peace will come.”

[Afghanistan] Afghan peace talk delays raise specter of Syria-style multiparty civil war: US diplomat (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [5/15/2020 2:01 PM, Joel Gehrke, 727K]
The Trump administration is pleading with Taliban and Afghan government officials to begin peace talks as the country heads for a Syria-style civil war that includes warring rebels and a central government.

“There is no alternative to pushing forward with peace,” State Department special representative Zalmay Khalilzad said Friday.

Afghan and Taliban officials have failed to begin the negotiations contemplated by a U.S.-Taliban deal orchestrated by Khalilzad due to a stalled prisoner exchange process and continuing terrorist attacks. Peace prospects reached a new low after this week’s bombing of a maternity ward in Kabul. U.S. officials maintain that an Islamic State offshoot conducted the attack, but Afghan officials blamed the Taliban and called for a new offensive against the militant group.

“Neither the Taliban hands nor their stained consciousness can be washed of the blood of women, babies & other innocent in the latest senseless carnage,” Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh tweeted Friday.

Khalilzad reiterated the U.S. view "that ISIS is responsible for the attack on the hospital” despite Saleh’s insistence that this assessment amounts to “naivete” about the Taliban. The American envoy emphasized the importance of finalizing a deal while U.S. troops are on the ground, lest the belligerents find themselves in the kind of bloodletting that the Syrian people have endured since ISIS and rival rebel groups began fighting each other and the Bashar Assad regime simultaneously.

“It will be best that this inter-Afghan negotiation happen when we have substantial forces still in Afghanistan,” Khalilzad emphasized. “Both the Talibs say they don’t want an endless war and a Syria scenario, and the Afghan government says that they want a political settlement and negotiations."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Khalilzad confirmed that the United States is in the process of "implementing the first phase of the agreement," including the provision that calls for lowering the number of U.S. troops in the country to 8,600 by mid-July. He maintained that ISIS Khorasan, as the Afghanistan affiliate is known, conducted the attack on the maternity ward in order to undermine the negotiations.

"We are urging both sides not to fall into that trap but indeed to cooperate against terrorists, including ISIS," he said.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani adopted an aggressive posture Friday, following the release of a government assessment that Taliban forces have killed nearly 500 civilians in more than 3,700 attacks since the signing of the U.S.-Taliban deal in February.

"Today, once again, there is a need for you to demonstrate your hidden power and bring out your swords from the sheath," Ghani said in a Friday address to the national security forces. "We are not moving away from peace. Our objective is to prove that the power of our commandos shows them the power of the sovereignty of the law."

[Afghanistan] Drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan continuing: Pentagon (Reuters)
Reuters [5/15/2020 2:39 PM, Staff, 5304K]
The United States is continuing its drawdown of troops from Afghanistan and is expected to meet a timeline that had been agreed upon with the Taliban earlier this year, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"That is still going forward. We expect to meet that within the timeline laid out under the agreement with the Taliban," Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said during a press briefing.

Hoffman's comments came after two brutal attacks in Afghanistan this week, though they are believed to have been carried out by the Islamic State.

[China] China Brings Fighter Jets to Illegal South China Sea Base (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/14/2020 5:32 PM, Gabrielle Reyes, 1711K]
Chinese military aircraft have been spotted at China's largest illegal military base in the disputed South China Sea, suggesting that the People's Liberation Army Navy Air Force (PLANAF) have started to use the site as a strategic operations base, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported on Wednesday, citing military surveillance by defense intelligence source Jane's.

Commercial satellite imagery of the site recorded Monday showed two types of surveillance aircraft beside a military helicopter at Fiery Cross Reef, located within the Philippine's Spratly Island chain.

Reports of PLANAF's beefed-up presence at Fiery Cross Reef serve as the latest evidence of China's increased military activity in the hotly contested South China Sea. Since 2016, China has established military installations in the Spratly Islands by building upon existing geological structures, such as reefs. This activity violates international law, as the Spratly

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Islands are the sovereign territory of the Philippines.

Monday's satellite images show a Type 071 amphibious transport ship has docked at the base's deep harbor, designed to accommodate Chinese warships and Chinese coast guard vessels sent on expeditionary missions in the South China Sea, according to the report.

The recent satellite imagery suggests that the base's hangar space could house at least three surveillance aircraft, with room for additional aircraft outside of the structure. In the past, hangar space at Fiery Cross Reef has been used to hold Chinese combat aircraft such as bombers, fighter jets, and military transport planes, according to Jane's.

On May 3, China's airborne early warning aircraft, the KJ-200 – known for its radar system but also used for military transport – was seen at Fiery Cross Reef, RFA reports.

In May 2018, Reuters, citing U.S. intelligence sources, reported that China installed both anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles on Fiery Cross Reef. The report stated that the weapons deployment marked the first time Beijing had installed missiles of either kind on the Spratly Islands, although satellite imagery has documented Chinese surface-to-air missile deployment on the Spratly Islands dating back to at least 2017, as Breitbart News reported at the time.

In recent years, China has occupied Fiery Cross Reef to establish its most prominent illegal military base in the South China Sea. In March, Beijing set up a new scientific "research station" on Fiery Cross, supposedly to study regional ecology. The Fiery Cross military installation was built along with another on Subi, a smaller reef in the Spratly Island chain.

On April 19, Beijing declared it had established two new "administrative districts" to govern the Spratly Islands, which are the sovereign territory of the Philippines, as well as Vietnam's Paracel Islands to the north. The move drew condemnation from the Philippines and Vietnam, both of whom formally protested the act.

Vietnam, in particular, has faced increasing aggression from China in the South China Sea in recent weeks. On April 3, a Chinese Coast Guard ship hit and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat in Vietnamese waters, a belligerent act for which Vietnam issued an official statement of protest.

On Tuesday, Vietnam's government announced it would continue fishing operations in Vietnamese waters near its Paracel Islands, despite Chinese attempts to limit Vietnamese fishing rights, RFA reported. On May 1, China issued a fishing ban, prohibiting all fishing activities in an area north of the South China Sea's 12th parallel, which Beijing illegally claims to have jurisdiction over. Vietnam dismissed Beijing's fishing ban as "invalid."

Vietnam's resistance to China's encroachment in the South China Sea comes as reports indicate that Malaysia, another Southeast Asian country with claims to the sea, has been less successful in standing up to Beijing's maritime bullying.

On Tuesday, a Malaysian drillship was forced to halt an oil exploration survey in Malaysian waters after a Chinese survey vessel along with a fleet of escort ships successfully pressured the ship into submission, having shadowed the ship for over a month.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Malaysia's West Capella drillship was originally contracted by the state's oil company to conduct oil exploration activities until May 20, according to RFA. Despite this, the ship announced that it had finished its planned operations on Tuesday, indicating that Malaysia submitted to China's campaign for it to pull out of the area. China unlawfully claims rights over the natural resources Malaysia was exploring through the expedition, and thus thwarted the mission.

The United States and Australia showed support for Malaysia during the month-long aggression by China, deploying warships to sail near the drillship.

In recent months, China has ramped up its military presence in the South China Sea, a valuable waterway full of natural resources like oil and gas reserves, and strategically located to accommodate major trade routes. Despite a 2016 ruling by the International Court of Justice at the Hague declaring Beijing's South China Sea claims unlawful, China continues to encroach upon and lay claim to territory in the sea already governed by surrounding Southeast Asian nations, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan.

[China] China Gives Fresh Details of Virus Response, Denies Cover Up (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/15/2020 4:47 AM, Staff, 6400K]
China said it did not know until Jan. 19 how infectious the new coronavirus is, pushing back against accusations that it intentionally withheld information about the severity of the outbreak in Wuhan from the world.

While Chinese officials knew that there were signs of human-to-human transmission earlier, it was hard to ascertain the new virus's level of contagiousness, said Zeng Yixin, vice minister of the National Health Commission, at a press briefing in Beijing on Friday. There are diseases like HIV that while infectious, are not easily transmitted from person to person, he said.

It was only on Jan. 19 that Chinese scientists concluded that the virus spreads easily among people and China released that information to the world the next day, said Zeng.

The accounting of events from top officials came as China faces growing blame for a delay in sounding the alarm about the coronavirus, which allowed people to spread it unwittingly for some time. Zeng was responding to an Associated Press report in April that cited confidential documents showing Chinese officials were internally discussing the possibility of widespread infections six days before President Xi Jinping warned the public of the dangers of the virus.

The alleged delay resulted in millions of people traveling from Wuhan to elsewhere in the country and the world, seeding a pandemic that has now sickened over 4.4 million people and killed over 300,000.

Giving a rundown of events since the crisis began, Zeng said that China concluded on Jan. 9 that it was dealing with a novel coronavirus and began developing test kits the next day. On Jan. 12, it informed the World Health Organization about the outbreak.

On Jan. 14, a national meeting of provincial health officials was held. "Many uncertainties remained. We understood there's more research needed on human-to-human transmission

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

and we couldn't rule out the chance of a further spread of the virus," said Zeng. "But we couldn't reach conclusions to many questions."

Trump's WHO Attack Accelerates Breakdown in Global Cooperation

Besides its alleged delay in disclosing information on the virus outbreak at an earlier stage, China has also faced skepticism about its official tallies of deaths and infections.

The pandemic has revived tensions between the world's two largest economies. China and the U.S. are escalating disputes from visas to supply chains as the two countries continue blaming each other regarding the origins of the virus, a mystery that global experts are trying to unravel.

Earlier this month, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo accused China of covering up the virus by silencing doctors who tried to warn about the disease and ordering that samples be destroyed on Jan. 3. Liu Dengfeng, another NHC official, said that China did issue a document on Jan. 3 about lab safety and that the country's regulations have clear requirements for how to handle samples, including their destruction.

"The comments made by these U.S. officials are taken out of context and intended to confuse the public," Liu said, adding that China has shared samples with countries including the U.S., U.K. and Australia in recent years.

Along with the U.S., countries including Australia and Germany have sought an investigation into how the previously unknown virus made the jump from animals to humans before being discovered in Wuhan last year.

Asked if China rejected a request from the WHO to visit the P4 lab in Wuhan that some have speculated is linked to the virus, NHC official Li Mingzhu said the agency has never asked to visit a particular lab in China and it's thus "not true" that such a request was turned down.

Li wasn't asked if China would allow access to the lab if a request was made.

While the number of infections has dropped dramatically in China, the nation still faces the threat of a second wave after a new cluster emerged in its northeastern region ahead of high-profile political meetings scheduled to convene next week in Beijing.

Xi on Thursday called for stronger measures to contain any risk that could undermine the country's success so far. In Wuhan, officials have been directed to prepare for mass testing the entire population of 11 million after new cases were reported for the first time since the city's lockdown lifted in April.

[China] China Admits Destruction of Early Coronavirus Samples (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/15/2020 5:04 PM, John Hayward, 1711K]
Chinese National Health Commission official Liu Dengfeng admitted on Friday that his government did indeed destroy early samples of the Wuhan coronavirus, as has long been alleged by skeptics.

Liu claimed this was done to "prevent the risk to laboratory biological safety and prevent

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

secondary disasters caused by unidentified pathogens."

The South China Morning Post (SCMP) noted that critics such as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have criticized the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for refusing to provide samples to the international medical community when the Wuhan outbreak began in late 2019 and for destroying those samples. Liu insisted there was nothing nefarious about the destruction:

"The remarks made by some US officials were taken out of context and intended to confuse," [Liu] said at a briefing in Beijing.

When the pneumonia-like illness was first reported in Wuhan, "national-level professional institutes" were working to identify the pathogen that was causing it, Liu said.

"Based on comprehensive research and expert opinion, we decided to temporarily manage the pathogen causing the pneumonia as Class II – highly pathogenic – and imposed biosafety requirements on sample collection, transport and experimental activities, as well as destroying the samples," he said.

Liu added that this was in line with China's standard practice for handling highly pathogenic samples, which should not be done by labs that do not meet the requirements.

The SCMP quickly pointed out that Liu's statements were not accurate since it has been established by earlier reports that major Chinese virus labs were ordered to destroy their samples after correctly identifying the mysterious new disease that emerged in December as a member of the SARS family.

As the New York Post summarized in February:

In late December, several genomics companies tested samples from sick patients in Wuhan — the center of the coronavirus outbreak — and noticed alarming similarities between their illnesses and the 2002 SARS virus, the Sunday Times of London reported, citing Chinese business news site Caixin Global.

The researchers alerted Beijing of their findings — and on Jan. 3, received a gag order from China's National Health Commission, with instructions to destroy the samples.

Rather than hunkering down to contain the virus, Wuhan officials went ahead with their annual potluck dinner for 40,000 families.

The alleged cover-up continued when representatives from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Jan. 8 visited Wuhan, where officials intentionally withheld information that hospital workers had been infected by patients — a telltale sign of contagion.

News of the virus' highly contagious nature didn't surface publicly until Jan. 20. Wuhan was locked down and a mass quarantine ordered three days later.

In early May, a leaked Western intelligence document described Chinese laboratories deliberately destroying evidence that the coronavirus could be transmitted between

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

humans, including virus samples, during the early weeks of the outbreak when the CCP was eager to conceal that dangerous information. The document described China's actions as an "insult to international transparency."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reportedly produced an analysis at roughly the same time that said China wanted to keep the rest of the world from knowing how contagious the coronavirus was because Chinese companies were frantically buying up medical supplies and protective gear from other countries, and would have encountered difficulty making those bulk purchases if the other countries understood how rapidly the virus could spread.

The SCMP reported that Chinese National Health Commission officials on Friday also denied multiple statements by World Health Organization (W.H.O.) officials that they have been refused access to Wuhan and its virology institute, the lab frequently discussed as a possible source of the outbreak.

"The W.H.O. has never made a request to visit a certain laboratory, so the statement that the WHO was denied a visit to the Wuhan laboratory is untrue," said senior Chinese official Li Mingzhu.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on Tuesday that the CCP is still stalling investigations into Wuhan, its notorious virus-spreading "wet markets," and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Eyewitnesses in China confirmed they gathered data and physical evidence from Wuhan in December that is still hidden from the world by the Chinese government, despite its constant claims of transparency and cooperation.

The Chinese National Health Commission pointedly refused to answer the WSJ's questions about this evidence, responding with CCP political boilerplate about how "the virus should not be linked to any particular country, region, or people" and all nations should "join forces and work together, rather than blaming each other and shirking responsibility."

The WSJ also noted that despite China's denials that it has stymied W.H.O. investigations, W.H.O. officials confirmed that investigative data long promised by China still has not been delivered to the organization, and China is indeed still thwarting efforts by international investigators to visit the outbreak area in Wuhan.

[China] Senate approves bill to sanction China over Uyghur rights (The Hill)
The Hill [5/15/2020 8:36 AM, Marina Pitofsky, 3408K]
The Senate this week passed legislation urging President Trump to issue sanctions against those responsible for China's actions against its Uighur Muslim minority as the president and his GOP allies have ramped up pressure on China over its handling of the coronavirus.

The bill introduced by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) calls for the Trump administration to issue sanctions over the "gross human rights violations" against Uighurs and other Muslim groups in the country. It would condemn the internment of Uighurs and other Muslim groups in China's Xinjiang region and call for the country to close the camps. The U.S. would also revoke the visas of any officials found to have taken part in the internment of the groups, among other measures.

"The Chinese Government and Communist Party's systematic, ongoing efforts to wipe out

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

the ethnic and cultural identities of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang is horrific and will be a stain on humanity should we refuse to act," Rubio said in a statement after the Senate passage.

The bill was passed by unanimous consent in the Senate without a roll-call vote. It now must be passed by the House before being sent to the White House for approval.

The bill was previously passed in the Senate in September, Bloomberg News reported. However, the House amended the legislation to block the export of devices that could be used for spying or restricting communications or movement of members of the groups. The Senate removed that language from the version of the bill passed Thursday.

China has worked to detain an unknown number of members of the minority population in what it says are "reeducation camps." Top administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have condemned the detainment, with Pompeo previously calling the effort an "attempt to erase its own citizens."

Trump has repeatedly attacked China over the coronavirus pandemic in recent weeks. Last week, the president described the pandemic as an attack even worse than Pearl Harbor or the attacks on 9/11.

"And it should have never happened. Could've been stopped at the source," he said. "Could've been stopped in China."

Trump on Thursday also said that the U.S. should end its reliance on products manufactured in China.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) on the Senate floor accused China's Communist Party of seeking to cover up the initial coronavirus outbreak, and Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) this week urged colleagues not to take meetings with Chinese companies and "exercise caution" when meeting with Chinese officials.

[China] U.S. Delivers Another Blow to Huawei With New Tech Restrictions (New York Times)

New York Times [5/15/2020 9:24 AM, Ana Swanson, 40577K]

The Trump administration issued a new rule Friday that will bar Huawei and its suppliers from using American technology and software, a significant escalation in the White House's battle with the Chinese telecom giant and one that is likely to inflame tensions with Beijing.

The rule change, which is slated to go into effect in September, will block companies around the world from using American-made machinery and software to design or produce chips for Huawei or its entities. Companies can apply for a license to continue supplying those products, but the administration said the presumption would be to deny those requests.

John Neuffer, the president of the Semiconductor Industry Association, which represents chip makers, said his group was concerned that the rule would "create uncertainty and disruption for the global semiconductor supply chain." He added, however, that it appeared less damaging than broader approaches the administration had previously considered.

The move appears aimed at inflicting further damage on Huawei, which continues to rely on

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

American-made machinery and software designs to make the chips for its smartphones and tablets, as do the companies that supply it. The Trump administration has singled out Huawei as a threat to national security, saying its gear should not be trusted because it is beholden to the Chinese government, an accusation the company has denied.

The measure is the latest of several restrictions taken against Huawei in the last year. The administration added Huawei to an “entity list” last May, barring exports of American products to the company and 114 of its affiliates unless suppliers had first obtained a license.

After that rule was imposed, Huawei took steps to reduce its reliance on American chip manufacturers like Qualcomm and ramp up its in-house production through a chip unit, HiSilicon.

But HiSilicon still relies on outside manufacturers, including the Shanghai-based Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation, or S.M.I.C., and the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, or T.S.M.C., to mass-produce chips to its specifications. Many of those operations rely to some extent on technology that was developed and refined in the United States, where the semiconductor industry began.

In a statement on Friday, the Commerce Department said Huawei had tried to “undermine” its previous restrictions by using American software and technology to make its own semiconductors, and buying products from foreign foundries that used American equipment.

“There has been a very highly technical loophole through which Huawei has been able, in effect, to use U.S. technology with foreign fab producers,” Wilbur Ross, the commerce secretary, said in an interview Friday morning on Fox Business Network. He said the changes announced Friday were tailored moves “to try to correct that loophole and make sure that the American fab foundries are competing on an equal footing with the foreign ones.”

The measure could weigh on major chip contract manufacturers that sell to Huawei, particularly S.M.I.C. and T.S.M.C., which rely heavily on American manufacturing tools. It may also clamp down on sales by makers of semiconductor equipment, like Applied Materials, KLA and Lam Research, as well as chip design software companies.

The move comes at a moment of heightened tensions between the United States and China. President Trump has blamed China for not doing enough to stop the spread of the coronavirus and has suggested that the United States may punish the Chinese government. He has also begun threatening to scrap the trade deal the two countries signed in January.

“This came from China,” Mr. Trump said at a White House event to discuss a vaccine on Friday. “It should have been stopped in China before it got out to the world.”

The administration’s new measure against Huawei, one of China’s biggest technology companies and a crown jewel of Chinese innovation, could prompt a backlash against American technology companies that depend on sales to China, such as Qualcomm and Apple.

On Friday evening, the English edition of the Chinese state-controlled newspaper Global

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Times cited an unnamed source who said the Chinese government was ready to retaliate.

“Based on what I know, if the U.S. further blocks key technology supply to Huawei, China will activate the ‘unreliable entity list,’ restrict or investigate U.S. companies such as Qualcomm, Cisco and Apple, and suspend the purchase of Boeing airplanes,” Hu Xijin, the editor in chief of the Global Times, wrote on Twitter.

In a call with reporters on Friday, a State Department official enumerated the United States’ broad concerns about Huawei, including that it had violated American sanctions on Iran and helped the Chinese government construct a surveillance network within China and abroad. Huawei is key to the Chinese government’s broad strategy of “civil military fusion” that supports the Communist Party’s global ambitions, the official said.

Senator Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican, called the rule change “long overdue.”

“The United States needs to strangle Huawei,” he said in a statement. “Modern wars are fought with semiconductors, and we were letting Huawei use our American designs. This is pretty simple: Chip companies that depend on American technology can’t jump into bed with the Chinese Communist Party.”

Huawei had no immediate comment.

On Thursday night, T.S.M.C. said it had agreed to build a $12 billion factory in Arizona, in response to the Trump administration’s growing concerns about the security of the global electronics supply chain. The twin announcements raised speculation that T.S.M.C. might have obtained some kind of assurance that at least a portion of its sales to Huawei would be exempted from the new ban. While the bulk of T.S.M.C.’s revenue is from American companies, HiSilicon accounted for 14 percent of its revenue in the first quarter and is the company’s fastest-growing client, said Paul Triolo, an industry analyst at Eurasia Group.

Keith Krach, the under secretary for economic growth, energy and the environment at the State Department, said Friday that T.S.M.C. had been given “no assurances” that it would be exempt from the measure. A Commerce Department official said the agency did not comment on individual license decisions.

A T.S.M.C. spokeswoman said the factory decision was based on its business needs, not part of any negotiation for eased trade sanctions.

In a statement early Friday, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo said the deal would increase American economic independence from China and strengthen the U.S. relationship with Taiwan, a self-governing island claimed by Beijing.

Also on Friday morning, the Commerce Department extended for another 90 days a license that has allowed American companies to continue doing business with Huawei temporarily. It warned that this would be the final extension.

[China] U.S. tries to close loophole that allowed China’s Huawei to skirt export ban (Washington Post)
Washington Post [5/15/2020 11:33 AM, Jeanne Whalen, 18460K]
The Trump administration issued new rules on Friday intended to block semiconductor

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

sales to China's Huawei in a hardening of its stance against a company it views as a security threat.

The administration last year banned the export of U.S. technology to Huawei, but the Chinese tech giant was still able to purchase semiconductors made outside the U.S. with U.S. software and equipment. The Department of Commerce said the new rule is designed to close that loophole.

The news came as a large Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer announced it would build a $12 billion factory in Arizona. Both the company, TSMC, and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross described the investment as critical to reinforcing U.S. high-tech manufacturing.

Both developments highlight the increasingly tense technology competition between the U.S. and China. Asked in an interview with Fox Business what the U.S. is doing to reduce its manufacturing reliance on China, Ross on Friday pointed to the TSMC news.

"Arizona, since it already has Intel, already has ON Semiconductor, will now have a very powerful technology complex that we hope will be very vertically integrated. And that should facilitate even more activity," Ross said.

Huawei, a large manufacturer of telecom network equipment and smart phones, didn't immediately provide comment on the Commerce announcement. It has repeatedly denied U.S. accusations that its telecom equipment could undermine U.S. national security by allowing the Chinese Communist Party to tap into the gear for espionage purposes.

The Commerce Department said it is amending a regulation so that overseas manufacturers of semiconductors, if they use U.S. equipment or technology to produce the chips, will need a license from the U.S. before selling to Huawei.

In a tweet, the editor of a state-controlled Chinese newspaper said Beijing could take retaliatory measures.

"Based on what I know, if the US further blocks key technology supply to Huawei, China will activate the 'unreliable entity list', restrict or investigate US companies such as Qualcomm, Cisco and Apple, and suspend the purchase of Boeing airplanes," Hu Xijin, editor of the Global Times, wrote.

[China] U.S. Tightens Rules to Crack Down on Huawei's Chip Supply (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/15/2020 11:08 AM, Debby Wu and Todd Shields, 6400K]
The Trump administration moved to prevent chipmakers using U.S. technology from supplying Huawei Technologies Co., injecting fresh turmoil into the complex international ecosystem that produces computer parts.

The Commerce Department said Friday it would require licenses before allowing U.S. technology to be used by the Chinese tech company or its 114 subsidiaries, including it chip-design unit HiSilicon.

The move is designed to inhibit Huawei from producing and designing its own chips, a senior department official said. U.S. officials accuse Huawei of being a security threat tied to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

the Beijing government, an allegation the company denies.

“We must amend our rules exploited by Huawei and HiSilicon and prevent U.S. technologies from enabling malign activities contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests,” Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in a tweet.

The new rules require any foreign chipmaker that uses American gear to get a license before they can sell to companies on a U.S. blacklist, a roster that includes Huawei and other prominent Chinese tech giants such as SenseTime Group Ltd. and Megvii Technology Ltd.

The restrictions may constrain the entire contract chipmaking industry because it uses equipment from U.S. vendors Applied Materials Inc., Lam Research Corp. and KLA Corp. in wafer fabrication plants. It steps up an ongoing White House campaign to contain Chinese technology giants viewed as a threat to national security, particularly Huawei -- the company at the heart of a global fifth-generation network rollout and Beijing’s Made in China 2025 effort to lead the development of future technologies.

Depositary receipts for Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., or TSMC, dropped in New York trading. Hours earlier the company based in Hsinchu, Taiwan said it plans to spend $12 billion building a chip plant in Arizona, a decision designed to allay U.S. national security concerns and shift more high-tech manufacturing to America.

All global chipmakers, including TSMC and China’s own SMIC, need gear from U.S.-based companies to fabricate chips for everything from smartphones to supercomputers. But the latest measure affects TSMC disproportionately because it counts on Huawei for about 10% of its revenue, according to Bloomberg’s supply chain estimates.

“We are following the U.S. export rule change closely,” TSMC said in a statement. “The semiconductor industry supply chain is extremely complex, and is served by a broad collection of international suppliers. As part of the global semiconductor ecosystem, TSMC maintains long-term collaborations with equipment partners around the world including those located in the United States.”

China and Huawei have threatened retaliation should the U.S. enact further measures to constrain the country’s largest tech company. On Friday, the Global Times -- a Chinese tabloid run by the flagship newspaper of the Communist Party -- reported that Beijing stood ready to initiate a series of countermeasures without elaborating.

“This will have a very substantial impact on Huawei’s ability to manufacture chips both in its smartphones as well as in its base stations, which make up 85 or 90% of its overall revenue,” said Beijing-based Gavekal Dragonomics analyst Dan Wang. “There’s quite a big possibility that these rules will cut off almost 90% of its revenue.”

Last year, citing those concerns, the U.S. put Huawei on an “Entity List,” requiring U.S. companies to obtain a special license to sell products to the Chinese company. The move has largely frozen Huawei out of getting some of the computer chips it needs to make equipment integral to new high-speed wireless networks.

Huawei continued to use U.S. software and technology to design semiconductors by their

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

production in overseas facilities using U.S. equipment, Ross said in a statement Friday.

A Huawei representative said the company had no immediate comment.

Materials in production today will get a 120 day grace period to not interrupt business continuity, a senior U.S. Commerce Department official said.

A senior State Department official said the action doesn't mean all licenses will be denied.

More U.S. restrictions could inflict further damage on Huawei. The Shenzhen-based company in April reported growth had all but evaporated in the first quarter, after the Covid-19 pandemic wiped out demand for the gadgets that drive its revenue. Huawei's HiSilicon is capable of crafting cutting-edge semiconductors that power its mobile devices and base stations, a key part of 5G infrastructure, but it depends on TSMC for production. Huawei may able to source some of its lower-end chip orders back to local foundry Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp., but has no recourse in the advanced processors for which TSMC was the sole manufacturer.

In late March, Huawei rotating Chairman Eric Xu warned that China will retaliate should the U.S. move to restrict sales by TSMC to his company. "I don't think the Chinese government will just watch and let Huawei be slaughtered on a chopping board. I believe the Chinese government will also take some countermeasures," he said.

[China] US seek to cut off China's Huawei from global chip suppliers (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/15/2020 10:25 AM, Staff, 1711K]
US officials moved Friday to cut off Chinese tech giant Huawei from global chipmakers, ramping up sanctions on the company seen by Washington as a national security risk.

The Commerce Department said it was broadening its sanctions enforcement to include semiconductor designs that are developed using US software and technology.

Officials said Huawei had been circumventing sanctions by obtaining chips and components that are produced around the world based on US technology.

"This announcement cuts off Huawei's efforts to undermine US export controls," the Commerce Department said in a statement.

The department said it would "narrowly and strategically target Huawei's acquisition of semiconductors that are the direct product of certain US software and technology."

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in a statement that even as Huawei seeks to develop its own components in response to US sanctions, "that effort is still dependent on US technologies."

The move is the latest aimed at Huawei, one of the world's biggest tech and smartphone firms, which US officials say has been stealing American trade secrets and aiding Beijing's espionage efforts.

Huawei has denied links to the Chinese government, and the sanctions have heightened US-China trade tensions.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The latest action “puts America first, American companies first and American national security first,” a senior Commerce Department official said in a statement.

US officials said the new rules would have a 120-day grace period. After that, any chips destined for Huawei or its affiliates would be required to have a license.

A senior State Department official, who joined a call with journalists on the new actions, said the move would not necessarily deny Huawei access to these products but require a license allowing Washington to keep track of the technology.

“One shouldn’t jump to conclusions on what the impact will be,” the official said.

Taiwan chipmaker in US

In a separate announcement, US officials announced the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation intends to invest $12 billion in a US-based nanometer semiconductor foundry.

The deal “is a game changer for the US semiconductor industry that will bolster American national security and our economic prosperity,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

Officials said the two announcements were unrelated. But analyst Patrick Moorhead of Moor Insights & Strategy said both were related to efforts to cut off China and Huawei from key US technologies.

“The US is concerned with ‘feeding’ Huawei, who they consider a threat with US technologies that could turn around and spy on them or their allies,” Moorhead said.

“With TSMC, the fear was that China could physically or electronically intrude on Taiwan based TSMC.”

Washington last year said it would blacklist Huawei from the US market and from buying crucial American components, though it has extended a series of reprieves to allow US businesses that work with Huawei time to adjust.

On Friday it extended this reprieve by another 90 days but said these exceptions are not likely to be extended further.

The Commerce Department senior official said the grace period was aimed at easing the transition for those using Huawei equipment but warned that “entities who rely on that equipment are urged to make preparations” to transition away from that by August.

Washington has been especially active in aiming to keep Huawei from developing 5G or fifth generation wireless networks in the US and allied countries, claiming these systems would be a security risk.

[China] Commerce Department cracks down on Huawei’s access to chips (The Hill)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Hill [5/15/2020 1:06 PM, Maggie Miller, 3408K]
The Commerce Department announced Friday that it would restrict Chinese telecom group Huawei's ability to use American technology and software to manufacture semiconductors, the latest step by the Trump administration to crack down on the company.

The new rule requires companies selling chips — semiconductors used in cellphones and other electronic devices — to Huawei that are made abroad with any U.S. parts or technologies to obtain a license, blocking Huawei from access to a large share of chip production.

The Commerce Department also extended the temporary license allowing certain American companies to do business with Huawei despite the company's inclusion on the Commerce Department's "entity list," which essentially blacklists the telecom group.

Huawei was added to the list last year, but the agency has issued a temporary extension since then to give U.S. businesses time to transition away from using Huawei equipment. The new 90-day extension runs through August.

"Despite the Entity List actions the Department took last year, Huawei and its foreign affiliates have stepped-up efforts to undermine these national security-based restrictions through an indigenization effort. However, that effort is still dependent on U.S. technologies," Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in a statement on Friday.

"This is not how a responsible global corporate citizen behaves," he added. "We must amend our rules exploited by Huawei and HiSilicon and prevent U.S. technologies from enabling malign activities contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests."

Reuters first reported that senior Trump administration officials were considering cracking down on Huawei's access to chips using U.S. technology in March.

A spokesperson for Huawei, which is the largest producer of 5G equipment in the world, did not immediately respond to The Hill's request for comment on the Commerce Department actions.

Concerns around Huawei stem from a 2017 Chinese intelligence law that requires companies and citizens to disclose sensitive data and information to the government if requested.

The Trump administration and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have taken a series of actions against the company over the past year.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted unanimously to classify Huawei as a national security threat in November, while President Trump signed into law legislation in March that bans U.S. companies from using federal funds to buy Huawei equipment. The legislation also provided $1 billion to help small rural telecom groups rip out Huawei equipment and replace it.

Ross said during an appearance Friday on Fox Business that he was "pleased" with the funds given to rural groups.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"We are very pleased that Congress has appropriated $1 billion to help the rural telecoms wean themselves," Ross said. "Now that we are giving them yet another extension, we want them to make clear to us during this extension to mid-August what they are doing to wean themselves from Huawei."

The moves against Huawei also come as tensions have spiked between the U.S. and China due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a day after Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) asked her colleagues to stop taking meetings with Huawei and other Chinese companies such as TikTok.

Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, applauded the Commerce Department's efforts to cut off Huawei.

"The United States needs to strangle Huawei," Sasse said in a statement. "Modern wars are fought with semiconductors, and we were letting Huawei use our American designs. This is pretty simple: chip companies that depend on American technology can't jump into bed with the Chinese Communist Party. This rule is long overdue."

[China] GOP senator calls to 'strangle' Huawei in wake of new sanctions (FOX News)
FOX News [5/15/2020 11:23 AM, Brooke Singman, 12006K]
Republican Sen. Ben Sasse on Friday said the United States "needs to strangle Huawei," as the Trump administration moved to impose new restrictions and sanctions on the Chinese tech giant.

Sasse has repeatedly called on the Commerce Department to disrupt Huawei's supply chain and applauded the Trump administration's efforts to prevent what his office dubbed the Chinese Communist Party's "tech puppet" from obtaining U.S. semiconductor technology.

"The United States needs to strangle Huawei," Sasse, R-Neb., said in a statement. "Modern wars are fought with semiconductors, and we were letting Huawei use our American designs."

He added: "This is pretty simple: chip companies that depend on American technology can't jump into bed with the Chinese Communist Party. This rule is long overdue."

Sasse's comments come as the U.S. is imposing new restrictions on Huawei by limiting its ability to use American technology to build its semiconductors. The Commerce Department on Friday said the move aims to cut off Huawei's undermining of current U.S. sanctions. The move will restrict Huawei's access to chip technology that the company relies on to make their smartphone devices.

According to administration officials, under the rule change, foreign companies that use U.S. chipmaking equipment will be required to obtain a U.S. license before supplying certain chips to Huawei. In order for Huawei to continue to receive some chipsets or use some semiconductor designs tied to certain U.S. software and technology, it would need to receive licenses from the Commerce Department.

A senior administration official told Fox Business that the administration looked at the economic impact, including the number of companies and products affected, before making

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

a change to the rules. The official said they have a comment period in place for companies to share any concerns.

Another official at the State Department told Fox Business that the licensing requirement "doesn't mean things are denied," but rather would "give the U.S. government visibility" into where U.S. tech is going, noting that each application will be "judged on its merits."

The administration is enforcing the license on both the design and manufacturing side. An administration official said that if Huawei designs a chip with U.S. origin software, they will now need a license. On the manufacturing side, if tangible items like chips are produced using U.S. technology, those items will require a license from the Commerce Department.

The new restrictions are separate from the Trump administration's ongoing push to cancel U.S. technology sales to Huawei.

The U.S. government blacklisted the Chinese tech company a year ago, deeming it a national security risk, but a limited reprieve allows wireless companies to keep offering service in remote parts of the U.S.

The Commerce Department said this week that reprieve is being extended for another 90 days. But numerous loopholes have been exploited, especially as U.S. companies continued to supply Huawei with chips made outside the United States. The Commerce Department said the new restriction will "narrowly and strategically" target Huawei's acquisition of semiconductors built in overseas foundries but using U.S. software and technology.

[China] U.S. moves to cut Huawei off from global chip suppliers (Reuters)
Reuters [5/15/2020 9:26 AM, David Shepardson and Karen Freifeld, 3832K]
The Trump administration on Friday moved to block shipments of semiconductors to Huawei Technologies from global chipmakers, in an action ramping up tensions with China.

The U.S. Commerce Department said it was amending an export rule to "strategically target Huawei's acquisition of semiconductors that are the direct product of certain U.S. software and technology."

The reaction from China was swift with a report saying it was ready to put U.S. companies on an "unreliable entity list," as part of countermeasures in response to the new limits on Huawei, China's Global Times reported on Friday.

The measures include launching investigations and imposing restrictions on U.S. companies such as Apple Inc (AAPL.O), Cisco Systems Inc (CSCO.O), Qualcomm Inc (QCOM.O) as well as suspending purchase of Boeing Co (BA.N) airplanes, the report said here citing a source.

Reuters first reported the news ahead of the Commence Department's release. The department said its "announcement cuts off Huawei's efforts to undermine U.S. export controls."

The rule change is a blow to Huawei, the world's no. 2 smartphone maker, as well as to Taiwan's Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co Ltd (2330.TW), a major producer of

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

chips for Huawei's HiSilicon unit as well as mobile phone rivals Apple and Qualcomm. TMSC announced late Thursday it would build a $12 billion chip factory in Arizona.

TSMC said Friday it is "working with outside counsels to conduct legal analysis and ensure a comprehensive examination and interpretation of these rules. We expect to have the assessment concluded before the effective date," the company said, adding the "semiconductor industry supply chain is extremely complex, and is served by a broad collection of international suppliers.

Huawei, which needs semiconductors for its widely used smartphones and telecoms equipment, is at the heart of a battle for global technological dominance between the United States and China.

Huawei, which has warned that the Chinese government would retaliate if the rule went into effect, did not immediately comment on Friday. U.S. stock market futures turned negative on the Reuters report.

"The Chinese government will not just stand by and watch Huawei be slaughtered on the chopping board," Huawei Chairman Eric Xu told reporters on March 31.

The United States is trying to convince allies to exclude Huawei gear from next generation 5G networks on grounds its equipment could be used by China for spying. Huawei has repeatedly denied the claim.

Huawei has continued to use U.S. software and technology to design semiconductors, the Commerce Department said, despite being placed on a U.S. economic blacklist in May 2019.

Under the rule change, foreign companies that use U.S. chipmaking equipment will be required to obtain a U.S. license before supplying certain chips to Huawei, or an affiliate like HiSilicon. The rule targets chips designed or custom-made for Huawei.

In order for Huawei to continue to receive some chipsets or use some semiconductor designs tied to certain U.S. software and technology, it would need to receive licenses from the Commerce Department.

NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told Fox Business "there has been a very highly technical loophole through which Huawei has been in able, in effect, to use U.S. technology with foreign fab producers." Ross called the rule change a "highly tailored thing to try to correct that loophole."

Ross said in a written statement Huawei had "stepped-up efforts to undermine these national security-based restrictions."

The Commerce Department said the rule will allow wafers already in production to be shipped to Huawei as long as the shipments are complete within 120 days from Friday. Chipsets would need to be in production by Friday or they would be ineligible under the rule.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The United States placed Huawei and 114 affiliates on its economic blacklist citing national security concerns. That forced some U.S. and foreign companies to seek special licenses from the Commerce Department to sell to it, but China hawks in the U.S. government have been frustrated by the vast number of supply chains beyond their reach.

Separately, the Commerce Department extended a temporary license that was set to expire Friday to allow U.S. companies, many of which operate wireless networks in rural America, to continue doing business with Huawei through Aug. 13. It warned it expected this would be the final extension.

Reuters first reported the administration was considering changes to the Foreign Direct Product Rule, which subjects some foreign-made goods based on U.S. technology or software to U.S. regulations, in November.

Most chip manufacturers rely on equipment produced by U.S. companies like KLA (KLAC.O), Lam Research (LRCX.O) and Applied Materials (AMAT.O), according to a report last year from China's Everbright Securities.

The Trump administration has taken a series of steps aimed at Chinese telecom firms in recent weeks.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) last month began the process of shutting down the U.S. operations of three state-controlled Chinese telecommunications companies, citing national security risks. The FCC also in April approved Alphabet Inc unit Google's (GOOGL.O) request to use part of an 8,000-mile undersea telecommunications cable between the United States and Taiwan, but not Hong Kong, after U.S. agencies raised national security concerns.

This week, President Donald Trump extended for another year a May 2019 executive order barring U.S. companies from using telecommunications equipment made by companies deemed to pose a national security risk, a move seen aimed at Huawei and peer ZTE Corp.

[China] US adds new sanction on Chinese tech giant Huawei (AP)
AP [5/16/2020 2:38 AM, Frank Bajak, 1891K]
The U.S. government has imposed new restrictions on Chinese tech giant Huawei's ability to use American technology, stepping up a conflict with Beijing over industry development and security.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said Friday that Washington wants to prevent Huawei from evading sanctions imposed earlier on its use of American technology to design and produce semiconductors abroad.

"There has been a very highly technical loophole through which Huawei has been able to in effect use U.S. technology," Ross told Fox Business. "We never intended that loophole to be there."

Huawei Technologies Ltd., China's first global tech brand and a maker of network equipment and smartphones, is at the center of U.S.-Chinese conflict over Beijing's technology ambitions. American officials say Huawei is a security risk, which the company denies. China's government has accused Washington of misusing security warnings to

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

harm a rising competitor to U.S. technology companies.

Under the new rules, foreign semiconductor makers must obtain a U.S. license to ship Huawei-designed semiconductors to the Chinese company that were produced using U.S. technology.

The move “looks like a victory for the people who really want to drive the nail, or what they think will be the nail, in Huawei’s coffin,” said Adam Segal, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

China threatened retaliation against U.S. companies.

Chip design and manufacturing equipment used in the world’s semiconductor plants is mostly U.S.-made, so the new rule affects foreign producers that sell to Huawei and affiliates including HiSilicon, which makes chips for supercomputers with scientific and military uses. The Commerce Department said foreign foundries would be granted a 120-day grace period for chips already in production.

Last year, the Trump administration barred U.S. firms from using Huawei technology or providing technology to the Chinese firm without government approval, deeming it a national security risk. The Commerce Department exempted a narrow list of products and services and has extended that waiver to reduce the impact on U.S. wireless carriers that use Huawei technology. This week, it added another 90 days.

Huawei responded by removing U.S. components from its core products. The company reported global sales rose 18% to $121 billion last year despite the restrictions, though it said smartphone sales suffered after it was blocked from preinstalling music, maps and other services provided by U.S.-based Google.

The new restrictions are separate from those exemptions, but loopholes have allowed U.S. companies to supply Huawei with chips made outside the U.S.

The Commerce Department said Friday the new restrictions would “narrowly and strategically” target Huawei’s acquisition of semiconductors that it designs built in overseas foundries that use U.S. software and technology.

Kevin Wolf, an attorney at Akin Gump who oversaw export administration at the Commerce Department during the Obama administration, noted the narrow scope of the rules.

“If a foreign foundry makes a chip based on a Huawei design and U.S. equipment is used to make a chip then it’s controlled, but if a chip is not made from a Huawei design then it is not controlled,” he said.

Huawei did not immediately respond to a request for comment. But China’s official Global Times newspaper threatened countermeasures on Friday. It said Beijing that could include restrictions on U.S. companies including Qualcomm, Cisco and Apple. It also threatened to suspend purchases of Boeing aircraft.

Global Times noted that the new rules would block companies such as TSMC, a Taiwainese chip maker, from providing semiconductors to Huawei.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TSMC said it was “following the U.S. export rule change closely.” The company said the semiconductor supply chain is “extremely complex” and TSMC was working with lawyers to “conduct legal analysis and ensure a comprehensive examination and interpretation of these rules.”

TSMC announced plans this week to build a chip plant in Arizona.

“It seems the U.S. is ratcheting up efforts to pinch China’s high-tech companies,” the Global Times said. It called the move an element of President Donald Trump’s reelection strategy. “U.S. suppression has become the No. 1 challenge to China’s development.”

[China] China tells US to stop ‘unreasonable suppression’ of Huawei (Breitbart)
Breitbart [5/16/2020 1:59 AM, Staff, 1711K]
Beijing has urged the United States to stop the “unreasonable suppression of Huawei and Chinese enterprises” after Washington announced new export controls to restrict the tech giant’s access to semiconductor technology.

The latest restrictions on the world’s second-largest smartphone manufacturer, which is at the centre of US spying allegations, are a new escalation in the US-China battle for global technological dominance.

“The Chinese government will firmly uphold Chinese firms’ legitimate and legal rights and interests,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Saturday.

“We urge the US side to immediately stop its unreasonable suppression of Huawei and Chinese enterprises.”

The ministry said the Trump administration’s actions “destroy global manufacturing, supply and value chains”.

The US Commerce Department said Friday the controls would “narrowly and strategically target Huawei’s acquisition of semiconductors that are the direct product of certain US software and technology.”

US officials have repeatedly accused the Chinese technology giant of stealing American trade secrets and aiding China’s espionage efforts, ramping up tensions with the rival superpower while both sides were involved in a long-simmering trade war.

As a result, Huawei has increasingly relied on domestically manufactured technology, but the latest rules will also ban foreign firms that use US technology from shipping semiconductors to Huawei without US permission.

The new restrictions will cut off Huawei’s access to one of its major suppliers, the Taiwanese chipmaker TSMC, which also manufactures chips for Apple and other tech firms.

The US last year banned Huawei from using US-manufactured semiconductors in their products.

China has threatened retaliation against the US for the move, including imposing

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

restrictions on major US firms and putting them on an “unreliable entity list”, according to an anonymous government source quoted in the Communist Party tabloid Global Times on Friday.

US tech giants Apple, Cisco, Qualcomm and planemaker Boeing are among the firms that may be targeted, the report said.

US-China relations are again on the rocks with Washington and Beijing trading barbs over the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the past week, China has also threatened retaliatory measures against the US for restricting the visa stay limits of Chinese journalists, and for several lawsuits filed by US lawmakers against China for the coronavirus pandemic.

Huawei has not yet responded to requests for comment.

[Taiwan] U.S. gave no assurances to Taiwan’s TSMC for license to sell to Huawei: official (Reuters)
Reuters [5/15/2020 5:11 PM, Humeyra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, 5304K]
Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co Ltd, which unveiled a $12 billion investment plan in Arizona on Friday, has not been given any assurances that it will be granted a license to allow it to sell U.S. technology to China’s Huawei, a senior U.S. official said.

TSMC, the world’s biggest contract chipmaker, announced its plans on Friday just hours before the Trump administration outlined a proposal to amend tech export rules that could restrict TSMC’s sales to Huawei, which is blacklisted by the United States because it is considered a national security threat.

The new rule, unveiled by the Commerce Department and first reported by Reuters, expands U.S. authority to require licenses for sales to Huawei of semiconductors made abroad with U.S. technology, vastly expanding Washington’s reach to halt exports to the world’s No. 2 smartphone maker.

“There’s no assurance whatsoever on that,” Keith Krach, the U.S. undersecretary for economic growth, energy and the environment, told reporters in a call, when asked if TSMC was assured about a license.

“I think roughly around 10-12% of TMSC’s business is China, and I think that is in essence almost primarily Huawei,” Krach said. “So they will be restricted unless they’re granted a license, and there is no assurances on that and we don’t anticipate that.”

Earlier, TSMC said it was working with outside counsel to interpret the rules in good time and maintain long-term collaborations with equipment partners around the world.

Krach has urged U.S. allies and partners to join Washington in aligning their domestic export control laws to address “the very real security threat” posed by Huawei and China.

He did not spell out what the potential incentives would be for TSMC, but said the administration will help make the company be successful in its investment. “In terms of incentives, I know there is a number of things the U.S. Congress is looking at. I think ...

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

there are some really good possibilities coming down the road," Krach said.

Huawei, which needs semiconductors for its smartphones and telecoms equipment, has found itself at the heart of a battle for global technological dominance between the United States and China. The relationship between the world's two largest economies has soured in recent months over the origins of the deadly coronavirus.

[Japan] Japan, U.S. to set up economic security dialogue: Yomiuri (Reuters)
Reuters [5/15/2020 11:03 PM, Stanley White, 5304K]
Japan and the United States will set up a dialogue on economic security that will discuss 5G mobile-phone networks and the export of civilian technology that also has military use, the Yomiuri newspaper reported on Saturday.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration on Friday moved to block global chip supplies to Chinese 5G equipment giant Huawei Technologies HWT.UL.

Japan's Cabinet Secretariat, the U.S. National Security Council and the U.S. Commerce Department are expected to participate and could hold their first meeting by the end of the year, the Yomiuri said, citing unnamed sources.

Officials at Japan's Foreign Ministry could not immediately be reached for comment on Saturday.

The United States has blacklisted Huawei, saying the company's 5G equipment could provide a back door for Chinese government espionage. Huawei, the world's largest telecom equipment maker, has denied this claim.

The U.S. government has also discouraged other countries from using Huawei's gear to build their 5G mobile phone networks as part of a larger battle for global technological dominance between the world's two largest economies.

Japan's government has decided to effectively exclude Huawei and rival Chinese telcom equipment maker ZTE Corp (0763.HK) (000063.SZ) ZTE from public procurement, and the country's top three telcos have followed suit.

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet1 [5/15/2020 8:19 AM] Thank you to @foxandfriends for covering, supremely, the greatest political scandal in the history of the United States, OBAMAGATE. Fake News @CNN and Concast's own MSDNC are only trying to make their 3 year Con Job just go away. They are embarrassed and don't know what to do.....Likewise, the @nytimes and @washingtonpost are a disgrace to journalism. They are all Fake News, and they know it better than anyone else. History is unfolding, and it is not a pretty picture for "journalism".

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet2 [5/15/2020 10:29 AM] I am proud to announce that @NJTransit will receive $1.4B in CARES Act funding to assist in their continued operations and to keep people moving in the NY/NJ area! The LARGEST single Federal transit grant to New Jersey Transit ever.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Together, we will prevail!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet3 [5/15/2020 10:35 AM] Chicago's @CTA has big federal resources heading its way to keep the transit system operational and to keep people moving where they need to go. $817M will aid in the economic recovery — buy Made in the USA!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet4 [5/15/2020 2:28 PM] Today I was presented with the brand new @SpaceForceDoD flag in the Oval Office. I will take Great Pride in displaying it at the @WhiteHouse! [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet5 [5/15/2020 2:50 PM] I am proud to announce that the United States will donate ventilators to our friends in India. We stand with India and @narendramodi during this pandemic. We're also cooperating on vaccine development. Together we will beat the invisible enemy!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet6 [5/15/2020 3:10 PM] Such a wonderful reception yesterday in Pennsylvania. Thank you! #MAGA [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet7 [5/15/2020 9:34 PM] "FAKE NEWS IS NOT ESSENTIAL!" [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet8 [5/15/2020 11:34 PM] Another Fake Whistleblower. Republicans must do something about these terrible people, and now! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet9 [5/16/2020 12:20 AM] My Hero. New York's Finest! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet10 [5/16/2020 12:23 AM] I'll do it again! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet11 [5/16/2020 12:30 AM] Hello to India! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet12 [5/16/2020 6:31 AM] Happy Birthday Tom! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet13 [5/16/2020 6:37 AM] So true! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

{End of Report} **RETURN TO TOP**

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT