

U.S. Supreme Court justices appear unlikely to throw out Obamacare | Reuters

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. Supreme Court justices on Tuesday signaled they are unlikely to strike down the Obamacare healthcare law in a legal challenge brought by Texas and 17 other Republican-governed states and joined by President Donald Trump's administration.

Chief Justice John Roberts and fellow conservative Brett Kavanaugh indicated skepticism during two hours of arguments in the case toward the stance by the Republican challengers that the entire law must fall if a single key provision, called the individual mandate, is deemed unconstitutional.

That provision originally required people to obtain insurance or pay a financial penalty. Trump signed a law in 2017 that erased the penalty, a change that Republicans then argued eliminated the constitutional justification for the provision as permissible under the power of Congress to levy taxes.

Roberts asked questions suggesting that because Congress did not repeal the entire law, formally known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA), when it eliminated the penalty, all of Obamacare should not be invalidated due to this one change.

If Roberts and Kavanaugh join the court's three liberals in the court's eventual ruling due by the end of June, the bulk of Obamacare would survive.

"It's hard for you to argue that Congress intended the entire act to fall if the mandate was struck down," said Roberts, who authored 2012 and 2015 rulings that upheld Obamacare in previous Republican legal challenges.

The case represents the latest Republican legal attack on the 2010 law, Democratic former President Barack Obama's signature domestic policy achievement. Republicans also have failed numerous times to repeal Obamacare in Congress, though Trump's administration has taken steps to hobble the law.

The justices heard arguments by teleconference in an appeal by a coalition of 20 states including Democratic-governed California and New York and the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives hoping to preserve Obamacare. The court, with three Trump appointees including Kavanaugh, has a 6-3 conservative majority.

After the arguments, President-elect Joe Biden, who served as Obama's vice president, criticized the "right-wing ideologues" who pursued the "simply cruel and needlessly divisive" litigation.

"This argument will determine whether (the) healthcare coverage of more than 20 million Americans who acquired it under the Affordable Care Act will be ripped away in the middle of the nation's worst pandemic in a century," Biden told reporters in Delaware.

Citing a "moral obligation to ensure that here in America healthcare is a right for all and not a privilege for a few," Biden promised to start building on the Affordable Care Act immediately after succeeding Trump on Jan. 20.

NHL ponders temporary realignment, travel hubs | Reuters

By Reuters Staff

The coronavirus pandemic might spark significant changes for the 2020-21 season, including temporary realignment and the use of travel hubs as bases for multiple games, commissioner Gary Bettman said Tuesday.

Bettman made his comments during a virtual appearance at the Paley International Council Summit that also included MLB commissioner Rob Manfred and NBA commissioner Adam Silver.

The fact that border restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic will prevent teams from moving smoothly between Canada and the United States is one impetus for the proposed changes. The NHL also wants to limit teams' potential exposure to COVID-19 without going so far as to introduce the complete "bubble" environments that were used to complete the 2019-20 regular season and postseason.

"Obviously, we're not going to move all seven Canadian franchises south of the 49th Parallel, and so we have to look at alternative ways to play," Bettman said.

He added, "As it relates to the travel issue, which is obviously the great unknown, we may have to temporarily realign to deal with geography, because having some of our teams travel from Florida to California may not make sense. It may be that we're better off -- particularly if we're playing a reduced schedule, which we're contemplating -- keeping it geographically centric and more divisional-based, and realigning, again on a temporary basis, to deal with the travel issues."

Bettman said, "We are exploring the possibility of playing in our own buildings without fans (or) fans where you can, which is going to be an arena-by-arena issue. But we're also exploring the possibility of a hub. You'll play for 10 to 12 days. You'll play a bunch of games without traveling. You'll go back, go home for a week, be with your family. We'll have our testing protocols and all the other things you need.

"It's not going to be quite as effective as a bubble, but we think we can, if we go this route, minimize the risks to the extent practical and sensible. And so that's one of the things that we're talking about."

The league is aiming for a Jan. 1 start to the season.

"Our goal is to get back to a normal schedule starting (next) fall and being done before July on a longer-term basis," Bettman said.

The NHL expanded its playoffs to 24 teams last season, but Bettman did not express support for maintaining that change.

--Field Level Media

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Russian scientists discover huge walrus haulout in Arctic circle | Reuters

By [Maria Vasilyeva](#)

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Scientists in northern Russia have discovered a huge walrus haulout on the shores of the Kara Sea where their habitat is under threat from shrinking ice and human activity.

The haulout, a place of refuge where walruses congregate, reproduce, and socialise, is located in a remote corner of Russia's Yamal peninsula, and scientists say they counted over 3,000 animals there last month.

Walrus haulouts have traditionally been located on drifting sea ice or on Arctic islands, scientists say. But warmer climate cycles mean sea ice is shrinking and habitats are under threat from oil and gas exploration and more Arctic shipping.

"This haulout is unique because there are both female and male walruses, as well as calves of different age," said Aleksander Sokolov, a senior Arctic researcher at Russia's Academy of Sciences who called the find a "unique open-air laboratory".

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) listed the species as "nearly threatened" in 2016, estimating the total number of adult Atlantic walruses in the world at 12,500.

Before commercial hunting of them was banned internationally in the middle of the 20th century, their numbers were threatened by overharvesting for their blubber and ivory.

Andrei Boltunov, from the Marine Mammal Research and Expedition Center, said the Yamal haulout which was first discovered last year but only properly documented last month, showed that the Atlantic walrus population was recovering.

"We want to believe that it's a positive sign," said Boltunov, who said there was too little information for now to draw sweeping conclusions however.

According to Boltunov, the Kara Sea's ice-free season has become longer in recent decades.

Scientists have taken DNA samples and fitted several walruses with satellite tags to monitor their movements for up to several months.

But Boltunov says much work was required to establish what made this particular Arctic beach so attractive for thousands of walruses and what steps could be taken to protect them.

Reporting by Maria Vasilyeva and Anastasia Adasheva; Writing by Maria Vasilyeva; Editing by Andrew Osborn and Raissa Kasolowsky

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China urges U.S. to stop increasing ties with Taiwan | Reuters

By Reuters Staff

BEIJING/TAIPEI (Reuters) - China urged the United States on Wednesday to stop boosting ties with Taiwan, after Washington and Taipei announced they would hold economic talks this month that Taiwan's government described as a "major milestone" in relations.

China considers democratically-ruled Taiwan its own territory with no right to formal ties with other countries, and has watched with growing alarm stepped up U.S. support for the island, including new arms sales and visits to Taipei by senior U.S. officials.

Taiwan will send a small delegation to Washington, led by Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs Chen Chern-chy, its government said, for Nov. 20's inaugural meeting of the U.S.-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue.

U.S. Undersecretary of State Keith Krach, who angered China with a visit to Taipei in September, will lead the U.S. side.

Speaking at a daily news briefing in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said they opposed any official exchanges between Washington and Taipei.

China urges the United States to "stop any kind of official exchanges or contacts with Taiwan and stop elevating substantive relations", he added.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry hailed the talks.

"This dialogue is a major milestone in Taiwan-U.S. economic relations. It demonstrates that Taiwan and the United States will develop closer and broader cooperation under their global economic strategic partnership," it said in a statement.

Krach was the most senior State Department official to visit Taiwan in four decades after being named to head a new bilateral economic dialogue with the island.

Taiwan has long sought a free trade agreement with the United States.

While U.S. President Donald Trump is a popular figure in Taiwan due to his administration's support for the island, Taipei's government has moved to assure people that President-elect Joe Biden will continue that backing.

"There may be changes in the U.S. government and personnel, but we are confident in the continued development of Taiwan-U.S. relations," Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen said on Wednesday, according to her Democratic Progressive Party.

Reporting by Gabriel Crossly and Ben Blanchard; Editing by Christian Schmollinger

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EU lawmakers back U.S. lobster deal after Biden election win | Reuters

By Reuters Staff

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - European Union lawmakers have backed a small trade deal with the United States to remove EU tariffs on U.S. lobsters following Democrat Joe Biden's victory in the U.S. presidential election.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden speaks about health care and the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) during a brief news conference at the theater serving as his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, U.S. November 10, 2020.

REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

Under an agreement struck in August, the EU plans to remove tariffs of 8%-12% on imports of lobsters, while the United States will halve its duties on imports of certain glassware, ceramics, disposable lighters and prepared meals.

The deal, worth some \$200 million in annual trade, needs to be approved by the European Parliament and by the European Council, the grouping of EU governments.

Parliamentary backing had been in doubt given strained relations between the bloc and the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, which has imposed punitive tariffs on EU steel and aluminium.

The chair of parliament's international trade committee, Bernd Lange, said last month that lawmakers should consider rejecting the deal.

However, the committee has now backed the agreement by 40 votes to two, parliament said on Wednesday, and it is likely to go before the full European Parliament in late November.

"Thanks to our engagement, the Commission is now more assertive on the U.S. aluminium tariffs. This, in addition with a new U.S. administration, puts the lobster deal in a new light," Lange said in a statement after the vote.

"Let's move forward and use this deal as a stepping stone for more constructive transatlantic dialogue."

The deal will help level the playing field for U.S. producers, notably in the state of Maine, whose European sales declined after a trade deal between Canada and the EU eliminated tariffs on Canadian lobsters.

The U.S. industry has also been hurt by Chinese tariffs imposed in 2018 and the collapse of sales to restaurants during coronavirus-related lockdowns.

Reporting by Philip Blenkinsop; Editing by Catherine Evans

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7-Day Forecast for Latitude 43.66°N and Longitude 70.27°W (Elev. 7 ft) (Text-Only)

Veterans Day: Increasing clouds, with a high near 66. West wind 10 to 15 mph becoming southwest in the afternoon.

Tonight: A 40 percent chance of showers after 9pm. Cloudy, with a low around 55. Southwest wind 5 to 10 mph becoming west after midnight. New precipitation amounts of less than a tenth of an inch possible.

Thursday: A 30 percent chance of showers before 1pm. Cloudy, with a temperature falling to around 48 by 5pm. North wind 5 to 10 mph. New precipitation amounts of less than a tenth of an inch possible.

Thursday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 39. North wind around 5 mph.

Friday: A 30 percent chance of showers after 1pm. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 48. Northeast wind 5 to 10 mph.

Friday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 39.

Saturday: Sunny, with a high near 48.

Saturday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 33.

Sunday: Partly sunny, with a high near 50.

Sunday Night: A 40 percent chance of showers. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 46.

Monday: A 30 percent chance of showers. Partly sunny, with a high near 53.

Monday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 38.

Tuesday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 43.

U.S. Republicans hint at limited time for Trump to make his post-election case | Reuters

By [Richard Cowan](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Top Republicans in the U.S. Congress for now are supporting President Donald Trump's attempt to challenge President-elect Joe Biden's victory, but some senior aides said Trump must soon produce significant evidence or exit the stage.

A handful of Republican senators have said they recognize Biden as last week's winner. Many more have not but are suggesting limits to their patience in giving Trump the benefit of the doubt.

Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, a state that Trump won handily last week, said in a statement that Biden is leading in enough states to win election "and President Donald Trump's campaign must produce evidence to support allegations of election fraud."

Portman added that he hoped states and courts would move "expeditiously" to resolve the matter.

Behind the scenes, some were more explicit.

"I think the goal here is to give the president and his campaign team some space to demonstrate there is real evidence to support any claims of voter fraud. If there is, then they will be litigated quickly. If not, we'll all move on," said one senior Senate Republican aide.

A second such aide, while noting that most Republican senators support Trump's right to refuse to concede, added that failing any surprise revelations, "At some point this has to give. And I give it a week or two."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Congress's top Republican, delivered a stinging speech that sounded more like a continuation of 2020 campaign rhetoric than a post-election call for getting down to business.

While defending Trump's challenge of the election result, McConnell took time to chastise "far-left mobs" that engaged in "summertime rioting" following the death of George Floyd while in police custody.

McConnell also hinted at something far less than prolonged litigation, such as was seen in the 2000 contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore: "Suffice to say a few legal inquiries from the president do not exactly spell the end of the Republic."

Meanwhile, Republican Senator Marco Rubio late on Monday refused to recognize Biden as the president-elect yet.

But responding to reporters' questions about unsubstantiated fraud allegations in hotly contested states such as Pennsylvania, Rubio said he was in no position to know what was going on anywhere outside his home state of Florida.

Another matter was higher in some senators' minds -- a pair of runoff elections in Georgia on Jan. 5 that will determine whether Republicans maintain control of the Senate next year or must turn it over to Democrats.

Rahm makes trick shot hole-in-one in Masters practice | Reuters

By [Andrew Both](#)

AUGUSTA, Ga. (Reuters) - Jon Rahm on Tuesday had a hole-in-one at Augusta National for the second day in a row, and this time there was a camera to record the feat for posterity even if there were no fans to celebrate the feat.

Is this the greatest hole-in-one ever?

There is no record of Rahm's Monday ace at the 225-yard fourth hole, except for a short grainy video of him extracting the ball from the cup.

But the TV cameras were running on Tuesday when the Spaniard stepped up to the tee box at the par-three 16th on his 26th birthday, and attempted a trick shot that is part of the Masters practice round tradition.

Eschewing a tee, he hit his ball off the turf and skipped it across the pond, his ball skimming the water three times before bouncing up onto the putting surface.

From there it rolled and rolled, taking the contour of the green perfectly and curling up and around to the left and then down into the cup, which was cut in the back left corner of the green.

His ball was on the move for 20 seconds, the excitement only building as it got closer and closer to the hole.

In normal times there would have been thousands of spectators milling about the hole but in the absence of fans, banned this year due to novel coronavirus concerns, only a handful of people witnessed the feat and screamed in delight.

Rahm could barely contain his joy, while practice round partner Rickie Fowler almost keeled over in laughter at the improbability of it all.

The episode offered a timely reminder of how this year's Masters will be so very different.

Though players have quickly adjusted to playing without fans since returning to competition after a three-month professional golf shutdown, the Masters and its "patrons" as they are known are inextricably linked.

"Just imagine the roars that would have created in a normal year," said Rory McIlroy, speaking at a news conference shortly after learning of Rahm's ace.

Imagine also if there had been nobody there when Tiger Woods chipped in famously at the same 16th hole and celebrated with a primal scream in the final round en route to victory in 2005.

Or if all had been quiet when Jack Nicklaus almost aced the hole as he charged to victory in 1986.

This year some players are not even bothering with the trick shot practice round routine.

"It's definitely for the fans," said Justin Thomas.

Scientists watch as China remote glaciers melt at 'shocking' pace | Reuters

By [Martin Quin Pollard](#)

QILIAN MOUNTAINS, China (Reuters) - Glaciers in China's bleak Qilian mountains are disappearing at a shocking rate as global warming brings unpredictable change and raises the prospect of crippling, long-term water shortages, scientists say.

Meltwater flows over the Laohugou No. 12 glacier in the Qilian mountains, Subei Mongol Autonomous County in Gansu province, China, September 27, 2020. REUTERS/Carlos Garcia Rawlins

The largest glacier in the 800-km (500-mile) mountain chain on the arid northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau has retreated about 450 metres since the 1950s, when researchers set up China's first monitoring station to study it.

The 20-square kilometre glacier, known as Laohugou No. 12, is criss-crossed by rivulets of water down its craggy, grit-blown surface. It has shrunk by about 7% since measurements began, with melting accelerating in recent years, scientists say.

Equally alarming is the loss of thickness, with about 13 metres (42 feet) of ice disappearing as temperatures have risen, said Qin Xiang, the director at the monitoring station.

"The speed that this glacier has been shrinking is really shocking," Qin told Reuters on a recent visit to the spartan station in a frozen, treeless world, where he and a small team of researchers track the changes.

The Tibetan plateau is known as the world's Third Pole for the amount of ice long locked in the high-altitude wilderness.

But since the 1950s, average temperatures in the area have risen about 1.5 Celsius, Qin said, and with no sign of an end to warming, the outlook is grim for the 2,684 glaciers in the Qilian range.

Across the mountains, glacier retreat was 50% faster in 1990-2010 than it was from 1956 to 1990, data from the China Academy of Sciences shows.

"When I first came here in 2005, the glacier was around that point there where the river bends," Qin said, pointing to where the rock-strewn slopes of the Laohugou valley channel the winding river to lower ground.

The flow of water in a stream near the terminus of the Laohugou No. 12 runoff is about double what it was 60 years ago, Qin said.

Further downstream, near Dunhuang, once a major junction on the ancient Silk Road, water flowing out of the mountains has formed a lake in the desert for the first time in 300 years, state media reported.

DANGEROUS CHANGE

Global warming is also blamed for changes in the weather that have brought other unpredictable conditions.

Snowfall and rain has at times been much less than normal, so even though the melting glaciers have brought more runoff, farmers downstream can still face water shortages for their crops of onions and corn and for their animals.

Russia says its Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine is 92% effective | Reuters

By [Polina Ivanova](#)

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia's Sputnik V vaccine is 92% effective at protecting people from COVID-19 according to interim trial results, the country's sovereign wealth fund said on Wednesday, as Moscow rushes to keep pace with Western drugmakers in the race for a shot.

Russia's results are only the second from a late-stage human trial, following on swiftly from data released on Monday by Pfizer Inc and BioNTech, which said their shot was also more than 90% effective.

While experts said the Russian data was encouraging and reinforced the idea the pandemic could be halted by vaccines, they warned that the results were only based on a small number of trial volunteers who had contracted COVID-19.

The analysis was conducted after 20 participants developed the virus and examined how many had received the vaccine versus a placebo. That is significantly lower than the 94 infections in the trial of the vaccine being developed by Pfizer and BioNTech.

"I assume there was political pressure after the press release from Pfizer and BioNTech earlier in the week to now draw level with their own data," said Bodo Plachter, deputy director of the Institute of Virology at the Mainz University. "What is missing for now is an analysis of statistical significance."

To confirm the efficacy rate of its vaccine, Pfizer said it would continue its trial until there were 164 COVID-19 cases.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which has been backing Sputnik V's development, said the Russian trial would continue for six months.

Alexander Gintsburg, director of the Gamaleya Institute which developed the vaccine, said the interim results demonstrated that Sputnik V was effective and mass vaccinations would be rolled out in Russia in the coming weeks.

European stocks and U.S. stock futures extended their gains slightly after Russia's announcement though the reaction was far more muted than after Pfizer's results. [MKTS/GLOB]

China's Sinopharm, which is running large-scale late-stage clinical trials for two COVID-19 vaccine candidates, said on Wednesday that its data was better than expected, though it did not give further details.

'NOT A COMPETITION'

Successful vaccines are seen as a crucial to restoring daily life around the world by helping end the pandemic that has killed more than 1.26 million people, shuttered businesses and put millions out of work.

However, experts said knowledge about the Russian trial's design was sparse, making it hard to interpret the data.

Nasdaq jumps at open as tech stocks snap back | Reuters

By Reuters Staff

(Reuters) - Wall Street's main indexes opened higher on Wednesday as signs of a working COVID-19 vaccine raised hopes of a faster-than-expected economic rebound, with technology stocks bouncing back from steep losses this week.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 103.43 points, or 0.35%, at the open to 29,524.35.

The S&P 500 opened higher by 17.69 points, or 0.50%, at 3,563.22, while the Nasdaq Composite gained 102.79 points, or 0.89%, to 11,656.65 at the opening bell.

Reporting by Medha Singh in Bengaluru; Editing by Shounak Dasgupta

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Biden plans move into White House as Trump clings to hope | Reuters

By [Andy Sullivan](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President-elect Joe Biden will further lay the groundwork for his new administration on Wednesday as President Donald Trump pursues a flurry of longshot lawsuits challenging the election results in an effort to cling to power.

Trump has declined to concede, instead lodging unsupported charges of election fraud that have gained little traction.

Judges so far have tossed out lawsuits in Michigan and Georgia brought by Trump's campaign, and legal experts say the litigation has little chance of changing the outcome of the Nov. 3 election.

Nearly 80% of Americans, including half of Republicans, say Biden is the rightful winner, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Tuesday.

Trump's refusal to accept defeat, even as world leaders congratulate Biden and look to their future relations, caps a tumultuous four years in office with the United States deeply polarized, ravaged by the coronavirus and torn by racial division.

But Trump's supporters, who as of the latest count gave him more than 72 million votes compared to Biden's 77 million, have delighted in his combative style and shattering of norms. Trump has eschewed a public concession or the pledge of cooperation typically offered by outgoing presidents.

"It's an embarrassment, quite frankly," Biden told reporters on Tuesday. "How can I say this tactfully? I think it will not help the president's legacy."

Trump's fellow Republicans have largely stuck with him, saying he has a right to contest the result. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick said Tuesday he would pay up to \$1 million from his campaign account to people who come forward with evidence of voter fraud.

But privately, some say Trump must soon produce significant evidence or exit the stage.

Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, a state that Trump won handily last week, said in a statement on Tuesday that Biden is leading in enough states to win election "and President Donald Trump's campaign must produce evidence to support allegations of election fraud." Portman added that he hoped states and courts would move "expeditiously" to resolve the matter.

Trump suffered another possible setback on Tuesday when Democrats on the House of Representatives Oversight Committee said a postal worker who claimed he witnessed ballot tampering in Pennsylvania had recanted his allegations, according to the Postal Service's internal watchdog.

NFL: League approves plan for 16-team playoff field if COVID-19 forces cancellations | Reuters

By [Amy Tennerly](#).

(Reuters) - NFL owners approved a proposal on Tuesday to expand the playoff field from 14 teams to 16 if clubs are unable to complete the same number of regular-season games due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposal, which passed unanimously, is a key contingency plan for the league aiming to complete its 2020 season on schedule even as COVID-19 cases surge again across the United States.

“Our objective is for all teams to safely and responsibly complete the regular season within our 17-week schedule and have a full post-season culminating with a Super Bowl – with fans in the stands – on Feb. 7th in Tampa,” Commissioner Roger Goodell told reporters on Tuesday after the league’s virtual meeting.

“We are committed to completing the season as scheduled. Today’s resolution was part of our contingency planning should it be needed.

“The resolution passed today established criteria for post-season eligibility in the event that all clubs cannot play the same number of regular-season games.”

The NFL has seen numerous COVID-19 positives among players, staff and personnel this season, forcing delays and rescheduling of games. So far, through nine weeks of competition, no games have been canceled outright.

The league enhanced its COVID-19 safety protocols last week, instructing teams to broaden the use of face coverings and expand the sideline area. It also stripped the Las Vegas Raiders of a sixth-round draft pick for repeated breaches.

The league also approved a proposal designed to boost diversity among head coaches and executive staff, which Goodell outlined as a key goal earlier this year amid criticism over the NFL’s largely homogenous coaching and executive ranks.

Under the plan, pending approval of the NFL Players Association, teams that develop minority employees who are then hired by another club as a head coach or primary football executive will receive third-round picks in the subsequent two drafts.

“Our effort here is to continue to look at everything we’re doing to try to improve our policies, our procedures, to encourage and to get the results we want, which is more diversity and inclusion within our ranks,” said Goodell.

Reporting by Amy Tennerly; Editing by Toby Davis and David Gregorio

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Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmakers to resign as Beijing moves to quash opposition | Reuters

HONG KONG (Reuters) - Hong Kong's pro-democracy opposition lawmakers said on Wednesday they would resign in protest against the dismissal of four of their colleagues from the city assembly after Beijing gave local authorities new powers to further curb dissent.

The Chinese parliament earlier adopted a resolution allowing the city's executive to expel lawmakers deemed to be advocating Hong Kong independence, colluding with foreign forces or threatening national security, without having to go through the courts.

Shortly afterwards, the local government announced the disqualification of four assembly members who had previously been barred from running for re-election as authorities deemed their pledge of allegiance to Hong Kong was not sincere.

The moves will raise further concern in the West about the level of Hong Kong's autonomy, promised under a "one country, two systems" formula when Britain ended its colonial rule and handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997.

Britain's foreign minister Dominic Raab said the expulsion of the four lawmakers constituted an assault on Hong Kong's freedoms as set out in the UK-China Joint Declaration.

"This campaign to harass, stifle and disqualify democratic opposition tarnishes China's international reputation and undermines Hong Kong's long-term stability," Raab said in a statement.

At a news conference in Hong Kong which started with all opposition lawmakers holding hands, Democratic Party chairman Wu Chi-Wai said: "We can no longer tell the world that we still have 'one country, two systems, this declares its official death."

"CORE VALUES"

Opposition members of the city assembly, all part of the moderate old guard of democrats, say they have tried to make a stand against what many people in Hong Kong see as Beijing's whittling away of freedoms and institutional checks and balances, despite a promise of a high degree of autonomy.

"My mission as a legislator to fight for democracy and freedom cannot continue but I would certainly go along if Hong Kong people continue to fight for the core values of Hong Kong," one of the disqualified lawmakers, Kwok Ka-Ki, told reporters.

China denies curbing rights and freedoms in the global financial hub, but authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing have moved swiftly to stifle dissent after anti-government protests flared in June last year and plunged the city into crisis.

The city government said in a statement the four legislators - Kwok, Alvin Yeung, Dennis Kwok and Kenneth Leung - were expelled from the assembly for endangering national security.

Hong Kong's Beijing-backed leader, Carrie Lam, later told a briefing she welcomed diverse opinion in the 70-seat legislature but the law had to be applied.

Federal judge dismisses some claims by Apple in fight against Epic Games | Reuters

By Reuters Staff

(Reuters) - A federal judge in California late on Tuesday dismissed some of Apple Inc's counterclaims against Epic Games, in a dispute that has seen the online game maker's "Fortnite" game removed from the iPhone maker's App Store.

Apple and Epic have been in a legal battle since August, when the maker of the popular game launched its own in-app payment system to circumvent what it called Apple's monopolistic practices.

Epic in October had filed a motion in advance of Tuesday's hearing, seeking the dismissal of Apple's counterclaims of intentional interference with prospective economic advantage and conversion, where in Apple had asked for lost App Store fees and other monetary damages.

"It is hereby ordered that the application of John I. Karin is granted," U.S. district judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers said in the Tuesday filing, referring to the application by the lawyer for Epic.

A judge in October had ruled that Apple could bar Epic's "Fortnite" game from its App Store but must not harm Epic's developer tools business, including the "Unreal Engine" software, which is used by hundreds of other video games.

"This is a high-stakes breach of contract case and an antitrust case and that's all in my view," U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers told lawyers, according to Bloomberg.

"You can't just say it's independently wrongful," Bloomberg quoted [bloom.bg/3pgZDlx](https://www.bloom.bg/3pgZDlx) the judge as saying to a lawyer for Apple, referring to Epic's conduct. "You actually have to have facts," the judge said, adding that the rest of the breach-of-contract case moves forward.

Apple and Epic did not respond to Reuters' request for comment. The iPhone maker told Bloomberg that it disagreed with the judge's decision on Tuesday, adding that it was clear that Epic breached its contract with the company.

Reporting by Bhargav Acharya in Bengaluru

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