

WORLD

Trump's flagged health cuts raising alarm

Slashed funds for global efforts seen as campaign shot that Congress will reject

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The steep cuts to global health funds proposed in the US government's 2021 budget could undermine global efforts to fight future epidemics but will likely be rejected by Congress, several experts and US lawmakers said.

US President Donald Trump unveiled a \$4.8 trillion election-year budget plan on Monday that reflects his administration's priorities in spending negotiations for the 2021 fiscal year, which runs from October 2020 to September 2021.

Under the proposed budget, US funding for global health programs would drop to \$6 billion in fiscal 2021 from the \$9.1 billion Congress allocated in fiscal 2020.

The proposal would also cut funding to the World Health Organization by 53 percent, according to US media reports.

The announced budget cuts come at a time when global health systems are on high alert as they respond to the novel coronavirus threat, which has infected more than 45,100 people worldwide and killed at least 1,100, mostly in China. The WHO has sent an expert team to China to collaborate with local experts to tackle the viral outbreak.

The coronavirus has now been officially named by the WHO as COVID-19. There are 13 confirmed cases of the virus in the US so far.

"I certainly don't agree that this is the time for a budget cut on global health programs," Jennifer Bouey, a senior policy researcher with RAND Corp, told China Daily on Tuesday.

The US Global Leadership Coalition also said that as the coronavirus continues to surge, it's "pretty incomprehensible" to consider cutting 34 percent from the country's global health programs.

"A disease threat anywhere is a disease threat everywhere," it said on Twitter. "Check out this graphic — pretty clear why Congress will reject the Administration's global health budget proposal! Because it's bad for America," Liz Schroyer, pres-

ident and CEO of the nonprofit organization, tweeted with a graphic reflecting the US' global health program funding in recent years.

The proposed budget is expected to face rejection by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives and by Democrats in the Senate.

"Everyone knows the latest Trump budget is dead on arrival in Congress," Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democrat on the Senate Budget Committee, said on Monday.

"It's hard to comprehend. Their response to Coronavirus is to literally RAMP DOWN efforts to fight Coronavirus. A 34-percent cut would mean massive layoffs of the people who are trying to stop pandemic diseases from hitting the US," tweeted Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator, commenting on the proposed budget cuts.

'Passing reference'

Cal Jillson, a political scientist and historian at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, said the Congress usually finalizes the budget with "only passing reference" to what the president has proposed.

"So the president's budget proposal must be seen as a rhetorical and political document, even a campaign document, rather than as a real statement of US budget policy for 2021," Jillson told China Daily.

As the Congress reshapes Trump's budget proposal, especially with the COVID-19 outbreak on its minds, US funding for the WHO will likely remain unchanged, or, if cut, it will be cut by a much smaller amount than what Trump proposed, he said.

Jillson noted that Republican presidents frequently propose cutting foreign aid, but Democrats and some Republicans in Congress always resist, adding that if cuts are made they will be modest.

Douglas H. Paal, an Asian studies expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the 2021 budget is a political statement designed to appeal to Trump's base, not a serious legislative proposal. "It does not make sense, and Congress will not treat this draft budget seriously. It will continue funding," Paal said.

Former Russian presidents could be senators for life

By REN QI in Moscow
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Russian parliamentarians have proposed constitutional amendments that suggested former presidents of the Russian Federation will get the right to become senators for life after their terms of office end, the State Duma said in a statement on Tuesday.

According to the State Duma Committee on State Building and Legislation, the proposal is among the amendments to the Russian Constitution by Russian President Vladimir Putin following sweeping changes to Russia's political system last month.

Meanwhile, it will give former presidents immunity from prosecution "after the term of their office expires or after an early termination of their term of office in case of resignation".

Under the relevant Russian law, lawmakers in the lower and upper houses of parliament are immune to criminal prosecutions.

The proposals to change the Constitution, which were accompanied by a government reshuffle, were made in Putin's State of the Nation address on Jan 15.

The lower house of parliament backed the changes in a preliminary vote last month. The new proposals will also be put to a vote.

Among them is a suggestion that presidents become lawmakers for life in the upper house of parliament once their terms in the Kremlin end or they resign, chairman of the State Duma Committee on State

Building and Legislation Pavel Krashenninikov said, Interfax news agency reported.

Krashenninikov said the idea had been put forward by the working group of amendments and was based on their study of upper houses of parliament in other countries.

He said the amendments would allow Russia to tap into the "colossal experience and knowledge" of former presidents.

Russian state Tass news agency said that the amendments would also focus on the procedure of shaping the Federation Council, which is made up of representatives from the regions, while the president also has the right to submit his candidacies.

Increased share

Krashenninikov said the share of presidential candidates in the Federal Assembly is currently no more than 10 percent (17 people), and the amendments suggested "increasing the presidential share to 30 people, of whom seven representatives can be appointed by the president for life for merits to the country in their state and public activity".

The working group has already put forward an array of other proposals, including one that would change Putin's job description to Supreme Ruler.

Before they become law, the constitutional amendments must be approved by the lower house of parliament in two further votes before being voted on by the upper house, examined by regional parliaments, and then signed by Putin.



Palestinian demonstrators take part in a rally against US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Tuesday. MOHAMAD TOROKMAN / REUTERS

Abbas steps up criticism of new peace proposal as a gift to Israel

By LIU XUAN
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Palestine has again rejected a US peace plan for the region and instead called for international powers and agencies to convene talks in a bid to help start negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis.

But the suggestion of a new diplomatic mechanism under an international umbrella has left some analysts skeptical on the feasibility of such an arrangement.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday encouraged the international quartet of Middle East mediators — the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations — to join with the UN Security Council and other countries "to hold an international conference for peace ... to implement resolutions of international legitimacy".

However, the diplomatic mechanism, if established, may play only a limited role in solving the problems between Palestine and Israel and in restricting the behavior of the United States, said Shu Meng, a researcher at the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University.

"Palestine wishes to restrict the influence of the US by including more powers, especially when the other three parties in the quartet are at odds with the US in dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli issues," she said. "Thus, their involvement can restrict the US' attitude of being partial toward Israel."

But any restrictions on the US' behavior would be limited, as indicated by the fact that the condemnations and criticism of its Middle East peace plan "didn't ultimately change the US' support for Israel", Shu said.

Also, given the main players' different positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, it would be hard for them to work together to mediate, she added.

Moreover, the mechanism may not prove as effective as Abbas would hope for in settling the arguments between Palestine and Israel with the absence of any direct participation by Arab countries.

"One of the core problems of the Palestinian-Israeli issue concerns the refugees, and this issue involves countless ties with the surrounding Arab countries," Shu said. "It is unrealistic to bypass those countries when trying to solve the refugee problem as Pales-

tine, Israel and the Arab world are closely intertwined on this point."

The mediation goal of the mechanism cannot work unless there is some common ground for agreement between Palestine and Israel, Shu said.

Abbas reiterated on Tuesday his grounds for rejecting the newly released Middle East peace plan, calling it an "Israeli-American proposal" and that it violates principles of international legitimacy.

"I have come to you on behalf of 13 million Palestinians to call for a just peace. That is all. I have come to you today to reaffirm the Palestinian position that rejects the Israeli-American proposal," Abbas told the UN Security Council, which met to discuss the US plan.

He said that the US "cannot be the sole mediator", adding that the Palestinians have experienced this before and will not agree to do so again.

The Security Council meeting was requested by Tunisia and Indonesia after Trump on Jan 28 revealed his controversial plan, which calls for a two-state solution while recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital".

Xinhua and Agencies contributed to this story.



A swell time

Hawaiian surfer Kai Lenny gets the better of a monster wave during the Nazare Tow Surfing Challenge in Nazare, Portugal, on Tuesday. MIGUEL RIOPA / AFP

Briefly

UNITED STATES Sanders wins New Hampshire primary

Bernie Sanders narrowly won New Hampshire's Democratic presidential primary on Tuesday, solidifying his front-runner status in the White House race and dealing a setback to moderate rival Joe Biden, who finished a disappointing fifth. Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, who narrowly edged out Sanders in last week's messy Iowa caucuses, came in a close second, after splitting much of the centrist vote with Senator Amy Klobuchar. Biden, the former US vice-president who was once the front-runner in the race, limped to his second consecutive poor finish after placing fourth in Iowa.

EGYPT Population officially hits 100 million

Egypt's fast-growing population hit 100 million on Tuesday, the official statistics agency announced, presenting a pressing problem for the

country with limited resources. The staggering figure is an increase of 7 million since the publication of the latest census results in 2017. Egypt's population has tripled since 1960, with the annual growth rate peaking in 1987 at nearly 2.8 percent. Every day nearly 5,000 people are born in Egypt, the agency estimates. The country is trying to cope with resurgent birthrates and a "youth bulge" that has reached a peak. Roughly 62 percent of the population are below the age of 29, according to the UN Population Fund.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA Four survive 32 days adrift in Pacific

Four people survived a month adrift in the Pacific by eating coconuts and drinking rainwater in an ordeal that claimed the lives of eight of their companions, including a baby, reports said on Wednesday. The group, from Papua New Guinea's Bougainville Province, are believed to have spent 32 days at sea. The Solomon Star News reported the group set off from Bougainville on

Dec 22, intending to celebrate Christmas in the Carteret Islands, about 100 kilometers away. But the small boat capsized and a number of the group drowned and the rest managed to right the vessel. They were finally picked up on Jan 23 off New Caledonia after drifting nearly 2,000 km.

SYRIA Rebels shoot down helicopter in Idlib

Rebels shot down a Syrian military helicopter in northern Syria on Tuesday, killing its crew members in a fiery crash, while the government forces kept up their bombing campaign on the opposition-held region. The violence in Idlib Province came as government troops moved closer to capturing the last rebel-controlled section of a strategic highway linking southern and northern Syria, which would bring the road under the full control of government forces for the first time since 2012.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Manila terminates troop pact with US

MANILA/WASHINGTON — Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on Tuesday announced the termination of a two-decade-old Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, or VFA.

Duterte, who has clashed with the US over several issues, decided to pull the plug on the troop rotation pact with the former colonial ruler to enable the Philippines to be more independent in its relations with other countries, his spokesman Salvador Panelo said.

"The president will not entertain any initiative coming from the US government to salvage the VFA, neither will he accept any official invitation to visit the US," Panelo said.

The decision was sparked by the revocation of a US visa held by a former police chief who led Duterte's war on drugs.

It would also limit Philippine access to US training and expertise in tackling extremism, natural disasters and maritime security threats.

Panelo said Duterte's decision was a consequence of US legislative and executive actions that "bordered on assaulting our sovereignty and disrespecting our judicial system".

"The effectivity (of the notice of termination) will be 180 days from the receipt of the US government of such notice," Panelo said.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper called the decision "unfortunate" and said it would be a move in the wrong direction.

The US embassy in Manila acknowledged receipt of Manila's notice and said Washington "will carefully consider how best to move forward to advance our shared interests".

Given the importance of the alliance with the Philippines in broader US strategy, Washington hopes the decision will be reversed or delayed before it takes legal effect.

Esper told reporters traveling with him to Brussels for a NATO meeting he only received notification of the move late on Monday. "We have to digest it. We have to work through the policy angles, the military angles. I'm going to hear from my commanders. But ... in my view, it's unfortunate that they would make this move," he said.

Clandestine activities

The Philippines and the US signed the VFA in 1998, allowing joint Philippine-US military operations. The Philippine Senate ratified the agreement in 1999, seven years after the closure of the last US base on Philippine territory.

Duterte said the US uses the pacts to conduct clandestine activities like spying and nuclear weapons stockpiling.

Ending the VFA could hurt Washington's future interests in maintaining an Asia-Pacific troop presence amid friction over the presence of US personnel in Japan and South Korea.

Some lawmakers are concerned that without the VFA, two other pacts would be irrelevant, namely the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement made under the Barack Obama administration, and a 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty.

Those cover dozens of annual military training exercises and broaden the access of US forces and equipment to the Philippines, as well as bind the two countries to defend each other from external aggression.

Supporters of the agreements said the \$1.3 billion of US defense assistance since 1998 has been vital in boosting the capabilities of Philippine forces.

Opponents, however, argued that the US did nothing to stop escalation in the South China Sea and said the VFA is lopsidedly favorable to US citizens, including the granting of immunity from prosecution for US servicemen.

Duterte has earlier said that he wants all security agreements between the US and the Philippines reviewed or scrapped.

"America is very rude. They are so rude," Duterte said.

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