

Democrats prep resolution against Trump's declaration

Votes will let Dems take a defiant stance

WASHINGTON, Feb 21, (AP): House Democrats will file a resolution Friday aimed at blocking the national emergency declaration that President Donald Trump has issued to help finance his wall along the Southwest border, teeing up a clash over billions of dollars, immigration policy and the Constitution's separation of powers.

Though the effort seems almost certain to ultimately fall short — perhaps to a Trump veto — the votes will let Democrats take a defiant stance against Trump that is sure to please liberal voters. They will also put some Republicans from swing districts and states in a difficult spot.

Formally introducing the measure sets up a vote by the full House likely by mid-March, perhaps as soon as next week, because of a timeline spelled out by law. Initial passage by the Democratic-run House seems assured.

The measure would then move to the Republican-controlled Senate, where there may be enough GOP defections for approval. The law that spells out the rules for emergency declarations seems to require the Senate to address the issue too, but there's never been a congressional effort to block one and some procedural uncertainties remain.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., seemed to predict approval, telling colleagues in a letter that her chamber will "move swiftly" to pass it and "the resolution will be referred to

the Senate and then sent to the president's desk."

Should the House and Senate initially approve the measure, Congress seems unlikely to muster the two-thirds majorities in each chamber that would be needed later to override a certain Trump veto.

Even so, Republican senators facing tough 2020 re-election fights in competitive states like Arizona, Colorado and North Carolina would have to take stances that could risk dividing the GOP's pro-Trump and more moderate voters.

Moderate Sen Susan Collins, R-Maine, said Wednesday she would back a resolution blocking the declaration, making her the first Republican to publicly state her support for the effort to thwart the emergency. With Republicans holding a 53-47 majority, three more GOP senators would need to vote with Democrats for the resolution to win initial approval.

Discomfort

The votes could also cause discomfort for other Republicans who've opposed the declaration. Many have expressed concerns that Trump's declaration sets a precedent for future Democratic presidents to declare emergencies to help their own favored issues, like global warming or gun control.

The battle is over an emergency declaration Trump has issued to access billions of dollars beyond what Congress has authorized to start erecting border barriers. Building the wall

was the most visible trademark of his presidential campaign.

Congress approved a vast spending bill last week providing nearly \$1.4 billion to build 55 miles of border barriers in Texas' Rio Grande Valley while preventing a renewed government shutdown. That measure represented a rejection of Trump's demand for \$5.7 billion to construct more than 200 miles.

Besides signing the bill, Trump also declared a national emergency and used other authorities that he says gives him access to an additional \$6.6 billion for wall building. That money would be transferred from a federal asset forfeiture fund, Defense Department anti-drug efforts and a military construction fund. Federal officials have yet to identify specifically which projects would be affected.

Pelosi and Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, circulated separate letters Wednesday to lawmakers seeking co-sponsors to his one-sentence resolution. A Castro aide said there were already 102 co-sponsors, all Democrats. Both letters targeted Friday for the measure's introduction.

While Congress is in recess this week, the House has a brief "pro forma" session Friday for bill introductions but no votes.

Castro's measure says Trump's emergency declaration "is hereby terminated." He chairs the 38-member Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

"The president's decision to go outside the bounds of the law to try to get what he failed to achieve in the constitutional legislative process violates the Constitution and must be terminated," Pelosi wrote.

Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-NY, said in a joint statement last week that lawmakers will use "every remedy available" to defend Congress' powers, including in the courts.

Democratic aides said Wednesday that leaders were still deciding exactly what legal action to take, and when.

Outside activists said they understood from conversations with congressional staff that Democrats were likely to file their own lawsuit, rather than simply joining other actions that 16 state attorneys general and liberal, environmental and other organizations have commenced separately.

It remained unclear whether Democrats would wait for congressional action to play out before going to the courts.

Declaration

Speaking Tuesday about the attorneys general suit, Trump said he expected to do "very well" in the case and said he had an "absolute right" to make the declaration.

Democrats and some Republicans say there is no emergency at the border. They say Trump is improperly declaring one to work around Congress' rejection of the higher amounts.

Once a resolution of disapproval is introduced, the national emergency law says it must be assigned to a committee, which has 15 calendar days to send it to the full chamber. The House parliamentarian has assigned Castro's measure to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

That chamber then has three calendar days to vote on it. The timing could be shortened, which is why a vote could occur more quickly.

The same procedure is then repeated in the second chamber. The law requires those timetables unless either chamber votes to do otherwise. If McConnell tries using that provision to delay the vote on the resolution, the vote on slowing the measure will become the key showdown.

A spokesman for McConnell declined to comment on what the leader will do.



Trump



British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn (right), speaks with the media outside EU headquarters in Brussels, on Feb 21. Corbyn is in Brussels to meet European Union chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier. (AP)

Where will it lead?

Brexit defections disclose frayed fabric of UK politics

LONDON, Feb 21, (RTRS): Brexit has torn the fabric of Britain's political system, say a group of 11 lawmakers behind a dramatic series of defections that have sent shockwaves through one of the world's oldest and most stable parliaments.

But the group needs to incite a much wider rebellion to achieve its goal of triggering a rethink over the country's exit from the European Union and smashing a two-party structure that they say is no longer fit for purpose.

"Where will it lead? It could lead to nowhere, it could become a footnote in the history of Brexit, or it could become the beginnings of the break-up of the party system which has been going for the last 100 years," said Tony Wright, Emeritus Professor of Government and Public Policy at UCL university.

"They need numbers. You're going to need some cabinet resignations, that would really set things moving."

Just 36 days from Brexit, Prime Minister Theresa May has yet to find a divorce deal with the EU that parliament will approve, leaving the world's fifth largest economy and all its global investors staring down the barrel of a potentially chaotic exit.

Over three days of high political theatre in London this week, three members of May's right-leaning Conservative Party and eight from the leftist Labour opposition have quit their parties to become independent lawmakers.

It is already the most significant breakaway group in almost four decades for a parliament in which the two main parties have formed the government of the day for almost a century, largely restricting smaller groups to the political fringes.

Defectors

The defectors, now known as 'The Independent Group', say their old parties have been hijacked by far-left and far-right factions, leaving the centre ground of British politics unmanned and powerless to exert its influence.

"You don't join a political party to fight it, and you don't stay in it and skirmish in the margins when the truth is the battle is over and the other side has won," said Anna Soubry, the one-time Conservative minister who resigned on Wednesday.

Brexit has proved to be the tipping point. The 2016 referendum that split the country 52-48 percent in favour of leaving also divided both main political parties, drawing a new battle line in parliament between 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' that cuts right through traditional party loyalties.

While the country is divided over EU membership, most agree it is at a crossroads and that its choices over Brexit will shape the prosperity of future generations. May has failed to rally eurosceptic and pro-EU wings of her party around a common position on how best to leave the bloc. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has been accused by critics of equivocation and a lack of clear direction.



Theresa May

Capitalise

The group knows it can only capitalise on widespread frustration over this stalemate and fears over the ticking Brexit clock if they succeed in convincing others there is a viable alternative to the two positions offered by Labour and the Conservatives.

"We have taken the first step in leaving the old tribal politics behind and we invite others who share our political values to do so too," said former Labour lawmaker Chuka Umunna, who resigned on Monday.

The lawmakers have not yet formed a new party with an agreed set of policies and positions on key issues. But their future will almost certainly be defined by Brexit, and they do not have much time to make an impact.

Almost all the group's members are clear that they do not want Britain to leave the EU without a deal, and they do want to hold a second referendum.

One or both of those views are shared by many in parliament, including ministers who have so far remained loyal to May and voted in favour of her deal despite their reservations.

But even in government, patience is wearing thin.

One minister who declined to be named, told Reuters prior to the defections that he was ready to vote against the government and face the sack if May hadn't made any progress on a deal. Several other have signalled publicly they could do the same.

Their loyalty is set to be tested next week when May either returns to parliament with a revised Brexit deal, or to set out what progress she has made towards one. Lawmakers will have a chance to vote on what happens next.

Those votes could see May's deal rejected and parliament handed an opportunity to seize control of the process and use it to rule out a no-deal exit and delay Britain's departure.

For The Independent Group this will be a defining moment to swell their ranks and reach the critical mass they need to attract the funding required to build a political party capable of fighting an election.

"Frankly if we have got the courage to do this, they can follow that. See it, grasp it, do the right thing by your country," Soubry said.

News in Brief

21 migrants rescued: Greek authorities say they have rescued 21 migrants found adrift in a small boat in a section of the northeastern Aegean Sea off the usual illegal immigration route.

The migrants were located Thursday between the island of Samothraki and the northeastern port of Alexandroupoli, after Greek authorities received an emergency call reporting their boat was in trouble.

Most migrants entering Greece illegally by sea from Turkey prefer the much shorter crossing to the eastern Aegean Sea islands, and the longer, northern route is rarely used.

Also Thursday, police in the northeastern region of Thrace said they detained nine Syrian and Afghan migrants found squashed into a car that was being driven west after crossing the land border from Turkey. The driver, a 20-year-old Syrian, was arrested on suspicion of people-smuggling. (AP)

German police detain 2: A German-Moroccan couple was arrested Thursday in central Germany on charges they were planning an Islamic extremist attack. A series of raids included searches of the homes of 12 other suspects, Frankfurt prosecutors said.

Frankfurt prosecutor Nadja Niesen said authorities believe the suspects were in the early stages of planning an attack in Germany.

"There was not yet a concrete attack target that we're aware of," she said.

The couple, both 26 and German-Moroccan dual nationals, tried to travel with their two young children to Syria in 2016 to join the Islamic State extremist group,

but were captured in Turkey and deported back to Germany, Niesen said.

They were arrested at their home in the Raunheim area, southwest of Frankfurt in the state of Hesse. (AP)

Comm flight fatalities up: A leading airline trade group says fatal commercial flight accidents increased in 2018 from a record low set in 2017.

The International Air Transport Association said Thursday 523 passengers and crew died in 11 fatal accidents last year, compared with 19 deaths in six fatal accidents in 2017.

The accident rate in 2018 was 1.35 accidents per million flights, better than the average 1.79 from 2013-2017 but higher than 1.11 in 2017.

IATA, with offices in Geneva and Montreal, says 4.3 billion passengers flew safely on 46.1 million flights in 2018.

It says "flying is safe and the data tell us that it is getting safer."

"Based on the data, on average a passenger could take a flight every day for 241 years before experiencing an accident with one fatality." (AP)

Spain's Vox debuts in Senate: Spain's far-right party Vox debuted in the upper house of parliament by blocking a motion calling for an official stance against homophobia in sport.

Vox automatically obtained the right to send one representative to the senate after it won 12 seats in a regional election in Andalusia in December, the first electoral success for the far-right in Spain in four decades. (RTRS)



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