

Coronavirus

Worsening COVID-19 outbreak

Hong Kong postpones elections by one year

HONG KONG, Aug 3, (AP): Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam announced Friday that the government will postpone highly anticipated legislative elections by one year, citing a worsening coronavirus outbreak in the semi-autonomous Chinese city.

The Hong Kong government is invoking an emergency ordinance in delaying the elections. Lam said the government has the support of the Chinese government in making the decision to hold the elections on Sept 5, 2021.



Lam

"The announcement I have to make today is the most difficult decision I've had to make in the past seven months," Lam said at a news conference.

"We want to ensure fairness and public safety and health, and need to make sure the election is held in an open, fair and impartial manner. This decision is therefore essential," she said.

The postponement is a setback for the pro-democracy opposition, which was hoping to capitalize on disenchantment with the current pro-Beijing majority to make gains. A group of 22 lawmakers issued a statement ahead of the announcement accusing the government of using the outbreak as an excuse to delay the vote.

Opinion

"Incumbent pro-democracy legislators, who represent 60% of the public's opinion, collectively oppose the postponement and emphasize the responsibility of the SAR government to make every effort to arrange adequate anti-epidemic measures to hold elections in September as scheduled," the group said, referring to the territory's official name, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

"Otherwise, it is tantamount to uprooting the foundation of the establishment of the SAR."

The city of 7.5 million people has had a surge in coronavirus infections since the beginning of July. Hong Kong has recorded 3,273 infections as of Friday, more than double the tally on July 1.

The government has tightened social distancing restrictions, limiting public gatherings to two people, and banned dining-in at restaurants after 6 pm.

The lead-up to the elections had been closely watched after a national security law that took effect in late June stipulated that candidates who violated the law would be barred from running.

The new law was seen as Beijing's attempt to curb dissent in the city after months of pro-democracy and anti-government protests rocked Hong Kong last year over a controversial – but now withdrawn – extradition bill that would allow suspects to be sent to the mainland for trial.

The months-long protests plunged Hong Kong into its largest ever political crisis, with clashes between protesters and police turning violent at times. Over 8,000 people have been arrested in connection to the protests since June 2019.

Disatisfaction with the Hong Kong government helped the pro-democracy bloc achieve a landslide victory in district council elections last November, a momentum that the opposition was hoping to ride to gain a majority in the legislature.

In Washington, White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said Friday the Trump administration strongly disapproved of Hong Kong's decision to postpone the election.

"We condemn the Hong Kong government's decision to postpone for one year its legislative council elections and to disqualify opposition candidates," McEnany said. "This action undermines the democratic processes and freedoms that have underpinned Hong Kong's prosperity and this is only the most recent in a growing list of broken promises by Beijing which promised autonomy and freedoms to the Hong Kong people until 2047 in the Sino-British joint declaration."

China's foreign ministry insisted that Hong Kong's legislative elections are an "internal affair."

"It is the responsibility of the Hong Kong SAR government to ensure that the elections for the 7th Legislative Council are held in a safe, orderly, fair and just environment," ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Friday. "We believe that the Hong Kong SAR government will proceed from the current anti-epidemic situation in Hong Kong and handle relevant matters in accordance with the law."

Activist

On Thursday, 12 pro-democracy candidates including prominent pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong were disqualified from running for not complying with the city's mini-constitution or pledging allegiance to the local and national governments.

"Beyond any doubt, this is the most scandalous election ever in Hong Kong history," Wong said at a news conference Friday. "I wish to emphasize that no reasonable man would think that this election ban is not politically driven."

"Beijing has staged multiple acts to prevent the opposition bloc from taking the majority in the Hong Kong legislature," he said.

Germany, which currently holds the European Union's rotating 6-month presidency, said it was suspending its extradition agreement with Hong Kong to protest the decision to postpone the elections and disqualify the candidates.

"We have repeatedly made clear our expectations that China will comply with its obligations under international law," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said. "This includes protecting the freedoms and rights guaranteed in the Basic Law, and this includes the right to free and fair elections."

The postponement also drew criticism from the New York-based group Human Rights Watch.

"Postponing the September elections for a year is a cynical move to contain a political emergency, not a public health one. This simply allows Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam to deny Hong Kong people their right to choose their government," said Sophie Richardson, the group's China director.

"Without making any attempt to look at alternative methods of voting, or ensuring all voting rights will be respected, Lam and her backers in Beijing are merely masking repression under the guise of public health," she said.

Separately, mainland state broadcaster CCTV said Friday that Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Nathan Law, former British Consulate employee Simon Cheng and four others were wanted under the national security law on suspicion of inciting secession and collusion with foreign forces.

The six are currently overseas, according to CCTV. Law fled Hong Kong for the UK in early July and Chen was granted political asylum in Britain.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson tries out a North Yorkshire Police Rural Taskforce electric bike during a visit to North Yorkshire Police headquarters, Northallerton, England on July 30, 2020. (AP)

Coronavirus

Virus spread speeds up

UK delays easing of lockdown

LONDON, Aug 3, (AP): British Prime Minister Boris Johnson put some of the country's next steps out of lockdown on hold Friday with just a few hours' notice, saying the number of new coronavirus cases was on the rise for the first time since May.

The government's top medical adviser warned that it was impossible to fully reopen society without the virus running out of control.

Johnson said statistics showed that the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community is likely increasing, with an estimated 4,900 new infections every day, up from 2,000 a day at the end of June. Britain has Europe's highest confirmed death toll in the pandemic, more than 46,000, behind only the United States and Brazil.

"We just can't afford to ignore this evidence," Johnson said at a news conference. "With those numbers creeping up, our assessment is that we should now squeeze (the) brake pedal in order to keep the virus under control."

Johnson called off plans to allow venues, including casinos, bowling alleys and skating rinks, to open beginning Saturday. The return of wedding receptions was also delayed, along with plans to allow some fans back into sports stadiums and limited audiences into theaters.

He said the measures will be reviewed after two weeks.

The prime minister said a rule requiring face coverings to be worn in shops and on public transit will be extended to museums, galleries, cinemas and places of worship beginning on Aug 8.

One change that was not put on hold: Beginning Saturday, UK businesses can ask employees to return to workplaces as long as they have been made "COVID secure."

Scientists advising the government say they are no longer confident that the R figure, which measures how many people each infected person passes the disease to, is below 1 in England. A number above 1 means the virus will spread exponentially.

England's Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, said the country had reached "the outer edge" of its ability to return to normal without risking a new wave of the disease.

"We have to be realistic about this," he said at the news conference. "The idea that we can open up everything and keep the virus under control is clearly wrong."

"If we do pull back, then we should be able to hold the line."

Travel

Britain imposed a nationwide lockdown in March – closing schools and businesses and barring all but essential travel – and has been lifting it in stages since June.

Countries across Europe that were hit hard by the pandemic in the spring, including Spain, are seeing rising infection rates after lifting lockdowns. Johnson said Britain was not immune from the resurgence.

"We must keep our discipline. We must be focused and we cannot be complacent," he said.

On Thursday, the government reimposed restrictions on social life across a swath of northern England because of a surge in cases, barring households from visiting one another.

Under the new restrictions, people from different households in Greater Manchester, England's second largest metropolitan area, have been asked not to meet indoors. The order also applies to the surrounding areas of Lancashire and West Yorkshire counties, affecting more than 4

million people in all.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said while it's not the "sort of decision that anybody would want to take," the government had no choice because data showed the coronavirus was being spread primarily between households.

Opposition politicians supported the move but criticized the government for announcing the restrictions in a tweet from Hancock late Thursday, just two hours before they took effect at midnight.

Labour Party business spokeswoman Lucy Powell said the "bolt out of the blue" approach was "not the way to build confidence and to take people with you and maximize compliance with these steps."

The affected region has a large Muslim population, and the restrictions coincide with the Eid al-Adha holiday, where many people would normally gather in each other's homes.

The Muslim Council of Britain's secretary general, Harun Khan, sharply criticized the way the announcement was made, saying that for Muslims "it is like being told they cannot visit family and friends for Christmas on Christmas Eve itself."

The restrictions on northern England are the second batch of local restrictions imposed in Britain to try to curb a second wave of the virus, following a stricter local lockdown in the central England city of Leicester. The government said restaurants, pubs, shops and hairdressers in Leicester could reopen beginning Monday, more than a month after they were closed.

Britain's pandemic death toll is five times higher than Germany's, a country with a larger population. Johnson has said there will be an independent inquiry into why the UK has had such a high coronavirus death toll.



Nobel Peace Prize winner and former leader of the Social Democratic Labour Party John Hume is shown at the Guild Hall, Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The family of politician John Hume, who won Nobel Peace Prize for work to end violence in Northern Ireland, says he has died. He was 83. (AP)



Elphicke



Jo Johnson

Britain

John Hume dies at 83:

Politician John Hume, who won Nobel Peace Prize for work to end violence in his native Northern Ireland, has died, his family said. He was 83.

The former lawmaker had dementia and had suffered ill health for a number of years.

The Catholic leader of the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party, Hume was seen as the principal architect behind the peace agreement. He shared the prize with the leader of the Protestant Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, for their efforts to end the sectarian violence that plagued the region for three decades.

A civil rights leader who joined the Northern Irish civil rights movement in the 1960s, Hume saw nationalism as a declining force. He sought the notion of extending self-government to Northern Ireland with power divided among the groups forming it.

"Ireland is not a romantic dream; it is not a flag; it is 4.5 million people divided into two powerful traditions," he said. "The solution will be found not on the basis of victory for either, but on the basis of agreement and a partnership between both. The real division of Ireland is not a line drawn on the map, but in the minds and hearts of its people."

While both Hume and Trimble credited the people of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, it was Hume's diplomacy that offered the impetus to the peace process.

Hume won a breakthrough in Belfast's political landscape in 1993 by courting Gerry Adams, the head of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, in hopes of securing an IRA cease-fire.

Hume had envisioned a broad agenda for the discussions, arguing they must be driven by close cooperation between the British and Irish governments. The process was overseen by neutral figures like US mediator George Mitchell, with the decisions overwhelmingly ratified by public referendums in both parts of Ireland.

Without John Hume there would not have been a peace process, Mitchell said at the time the

prize was announced. Without David Trimble there would not have been a peace agreement. (AP)

UK lawmaker arrested:

British media reported Sunday that a Conservative Party lawmaker has been arrested after a former parliamentary aide accused him of rape and sexual assault while they were in a relationship.

The Sunday Times and Mail on Sunday did not name the lawmaker, who they reported was a former government minister. The complainant alleged that the man assaulted her and forced her to have sex, according to the Times.

The Metropolitan Police said it is investigating allegations of sexual offenses and assault relating to four incidents at addresses in London, including in Westminster, between July 2019 and January.

The force said officers arrested a man in his 50s on Saturday on suspicion of rape and took him into custody at a London police station. The man has been

released on bail. The force did not name the man, in accordance with its usual rule of not naming suspects until they are formally charged.

The investigation came days after former Conservative lawmaker Charlie Elphicke was convicted in a separate case of sexual assaulting two women, including a parliamentary worker.

The governing Conservative Party said in a statement it takes "all allegations of this nature extremely seriously" but that it could not comment because the matter was being investigated.

The party said it wasn't suspending the lawmaker but may review that decision once the police investigation has concluded.

Jess Phillips of the opposition Labour Party said it was "shocking" that the Tories refused to suspend the lawmaker under investigation.

"In any other organisation, were this police investigation to be going on, somebody would be suspended while the investigation



The London Eye – seen from across the River Thames in London, July 30, 2020 which will reopen to the public on Saturday Aug 1 after the coronavirus lockdown. (AP)

was taking place," she said. (AP)

Boris brother to Lords:

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson named 36 new members to Parliament's unelected House of Lords on Friday, including his brother, several prominent Brexit supporters and a Russian-born newspaper owner whose father was a KGB agent.

The list of new peers also includes Brexit-backing former lawmakers and ex-cricketer star Ian Botham, a vocal proponent of leaving the European Union.

Former Treasury chiefs Ken Clarke and Philip Hammond, who both opposed Brexit, were also appointed to the Lords. So was Evgeny Lebedev, owner of the Independent and Evening Standard newspapers. His father, Russian oligarch Alexander Lebedev, once worked for the KGB.

Former Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson is on the list, along with Johnson's chief of staff Eddie Lister and the prime minister's anti-Brexit brother Jo Johnson, who quit the government last year in opposition to its policies.

Most of the appointees are allied with Johnson's governing Conservative Party, though the list also includes several former opposition Labour Party lawmakers who supported Brexit, Britain's historic departure from the European Union.

A notable omission is former House of Commons Speaker John Bercow. It's customary for ex-Speakers to be appointed to the Lords, but Bercow infuriated the Conservative government by aiding lawmakers' efforts to change the course of Brexit.

The new members will be given aristocratic titles – baron or baroness – and will join almost 800 others in the House of Lords. (AP)

UK goes to Supreme Court:

The British government is going to the UK's Supreme Court to challenge the return of a woman who ran away from home as a teenager in London to join the Islamic State group.

A lower appeals court ruled earlier this month that Shamima Begum had the right to come back to her home country to mount a legal challenge aimed at restoring her British citizenship, which was revoked on national security grounds.

The three-judge Court of Appeal panel ruled that "the only way in which she can have a fair and effective appeal is to be permitted to come into the United Kingdom." Britain's Home Office challenged the decision, arguing that Begum doesn't have the right to repatriate.

A lawyer for the Home Office, James Eadie, said there were "significant national security concerns" surrounding her return.

"The exposure of the public to an increased risk of terrorism is not justifiable or appropriate in an individual case on fairness grounds save perhaps in the very rarest of cases ... this was not such a rare case," he said.

Begum, now 20, was one of three east London schoolgirls who traveled to Syria in 2015. She resurfaced at a refugee camp in Syria and said she wanted to come home, but her apparent lack of remorse triggered criticism and opposition to such a move.

Former Home Secretary Sajid Javid revoked her citizenship. Begum challenged Javid's action, arguing that it left her stateless.

The British government claimed she could seek a Bangladeshi passport based on family ties. But Begum's family argued that she was from the UK and never held a Bangladeshi passport. (AP)