

POLITICS

Trump has officially begun to withdraw the US from the World Health Organization as pandemic spikes

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WASHINGTON – The Trump administration has officially begun to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to grip the globe and infections spike in many states across the U.S.

Congress received formal notification of the decision on Tuesday, more than a month after President Donald Trump announced his intention to end the U.S. relationship with the WHO and blasted the multilateral institution as a tool of China. The White House said the withdrawal would take effect on July 6, 2021.

Democrats said the decision was irresponsible and ill-considered, noting it comes as the pandemic is raging and international cooperation is vital to confront the crisis.

"This won't protect American lives or interests – it leaves Americans sick & America alone," Sen. Bob Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, tweeted after receiving the White House's notification. "To call Trump's response to COVID chaotic & incoherent doesn't do it justice."

Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, said he would rejoin the WHO immediately if he wins.

"Americans are safer when America is engaged in strengthening global health. On my first day as President, I will rejoin the @WHO and restore our leadership on the world stage," the former vice president tweeted.

Tarik Jasarevic, a spokesman for the WHO, said the organization had received reports of the United States' formal notification. "We have no further information on this at this stage," he said.

The formal withdrawal comes as the United States nears 3 million reported coronavirus cases and more than 130,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data. Globally, there have been 11.6 million cases and almost 540,000 deaths.

Trump and his advisers have blasted the WHO for failing to press China to be more transparent about the scope and severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, which began in Wuhan, China.

Trump has said that China "has total control" over the WHO, even though it contributes far less than the US to the health organization's budget. The U.S. has contributed approximately \$450 million dollars a year.

Menendez and other Senate Democrats have introduced legislation to reverse the decision and restore U.S. funding to the WHO. It's unclear how far that could get in the GOP-controlled chamber, although some Republicans have also expressed concern with Trump's decision.

Critics said Trump's WHO attacks are an attempt to deflect blame from his own mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak – and one that will end up hurting the U.S.

"Deflecting blame onto the WHO won't reverse the administration's mistakes or undo the suffering our country has endured," said Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "The president needs to get serious about stopping this pandemic's lethal spread by restoring our membership in the WHO, ramping up testing, and encouraging everyone to practice social distancing and wear masks."

Amanda Glassman, a public health expert and executive vice president of the Center for Global Development think tank, noted the world doesn't just face today's threat of COVID-19 but also the treat of future pandemics, which are more likely because of increased zoonotic transmission.

The probability of a high lethality strain of influenza in the next decade or so is also significant, said Amanda Glassman, a public health expert and executive vice president of the Center for Global Development think tank. She said corrective measures at the WHO are needed but can only happen with the United States staying engaged.

"Withdrawal is counterintuitive at best and dangerous to human life at worst. The US Congress should immediately explore what power it has to prevent this from happening," Glassman said

Gayle Smith, president and CEO of The ONE Campaign, an advocacy group focused on improving global health and eliminating poverty, echoed that assessment. "The US should use its influence to strengthen and reform the WHO, not abandon it at a time when the world needs it most," said Smith, who served on the National Security Council and other top positions in the Obama administration.

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