

US VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE 2020

Pence, Harris set to lock horns in key face-off

AGENCIES

The incumbent, Mike Pence, and the California senator Kamala Harris are set to take part in a vice-presidential debate in Salt Lake City, Utah, today with both under pressure to show their readiness to step up to the top job.

The debate will be, given the age of the presidential candidates and the hospitalisation of US President Trump, the most important of its kind since VP debates began 40 years ago, experts have said.

The presidential race has been upended again, this time by 74-year-old Trump's infection with the coronavirus, focusing minds on the potential for Pence to take over even before election day on 3 November. The Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, is even older at 77, raising the prospect that if elected, he might not serve two terms but rather pass the torch to Harris in 2024.

Pence has been rehearsing for the debate with Pam Bondi, the former attorney general of Florida, playing the role of Harris, the Axios website reported. Harris has been practicing with Pete Buttigieg, a fellow Democratic primary candidate, standing in for Pence – both men are from Indiana.

The pair will debate with a plexiglass

shield between them, according to the news agencies, a precaution requested by the Biden-Harris campaign. And whereas Biden and Trump were separated by 7ft, Pence and Harris will be seated 12ft apart as an extra precaution.

Pence is a socially conservative Christian evangelical man from the midwest, Harris a progressive mixed race woman from California. Her past career as a criminal prosecutor, and a tormentor of Trump allies in congressional hearings, mean she is widely seen as a formidable debater.

Vice presidential debates tend to be boring events focused on how best a candidate would help the president if elected and what types of policies an administration would pursue. In the background of these debates is always the recognition that either individual must be ready to become president, if their ticket succeeds.

Whether Trump is reelected or Biden wins next month, they will be sworn in during a deadly pandemic that has proved to be particularly dangerous to older men. And Americans will be watching the VP debate with renewed awareness that one of those two individuals could easily become president—not because they ran for the office but because they succeeded to the office.



Marine One with US President Donald Trump is seen as it arrives to the White House from Walter Reed Medical Center after undergoing COVID-19 treatment, on Monday. Inset, Trump pulls off his protective face mask as he poses atop the Truman Balcony of the White House.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Downturn not as bad as feared

Says IMF chief on economic recovery as world confronts second wave of infections

AGENCIES

Amid a flood of government spending, the global downturn sparked by the coronavirus pandemic will not be as bad as originally feared, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said yesterday, but she warned that the crisis is far from over as coronavirus cases surge again around the world.

"The picture today is less dire... allowing for a small upward revision to our global forecast for 2020," she said in a speech ahead of IMF-World Bank autumn meetings next week, when the IMF is due to present its updated forecasts.

In June, the Washington-based crisis lender projected a nearly five percent contraction of global GDP, but results in the second and third quarters were better than expected.

Georgieva credited the "extraordinary policy measures that put a floor under the world economy" which amounted to \$12 trillion in fiscal support to households and firms.

But she warned governments not to prematurely withdraw the help they have provided, since the outlook for next year is mixed and rife with uncertainties and risks.

After more than a million deaths, "this calamity is far from over. All countries are now facing what I would call 'The Long Ascent' -- a difficult climb that will be long, uneven, and uncertain," Georgieva said.

In the United States and Europe the downturn, though painful, was not as bad as economists feared at the outset, and China is seeing "a faster-than-expected recovery."

But the news elsewhere is bad: "In low-income countries, the shocks are so profound that we face the risk of a 'lost generation,'" she said.

Low-income countries have not had the resources to spend as much to support jobs and businesses, and also will need help to deal with

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Paris bans cafes, bars; New York bans schools

Malaysia to impose targeted lockdowns to halt infections surge

US CDC revises guidance, says Covid can spread through virus lingering in air

their debt burden, including through more grants and debt restructuring.

She likened the crisis to World War II when leaders "forged a better world in the worst possible moment," and called for governments to continue support for workers as long as it is needed, while spending to create a better, more equitable, economic system.

Her statement came after a second wave of the coronavirus in Europe again imposed tough curbs on societies.

France yesterday shut bars and cafes in Paris after the reported nearly 17,000 new coronavirus cases on Saturday alone.

The coronavirus has continued to ravage the US: New York governor Andrew Cuomo announced Monday that schools would temporarily close in nine neighborhoods experiencing an uptick in Covid-19 infections.

Yesterday, Malaysia's Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said targeted lockdowns would be imposed in areas with high rates of coronavirus infections, as the country grapples with a sharp spike in cases over the past two weeks. The health ministry reported 691 new COVID-19 cases and four deaths yesterday.

Meanwhile, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Monday said Covid-19 can spread through virus lingering in the air, sometimes for hours, acknowledging concerns widely voiced by public health experts about airborne transmission of the virus.

In Monday's guidance, CDC said there was evidence that people with COVID-19 possibly infected others who were more than 6 feet away, within enclosed spaces with poor ventilation.

Under such circumstances, CDC said scientists believe the amount of infectious smaller droplet and particles, or aerosols, produced by the people with COVID-19 become concentrated enough to spread the virus.

US ELECTION 2020

Nearly 4m Americans have already voted early

REUTERS, Washington

Americans are rushing to cast ballots ahead of the November election at an unprecedented pace, early voting numbers show, indicating a possible record turnout for the showdown between President Donald Trump and Democratic rival Joe Biden.

With four weeks to go before Election Day Nov 3, more than 3.8 million Americans already have voted, far surpassing about 75,000 at this time in 2016, according to the US Elections Project, which compiles early voting data.

The shift has been driven by an expansion of early and mail-in voting in many states as a safe way to cast a ballot during the coronavirus pandemic and an eagerness to weigh in on the political future of Trump, said Michael McDonald of the University of Florida, who administers the project.

"We've never seen this many people voting so far ahead of an election," McDonald said. "People cast their ballots when they make up their minds, and we know that many people made up their minds long ago and already have a judgment about Trump."

The early surge has led McDonald to predict a record turnout of about 150 million, representing 65% of eligible voters, the highest rate since 1908.

Biden leads Trump in national opinion polls, although surveys in crucial battleground states indicate a tighter race.

The numbers reported so far come from 31 states, McDonald said, and will grow rapidly as more states begin early in-person voting and report absentee mail-in totals in the next few weeks. All but about a half-dozen states allow some level of early in-person voting.

Trump has repeatedly railed against mail-in voting, making unfounded accusations that it leads to fraud. Experts say fraud is rare.

A national Reuters/Ipsos poll taken last week found 5% of Democrats nationwide said they had already voted compared to 2% of Republicans. About 58% of Democrats planned to vote early compared to 40% of Republicans.

In the crucial battleground state of Florida, Democrats have requested more than 2.4 million mail-in ballots and returned 282,000, while Republicans have asked for nearly 1.7 million and returned more than 145,000.



People protesting the results of a parliamentary vote gather by a bonfire in front of the seized main government building, known as the White House, in Bishkek, yesterday. Opposition groups said they had seized power in Kyrgyzstan yesterday after taking control of government buildings during post-election protests in the strategically important Central Asian state. President Sooronbai Jeenbekov said the country was facing an attempted coup d'etat.

Hundreds of thousands shackled for mental health issues: HRW

REUTERS, Abuja

Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children with mental health conditions are living chained up in roughly 60 countries, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

Without mental health support or awareness, families or institutions often shackle people against their will, leaving them eating, sleeping, urinating and defecating in one small space, the rights watchdog said in a report.

In the run-up to World Mental Health Day on Oct 10, Human Rights Watch's report documents through almost 800 interviews how people with psychosocial disabilities in countries like China, Nigeria and Mexico can live shackled for years - chained to trees, locked in cages, imprisoned in animal sheds.

"We have found the practice of shackling across religions, social strata, economic classes, cultures and ethnic groups - it's a practice that is found around the world," said Kriti Sharma, senior disability rights researcher at Human Rights Watch, in an interview.

Last year, Nigerian authorities' raids on Islamic rehabilitation centres for drugs and behavioural issues made global headlines after boys and men told of being shackled, kept naked, beaten and sexually abused.

But around the world, in state-run and private centres and traditional and religious healing institutions, handlers deny people food, force medications and herbal remedies on them, and mete out physical and sexual violence, Human Rights Watch said.

In many countries, these services are "very profitable businesses," Sharma said. The watchdog said families often shackle their loved ones out of fear they will escape and harm themselves or others.

Turkey criticises ceasefire efforts to end Nagorno-Karabakh crisis

REUTERS, Ankara

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday criticised international efforts to tackle the Azeri-Armenian conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, saying they had achieved nothing in nearly 30 years.

Fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh, which belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but is populated and governed by ethnic Armenians, has risen to its worst level since the 1990s.

Turkey has condemned what it calls Armenian occupation of Azeri lands and vowed full solidarity with its ethnic Turkic kin in Azerbaijan. Ankara has repeatedly called on Yerevan to withdraw its troops from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Speaking during a visit to the Azeri capital Baku yesterday, Cavusoglu said a ceasefire alone would not be sufficient to end the fighting.

"We look at the calls coming from around

the world, and it's 'immediate ceasefire'. What then? There was a ceasefire until now, but what happened?" Cavusoglu said in comments broadcast on Turkish television.

"Can you tell Armenia to immediately withdraw from Azeri lands? Can you come up with a solution for it to withdraw? No, it's the same calls for 30 years," he added.

Last week, France - a co-chair of the Minsk group mediating the conflict along with Russia and the United States - proposed a new initiative to restart talks between Baku and Yerevan. The battles began on September 28 in a long-simmering territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave that broke away from Azerbaijan in the 1990s.

Neither side has shown any inclination to slow hostilities despite a mounting civilian death toll. Azerbaijan's defence ministry and Karabakh's foreign ministry both said fighting was continuing on several fronts yesterday morning.

Unite against China's coercion

Says Pompeo; Beijing leads UN call for US to end sanctions

AFP, Tokyo

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday called on key Asian allies to unite against China's "exploitation, corruption and coercion" in the region, as he held talks in Tokyo.

Pompeo was speaking at the start of discussions with his Japanese, Indian and Australian counterparts -- the so-called Quad grouping, seeking to present a united front against an increasingly assertive Beijing.

But it was the top US diplomat who took the hardest line on China, referring to the "pandemic that came from Wuhan".

He warned it was "more critical now than ever that we collaborate to protect our people and partners from the CCP's exploitation, corruption and coercion", citing China's actions in the Himalayas, Taiwan Strait and elsewhere.

This rhetoric was not fully echoed by Washington's partners in the grouping, although Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne pointedly spoke of the desire for a region "governed by rules, not power".

The talks come with Washington, Sydney and New Delhi all at loggerheads with Beijing.

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar noted the fact that the meeting was happening at all, given the coronavirus pandemic, was "testimony to the importance" of the alliance.

Although planned stops in South Korea and Mongolia were scrapped, Pompeo said it was important to go ahead with the four-way talks.

However, no joint statement or press conference is expected after the meeting.

Pompeo's call came a day after China, Russia and two dozen other countries called on the United States and Western countries to end the use of unilateral sanctions, which they said make it harder to deal with Covid-19.

In a statement read by Chinese envoy Zhang Jun at the UN, they accused the US of violating human rights, systematic racial discrimination and hindering development in countries it places economic sanctions on. It was made to the UN General Assembly's third committee, which focuses on human rights and humanitarian affairs.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Italy cabinet softens harsh Salvini migrant laws

Italy's cabinet yesterday softened tough anti-migrant laws penned by far-right chief Matteo Salvini, making it easier for people to apply for humanitarian protection or obtain work permits. The centre-left coalition government had pledged on coming to power last year that it would overhaul Salvini's draconian laws, which penalised charity ships rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean, and had been widely criticised by rights campaigners. Previously, asylum was only granted to those who risked being tortured if repatriated. Protection will now be extended to those who risk being subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment, or having their right to private and family life violated.

EU court curbs mass phone data grab by spy agencies

The EU's top court yesterday put limits on how European spy and security agencies could harvest troves of personal data, but said this could be done under a serious threat to national security. Data privacy is a highly sensitive issue in Europe, where activists have put the legality of Facebook and other big tech operations into jeopardy over similar concerns. The legal onslaught began after revelations by Edward Snowden of mass digital spying by US agencies that also revealed cooperation with Washington by the UK's spy agencies. The mass harvesting of data is a central part of anti-terror laws passed in several Western countries in the wake of September 11 and other attacks.

Maldives ex-vice president gets 20 years for graft



Maldives former vice president Ahmed Adeb has been sentenced to 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to graft, money laundering and abuse of power, court officials said yesterday. Adeb was a close ally of ex-president Abdulla Yameen until Adeb was jailed for allegedly trying to assassinate the strongman former ruler with a bomb on board his yacht in 2015. The Criminal Court in an overnight decision also imposed a fine of two million rufiyaa (\$129,000) on him. He was accused of causing a loss of about \$260 million to the state in leasing islets for resort development and receiving kickbacks from tourism companies.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS