

International

Supreme Court to tackle gay rights, guns, abortion, Trump

Trump's appointees have moved court to the right

WASHINGTON: The US Supreme Court's new term opens on Monday with the conservative majority in a position to take a more aggressive rightward turn on divisive issues including abortion, gay rights and gun control while also refereeing legal brawls involving President Donald Trump. The court has moved to the right since Trump took office, with a 5-4 conservative majority that includes two justices he appointed: Brett Kavanaugh in 2018 and Neil Gorsuch in 2017.

"We will likely see the court move further and faster in a rightward direction," said Irv Gornstein, executive director of Georgetown University Law Center's Supreme Court Institute. The justices are due to tackle a larger number of consequential cases than they did

in their previous term, and they could end up producing more 5-4 rulings along ideological lines with the conservative justices on the winning end and the four liberal justices in dissent, according to court experts.

There were few such rulings in the term that ended in June. In one of the biggest rulings of the last term, conservative Chief Justice John Roberts joined the four liberals in blocking Trump from adding a citizenship question to the 2020 U.S. census that opponents called an effort to intimidate immigrants into not taking part in the decennial population count. The nine justices on Tuesday will hear their first major case: on whether gay and transgender people are protected by a landmark federal civil rights law that bars em-

ployment discrimination. On Nov 12, they will weigh the legality of Trump's move to end a program created by his Democratic predecessor Barack Obama that protects from deportation hundreds of thousands of immigrants - mostly Hispanic young adults - who were brought into the United States illegally as children. The court has arguments scheduled for Dec 2 in the first major gun rights case in decade, although the justices potentially could dismiss it because the New York City law being challenged by gun rights advocates has been amended since the litigation began. Other gun-related cases wait in the wings for possible action by the justices.

The court could announce as soon as this week whether it will take up two appeals re-

garding Republican-backed abortion restrictions enacted in Louisiana and Indiana. If the court were to take either or both of those cases, it would raise the possibility of a ruling that curbs abortion rights, as hoped for by anti-abortion activists.

The Louisiana case concerns a challenge by an abortion clinic to state requirements that doctors who perform the procedure have a difficult-to-obtain arrangement known as "admitting privileges" with local hospitals. It is similar to a Texas law that the Supreme Court struck down in 2016, when conservative Justice Anthony Kennedy sided with the court's liberals. Kennedy, who defended abortion rights in some pivotal rulings, retired last year and was replaced by Kavanaugh.—Reuters

At least seven dead; WWII plane crashes

NEW YORK: At least seven people were killed when a World War II bomber carrying 13 passengers and crew crashed at an airport in the northeastern US state of Connecticut Wednesday, local media reported. The Boeing B-17 aircraft, which the US Air Force deployed against Germany and Japan, crashed at Bradley International Airport while trying to land around 10:00 am.

Ten passengers and three crew were on the aircraft, which was operated by the Collings Foundation, a group catering to aviation buffs who pay to experience vintage planes, officials said. James Rovella, a Connecticut state disaster emergency official, told a news conference that there had been fatalities but added it was too early to say the exact number. "Burn victims are very difficult to identify. We don't want to make a mistake," he said.

A maintenance officer working on the ground was also injured, Rovella added. Local media later cited officials as saying that the crash left at least seven dead and nine injured, including three people who were on the ground at the time. Ten minutes after the flight took off at 9:45 am, the pilots radioed the control tower to say they were experiencing problems, said Kevin Dillon, director of the state's airport authority.

"We could see they could not gain altitude. Upon touchdown they obviously lost control, struck our de-icing facility here as well as a maintenance facility," he told reporters. A spokesman for Hartford Hospital, situated 15 miles from the airport, told AFP the facility had received six patients, three of whom were critical. It was not immediately clear what caused the crash. According to excerpts of a cockpit conversation reported by several news outlets, the pilot had asked the control tower for permission to land urgently because of an engine problem.

Photos circulating on social media and carried by US media outlets showed a thick black plume of smoke billowing from the crash site. Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal said the plane was one of only 18 B-17s left in the country, and that the crash might have implications for the flying of vintage aircraft. "If there were defects or improper maintenance as a cause, it is a very strong red flashing light for others who are flying these planes," he said. The airport was closed for several hours before later reopening. — AFP

Trump unleashes furious attacks amid impeachment storm

WASHINGTON: A bellicose Donald Trump unleashed furious attacks Wednesday on the impeachment inquiry launched against him by Democrats, amid an intensifying standoff between the president and Congress. Trump - accused of leaning on Ukraine's president to dig up dirt on one of his main 2020 election rivals - resorted to coarse language in his broadsides against the investigation and his adversaries conducting it.

Democrats should be "focused on building up our Country, not wasting everyone's time and energy on BULLSHIT, which is what they have been doing ever since I got overwhelmingly elected in 2016," Trump tweeted. Adam Schiff, the impeachment probe's Democratic point man in the House of Representatives, told reporters there is a "real sense of urgency" to press forward. Trump has fought back in terms once inconceivable for a president, including his claim late Tuesday that this is "not an impeachment, it is a COUP."

He amplified the message Wednesday standing alongside Finnish President Sauli Niinisto in the White House, branding the impeachment process - announced by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi last week - as a "hoax." Trump assailed Schiff, declaring the House Intelligence Committee chairman "a low life" who should be arrested for "treason." But at the same time Trump acknowledged he may yet cooperate with the latest move by Democrats, who threatened to subpoena the White House for documents related to the president's efforts to get Ukraine to probe a political rival.

"We'll work together with 'shifty' Schiff and Pelosi and all of them and we'll see what happens," he said. Trump insists he did nothing wrong in a July phone call with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky and on Wednesday got support from Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who said he saw "nothing compromising" in the conversation. Given Trump's controversial history with Putin, it was unlikely that the Kremlin leader's backing would do much to calm waters in Washington.

'Not fooling around'

A White House summary of the call showed Trump pressed Zelensky several times to open a corruption investigation against leading Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and son



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: Staff arrive at a closed door House Intelligence Committee meeting where former US Special Envoy for Ukraine Kurt Volker is being interviewed yesterday. Volker is the first official to testify on the whistleblowers charges that President Donald Trump tried to pressure Ukraine to investigate his Democratic rival Joe Biden. — AFP

Hunter, who did business in Ukraine when his father was vice president. Neither Biden has been credibly accused of any wrongdoing. "Biden and his son are stone-cold crooked," Trump said Wednesday. Trump is alleged to have suggested that US military aid Ukraine sought to beef up its defenses against Russia would be contingent on him getting that favor.

A whistleblower, so far only identified as someone from the intelligence services, went to authorities with concerns about the call, triggering the impeachment inquiry. Trump has likened the whistleblower to a spy and called for his or her identity to be made public, although by law whistleblowers are protected. Schiff on Wednesday called Trump's comments about the whistleblower a "blatant effort to intimidate witnesses." He also warned Trump and the White House to treat the pending subpoena with the utmost gravity.

"We're not fooling around here," Schiff said, adding that efforts to stonewall the collection of related data would be considered "evidence of obstruction of justice." Meanwhile, the State Department's independent watchdog met with a bipartisan group of staffers from House and Senate committees to discuss new wrinkles in the scandal. Inspector General Steve Linick showed staff, and some lawmakers who attended, documents sent mysteriously to State that included a rehash of conspiracy theories that appeared aimed at discrediting Trump's opponents.—AFP