

## International

# US Senate approves stopgap averting shutdown, denying Trump wall funds

## A step closer to avoiding a potentially crippling closure

**WASHINGTON:** The US Senate on Wednesday night approved an emergency short-term spending bill that averts a looming government shutdown, but excludes the \$5 billion that President Donald Trump sought for a US-Mexico border wall.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said the measure will fund normal government operations at current levels through February 8 — bringing Washington a step closer to avoiding a potentially crippling closure of some federal offices over the Christmas holiday.

The bill, which cleared the Senate by voice vote, will need to pass the House of Representatives and be signed by Trump before midnight Friday, when funding is set to expire for key agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security. Republican and Democratic leaders gave strong signals that the stopgap bill, known as a continuing resolution, would pass Congress and land on the president's desk.

"It's good that our Republican colleagues in the Senate finally realized that they should not shut down the government over a wall that does not have enough support to pass the House or Senate and is not supported by a majority of the country," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said upon the bill clearing the Senate. White House aides told US media that

Trump is inclined to sign the measure. But it is seen as a defeat for the president, who had argued strenuously for new funding for a wall that he insists would check illegal immigration.

Trump essentially abandoned his position from last week, when he told Democrats he would be "proud" to shutter government over border security. The six-week deal would temporarily break an impasse over spending and border security, as Democrats and Republicans continue to clash over immigration. It comes a day after Democratic leaders rejected a longer-term Republican offer that would have increased border security. Once Democrats take House control next month, they will be loathe to greenlight more money to Trump for his wall.

### 'Political spite'?

The president has fumed about Democrats not giving in, and he ranted about it again Wednesday. "In our Country, so much money has been poured down the drain, for so many years, but when it comes to Border Security and the Military, the Democrats fight to the death," he tweeted. "We won on the Military, which is being completely rebuilt. One way or the other, we will win on the Wall!"

McConnell's pragmatic move belied his irritation over what he called "Democrats' allergy to sensible immi-



In this file photo taken on November 18, 2018, would-be migrants to the United States from Honduras peer through the fence demarcating the US-Mexico border in San Ysidro, California. — AFP

gration policies." "It seems like political spite for the president may be winning out over sensible policy," he said. Some congressional conservatives complained about McConnell's maneuver — including Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who lamented the bill's pas-

sage. "This is a missed opportunity to deliver on the promises made to the American people," he said.

House Republican Mark Meadows had also said there was no excuse to back down on wall funding. Punting the issue to February 8 gives

Democrats a "Christmas present," tweeted Meadows, who chairs the far-right House Freedom Caucus. "Democrats will win, the wall will not be built, and Congress will once again have punted when we should've been taking a stand." — AFP

## Federal judge deals setback to Trump's asylum restrictions

**WASHINGTON:** A US federal judge dealt a new setback to President Donald Trump's anti-immigration efforts Wednesday, declaring unlawful a decision to block domestic and gang violence victims from seeking asylum. US District Judge Emmet Sullivan in Washington branded the restrictions "arbitrary, capricious, and in violation of the immigration laws."

"It is the will of Congress — not the whims of the executive — that determines the standard for expedited removal," he wrote. On June 11, then-attorney general Jeff Sessions announced that being a victim of domestic violence or a gang target was not sufficient grounds to seek asylum. "The asylum statute does not provide redress for all misfortune," Sessions said at the time. Twelve Central American asylum seekers — all fac-

ing deportation — then filed suit with the backing of immigrant rights groups.

Sullivan sided with them, suspending the restrictions and ordering that the plaintiffs' deportation orders be cancelled — or that those who had already been deported be brought back to the US. It followed his similar order in August to halt the deportation of a mother and daughter and return them to the US after removal proceedings began amid their appeal. White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said the ruling will "will further overwhelm our immigration courts with meritless cases" and "encourage more illegal immigration."

"Today's ruling is only the latest example of judicial activism that encourages migrants to take dangerous risks; empowers criminal organizations that spread turmoil in our hemisphere; and undermines the laws, borders, Constitution, and sovereignty of the United States," she added in a statement. Last month, a Californian judge blocked another administration attempt to automatically reject asylum seekers who cross the border illegally, sparking fury from the president. Trump's flagship effort — a travel ban for citizens from several mostly Muslim countries — was also repeatedly blocked before the Supreme Court approved the latest version. — AFP

## George HW Bush sponsored a Filipino boy

**CHICAGO:** To the boy in the Philippines, his American benefactor and source of kind letters and gifts was known simply as "G. Walker." To the Christian charity helping him keep his benevolence secret from the world, he was George Herbert Walker Bush — the 41st president of the United States. Compassion International, which helps poor children around the world through a network of local churches, revealed for the first time this week that the late president, who died last month, had quietly sponsored a Filipino boy named Timothy for 10 years.

The organization released a number of Bush's heartwarming letters to his young charge. "I want to be your new pen pal," Bush wrote in his initial letter sent on January 24, 2002. "I am an old man, 77 years old, but I love kids; and though we have not met, I love you already," said the former president, identifying himself as a resident of Texas. Bush's former press secretary Jim McGrath con-

firmed to AFP the authenticity of the letters.

"This is but one of seemingly countless acts of kindness that George Bush performed through the years without fanfare, but rather because it was what was in his heart," McGrath said. Bush began sponsoring Timothy with a monthly donation in 2002 until his graduation from the charitable program in 2012. Through all of that time, Bush's true identity was kept secret due to security concerns. At times, Bush's letters contained hints of his true identity, such as one in which he wrote: "I got to go to the White House at Christmas time. Here is a little booklet that I got at the White House in Washington." In others, he offered gentle advice.

"I sure hope you like school and athletics. I do. I am an old man — now 78 — but I feel young at heart," Bush wrote. Bush also occasionally sent gifts to Timothy, who spoke in his letters of loving to draw, and playing basketball and guitar. "I'd like to thank you for the letter you sent me, as well as the drawing pad, colored pen and colored pencil," Timothy wrote in 2004. At age 17, he graduated out of the program and a charity employee revealed to him the identity of his pen pal. Timothy was stunned, the organization told US media. The charity has since lost touch with Timothy, but its former president Wess Stafford is sure of Bush's impact on the young man's life. — AFP