

Analysis

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What Republicans mean when they talk about US welfare reform

US President Donald Trump had indicated he would like to rein in spending on US social welfare programs to follow up on his 2017 victory in overhauling the US tax code. Some Republicans, including House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan, welcomed the effort. Others, including Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, indicated they are hesitant to tackle this politically volatile issue in a congressional election year.

Trump said after speaking to congressional leaders that they may need to delay pursuit of a welfare overhaul, prioritizing immigration changes and infrastructure spending. There are roughly 80 welfare programs. Here are some that Republicans, who voted last month to add \$1.5 trillion to the US national debt over 10 years to pay for tax cuts, may target as they seek to cut federal spending.

Medicaid

Federal and state governments jointly fund Medicaid. The health insurance program for low-income, disabled, elderly and other individuals is administered by the states. About 68 million people - about one in five Americans - are insured by Medicaid. The program cost about \$553 billion in 2016. It is open-ended, meaning its cost can fluctuate if more individuals qualify for Medicaid coverage. Ryan has said capping Medicaid spending is a long-time goal.

As a candidate, Trump promised not to cut spending for Medicaid, the Medicare health insurance program for the elderly or the Social Security retirement program. But a White House budget blueprint released in May proposed slashing more than \$600 billion from Medicaid's budget over a decade. The Trump administration is examining ways to limit Medicaid eligibility. Seema Verma, head of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said in November the administration would encourage states to add work requirements to the program.

CHIP

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) offers health insurance for 8.9 million children in lower-income families. It is run jointly by the federal and state governments. Congress allowed CHIP funding to expire at the end of September 2017. States warned that they could be forced to shut down their programs or freeze enrollment. Under a deal to keep the government open through Jan. 19, Congress approved \$3 billion for in CHIP funding through March, when it will need another congressional reauthorization.

TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) provides federal block grants to states for programs to help needy families. TANF grants in 2017 aided 1.1 million families. The program has an annual budget of about \$16.5 billion, which Trump proposed trimming by 10 percent in his May blueprint.

EITC

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a refundable tax credit for low- and moderate-income taxpayers, particularly those with children. Roughly 28 million taxpayers claimed it in 2015. Republican tax legislation approved in December left the EITC largely unchanged.

Child Tax Credit

The Child Tax Credit is a partially refundable tax credit for taxpayers with children, which is phased out at higher income levels. The Republican tax legislation increased the credit to \$2,000 from \$1,000, setting the refundable portion at \$1,400 for those with earned income of \$2,500 or more. The bill made the credit available to higher-income families. The credit now phases out as income surpasses \$400,000 for married couples filing joint tax returns. Children must have a Social Security number for their parents to claim the credit.

SNAP

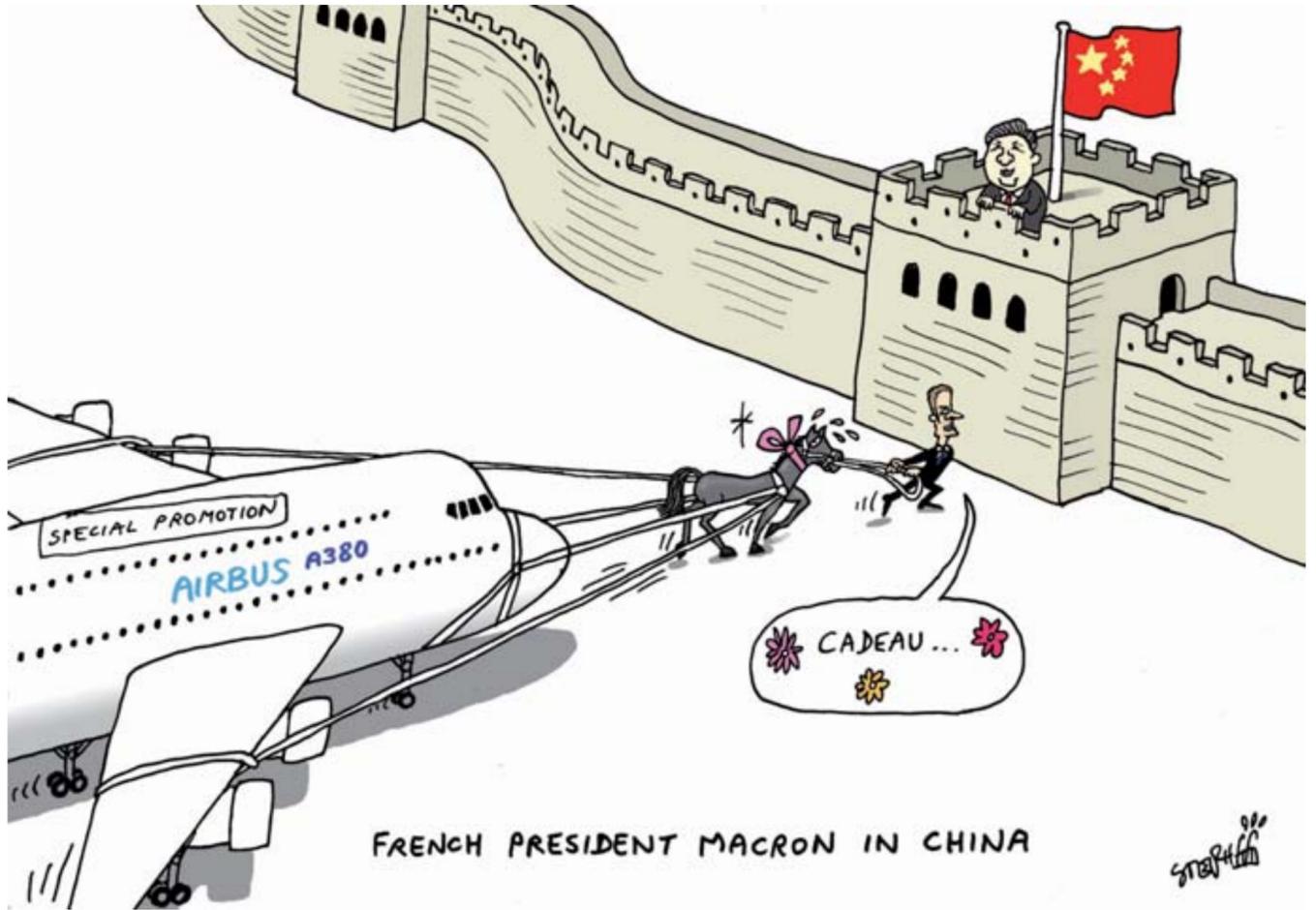
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is better known as food stamps. It helped nearly 44 million Americans in 2016, with an annual budget of about \$71 billion. Trump's budget proposed cutting more than \$192 billion from SNAP over a decade. The Agriculture Department said recently it will give states greater control over SNAP, potentially opening the door to drug testing or stricter work requirements.

WIC

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal block grants to states for supplemental nutrition and nutrition education for infants, young children and pregnant and post-partum women. More than half of all US-born infants get WIC benefits. WIC provided about \$6.5 billion in assistance in the 2017 fiscal year. About 7.7 million individuals received WIC benefits per month in 2016. Trump proposed cutting \$200 million from WIC's 2018 budget. House Republicans suggested a similar figure.

SSDI

Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) provides income benefits to disabled people unable to work who have paid past payroll taxes, which fund the program. SSDI benefits can be temporary or permanent. They are based on past earnings and do not run out so long as the person is disabled and cannot work. About \$143 billion in SSDI benefits were paid in 2016 to 10.2 million people. Trump's budget proposed reducing the time-frame for which recipients can obtain retroactive benefits and cutting \$64 billion from the program over the next decade. —Reuters



Refugee women unprotected against violence

Rolling up the sleeves of her long black robe to reveal a scar from a cigarette burn on her arm, refugee Sara shows how her husband pressed a pillow over her face to shut her up when he attacked her. The abuse began as soon as they got married in 2009, just a year after Sara had fled her home in Myanmar, where her fellow Rohingya - an ethnic Muslim minority - are shunned and persecuted in the Buddhist-majority nation.

She landed in Malaysia and married her husband, a 42-year-old Rohingya man, the following year. "I wanted to be a good wife but he was always very angry. He would not allow me to go out, he would expect me to have all the food ready, and prepare him a hot towel and a glass of water when he gets home. He would hit me if he was not happy. If I cried, he covered my mouth with a pillow so our neighbors could not hear me," said Sara, who used a pseudonym for fear of retaliation from her husband.

The 30-year-old eventually escaped her home with her six-year-old son and the pair has been living for five months in a shelter run by an organization that supports migrant workers and refugees. Stories like Sara's are not unusual among the refugee community in Malaysia, which hosts over 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers, the majority of them from Myanmar and some of whom have lived in the country for over a decade. Rights groups say uncertainty over their future and years of living in a host country where they are considered illegal migrants have taken a toll on their mental health, and driven up cases of domestic violence among refugee families.

'Silent in Fear'

Kuala Lumpur-based Tenaganita, a campaign group which works with refugees, said there was "extensive" gender-based violence against refugee women in Malaysia. Since last year, the group has been working with the University of

Colorado in the United States to conduct a two-year survey among some 500 Rohingya families in Malaysia on the prevalence of gender-based violence.

Tenaganita's executive director, Glorine Das, said although the survey is still underway, early indications showed both male and female respondents acknowledged physical and emotional abuse happened within their families. "Not being



Physical and emotional abuse happens within their families

able to resettle or taking a long time adds stress to the family," Das told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Ultimately husbands or the male family members tend to take it out on their female partners."

She added that the fact refugees are not recognized by the government also means that victims of violence have no legal avenue to turn to when they want to seek recourse. "Their deemed 'illegality' renders the women silent in fear," Das said. While the refugees are recognized by the UN's refugee agency UNHCR, Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which means all refugees are viewed as illegal migrants awaiting resettlement in a third country. The country also does not extend protection, job opportunities or education to them, leaving many refugees end up finding odd jobs in the informal sectors as cleaners, waiters or construction workers.

to seeds that better stand up to harsher conditions, as well as better fertilizers. They also get a guaranteed price for their crop, as long as they produce good-quality potatoes on time, said Wachira Kaguongo, head of the National Potato Council.

Fair Deals

The consortium, which was set up in 2016 by the National Potato Council, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and the Grow Africa partnership, aims to increase private investment in agriculture by linking potato farmers with food processors across the country, Kaguongo said.

“The cold damages potato vines with frostbite while heat makes them wilt”

Each production agreement is reviewed and approved by the National Potato Council, which ensures it is fair to both parties, said Willy Bett, cabinet secretary of the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries.

"Businessmen will always want to get farmers to sign something that may not be favourable to them," Bett told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "We're trying to prevent that by ensuring that

Campaigners say the lack of a formal status often leaves refugees vulnerable to abuse, and at risk of arrest as well as deportation under immigration laws. Some refugees are resettled by the United Nations in so-called third countries, such as the United States, Canada, the Czech Republic and Australia. Responding to a query from the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the UNHCR could not say how long on average it takes for a refugee in Malaysia to be resettled because applications are handled on a case by case basis.

But its data showed number of refugees who left Malaysia for resettlement fell from over 12,500 in 2015, to about 8,100 in 2016 and plummeted to 2,338 to the end of Oct 2017. "Given the limited numbers of resettlement places, UNHCR must prioritize those with acute and pressing vulnerabilities," UNHCR spokeswoman Yante Ismail said in an emailed reply. "For those who do not have a pressing need for resettlement, the process can take much longer, or may not even be an available option," she added.

Refugee Ban

Although President Donald Trump lifted a temporary ban on most refugee admissions in October, the number of refugees admitted to the United States has dropped, according to a Reuters analysis of State Department data. UNHCR's Yante said the uncertainty refugees feel about their future brings a "corrosive effect" on their mental and physical health and called on Malaysia to do more to protect them in the country.

Meanwhile violence - especially against women - continues. Noor Arifah Bujang, who provides counselling to refugee women, said they often told her stories of how their husbands were in constant fear of being arrested and struggled to make ends meet. "The (husbands) become stressed and they tend to beat up their wives or children. Marital rape is the most common," she said. —Reuters

farming activity is done on a contract basis in Kenya." Contract farming has allowed farmers to sell produce to food giants such as the fast-food chain KFC, formerly known as Kentucky Fried Chicken. Macharia's potatoes now fetch 22 shillings (\$0.20) per kilo, more than double what he used to get when selling them at the Kippiri open air market. "I am paid in cash at my farm," he said. "And I do not have to travel to the market when I don't want to." So far 5,000 farmers have signed up to the system, with a total of 23,000 expected to have made the switch by 2020, said Kaguongo.

Supply Shortage?

Felix Matheri, a researcher at the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology, said that while contract farming provides farmers with a steady income, it risks depriving poor families of their food supply. "Contracts bind farmers to supplying an agreed amount of potatoes, meaning that when the harvest is low farmers are forced to sell all their produce to meet their obligations," he explained. "But potatoes are rich in starch and a critical source of nutrients - farmers should save some for home consumption," he said.

Others have concerns about contract farming as well. Louise Wangari, a roadside seller of potatoes in Nyandarua County, said she is worried it might affect the supply she gets from farmers. "The quantity of potatoes I was getting from farmers was already decreasing due to extreme weather," she said. "If they start signing contracts with other buyers, then I may be out of business soon, as I can't afford to pay them as much as the food processors." —Reuters