

AUSTRALIA TO VOTE ON GAY MARRIAGE REFORM

SYDNEY: Australians are set to vote on legalising same-sex marriage, potentially ending years of political stalemate, after the nation's highest court yesterday threw out two challenges to a voluntary postal ballot. There is popular support for changes to the marriage laws, but the issue has dragged on for more than a decade amid political wrangling.

In the latest effort to resolve the issue, the conservative government opted for a postal survey after an election pledge to hold a national referendum was twice rejected by the upper house Senate. But it was challenged by two gay marriage advocacy groups, who said the government had exceeded its powers in funding the ballot without parliamentary approval. On Tuesday, their challenges were thrown out by the High Court, paving the way for ballot papers to be sent out as scheduled next week, with results known in November. "We encourage every Australian to vote in this survey, to have their say," Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, a supporter of same-sex rights, told parliament in Canberra after the court ruling. "As I have said in this House and in many other places, Lucy (wife) and I will be voting 'yes' and I will be encouraging others to vote 'yes.'" If the majority of Australians vote "yes", the government will hold a free vote in parliament on the issue, with MPs not bound by party policy or the postal ballot's result.

If there is a "no" outcome, there will be no parliamentary vote. "We are disappointed with the outcome," said Jonathon Hunyor, the head of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, one of the groups that mounted the challenge. "But we now need to focus on ending discrimination against same-sex couples and making marriage equality a reality."

Courtesy and respect

The voluntary postal vote was strongly opposed by many gay marriage supporters, who said it would be expensive and divisive, subjecting gay people and their families to hate speech. Ahead of the court's decision, there were early signs the debate could turn toxic, with a poster emblazoned "stop the fags" put up in central Melbourne. There were also flyers describing homosexuality as "a curse of death" distributed in suburban Sydney, sparking calls by the government for a respectful debate.

The government said safeguards would now be introduced via legislation to "support the fair and proper conduct" of the survey, which could include tighter advertising restrictions. Australia's highest-profile gay politician, Labor opposition Senator Penny Wong, opposed the ballot along with her party but said it was time to make marriage equality a reality. "We didn't want to be here but now we are here, let's win it. Let's get it done," Wong told reporters. A leading group behind the "yes" vote, The Equality Campaign, said it would be "hitting the ground running with hundreds of thousands of supporters talking about why marriage equality matters". Meanwhile, a key voice backing the "no" vote, the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), said it would continue its campaign to inform Australians about the "consequences of changing the Marriage Act for them and their family".

This would include what ACL's managing director Lyle Shelton said would be the impact of the reforms on religious freedom and the rights of parents on whether their children would be taught "radical" gay programs in schools. Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher said in a post on his archdiocese's website that the push for marriage reforms raised key questions for Australian Catholics. — AFP



VLADIVOSTOK: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, left, smiles as Russian President Vladimir Putin answers questions during a plenary session titled "The Russian Far East: Creating a New Reality" at the Eastern Economic Forum. — AP

JAPAN, S KOREA PUSH PUTIN OVER PYONGYANG SANCTIONS

NATIONS LOOK TO GRIND DOWN RESISTANCE FROM RUSSIA

VLADIVOSTOK: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday echoed South Korea's demand for more pressure on Pyongyang after its nuclear tests as the leaders of the two countries looked to grind down resistance from Russia's Vladimir Putin.

"The international community must unite in applying the greatest possible pressure on North Korea," Abe said in a speech alongside Putin and South Korea's Moon Jae-in at an economic forum in Vladivostok. "We must make North Korea immediately and fully comply with all relevant UN Security Council resolutions and abandon all its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," Abe insisted.

The call came just four days after Pyongyang staged its sixth and most powerful nuclear test to date, claiming a "perfect success" in testing a hydrogen bomb. The United States on Wednesday demanded the United Nations slap an oil embargo on Pyongyang and a freeze on the foreign assets of its leader Kim Jong-Un in a dramatic bid to force an end to the perilous nuclear stand-off. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that China would support the United Nations taking further measures against North Korea following its recent test.

"Given the new developments on the Korean peninsula, China agrees that the UN Security Council should respond further by taking necessary measures," he told a press conference in Beijing. "We believe that sanctions and pressure are only half of the key to resolving the issue. The other half is dialogue and negotiation," Wang added.

Putin meanwhile has repeatedly insisted that further economic pressure on Pyongyang will not work and insisted that the only route is diplomacy. "It is impossible to intimidate them," Putin

said in Vladivostok. "I am convinced that we can avoid a large-scale conflict including weapons of mass destruction in the region and that we can solve this problem through diplomacy." US Ambassador Nikki Haley said the United States would be seeking a vote at the council on new sanctions on September 11.

Meanwhile the EU said it is preparing to increase its own sanctions against North Korea, as part of international efforts to punish the rogue state. "I will put forward to ministers to work in the coming days to increase EU autonomous sanctions," Federica Mogherini said as she arrived for a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Tallinn.

Celebrations in Pyongyang

Despite the mounting pressure on leader Kim Jong-Un, the message from Pyongyang remains one of fierce defiance. North Korea held a mass celebration for the scientists involved in carrying out its largest nuclear blast to date, with fireworks and a mass rally in Pyongyang. Citizens of the capital lined the streets Wednesday to wave pink and purple pom-poms and cheer a convoy of buses carrying the specialists into the city, and toss confetti over them as they walked into Kim Il-Sung Square.

In a sign of the international stakes over Pyongyang's latest test, China said yesterday that it had lodged a diplomatic protest with South Korea following its announcement that it would increase deployments of a US anti-missile system. In a phone call with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, US President Donald Trump on Wednesday insisted that military action against North Korea was not his "first choice" and pushed for a diplomatic option. — AFP

DUTERTE'S SON DENIES DRUG SMUGGLING CLAIMS

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's son and son-in-law denied allegations yesterday that they belonged to a drug trafficking gang, with the explosive claims raising questions about the government's bloody anti-narcotics crackdown. Duterte came to power last year promising to wage a brutal and unprecedented war on drugs. Since then, police have killed around 3,800 suspects in anti-narcotics operations, while thousands of other people have been murdered in unexplained circumstances.

His son Paolo Duterte and son-in-law Manases Carpio appeared at a Senate inquiry

yesterday to answer accusations that they helped facilitate the shipment of crystal methamphetamine worth 6.4 billion pesos (\$125.4 million) into the Philippines from China in exchange for payment. The allegations emerged last month when a customs broker told the Senate panel that he had heard the names of Duterte's son and son-in-law mentioned while seeking to expedite the shipment.

The broker later issued a statement clearing the two men of involvement. But opposition senator Antonio Trillanes at the inquiry accused Duterte's son of belonging to a drug trafficking

gang, saying the 42-year-old had a tattoo on his back, resembling a dragon, that was "proof... of his membership" in the gang. Paolo Duterte, vice-mayor of the southern city of Davao, told the panel that he had a tattoo but said he could not answer allegations based on hearsay.

"The law of karma will operate especially to those with evil intent," he added in a apparent swipe at Trillanes, an arch-critic of the president. Carpio, who is married to Davao city mayor Sara Duterte, also rejected allegations against their family. "Me and my brother-in-law have been publicly crucified based on rumours and gossip,"

said Carpio, a lawyer. "I have no knowledge of or involvement in the illegal drugs shipment."

The sensational allegations have captured the attention of Filipinos, many of whom back the president's vow to pursue an unrelenting war against drug traffickers.

Duterte, 72, has said he would be "happy to slaughter" three million Filipino drug addicts, even as critics warn the deaths of thousands of people killed in the crackdown may amount to a crime against humanity. Duterte has denied ever inciting police or vigilantes to commit mass murder. — AP