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Trump Says US Suspending Immigration Due to Coronavirus

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U.S. President Donald Trump says he will suspend immigration to the United States due to the coronavirus outbreak. In a tweet late Monday, Trump called the outbreak "the attack from the Invisible Enemy," and he cited a "need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens."

He offered few details, saying only the move would come by way of executive order. Halting immigration to the U.S. could affect hundreds of thousands of visa holders and people hoping to apply for permanent resident "green cards."

The U.S. has by far the most confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world, with nearly 789,000 instances and 42,458 deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins University, which is tracking cases. The U.S. has nearly one-third of all reported cases.

In March, the Trump administration closed the Mexican and Canadian borders to non-essential travel, and it also barred entry to any foreign nationals who in the past 14 days had been in China, Iran or the countries that make up Europe's Schengen area. Restricting immigration has been a top priority for Trump, who has been roundly criticized for initially downplaying the coronavirus.

A foreign national shows a canceled U.S. visa in his passport, having been denied entry, at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Virginia on Feb. 6, 2017. /Reuters

Two researchers with the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian research group, said in a blog post that Trump has the authority to restrict immigration to protect public health. "However, blanket bans like those imposed by the administration in recent months and those coming on April 21 are akin to closing the bar door after the horse has escaped," wrote researchers Andrew Forrester and Alex Nowrasteh. "Most research on travel bans in response to pandemics finds that they don't limit the spread of the disease, in part because they are always imposed after the disease has spread," Forrester and Nowrasteh added.

The American Civil Liberties Union's Andrea Flores said spread of the virus can be curbed by "ensuring equal access to testing and treatment," releasing people who have been detained by

U.S. immigration and border protection authorities, and suspending enforcement of immigration policies. "Unfortunately, President Trump seems more interested in fanning anti-immigrant flames than in saving lives," Flores said. "We cannot allow President Trump to exploit this pandemic to advance his racism and xenophobia."

But Trump's national security adviser, Robert O'Brien said the suspension is aimed at protecting the health of the American people and would not be "dissimilar" to the January travel restrictions Trump placed on people traveling to the U.S. from China. "We're trying to do everything, the president's trying to do everything he can to put the health of the American people first during this crisis," O'Brien said during a Fox News Channel interview.

O'Brien said the travel restrictions to the U.S. from China and hard-hit European countries have saved "tens of thousands of American lives" by slowing the spread of the virus in the U.S. But Trump has not imposed similar travel restrictions to other countries that are currently experiencing outbreaks.

With more than 789,000 confirmed cases in the U.S., critics questioned the effectiveness of the suspension and suggested the move is an attempt by Trump to portray immigrants as the cause of the crisis. "Trump is trying to distract and deflect from his failure to address the ongoing pandemic," tweeted Democratic Senator Kamala Harris. "To our immigrant community: know that we see you and we won't stop fighting against Trump's anti-immigrant agenda."

"President Trump's tweet is an outrageous attempt to divide us and distract us from his abject failures in dealing with the current pandemic," said Democratic Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, chairwoman of the Judiciary Committee's Immigration and Citizenship Subcommittee.

Republican Senator Ted Cruz said, however, that Trump's suspension is a sensible short-term decision that Democrats are, nevertheless, opposing. "It's the same opposition they had when the president on January 31st halted flights in and out of China. That decision saved lives in America," Cruz said in an interview on "Fox & Friends."

The U.S. State Department issued an estimated 462,000 immigrant visas during the 2019 fiscal year and U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services approved permanent residence status to almost 577,000 people.