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AZ lawsuit marks latest phase in immigration debate

By Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Xinhua) -- A U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit against Arizona marks the latest part in a debate that is heating up over how to fix the nation's broken immigration system.

The DOJ on Tuesday filed a lawsuit seeking to prevent Arizona's controversial immigration law from being implemented. The legislation allows police to inquire about someone's immigration status if they are stopped on suspicion of another crime. DOJ argues the law usurps the power of the federal government to deal with immigration issues.

The law's opponents praised the federal government for filing the suit.

"We commend the Obama administration for taking this critical step to negate Arizona's unconstitutional usurpation of federal authority and its invitation to racial profiling," said Lucas Guttentag, director of the Immigrants' Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer countered in a statement that the law is both "reasonable and constitutional."

"It mirrors substantially what has been federal law in the United States for many decades. Arizona's law is designed to complement, not supplant, enforcement of federal immigration laws," she said.

The lawsuit comes on the heels of a speech in which U.S. President Barack Obama pressed for reform of the nation's broken immigration system.

Obama favors a comprehensive overhaul including tighter border security and a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented workers living in the United States. But he emphasized that undocumented workers would have to pay a fine and wait behind those who came to the United States legally.

Critics argue the president's public support for the lawsuit is an attempt to win over Hispanic voters in the face of the upcoming Congressional elections, in which Democrats are predicted to lose seats.

U.S. opinion on how to fix the immigration system varies. Some emphasize the need to boost border security and others argue reforms should be more comprehensive. A third group calls for better border enforcement first and incremental reforms later.

A Gallup pole released Friday found that Americans are more likely to oppose the federal government's lawsuit.

"This means the Obama administration is sailing against the tide of public opinion in its

efforts to block the law," Gallup said in a statement.

The lawsuit's impact on the upcoming mid term elections, however, is difficult to gauge at this point, Gallup said.

"Republican leaders will hope that reaction against the lawsuit generates more support for GOP candidates running on an anti- administration platform, while Democrats may hope that the lawsuit solidifies support among Hispanic voters in key congressional districts and states with close Senate and gubernatorial races," Gallup said.

The immigration debate boiled over during the Bush administration but died down after Congress failed to vote on a law.

But the issue has crept back up and came to a head in Arizona when in March rancher Robert Krentz was slain in an attack by an alleged illegal immigrant who fled to Mexico.

The incident bolstered Arizonans' support for the law and proponents said the legislation helps do what the federal government can not - stem the tide of massive illegal immigration.

Opponents describe the law as a draconian measure that encourages racial profiling and runs contrary to American ideals and civil liberties.

Ilya Shapiro, senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute, said the Arizona case is complex and that those who drafted the law were careful in their efforts to avoid overstepping any federal boundaries.

"I don't think it's a clear cut case one way or another," he said. "The courts are going to have a hard time trying to figure all this out," he said.

In the end, the immigration debate may prove anti-climactic, as a divided Congress may be unable to agree on a package of reforms.

Audrey Singer, senior fellow and expert on migration at the Brookings Institution, said the DREAM Act could see some movement. The proposed legislation would allow some illegals who came as minors and graduated from U.S. high schools a chance to earn permanent residency.

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