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Trump wants to ban TikTok

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AFP | Washington

U.S. President Donald Trump said he is considering banning the wildly popular video-sharing app TikTok as a way to punish China over the coronavirus pandemic, remarks China described yesterday as “a malicious smear”. TikTok has been caught up in the escalating disputes between the United States and China, with the Chinese-owned firm accused of acting as a spying tool for Beijing -- an allegation it denies.

“It’s something we’re looking

at,” Trump said during a TV interview on Tuesday when asked about a possible ban, according to Bloomberg News.

“It’s a big business. Look, what happened with China with this virus, what they’ve done to this country and to the entire world is disgraceful.”

Trump did not provide any details, and told Gray Television that it was “one of many” options he was considering against China, Bloomberg added.

The United States is the country worst-hit by the virus, which the American president has blamed on poor management and a lack of transparency in China -- which has rejected the allegation.

“The remarks made by some politicians in the US are totally groundless and a malicious smear,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Wednesday when asked about Trump’s comments on TikTok and China’s role in the pandemic. “The Chinese government has always asked Chinese busi-



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TIKTOK SPOKESPERSON

nesses to conduct cooperation overseas on the basis of law and compliance,” he told a regular press briefing.

Trump’s comments came a day after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US government was looking at banning Chinese apps -- including TikTok -- over espionage concerns.

TikTok is estimated to have close to one billion users worldwide, but despite the huge pop-

ularity, it has long battled allegations that it is a spying tool for Beijing, with critics pointing to the fact that it is owned by a Chinese firm -- ByteDance.

The firm has consistently stressed that it does not share user information with the Chinese government.

“TikTok is led by an American CEO, with hundreds of employees and key leaders across safety, security, product, and public policy here in the US,” a TikTok spokesperson told Bloomberg.

“We have never provided user data to the Chinese government, nor would we do so if asked.”

TikTok has been caught up in another international spat too -- it was among the dozens of Chinese apps banned by India over national security concerns after a deadly border clash between its soldiers and Chinese troops.

And on Monday, TikTok said it was pulling out of Hong Kong after a new national security law imposed by China gave authorities sweeping powers to police the internet.

North Korea’s Kim ordered to pay damages to Seoul POWs



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaks at a meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea in Pyongyang

Seoul

A South Korean court ordered Pyongyang’s leader Kim Jong Un to compensate two former prisoners of war who spent decades as forced labourers in the North, in a move that could set a far-reaching legal precedent on the divided peninsula.

The ruling was the first time a South Korean court claimed jurisdiction over Pyongyang or issued a compensation order against its leader, according to a campaign group backing the plaintiffs.

The two men -- one surnamed Han, 87, and the other Ro, 90 -- say they were captured during the 1950-53 Korean War, but were never repatriated after the armistice that brought hostilities to a close.

Instead, they say they were forced to work at coal mines and other facilities for decades until they escaped the North via China. Ro returned to the South in 2000, and Han a year later.

They filed the suit in 2016, saying they had suffered “enormous mental and physical damage” in the North.

The Seoul Central District Court on Tuesday ordered the North and leader Kim to pay each of them 21 million won (\$17,500), a court spokeswoman

said. Following the ruling, a civic group supporting the two said they would take legal steps to seize North Korean assets under Seoul’s control, such as copyright fees for Pyongyang’s state TV.

By the end of the war, there were 170,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners in the US-led UN forces’ POW camps, while 100,000 South Korean and UN troops were held in the North, according to data by the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul.

Pyongyang repatriated only 8,343 South Koreans after the armistice, according to the Seoul government.

The South has since raised the issue many times, but the North maintained no former soldiers from the South were being held against their will.

Civic groups say some 80 South Korean POWs escaped the North and returned to the South in 2000 and 2001.

Lawyers representing the two men welcomed the ruling, saying a South Korean court for the first time “exercised jurisdiction” against “illegal acts committed by Kim Jong Un”.

“This is a milestone ruling,” said lawyer Koo Chung-seo, adding it paved the way for further legal action by other individuals against Kim and his regime.

Sri Lanka rangers spot possible rare baby elephant twins

AFP | Colombo

A pair of baby elephants feeding from the same mother have been spotted in a Sri Lankan national park, with officials speculating Wednesday the two could be a rare set of twins.

The young tuskers -- who rangers estimate are three to four weeks old -- were spotted in the Minneriya sanctuary about 200 kilometres (125 miles) north-east of Colombo, grazing with a herd of about a dozen elephants.

After observing the pair from a distance, officials are confident enough to “say they are twins,” Department of Wildlife Conservation Director-General Tharaka Prasad said.

The two were also photographed feeding from the same cow on Monday by renowned conservationist Sumith Pilapitiy, who also said he believed the two were twins.

Rangers were carrying out DNA tests on the herd’s dung to confirm, Prasad said.

If the results matched, it would mark the first time wildlife officials on the Indian Ocean island had sighted twins alongside their mother, he added.



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The sighting was near the area where seven elephants died from poisoning in September, in an act blamed on local farmers.

Nearly 200 elephants are killed every year on the island, many by farmers after the pachyderms stray onto their land.

Marauding elephants kill an average of 50 people annually, mostly when they stray into villages near their habitat.

The country’s elephant population has declined to just over 7,000 according to the latest census, down from an estimated 12,000 in the early 1900s.