

US passes Hong Kong 'Democracy Act'

AFP | Washington

The US House of Representatives passed a bill Tuesday sought by pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong that aims to defend civil rights in the semi-autonomous territory, prompting an angry response from China.

The Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which will now move to the Senate before it can become law, has drawn rare bipartisan support in a polarized Congress.

The law would end the Hong Kong-US special trading status unless the State Department certifies annually that city authorities are respecting human rights and the rule of law.

China expressed "strong indignation" over the passing of the act, which also requires the US president to identify and sanction people who are responsible for the erosion of autonomy and serious abuses of human rights in Hong Kong.

"What Hong Kong faces is not the so-called human rights and democracy issue at all, but the issue of stopping violence, reinstating order and upholding the rule of law as soon as possible," said foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang in a statement.

Geng said the US should "stop meddling" and warned China would take "strong measures" to counter the proposed Hong Kong bill.

The act will now move to a similar vote in the Senate before it can become law.

"Today we're simply urging the Chinese president and the Hong Kong Chief Executive,

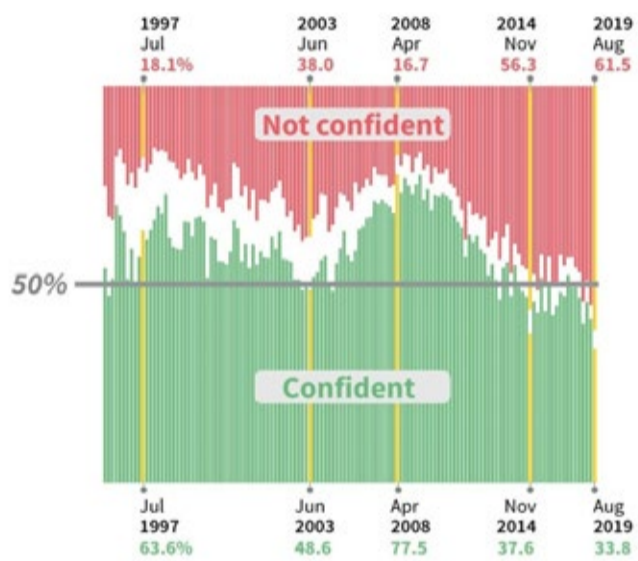


A protester holds a sign during a rally in Hong Kong calling on US politicians to pass Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act

Hong Kong confidence in "One Country, Two Systems"

Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Group

Random telephone interviews, about 1,000 people per survey



Carrie Lam, to faithfully honor the government's promises" that Hong Kong's rights and autonomy would be protected, Republi-

can Representative Chris Smith, prime sponsor of the bill, said Tuesday on the House floor.

China has frequently accused

"external forces" of fuelling weeks of unrest in the global financial hub.

Millions have taken to the streets of Hong Kong, initially

against a now-dropped bid by its leaders to allow extraditions to the authoritarian Chinese mainland.

Hong Kong protest leader left bloodied in street attack



Civil Human Rights Front member Jimmy Sham was left bloodied after being attacked in Hong Kong

Hong Kong

A leading face of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement was rushed to hospital covered in blood late yesterday after being attacked by unidentified thugs with hammers, his protest group said.

The Civil Human Rights Front said leader Jimmy Sham was assaulted by four to five people wielding hammers in the district of Mongkok in what they described as an act of "political terror".

"He received a bloody head wound and was sent to Kwong Wah hospital," the CHRF said in a statement,

adding Sham was conscious when paramedics arrived.

Photos posted online showed Sham in a red t-shirt, sprawled on the street in a pool of blood.

"It is not hard to link this incident to a spreading political terror in order to threaten and inhibit the legitimate exercise of natural and legal rights," CHRF added.

Sham is the main spokesman of the CHRF, a group which advocates non-violence and organised a series of record-breaking, peaceful marches earlier this summer that were opposed to a bill allowing extraditions to mainland China.

Scientists shed light on how brains turn pain up or down

Washington

Pain perception is essential for survival, but how much something hurts can sometimes be amplified or suppressed: for example, soldiers who sustain an injury in battle often recall not feeling anything at the time.

A new study published in Cell Reports on Tuesday honed in on the brain circuitry responsible for upgrading or downgrading these pain signals, likening the mechanism to how a home thermostat controls room temperature.

Yarimar Carrasquillo, the paper's senior author and a scientist for the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH), said the region responsible was the central amygdala, which according to her work appeared to play a dual role.

Studying mice, Carrasquillo and her colleagues found that the activity in neurons that express protein kinase C-delta amplified pain, while neurons that express somatostatin inhibited the chain of activity in the nerves required to communicate pain.

The central amygdala isn't completely responsible for pain itself: if it were removed entirely, then "the 'ouch' of things, or the protective pain, would remain intact," said Carrasquillo.

Kim Jong Un's horseback ride spurs policy shift speculation

Seoul

New pictures of Kim Jong Un riding a white horse through a winter landscape to the summit of Mount Paektu, a sacred peak for North Koreans, have fuelled speculation that the young leader may be set for a major policy announcement.

The images released by the official KCNA news agency were accompanied by a gushing text, that noted the "noble glitters" in Kim's eyes, and labelled his snowy, horseback ride "a great event of weighty importance" for the nation.

Accompanying officials were



Pictures of Kim Jong Un riding a white horse through a winter landscape have fuelled speculation that the young leader may be set for a major policy announcement

left convinced that "there will be a great operation to strike the world with wonder again and make a step forward in the Korean revolution," the agency said.

Analysts said the hike may signal a new policy direction for the nuclear-armed North.

"In the past, Kim has climbed Mount Paektu ahead of major political decisions," said Shin Beom-chul, an analyst at the Asan Institute of Policy Studies.

Kim hiked to the peak in December 2017 before launching diplomatic overtures that led to his first ever summit with US President Donald Trump.

But negotiations have been gridlocked since a second summit between Kim and Trump collapsed in February and the North has been raising tensions through a series of missile tests.

The sight of North Korean leaders riding white horses across snow-capped peaks - and in particular Mount Paektu - have been a dominant theme of past photos, posters and portraits of Kim's father Kim Jong Il and grandfather Kim Il Sung.

According to B.R. Myers, a professor at Dongseo University in South Korea who specialises in North Korean propaganda,

the images present an imperial motif of a leader protecting the cultural and ideological purity of the nation from corrupt, outside forces.

Kim also visited the site of a giant construction project in nearby Samjiyon county, KCNA reported, and blamed US-led international sanctions for his country's hardships.

"The situation of the country is difficult owing to the ceaseless sanctions and pressure by the hostile forces and there are many hardships and trials facing us," Kim was quoted as saying.

Italy rejects bid to stop iconic Da Vinci loan to Louvre

AFP | Rome

An Italian court yesterday rejected a dramatic last-minute bid to halt the loan of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic Vitruvian Man drawing and other works to France's Louvre museum, ending a bitter cultural row.

The court in Venice cited "the exceptional global relevance of the (Louvre) exhibition and (Italy's) desire to maximise its heritage potential" in overturning the bid by a heritage group to stop the loan of several Da Vinci works.

The court last week suspended the loan of the world famous artwork, due to appear later this month in an exhibition at the



Leonardo da Vinci's The Vitruvian Man is kept in a climate-controlled vault in the Accademia Gallery in Venice and is rarely displayed to the public

Paris museum to mark the 500th anniversary of the artist's death.



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It did so after the group Italia Nostra (Our Italy) filed a complaint saying the drawing was too fragile to travel.

The court had put on hold an accord signed in September in Paris between Italy's culture ministry and the Louvre for a swap of works by Da Vinci and Italian painter Raphael for the Renaissance master's quincennial next year.

Rome is lending several Leonardo works to the Louvre for a major exhibition which opens next week.

In return, paintings and drawings by Raphael are to be loaned to Italy for an exhibition in the Italian capital in March.

The loan was already ques-

tioned by Italy's former right-wing government, which railed against the idea of lending Da Vinci works to France.

With fewer than 20 Leonardo paintings still in existence, many Italians are resentful that the Louvre possesses five of them, as well as 22 drawings.

The Renaissance genius was born in Tuscany in Italy, but died in the French town of Amboise in 1519, at the age of 67.

Italia Nostra said its motives were not political, but aimed at safeguarding a national treasure, saying the Vitruvian Man risked tearing and those who had given the green light for it to travel had not removed it from its case to examine it properly.