

# BATTLE LINES DRAWN AS UK SQUARES UP FOR EU VOTE

## 'REMAIN' AND 'LEAVE' CAMPS NECK-AND-NECK

**LONDON:** Activists hit the streets yesterday for the first official day of campaigning over Britain's "Brexit" referendum, firing the starting pistol on a tense 10-week battle over the country's future in Europe. Opinion polls suggest the British public is evenly split ahead of the June 23 vote, which could bring down Prime Minister David Cameron and plunge one of the world's leading economies into uncertainty. The referendum - Britons' first direct say on the divisive issue of Europe in 41 years - is also being nervously watched in Washington and Brussels, where a British exit would add to a long list of EU crises.

"We absolutely think we're going to win it," Peter Reeve, a spokesman for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), told AFP as he campaigned in Peterborough - a market town in eastern England where an influx of East European workers has angered many locals. Charismatic London Mayor Boris Johnson was to lead a "Brexit blitz" with rallies yesterday and today, where he will try to persuade Britons that they could thrive if cut free from European Union red tape. Johnson has compared leaving the 28-country bloc to escaping from prison, saying the referendum was "like the jailer has accidentally left the door of the jail open and people can see the sunlit lands beyond".

### 'Project Fantasy'

In the "Remain" corner is Cameron, who says Britain has a "special status" within the EU thanks to a renegotiation he sealed in February, and that the country will be richer



**LONDON:** British Labour Party politician Alistair Darling gestures toward a journalist while giving a speech on the economic arguments for EU membership yesterday. — AFP

and stronger if it stays in. Former finance minister Alistair Darling lashed out at Brexit backers in a speech yesterday, accusing them of "playing with fire" and offering "Project Fantasy". "This is a very, very close vote. No one can predict with any certainty what is likely to happen," he told a Britain Stronger In Europe event in London.

In Covent Garden in the heart of rain-soaked London, anti-Brexit volunteers were handing out leaflets to workers on their

lunch breaks yesterday. "Financially, it would be a disaster if we left the EU," said Gael Simmonds, wearing an "I'M IN" t-shirt. Robin Phelps, 38, added: "There is a narrative saying 'In' voters are not so enthusiastic. I'm not sure that's true because I think when the reality dawns that it can be risky, they'll turn out."

However, John Curtice of Strathclyde University, Britain's leading poll expert, said the evidence available so far consistently points to Leave' voters "being keener to make it to the polls". Overall, the "Remain" and "Leave" camps are neck-and-neck on 50 percent support, according to a poll of polls run by academics at the What UK Thinks project, with around one fifth of voters undecided.

### 'Straightforward and Candid'

Both camps have planned dozens of events across Britain to launch their campaigns, mobilizing volunteers to hand out leaflets in a bid to win over fellow Britons. "Remain" supporters can also count on the backing of US President Barack Obama, who will head to London next week to join an international chorus of leaders imploring Britain not to leave the EU. His foreign policy adviser Ben Rhodes said the president would be "very straightforward and candid... as to why the US believes that it is good for the UK to remain."

Cameron is confident of winning the poll, despite deep divisions within his Conservative party on Europe. His campaign has the support of the main political parties and some of the country's biggest employers. Global bodies such as the International Monetary Fund have also warned that Brexit could damage Britain. Debate about whether Britain should stay in the EU has been raging for weeks, but the race shifted up a gear this week when election officials named the two official campaigns, unlocking a treasure chest of publicly funded benefits for both sides. After months of infighting, the "Vote Leave" campaign beat the Leave.EU campaign supported by UKIP leader Nigel Farage to be named the official Brexit campaign. — AFP

## ITALY INSISTS 'NO INVASION'

**ROME:** Italy insisted yesterday it was not facing an "invasion" after a spike in migrant boat crossings from Libya exacerbated fears the country is on the verge of becoming the main entry point for people trying to reach Europe. Nearly 6,000 mostly African migrants have landed at southern Italian sports since Tuesday but Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said the overall trend this year was broadly in line with the 2015 pattern. "We are not facing an invasion," the premier told a press conference after the figures were released by the International Organisation for Migration in Geneva.

Fears are running high in Italy that it could pay the price of EU moves to close routes through the Greek Islands and the Balkans. Italian officials are also wary of the possibility of neighbouring EU countries closing their borders, as France did temporarily last year and Austria is threatening to do now. Austria has begun preparing for a possible reintroduction of border controls at the Brenner pass in the Alps, prompting protests from Italy and the European Commission.

Renzi warned yesterday of repercussions if Vienna did close the border. "If the rules are broken we cannot act as if nothing has happened," he said. Italy's interior ministry this week asked local authorities to find 15,000 extra beds to

house asylum-seekers in anticipation of a possible increase in the numbers of people requiring accommodation. "There is a problem that concerns our country but there is not an invasion underway," Renzi said. "We have taken certain initiatives but we are not facing an invasion. It is a big problem but we have clear ideas about how to deal with it."

Renzi said the EU was working on deals with African countries to stem the flow of migrants leaving for Europe and to prevent those who do from being allowed to pass through transit countries. "I do not want to play it down but I do want to send a reassuring message. The numbers of boats are barely a few higher compared to last year."

### Few Syrians in Libya

The IOM said that of the 6,021 migrants who have reached Europe by sea since Tuesday, only 174 had landed in Greece, with the balance coming ashore in Italy. IOM spokesman Joel Millman stressed there was no evidence yet to suggest the Italy arrivals were linked to an EU-Turkey deal aimed at stemming the influx of people to the Greek islands. Migrants who spoke to IOM staff in Italy all said they had crossed from Libya, most of them on rubber dinghies loaded with around 130 people. — AFP

## CZECHS PICK 'CZECHIA' AS NEW NAME

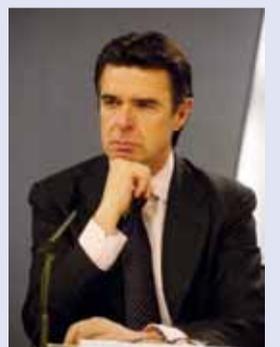
**PRAGUE:** The Czech Republic's leaders have chosen "Czechia" as the one-word alternative name of their country to make it easier for companies, politicians and sportsmen to use on products, name tags and jerseys. The choice, agreed on Thursday evening by the president, prime minister, heads of parliament and foreign and defence ministers, must still win cabinet approval before the Foreign Ministry can lodge the name with the United Nations and it becomes the country's official short name.

The Czech Republic emerged, along with Slovakia, from the peaceful breakup of the old Czechoslovakia in 1993. But so far there has been no standardised one-word English name for the Czech Republic, unlike, say, France, the shortened version of the French Republic. That has led to a lot of head-scratching. The largest part of the country is known as Bohemia ("Cechy" in Czech), but there are also other parts, Moravia and Silesia, so one name is needed that does not exclude those historic lands. The Czech Republic's adored ice hockey team has donned "Czech" on their jerseys, as have bottles of the country's premium export beer, Pilsner Urquell. But "Czech" is an adjective and cannot be used as a one-word name for the country. Supporters of "Czechia" say the term in English can be traced back to the 19th century and was codified by the Czech surveying and mapping authority soon after the 1993 split of Czechoslovakia as a possible one-word alternative.

But it never gained traction until now and it may not have an easy start once it gains official status. To some, it sounds ugly. Others, including Regional Development Minister Karla Slechtova, think it is too close to "Chechnya", making it prone to confusion. Slechtova tweeted on Thursday that the Czech Republic had invested more than \$40 million into a tourism promotion campaign using its full name, and should stick to it. In some other languages, including French and German, the Czech Republic is already designated by a single name, but in Czech itself the name 'Cesko' has only made slow progress since 1993 and 'Cechy' - or Bohemia - is still commonly used to mean the whole country. — Reuters

## PANAMA PAPERS CLAIM NEW VICTIM IN SPAIN MINISTER

**MADRID:** The worldwide Panama Papers scandal claimed a fresh political victim yesterday as Spain's industry minister resigned over allegations he had links to offshore companies. Jose Manuel Soria said he had tendered his resignation "in light of the succession of mistakes committed along the past few days, relating to my explanations over my business activities... and considering the obvious harm that this situation is doing to the Spanish government."



Jose Manuel Soria

Soria's troubles began on Monday when Spanish online daily El Confidencial, which has had access to the Panama Papers - millions of files leaked from law firm Mossack Fonseca - said he was an administrator of an offshore firm in 1992. Soria called a news conference to deny any link to the company, but as the week went by, more allegations emerged from other media outlets, revealing further alleged connections to offshore havens. It is unclear as yet whether any of his alleged actions were illegal.

Soria is the latest political victim of the Panama Papers leak, which revealed how the world's wealthy stashed assets in offshore companies and which the law firm blamed on a computer hack. Iceland's Prime Minister Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson was also forced to resign over the leaks. In his statement, Soria said politics "is an activity that must always be exemplary, also where... explanations are concerned". "When that doesn't happen, one must assume one's responsibilities," he added, in an indication that he was resigning due to how he had handled the revelations, rather than over any irregularities. — AFP