



Hindu hardliners block Indian temple to women
 Page 16

Trump threatens to close US-Mexico border over migrant 'onslaught'

Page 14



BRISSELS: Britain's Prime minister Theresa May answers journalists' questions upon her arrival at the European Council in Brussels. — AFP

UK PM mulls longer Brexit transition

Open letter warns British PM against Brexit surrender

BRUSSELS: European leaders insisted yesterday that Prime Minister Theresa May must do more to avoid Britain crashing out of the EU without a deal, even after she indicated she was open to extending a Brexit transition period if it helped unblock negotiations. At a summit in Brussels, May confirmed that she is considering the extension idea floated by the EU as a possible way to break the deadlock over how to keep Britain's border with Ireland open after Brexit.

But other EU nations warned this may not resolve the impasse, which has raised fears of the potentially catastrophic scenario of Britain crashing out in March without any agreement. May's own officials also admitted that an extension—which has sparked outrage among eurosceptics at home—would not affect London's position on the Irish border. Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel repeated an earlier call from EU Council President Donald Tusk for the prime minister to act, saying: "More than ever, the ball is in Britain's court."

Longer transition

This week's Brussels summit had been set as the deadline for a draft deal, but the other 27 EU leaders were left once again demanding more

progress from London. Arriving for the second day yesterday, May noted that both sides remained at odds over a "backstop" plan to avoid frontier checks between Britain and Ireland if and until a new trade deal to resolve the issue can be signed. "A further idea that has emerged—and it is an idea at this stage—is to create an option to extend the implementation period for a matter of months," she told reporters.

Currently a transition phase is planned from Brexit next March until the end of December 2020, to allow time to sign a new EU-UK trade deal. Extending this could reduce the likelihood of having to use any "backstop" plan, thus taking the heat out of the most contested Brexit issue. The EU suggests that the British province of Northern Ireland stay aligned to its single market and customs union until a new trade deal is agreed.

But Britain has rejected this, proposing instead that the whole United Kingdom temporarily follow EU customs rules—something Brussels

in turn has said is not possible. A senior British official confirmed yesterday that even if the transition were extended, Britain remained opposed to the EU's backstop plan. EU nations also questioned whether the idea would change the situation. A source in the French presidency warned that an extension "could be part of the discussion but is not an ideal solution".

Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel added that Britain's general approach remained a problem. "It's not possible that the UK keeps all the advantages from the common market but only under its own conditions," he told reporters.

Embarrassing climbdown

Even if May's suggestion of an extension to the transition is unlikely to break the deadlock in Brussels, it energized her critics in London. The Conservative leader has been struggling since the 2016 vote for Brexit to find a compromise divorce deal that is acceptable to both the

EU and her own MPs, who could block the final accord in the House of Commons. Boris Johnson and David Davis, two former ministers who quit in July over her approach to Brexit, signed a joint letter demanding Britain avoid the "purgatory of perpetual membership of the EU's customs union".

On the other side of the political divide, the anti-Brexit Liberal Democrats said extending the transition was another "embarrassing climb-down" for May. May did little to deflect their anger by suggesting that she did not expect any extension to be used, because she expected a trade deal before December 2020. The prime minister had made a personal plea to fellow EU leaders on Wednesday to recognize the progress made so far and keep negotiating.

Over dinner afterwards, they agreed to keep talking, but upped the pressure by refusing to sign off on a planned special summit next month to seal the divorce. Failure to meet in November could see a draft Brexit deal pushed back to a December summit, leaving little time for its ratification by the British and European parliaments. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said EU leaders had asked the bloc's executive "to work with even more vigor on a no-deal scenario". —AFP

“ The ball is in Britain's court ”