

International

Britain's May seeks to sell new Brexit delay at home

May to use delay threat to secure votes from Brexit-backing lawmakers

LONDON: British Prime Minister Theresa May will try to convince her splintered country to accept a Brexit delay of up to six months she secured from EU leaders yesterday to the fury of many in her own party. May's 27 EU counterparts pulled another all-nighter in Brussels before clinching a compromise timetable for the unwinding of nearly half a century of ties that have been guiding many of Britain's policies. Britain will be able to leave before October 31 if its parliament manages to finally ratify the ill-loved deal May reached with the bloc and that has been behind all the political drama and anguish in London.

It could also still crash out on June 1 if it refuses to take part in European Parliament elections on May 23 — three years after Britons narrowly voted to leave in a referendum whose arguments echo to this day. May will instead try to use the delay threat to secure votes from Brexit-backing lawmakers who keep voting against her because they view Britain's current withdrawal terms as an abdication to Brussels. "The EU have agreed that the extension can be terminated when the Withdrawal Agreement has been ratified," May said. "If we're able to do that before May 22, then we won't have to hold European parliamentary elections." The pound rose slightly in relief that the sides had managed to avoid a messy divorce that would have loomed had the current Brexit extension expired on Friday night without a new delay.

Everything is possible

The delay avoids a possibly economic calamity on both sides of the Channel but does little to resolve

the political morass that has seen May's control over her Conservative Party and cabinet gradually slip. Top anti-EU Conservatives lined up to take shots at their party leader while her Northern Irish coalition partners prepared for meetings in Brussels at which they could air their grievances with the plan. "The pressure on her to go will increase dramatically, I suspect, now," May's former Brexit secretary David Davis told the BBC.

Right-wing MP Jacob Rees-Mogg also recalled May's promise to lawmakers on March 20 that she was "not prepared to delay Brexit past June 30". "I thought the prime minister said a few weeks ago that she wouldn't agree to any extension and now we are getting quite a long one," Rees-Mogg said. The party's right wing fears that this delay might be prolonged yet again—and the extra time used to either water down the split between Britain and Europe even further or annul it outright.

EU Council Donald Tusk admitted in Brussels after the marathon meetings wound down that "everything is possible". "Our intention is to finalise the whole process in October... but I am too old to exclude another scenario," Tusk told reporters. May did get an unexpected boost in the shape of a tweet from US President Donald Trump—a leader whose protectionist agenda has him locking horns with Brussels over trade. "Too bad that the European Union is being so tough on the United Kingdom and Brexit," Trump wrote.

May last week decided to focus her energy on finding a compromise with the main opposition Labour Party that could help ease her deal through in time for Britain to leave without taking part in



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May speaking in the House of Commons in London, as she updates MPs on Brexit, following her attendance at the EU Summit.—AFP

the European vote. Downing Street said the talks would continue at a "technical" level yesterday after making little progress in initial rounds. Labor is primarily hoping to place Britain in a European customs union of some sort.

May had previously ruled this out because it prevents her from fulfilling the promise of striking lucrative independent trade agreements with giants such as China and the United States. The talks have further outraged Conservatives and fuelled additional talk of

attempts by her party's right-wing to unseat her. May has promised to step down once she delivers the first stage of Brexit—a timeline that could keep her in power until near the end of the year. "But it is absolutely I think the case that there is growing discontent with her in her party," said King's College European politics professor Anand Menon. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if, after the local and European elections, we see some attempt to oust her and to replace her with another leader."—AFP

Europe suffers from Italian mafia 'cancer'

ROME: International anti-mafia stings may have increased in recent months, but Italian organized crime groups constitute a social and economic "cancer" that the world seems to underestimate, experts say. The most high-profile recent operation saw 90 mobsters from the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta mafia arrested in December in six different countries, in raids involving hundreds of police officers. While the notorious Sicilian Cosa Nostra is well known to be present in Australia, Canada and the United States, other Italian mafias have been globalizing too—with Europe Union countries among their top destinations. The three main groups—Cosa Nostra, the Neapolitan Camorra and the 'Ndrangheta—are "among the most threatening in Europe" because of the global reach of their criminal operations, according to Europol. Their power lies in their control and exploitation of territory and community, including installing allies in administrative positions even in places far from the territories they control, the European police agency said. Italian mafia-hunting expert Cristiano Tomassi cited cases of entire neighbourhoods in European cities which are under the control of organised crime groups, and are having the life strangled out of them.

"Why does it seem like nothing's going on in those areas? Because the mafia is in control, but it is not a healthy control, it is like a cancer that progresses. And where there is a cancer

there is no more life," Tomassi said. "Petty crime no longer exists, but neither does the healthy economy. It's true that weeds no longer grow, but grass doesn't grow either," said Tomassi, a police colonel and organised crime analyst with anti-mafia investigative authority DIA.

The powerful Italian mafias make their money in large-scale drug trafficking and money laundering, as well as currency and goods counterfeiting, and the trafficking of toxic waste. They wreak heavy damage on local and national economies, according to the latest DIA report: They "pollute financial and credit channels, disrupt competition and the markets (and) promote black market activities and tax evasion." In places suffering an economic crisis—such as Europe—the mafia infiltrates even more easily, for "whoever brings in new money can initially be seen as a resource," says Tomassi, referring to the mob's "almost unlimited" financial means. Tomassi and his colleagues at the authority's imposing offices on the outskirts of Rome have been forced in recent years to expand their scope beyond Germany, France and Spain to eastern European countries.

Assets worth 250 million euros were seized in a recent operation in Romania, where the mafia had got its claws into everything from construction companies to hundreds of apartments and even spas, Tomassi said. "Mafiosi reason like economists: growth rates and development prospects are higher (in Eastern EU countries) even than those in prosperous Germany," he said.

Investigators have uncovered mob activity in Slovakia, for example, where the 'Ndrangheta is attempting a favorite mafia pastime—siphoning off European Union grants, he added. Vast sums are also to be made through illegal gambling, and the mob has been moving its operations in that sector to Austria, the Netherlands Antilles, Panama, Romania and Spain, "where the law is most advantageous in terms of tax". —AFP

Former pope blames abuse crisis on '68 sex revolution

VATICAN CITY: Pope emeritus Benedict XVI yesterday blamed the Catholic clerical sex abuse scandals on the 1960s sexual revolution and a collapse in faith in the West. The ex-pope, who retired in 2013, said responsibility for the crises rocking the Roman Catholic Church globally from Australia to Europe lay with the fight for an "all-out sexual freedom, one which no longer admitted any norms". "Part of the physiognomy of the Revolution of '68 was that pedophilia was then also diagnosed as allowed and appropriate," he wrote in a 6,000-word essay for *Klerusblatt*, a German monthly magazine for clergy.

Benedict, who was the first pontiff to resign in almost 600 years, said the direct consequence was the "collapse of the next generation of priests in those years and the very high number of laicization's" or priests leaving the Church. The 91 year old said pedophilia "reached such proportions" because of the "absence of God". Some theologians were quick to criticize Benedict's analysis of the causes of clerical pedophilia.

"It does not address structural issues that abetted abuse cover-up, or Benedict's own contested 24-year role as head of the Vatican's powerful doctrinal office," Vatican expert Joshua McElwee wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter*. The German ex-pope said the sexual revolution also led to the "establishment" in various seminaries of "homosexual cliques... which acted more or less openly and significantly changed the climate".

He recalled one bishop who "arranged for the seminarians to be shown pornographic films, allegedly with the intention of thus making them resistant to behavior contrary to the faith". The Church was first rocked by the child sex abuse crisis in the second half of the 1980s, particularly in the United States, and it has been repeatedly criticized for protecting pedophile priests and its reputation.—AFP