

International

UK urges Germany, France to change position and negotiate new exit deal

Leaked documents set out no-deal Brexit challenges

TRURO: Prime Minister Boris Johnson called on France and Germany yesterday to change their position on Brexit and negotiate a new exit deal for Britain, reiterating his stance that he is ready to leave the European Union without a deal if they do not. With Britain set to leave the bloc on Oct 31, it has less than 74 days to resolve a three-year crisis that is pitting the country against the EU, and parliament against the executive. "We will be ready to come out on Oct 31 - deal or no deal," Johnson told reporters in Truro, southwest England.

"Our friends and partners on the other side of the Channel are showing a little bit of reluctance to change their position - that's fine - I am confident that they will," he said. Asked specifically about meetings scheduled this week with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, he said: "I hope they will see fit to compromise." Johnson took office last month after his predecessor, Theresa May, failed three times to get parliament to approve the withdrawal deal she had negotiated with the EU.

He is insisting Britain will leave with or without a transition deal on Oct. 31 although a majority in parliament have previously tried to prevent a so-called no-deal Brexit. Johnson's calls for the EU to renegotiate the deal have so far been rejected by the bloc's negotiators. That puts Britain on course for an unmanaged exit, which an official assessment published by the Sunday Times said would jam ports, increase the risk of public protests and severely disrupt the world's fifth-largest economy.

In his first foreign trip as prime minister, Johnson will meet Merkel in Berlin on Wednesday and Macron in Paris on Thursday. The European Commission, which is leading negotiations on behalf of France, Germany and other EU members, said it was ready for a no-deal Brexit and that

Britain would suffer most under such a scenario. On Sunday Merkel said Germany would be prepared whatever the outcome.

Ministers in Johnson's Conservative government have played down the leaked no-deal assessment on Sunday, saying the document was old and did not reflect increased funding and planning undertaken by the prime minister since he took office. They accuse the opposition Labor Party and others who are opposed to a no-deal Brexit of undermining negotiations with the EU, saying European leaders will wait to see if parliament can block such an outcome before deciding whether to renegotiate the deal.

Parliament recall?

While Johnson looked ahead to a week of foreign engagements, which includes a G7 meeting in France attended by US President Donald Trump on Saturday and Sunday, he faced increasing pressure at home to recall parliament from its summer break to urgently debate the Brexit crisis. Lawmakers are already fretting that they do not have enough time to stop a no-deal Brexit, and they have yet to agree on a unified approach, which badly damages their chances of success.

Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn joined calls for parliament to be recalled, saying during a speech in Corby, central England that "We will do everything to stop a no-deal Brexit". He said Johnson must not be allowed to use parliamentary procedure to block discussion of the country's future, referring to concerns that Johnson could suspend the legislature until after Oct. 31 or delay a national election even if his government fell before that date.

"We do support the recall of parliament in order to prevent the prime minister having some kind of maneuver to take us out on the 31st of October without any further



LONDON: The buildings of The City of London are viewed from Greenwich Park in the early morning sunshine in London. — AFP

discussion in parliament," Corbyn said. His comments added weight to a demand made on Sunday, signed by more than 100 lawmakers, for a parliamentary recall to discuss what they called a "national emergency". Parliament is currently not due to sit until Sept 3, when it will reconvene for a short session before breaking up again to allow for annual party conferences.

A government source said Michael Gove, the minister in

charge of co-ordinating no deal preparations, would give a statement to parliament as soon as it returns, updating them on the latest progress. He would commit to give regular updates, the source said. Labor wants to bring down Johnson's government and form its own emergency coalition under Corbyn's leadership to delay Brexit. Other opponents of a no-deal Brexit have balked at supporting a plan that would put Corbyn in charge. — Reuters

A WW2 battle reverberates in Poland election

GDANSK: A monument to a battle fought in the opening days of World War Two has become a new frontline in the fight between Poland's ruling nationalists and the liberal opposition in the countdown to a parliamentary election on Oct 13. The granite column that towers over the Baltic port of Gdansk commemorates the seven-day siege of Westerplatte in September 1939, when dozens of Polish soldiers defied the overwhelming firepower of a Nazi German naval fleet.

For many Poles the monument - comprising the column and a small park - is a symbol of national courage, but the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) accuses the Gdansk municipality, which is linked to the opposition, of allowing the site to fall into disrepair. Near the column stand ruined barracks with rusted wires protruding. Last month PiS rushed legislation through parliament to transfer oversight of the area to the central government in Warsaw.

Critics of PiS say the row over Westerplatte is part of a broader government policy of historical revisionism they say is aimed at fanning nationalist sentiment among voters and discrediting the opposition. PiS officials say the bravery of the Westerplatte soldiers has not been celebrated sufficiently. Since it won power in 2015, PiS has repeatedly accused liberal governments that ruled Poland since the collapse of communism in 1989 of failing to conduct "the politics of history" effectively, allowing young Poles to forget patriotism.

PiS, a socially conservative, eurosceptic party, also says Poland can only be effective in the international arena if its Western allies come to understand and appreciate the extent of its suffering and bravery under Nazi and then Soviet occupation. "After 1989, what we call the politics of memory or history was badly neglected. There was no tool, capacity or desire to carry this symbol," Karol Nawrocki, a historian nominated by PiS to run a World War Two museum in Gdansk, told Reuters. His museum will oversee an overhaul of the Westerplatte site. Underscoring divisions over remembrance, the PiS government has moved the ceremonies commemorating the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War Two from Gdansk, where such events have been held in the past, to Warsaw and the town of Wielun, the site of another battle in September 1939. While Gdansk authorities will still hold their own ceremony, events in Warsaw will be attended by U.S. President Donald Trump, who shares the PiS government's views on a range of issues, including migration, climate change and abortion.

Battles over the past

The government's message seems to be working. Opinion polls show PiS likely to win a second four-year term in October with the support of more than 40 percent of Poles. An alliance of liberal parties called the Civic Coalition is polling second with less than 30 percent. Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the mayor of Gdansk who has long been tied with the opposition, denies the city has neglected the Westerplatte site but says PiS is trying to foment a retrogressive nationalism.

"This is a message that is being used to influence voters," Dulkiewicz said. "Eighty years after the start of World War Two, do we want to glorify war or do we want to think about how to have peaceful relations in the future?" "We should be building relationships between people, between societies, to prevent war," she said. Gdansk, cradle of the Solidarity trade union that toppled communist rule and now one of Poland's most liberal cities, has been the focus of tensions over remembrance in the past.

Last year, the PiS government decided to slash the state subsidy to a museum commemorating Solidarity, saying it had become too supportive of opposition politicians. Criticism of Poland's transition from communism is central to the PiS goal of redefining how national history is perceived. While hailing the end of Soviet domination, PiS says liberal politicians wasted the chance to create a fairer society true to its Christian roots after 1989. — Reuters

Merkel and Orban stress unity on Iron Curtain anniversary

SOPRON: German Chancellor Angela Merkel struck a conciliatory tone yesterday alongside her Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orban as they commemorated the 30th anniversary of a pivotal moment in the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Merkel admitted there were still "differences" between the pair over migration but she also emphasized that they agreed on many aspects of the issue, including doing more to tackle the causes of refugee movements.

The two leaders were speaking after marking the anniversary of the "Pan-European Picnic" held at the Austro-Hungarian border in 1989, which saw at least 600 East Germans cross the border and escape to freedom in the West. The first mass exodus of East Germans since the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, it was seen as a key factor in the fall of the wall itself three months later. The commemoration was a rare encounter between two of the great survivors of European politics, with Merkel in office since 2005 and Orban since 2010.

Their last major meeting was in July 2018 when Orban made his first visit to Berlin for three years. It was an awkward affair, during which their divisions were on full display and Merkel accused Orban of failing to respect "humanity" with his harsh anti-immigration policies. Orban has been a sharp critic of Merkel's 2015 decision to open German borders to those fleeing Middle Eastern conflict zones.



SAN DIEGO: Trucks wait in line to exit the inspection facility and enter the United States at the Otay Mesa port of entry at the US-Mexico border. US Customs officers have seized nearly four tons of marijuana worth \$2.3 million hidden in a consignment of jalapeno peppers. — AFP

Hot cargo: US Customs seize tons of marijuana hidden among peppers

LOS ANGELES: US Customs officers have seized nearly four tons of marijuana worth \$2.3 million hidden in a consignment of jalapeno peppers. A sniffer dog alerted officers to a trailer with a shipment of peppers in San Diego on the border with Mexico on Thursday, Customs and Border Protection said.

The CBP statement said "a 37-year-old male Mexican citizen entered the port of entry driving a tractor pulling a trailer with cargo manifested as jalapeno peppers." Officers at Otay Mesa cargo facility found 314 packages of marijuana weighing 7,560 pounds (3.4 tons) mixed among the jalapeno peppers. "I am proud of the officers for seizing this significant marijuana load," said Otay Mesa Port director Rosa Hernandez.

It was the second large haul of marijuana at the facility in days. Officers seized 10,642 pounds of the drug in a shipment of plastic auto parts at Otay Mesa on Tuesday. CBP has seized 113 tons (103 tons) of marijuana so far this year, along with 41 tons of cocaine and 27 tons of methamphetamine. In July authorities seized nearly 20 tons of cocaine with an estimated street value of more than \$1 billion from a ship at the port of Philadelphia in one of the largest drug busts in US history. — AFP



SOPRON: German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban leave a press conference during their meeting in the Hungarian-Austrian border town of Sopron to mark the 30th anniversary of the 'Pan European Picnic'. — AFP

'Germany's southern garrison'

Merkel said at yesterday's press conference that she had faith in incoming European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen to give fresh impetus to finding a common European approach to the migration question. Meanwhile, Orban was asked whether it was incongruous to celebrate the dismantling of borders given that Hungary has erected fences along its southern frontier.

He rejected any contradiction, saying that the walls in 1989 had been taken down so people could live in peace and security and "the new ones are built precisely in order to preserve European peace and security". Due to the Schengen agreement, "in one sense we are Germany's southern garrison," he added. Pressed on the frequent

The Iron Curtain: 5 things to know

PARIS: The Iron Curtain was at first an ideological and then a physical separation of communist Eastern Europe from the West from the 1940s after World War II.

The name

The term "iron curtain" was popularized after it was used by former British prime minister Winston Churchill in a landmark speech at Westminster College in Fulton, the United States, in March 1946. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent," declared Churchill, then leader of the opposition Conservatives. His comments were seen as an opening salvo in the Cold War, which opposed the Soviet Union and the West for more than four decades. The term had been coined earlier. Russian writer Vasily Rozanov, in his 1918 book "The Apocalypse of Our Time", wrote "an iron curtain is being lowered, creaking and squeaking, at the end of Russian history."

A physical frontier

The ideological barrier between Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe and the West gradually became a physical one spanning thousands of kilometers. To stop their citizens from fleeing to the West, the Soviet-dominated Eastern countries began erecting various forms of barriers using barbed wire, ditches and concrete walls. The separations were controlled through alarms, watchtowers, mines and soldiers. Socialist Hungary put up the first section in 1949, building a 260-kilometre (160-mile) barbed wire fence along its border with Austria.

Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall was the most famous section of the Iron Curtain and became its symbol. In 1952 Soviet-satellite East Germany constructed a 10-metre-wide barbed wire buffer along the entire length of its border with West Germany. However, people were still able to cross over in the divided city of Berlin, with about three million fleeing the East via this route between 1952 and 1961. To stop this important loss of manpower, East Germany in 1961 began constructing a wall within the city. Made of reinforced concrete and wire mesh, the Berlin Wall stretched for 155 kilometers. It had a heavily controlled no-man's land on the eastern side.

Escape attempts

Eastern European citizens were only allowed to visit the

criticisms leveled at Hungary over the erosion of the rule of law, Orban said they were "politically biased and not supported by facts". "We have our own... constitutional foundations and Christian freedom which we will always protect," he said.

'Liberation from the Soviet yoke'

Earlier the two leaders addressed an ecumenical church service in Sopron, close to where the picnic was held. Orban hailed the fact that the events of 30 years ago had "cleared the way towards German reunification". Hungarians had always known that "our liberation from the Soviet yoke would be definitive and only once Germany was united," he added. Merkel recalled her own memories of seeing plans for the picnic advertised in 1989. She remembered the "uncertainty and worry" when it became apparent the picnic had turned into an escape to the West.

"Everyone knew how the uprising in East Germany in 1953 turned out, as well as the one in Hungary in 1956 and the Prague Spring," she added. She praised the "courage" and "humanity" of the Hungarian border guards who did not fire on the crowds. The events at the picnic reflected the values of "solidarity, freedom and a humane Europe", she said. The two leaders were both personally marked by the events of 1989 but have since taken starkly diverging political directions.

Merkel's upbringing in communist East Germany imbued her with a belief in the importance of liberal values in politics and free market economics. Orban by contrast, while starting as a young liberal centrist in 1989, sees the events of that year as the first step for the nations of eastern Europe to re-establish their sovereignty. Despite the political tensions, Budapest and Berlin enjoy close economic relations. Germany is Hungary's largest trading partner and a major source of foreign investment, particularly in the form of the mighty German car industry. — AFP

West under strict conditions and those who tried to cross over without permission did so at great risk. About 600-700 people died trying to escape East Germany, at least 136 at the Berlin Wall, according to historians. Around 5,000 people made it out, however, often using innovative means. One man crossed via a wire cable shot by bow and arrow from the roof of a building to a relative on the other side. Others escaped by swimming across Berlin's Spree River, via tunnels, or by hot air balloon.

Iron curtain crumbling

The first crack in the Iron Curtain appeared in May 1989 when Hungary decided to start opening its border with Austria. On August 19 the frontier was to be symbolically opened for a few hours for a Pan-European Picnic. More than 600 East Germans holidaying in Hungary at the time took advantage and fled to the West. It was the first massive exodus since the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall. Soon afterwards Eastern Europe's communist regimes started to tumble.

East Germans began to demonstrate, and on November 9 the regime unexpectedly granted them the right to travel to the West freely. Thousands flocked to the wall, and disoriented border guards opened the checkpoints. Through the night euphoric Berliners celebrated, perched on the wall. Then they used pickaxes to knock out chunks. Within two years the Soviet Union had imploded, the Iron Curtain falling with it. — AFP



BERLIN: This file photo shows West Berliners who are crowded in front of the Berlin Wall early 11 November 1989 as they watch East German border guards demolishing a section of the wall. — AFP