

## International

# Ball is in your court - UK, EU clash over next Brexit move

## Weakened UK leader faces party infighting

LONDON: Britain and its European Union partners clashed yesterday over which side should make the next move to unblock Brexit talks, despite concerns they will miss a deadline for a divorce deal and that London is heading for a chaotic departure. Prime Minister Theresa May made clear in speech she was to deliver to parliament that she hoped her EU partners would make proposals at a new round of talks opening the way to the next stage of negotiations, saying "the ball is in their court".

But even before she had delivered the speech, an EU spokesman hit back in Brussels, saying "the ball is entirely in the UK court for the rest to happen". May is desperate to try to regain some of her authority and refocus on talks to unravel more than 40 years of union after a speech at her party conference last week, marred by a repetitive cough, a prankster and a stage malfunction, left her weaker than ever.

She has so far fought off attempts to unseat her by critics already angry over an ill-judged election when she lost her governing Conservatives' majority, but her weakness has opened the door for many in her party to challenge her Brexit strategy with just 18 months to go before Britain leaves the EU. With Brussels quietly preparing for a collapse in the talks and Britain getting ready for what May calls "all eventualities", some officials and business chiefs worry the country will crash out of the EU without a deal. Speaking in parliament later, May will say she is determined to secure a new partnership with the other 27 members of the wealthy political and trade bloc.

"Achieving that partnership will require leadership and flexibility, not just from us but from our friends, the 27 nations of the EU," she will say, according to excerpts of her

speech. "And as we look forward to the next stage, the ball is in their court. But I am optimistic we will receive a positive response." But the EU was clear: "There is a clear sequencing to these talks and there has been so far no solution found on step one, which is the divorce proceedings," European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas told a regular briefing. "So the ball is entirely in the UK court for the rest to happen."

### 'See what happens'

May, who will host businesses later to listen to their Brexit concerns, is keen to push the talks beyond a discussion of the divorce to try to offer firms some certainty about future trading conditions. A report that aerospace manufacturer BAE Systems is planning to cut more than 1,000 jobs can only add pressure for May to press her case for the EU to move beyond talks on the divorce settlement, the rights of expatriates and the border with EU-member Ireland.

EU negotiators say that while they see no big breakthrough at the summit next week, they may offer May a hand by offering some hope of a shift at the next scheduled meeting in mid-December. Aides to May have signaled that the prime minister has accepted that her October deadline will not be met despite a speech in Italy last month which attempted to reset the tone of the difficult negotiations.

Her spokesman told reporters: "Let's see what happens in the next round of talks". But some pro-Brexit campaigners are calling on the prime minister to get ready to step away from the talks - underlining the deep divisions in the Conservative Party. Those differences were aired again yesterday with negative briefings in the local media against finance minister Philip Hammond, who supports prolonging



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May reacts as she arrives in Downing Street in central London yesterday.— AFP

the status quo with the EU for as long as possible, and foreign minister Boris Johnson, who angered some Conservatives for setting his own Brexit red lines.

Some have suggested that May will reshuffle her cabinet, but yesterday her spokesman said she had full confidence in both ministers. "We are fast reaching the point

when the prime minister should assert the authority of her office over the negotiations and call time," Bernard Jenkin, a Conservative lawmaker, wrote in the Guardian newspaper. Asked whether he meant Britain should walk away if there was no progress at the October summit, Jenkin told Reuters: "Yes".— Reuters



## EU negotiators see no imminent breakthrough

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### News in brief

#### Boats collide; 8 dead

TUNIS: At least eight people drowned yesterday when a boat carrying dozens of mostly Tunisian migrants collided with a navy vessel off the country's southeast coast, its defense ministry said. According to testimony from survivors, there were between 70 and 80 people on board. International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokesman Flavio Di Giacomo said. He said at least 20 people were missing and some 40, almost all Tunisians, had been rescued. The ministry said eight bodies had been recovered after the collision with the Tunisian navy boat, which occurred 54km off the coast. Italian news agency ANSA said the migrant vessel had sunk. Libya has long been the busiest country of departure for a steady flow of migrants trying to reach the European Union from North Africa. But activity on that route has declined since July as Libya's coast guard and an armed group in the smuggling hub of Sabratha tightened controls.

#### Fire near plane

HONG KONG: A fire broke out on the tarmac of Hong Kong's international airport yesterday, with black smoke seen billowing near the belly of an American Airlines plane. The blaze began around 5:30 pm in one of the parking berths and one person was injured, police said. "When a loading vehicle was loading cargo onto the plane it caught on fire," a police spokeswoman said, adding that it was an empty American Airlines flight. Photos on social media showed the fire blazing, with black smoke rising near the belly of the plane in between the right wing and tail wing. Hong Kong Airport Authority said the fire, which occurred at ground level, had been extinguished and they were investigating its cause. The plane was bound for Los Angeles, according to the airport website.

#### Taiwan logo gaffe

MANILA: The Philippines apologized to China yesterday, days after embarrassingly using the logo of rival Taiwan at an official defense ministry ceremony to accept a Chinese donation of rifles and ammunition. A banner with the logos of the Philippine and Taiwanese defense ministries hung above the stage Thursday as Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and Chinese ambassador Zhao Jianhua sat together to witness the weapons turnover. "Military assistance gratis from the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China," read the banner, with the wrong logo apparently not attracting attention at the time. "The Department of National Defense committed a grievous but purely unintentional mistake of using a different logo on a banner to represent the Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China," said a Philippine defense ministry statement. "We have issued an official apology to the government and the people of the People's Republic of China," it said, adding that Philippine defense authorities and the military "strictly adhere" to Manila's "One China Policy".

#### Kenya police kill 37

NAIROBI: Thirty-seven people were killed after Kenya's August elections, and all but two of the cases were caused by "excessive" force by police, a human rights watchdog said yesterday. Previous tolls from the disputed elections—since annulled by the Supreme Court—had not exceeded 24, and until now there were few details into how the deaths occurred. In a 262-page report, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) said 35 of 37 deaths it documented between August 9-15, were due to "excessive use of force by police". The remaining two were due to "civilian aggression". The August 8 presidential poll has been cancelled by Kenya's paramount court, which cited widespread "illegalities and irregularities." New elections are scheduled for October 26.

## In shooting chaos, Las Vegas airport became safe haven

LAS VEGAS: As bullets began flying into a crowd of country music fans, a pack of 300-plus people ran about a mile to the Las Vegas airport, where they kicked down chain-link fences, hobbled over razor wire and were briefly mistaken by security officials for being attackers instead of shooting victims. Once they pushed past the fence at McCarran International Airport, some of them ran onto the tarmac as helicopters beamed searchlights toward people they assumed were intruders. Airport authorities found people who were shot, bloodied and hysterical. Officials immediately halted air traffic, diverted two dozen flights to Phoenix and other cities and shut off some runway lights.

"I'm thinking to myself, I don't know if the airport police know what's going on yet," said Mark Gay, who was near the front of the crowd as it ran to the airport. "We were running, running out of the dark. If the cops were on that side, they don't know who we are. So it was: 'Put your arms out when you're coming in.'" The large-scale airport breach highlighted the chaos that ensued after gunman Stephen Paddock opened fire on Oct 1 from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay casino-hotel on a country music festival down below, killing 58 people and wounding hundreds.

The breach also raised questions about the security of the McCarran International's perimeter as people were able to barge their way through the fences of one of the nation's busiest airports. "I don't know that we ran across any breach that was comparable to this," said Jenny Grover of the Government Accountability Office, which audits the Transportation Security Administration and reviews the agency's security data. "Because of the uniqueness of the situation, I'm not really sure when it changed from a breach to a relief effort."

McCarran has had a large number of perimeter breaches in recent years. An Associated Press investigation found that McCarran had 30 known perimeter security breaches



LAS VEGAS: Some of the casinos along the Las Vegas Strip dim their marquee signs for about 10 minutes in Las Vegas, to pay tribute to the victims who spent that much time under fire in the Las Vegas shooting.— AP

between 2004 and 2016, making it the second-most breached major airport in the country by AP's count. Unlike other cities where the airport is on the outskirts, McCarran is located in the heart of Las Vegas. It's only a few hundred feet from Las Vegas Strip properties like the Mandalay Bay and Luxor. In the chaos of the massacre, some panicked concert-goers headed to the airport in the belief that it provided the best opportunity for safety, even if they had to force their way through the perimeter.

At the time of the shooting, rumors were flying around about active shooters and bomb threats at a number of Las Vegas casinos, so they chose to get to the airport. "We

were making the decision - we're headed to the airport. The airport seems like the most secure, safe place," said Fred Rowbotham, an off-duty police officer from the San Diego area who was in the crowd that went to McCarran. As it became clear that the crowd on the McCarran tarmac was fleeing gunfire, the airport repositioned workers to help with the evacuation and shepherded hundreds of the victims into secure facilities.

For hours, they tended to the wounded and offered food, water, blankets, phone chargers and reassurance. Airport shuttle buses later took them to a central evacuation center.— AP

## Split within a split: Catalan valley sticking with Spain

VIELHA: If Catalonia declares independence from Spain this week, one community in the region's mountainous north might declare independence from Catalonia. Most people in the picturesque Aran Valley - a semi-autonomous community nestled among the Pyrenees - want to stay with Spain, and the area has the right to self-determination under a law passed in 2015 by the Catalan parliament. "We're a little spot on the map and often we're not taken into account," said Maria Verges Perez, the deputy mayor of Aran's capital, Vielha, a cluster of stone-and-slate houses on the valley floor ringed by autumnal forests.

"But we will exercise our right to decide our future," Catalan President Carles Puigdemont is expected to declare independence today in Spain's worst constitutional crisis since the return of democracy in the 1970s. The roughly 10,000 people of Aran, on the border with France, have a language and culture distinct from the rest of Catalonia, which itself differs from the rest of Spain. The valley's economy is heavily dependent on winter sports tourists from Spain and the EU.

Their politicians say the 2015 law gives them the right to vote on whether they want to break away with Catalonia - something which Catalan officials do not dispute. The Spanish government has vowed to prevent Catalonia seceding. Losing the region would deprive the country of 16 percent of its people and a fifth of its economic output. But while Madrid insists Spain is indivisible under its constitution, the Aran Valley underlines the complex nature of nationhood in such a culturally diverse country.



## Mountain community has its own culture and language

away from what is going on in Barcelona," said Carlos Barrera, head of the Aran government, at a rural festival in Salardu village where locals judged stocky Pyrenean horses and handed out racks of blood sausages.

### Crown of aragon

The valley had the lowest voter turnout by far in

Catalonia's Oct 1 independence referendum, which had been declared illegal by Spain's constitutional court. Across Catalonia there was a 43 percent turnout, with most people who wanted to remain in Spain staying home, and 90 percent of those who voted backed secession. In Aran, just 24 percent voted, with 84 percent of those backing independence.

The valley traces its political allegiances back to pacts drawn up in the 13th century with the Crown of Aragon, a monarchy that would join with the Crown of Castile two centuries later to form what became Spain. Many locals speak Aranese, a dialect of the Occitan language still spoken in pockets of the Pyrenees and southern France. Two years ago, the Catalan parliament approved the "Law on Aran's Special Status", giving it control over its culture, language and administration and recognizing "the right of the Aranese people to decide their future". A Catalan government spokesman said Catalonia would respect the Aranese people's decision in any future referendum.

A Spanish government spokesman declined to comment on whether Aran could remain part of Spain, saying Catalonia would never become independent. Aran's residents are some of the sternest critics of the Catalan government which they say is ignoring those people who want to stay in Spain and charging towards independence at any cost. In Vielha, a lone red and yellow Catalan independence flag hanging from an apartment block was the only evidence last Saturday of the separatist fever sweeping many parts of the region, where cities convulse with protests triggered by Madrid's violent crackdown on the referendum.

Many people in Aran fear Catalan independence would destroy its tourism economy which revolves around Baqueira-Beret, Spain's most popular ski resort. About two-thirds of the population in Aran depend on the ski resort for jobs. In the winter, the population triples with the influx of skiers drawn to the same slopes used by Spain's royal family.— Reuters