

International

May implores parliament in final bid to save Brexit deal

Gambit failing as her premiership fades

LONDON: Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday implored British MPs to back her reworked EU divorce deal but saw pro-Brexit Conservatives and opposition parties savage her bid for a compromise to end months of political crisis. On the eve of European elections Britain had not expected to hold three years after the Brexit referendum, May urged lawmakers who have repeatedly rejected her plan to vote for it in early June so that the country can finally leave the bloc later in the summer.

"The opportunity of Brexit is too large and the consequences of failure too grave to risk further delay," the prime minister, who has vowed to stand down following the crunch parliamentary vote, told the House of Commons. "Reject it and all we have before us is division and deadlock." May outlined a package of "compromise measures" aimed at securing the support of MPs from the main opposition Labour Party, which included giving parliament a vote on holding a referendum on her divorce deal.

But Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who last week pulled out of weeks of cross-party Brexit talks citing the government's unwillingness to compromise, said it was "little more than a repackaged version of her three-times rejected deal". "The rhetoric may have changed but the deal has not," he added. Amid strong opposition from May's Conservative colleagues to the new move, Ian Blackford, leader of the Scottish National Party

in Westminster, said the embattled prime minister was "fooling no one but herself". "Her own party doesn't want her deal... Her time is up."

In a sign of the scale of the apparent internal backlash, Environment Secretary and Brexiteer Michael Gove hinted that the vote in the week of June 3 may not even go ahead. "We will reflect over the course of the next few days on how people look at the proposition," he told BBC radio.

'A question of democracy'

May's offer comes as Britain votes in EU elections today with the two main parties trailing behind the Brexit Party and the pro-EU Liberal Democrats, according to polls. The latest YouGov survey showed eurosceptic populist Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party claiming 37 percent of votes, with the Lib Dems second on 19 percent, followed by Labour on 13 percent and the Tories lagging in fifth place with just seven percent. "If we win big on Thursday, we will kill off any prospect of parliament forcing a second referendum upon us because they know they would lose!" Farage told supporters at a final rally Tuesday.

Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable, whose party is set to come second in the polls, told a party gathering on Tuesday that a vote for his party was "a vote to stop Brexit". The pro-EU party's outright rejection of Brexit appears to be resonating with Remain voters

who would normally back Labour or the Conservatives.

'Last chance'

May has pitched her "new Brexit deal" as MPs' "last chance" to end the political gridlock that has already delayed Britain's departure from the bloc past its original March deadline and prompted public anger. The government is aiming for the law to be approved by the time parliament's summer recess begins on July 20, which would let the country leave at the end of that month - as long as lawmakers reject a second referendum. Otherwise the process could be delayed until Oct 31 - the deadline set by the EU - or even later if its leaders grant Britain another postponement.

May's proposals threaten to further infuriate resolute eurosceptics in her own Conservative Party. British media reported party power-brokers were to make a fresh attempt later yesterday to change internal rules to allow an immediate leadership challenge to May. Former foreign secretary Boris Johnson, the favorite to replace her as leader, said on Twitter he would not support her new package, having backed it last time it was put to parliament. "We can and must do better - and deliver what the people voted for," he said, rejecting the idea of any customs union or second referendum. Analysts and British newspapers gave May little-to-no chance of winning on this occasion, with the eurosceptic Daily Telegraph calling her move: "Desperate, deluded, doomed." — AFP



LONDON: A combination of video grabs shows Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May reacting as main opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn speaks during the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) session in the House of Commons yesterday. — AFP

News in brief

Woman head of US Air Force

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump announced Tuesday he had nominated a former ambassador and Arizona businesswoman to lead the Air Force. Barbara Barrett, 68, served as the US ambassador to Finland from 2008 to 2009 under the George W Bush administration. She also chaired an aeronautics research and development center, The Aerospace Corporation, until 2017. "She will be an outstanding Secretary!" Trump tweeted. A former lawyer and test pilot, Barrett is also a board member at the Rand Corporation, a think tank that provides research and analysis to the US armed forces. She and her husband Craig, the former CEO of American technology giant Intel, are major Republican donors. — AFP

Queen pops down to Sainsbury's

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth popped down to the supermarket yesterday to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the British high street chain, Sainsbury's. The 93-year-old queen visited a pop-up replica of the original Sainsbury's shop which was founded on London's Drury Lane in 1869, selling just butter, milk and eggs. She was greeted by Lord John Sainsbury, the great-grandson of the supermarket chain's founder John James Sainsbury, and was shown around replicas of old shop floors as they developed from the introduction of self-service shopping in the 1950s to the use of modern technology. It was explained to her how shoppers now use self-service tills and pay using their mobile phones, although she did not try it out herself, and she also cut a commemorative birthday cake. — AFP

Nigerian bandits kill at least 20

KANO: Bandit gunmen have killed at least 20 people in separate attacks in northwestern Nigeria, police said yesterday, the latest violence in the restive region of Katsina. Armed bandits on motorcycles stormed into a farming village on Tuesday, spraying the people with gunfire. Katsina state police spokesman Gambo Isah said. "They killed 18," Isah said. That attack happened on at Yargamji village in Batsari district, some 50 km from the state capital Katsina. A self-defense militia from another village then chased the bandits, ending in a gun battle in the forest. Police said the bodies of two militia members shot dead were brought back and buried from that fight, but residents said more people were killed. — AFP

US billionaire's gift to graduates fuels debt debate

NEW YORK: When the American billionaire Robert Smith announced to students graduating from historically black Morehouse College that he would pay off their student loans, he put himself at the center of one of the 2020 US election's key issues. While the cost of Smith's surprise gift announced on Saturday to Morehouse's 396-strong class of 2019 is not yet known, the body's student debt is thought to reach \$40 million. Smith, a Texas businessman who is the wealthiest African-American, has been applauded for his generosity, but his gift also generated jealousy among the many Americans struggling with huge student debts.

"Can a billionaire pledge to pay off my student loan debt? I'm glad for the graduating class, but also envious," one Twitter user wrote, reflecting a sentiment common on social media. Already, several Democratic challengers to President Donald Trump in next year's elections have proposed ways to reduce the nearly \$1.5 trillion American student loan burden, and even politicians who aren't running have weighed in. "People shouldn't be in a situation where they depend on a stranger's enormous act of charity for this kind of liberation to begin with," tweeted Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a rising Democratic House representative who was elected last year in part on the promise of free university education.

Mobilized billionaires

More than two-thirds of American graduates were in debt in 2016, the Institute for College Access and Success said in

Dem impeachment talk gains as Trump blocks testimony

WASHINGTON: Democratic Party talk of impeachment intensified Tuesday after Donald Trump's former lawyer Don McGahn refused to testify about obstruction allegations against the US president. House Democratic leaders held off fresh pressure from rank-and-file legislators to launch an effort to remove the president, after the White House again stymied their probe into Trump's actions in the Russia meddling investigation. But McGahn's refusal to abide by a subpoena from the House Judiciary Committee stoked the furor among Democrats, with more demanding the party resolve to put the president on trial.

In a pair of early morning tweets yesterday, Trump denounced the congressional investigations by House Democrats as "PRESIDENTIAL HARASSMENT!" and complained they were hurting his poll numbers. "Without the ILLEGAL Witch Hunt, my poll numbers, especially because of our historically 'great' economy, would be at 65%. Too bad! The greatest Hoax in American History."

Fears rapist working in NZ parliament

WELLINGTON: The lawmaker in charge of New Zealand's parliament said yesterday he fears a rapist is stalking the building's corridors, after an inquiry exposed the toxic work culture that staffers endure. Speaker Trevor Mallard said he was disturbed by the findings of the independent inquiry, which said bullying, harassment and other abusive conduct was rife in the parliamentary precincts. The most serious accusations concerned three sexual assault allegations against an unnamed man, which the inquiry's report said "appeared to be part of a multi-year pattern of predatory behavior."

Mallard, who is responsible for administering the parliament, said such behavior amounted to rape. "We're talking about serious sexual assault. Well, for me, that's rape," he told Radio New Zealand, saying he did not know the identity of the alleged perpetrator or victims. He added: "Reading the report carefully, I get the sense that the man

April, with their burden averaging \$29,650. Paying off the debt often weighs heavily on young Americans' lives through their 20s and 30s, delaying the starting of families and the purchase of cars and homes. All of that affects the US economy, and Smith isn't the first billionaire to take notice.

Last November, former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged \$1.8 billion to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, from which he graduated in 1964. The donation aims to make education at the elite school more affordable to low- and middle-income students, who would otherwise have to face fees and living costs totaling about \$72,000 per-year. Another billionaire, Kenneth Langone, gave \$100 million to the New York University School of Medicine last year to make tuition free for its current and future students. Student loan debt levels soared in the US between 1996 and 2012, and Senator Bernie Sanders put the rising costs at the heart of his unsuccessful 2016 presidential campaign.

The following year, the independent politician from Vermont put a measure called the "College For All Act" before the Senate, which would have abolished tuition fees at public universities for most families. The cost of the measure, which the Republicans leading the Senate have shown no interest in, has been estimated at \$600 billion, to be financed by a tax on financial transactions.

Sanders is now among the 23 candidates for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, and together with Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren has once again made student loan debt a plank of his campaign. Warren last month unveiled a detailed proposal to abolish student fees in public universities and cancel student loan debt according to income. The plan, estimated to cost \$1.25 billion over a decade, would be financed by a tax on the very wealthy.

State measures

Though few other detailed plans have emerged, almost

"Stonewalling Congress on witnesses and the unredacted Mueller report only enhances the President's appearance of guilt, and as a result, he has pushed Congress to a point where we must start an impeachment inquiry," said Representative Mark Pocan, one of the leaders of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. "We need to do our job & vote on impeachment," tweeted Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who has so far fended off pressure to pursue that option, scheduled a party meeting Wednesday to discuss the issue. "I don't think we're there at this point in time," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, Pelosi's deputy, said Tuesday. Hoyer said they would continue on the current path of investigating Trump, which has included seeking testimony and documents that so far the Trump administration has refused to hand over. "And if it leads to a conclusion that we need to proceed further through other avenues, including impeachment, so be it," he said.

White House 'stonewalling'

McGahn's refusal to appear before the Judiciary Committee was the most recent in a growing list of ways the White House has frustrated investigations by the Democrat-controlled House. Trump's Justice Department has refused to turn over to Congress the unexpurgated version of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's final report on

is still on the premises." Mallard described the situation as "intolerable" but said he could not go to police as all submissions to the inquiry were made on the basis that they would be kept strictly confidential. He said he hoped the women involved would contact police directly, and would receive support from rape counselling services.

There are 120 MPs in the New Zealand parliament, known as The Beehive, but the number of people working in the complex swells to the thousands when advisers, bureaucrats, media and security are taken into account. The five-month inquiry by workplace consultant Debbie Francis was called after allegations against lawmakers from both sides of politics, including that a minister physically attacked a press secretary who she blamed for missing an appointment.

Francis found parliament was a high-pressure, insular environment where unacceptable conduct was too often tolerated. In a 120-page report released Tuesday, she said there was a reluctance to hold MPs accountable over bullying behavior, even though some were regarded by staffers as serial offenders. "The fundamental problem is the power imbalance. It's a master-servant relationship and they're treated like gods," an anonymous respondent told the inquiry. Others described "creepy" behavior towards young women and those who made complaints often said they received little support. — AFP



ATLANTA: In this screen grab taken on May 20, 2019, Robert F. Smith, an African-American businessman with a fortune estimated at \$4.4 billion, announces to the new graduating class at Morehouse College that he plans to pay off the entirety of their student debt. — AFP

all Democratic candidates in 2020 argue for making universities more affordable. With the election still more than a year off, some states are taking their own steps to reduce the cost of higher education. New York state started offering scholarships last year equalling public university fees to students of modest means, with the caveat that graduates remain in the state for a few years after finishing.

Washington state governor Jay Inslee - another Democratic candidate in the 2020 race - on Tuesday signed into a law a bill raising a key business tax and using the revenue to make attending a public university free starting next year for students from families below the median income level. The bill was supported by two of the state's largest taxpayers: Microsoft and Amazon. — AFP

his Russia meddling and obstruction investigation, along with supporting documentary evidence. Arrangements for Mueller himself to testify have been stalled on his insisting that much of his testimony take place in private.

And the White House appealed Tuesday against a federal court order for Trump's accountants to turn over years of his financial records to another House committee. McGahn was subpoenaed to testify on evidence he provided to Mueller on Trump's efforts to stifle that investigation, evidence which Mueller indicated was strong enough to support criminal obstruction charges. Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler said each of the incidents that McGahn described to Mueller "constitutes a crime," and that McGahn must testify. "Our subpoenas are not optional," Nadler said in opening the hearing with the witness chair empty. "Let me be clear: this committee will hear Mr McGahn's testimony, even if we have to go to court to secure it."

Nadler accused Trump of "stonewalling" but the White House maintains that Mueller's sprawling probe cleared the president, meaning there was no need for more digging. The White House also says that people on Trump's staff cannot legally be compelled to testify. Nadler underscored his disagreement and determination to force testimony Tuesday afternoon when his committee subpoenaed former Trump aide Hope Hicks and former McGahn chief of staff Annie Donaldson to testify. — AFP

Turkey ready for US sanctions over Russian missiles

ANKARA: Turkey insisted it would go ahead with its controversial decision to buy the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, saying it was preparing for any possible sanctions from the US. Turkey's push to buy the S-400 system has strained relations with the United States, a NATO ally, which worries about integrating Russian technology with Turkey's Western equipment. Defense Minister Hulusi Akar told reporters late Tuesday that Ankara was "preparing" for US penalties under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which prohibits business with Russia's state and private defense and intelligence sectors.

He added that Turkey was "fed up" with being just being a buyer of military equipment, and wanted to be involved in joint production and technology transfers. "The idea that we always buy, you always produce, is finished," he told reporters in Ankara. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday said Turkey and Russia would jointly produce S-500 defense systems after the purchase of the S-400 system. Turkey has already sent personnel to Russia for training, Akar said, and the system could be delivered as early as June or July.

Last month, he said the S-400 would likely be used to protect the capital Ankara and Istanbul. In a bid to force Turkey to cancel its S-400 deal, the US offered a renewed proposal in March for Patriots, its own anti-missile and anti-aircraft weapon system. The US has said buying the S-400 could jeopardize the Turkey's involvement in the F-35 fighter jet program, for which it provides some parts. Akar said Turkey was still considering the offer but that there had been "general easing" in negotiations with the US on the F-35s and Patriots.

Akar said Turkey was fulfilling its responsibilities in the F-35 project and expected the program to continue as planned. He said buying the S-400s was only meant to meet Turkey's defense needs and posed no threats. "We are doing whatever normal bilateral agreements mandate. Though there are some issues from time to time, we are pleased that there has been no sharp turn until now... Turkey is also making preparations for the potential implementation of CAATSA sanctions," he said. "In our talks with the United States, we see a general easing and rapprochement on issues including the east of the Euphrates, F-35s and Patriots."

Relations have been tense over multiple issues, including US support to a Syrian Kurdish militia viewed by Ankara as terrorists, and the refusal to extradite a Pennsylvania-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen accused of ordering a failed coup in Turkey in 2016. — Agencies