

BRITAIN'S YEARS-LONG BATTLE OVER BREXIT

The curtain came down on Britain's membership of the European Union yesterday after more than three and a half years of disagreements and delays. Here are the milestones in the rocky process.

LEAVE WINS

In a referendum on June 23, 2016 that followed decades of arguments over Europe, Britons vote by 52 percent to 48 percent to become the first nation to leave the EU bloc. Conservative leader David Cameron, who led the campaign to remain in the EU and called the vote expecting to win, resigns as prime minister the next day. He is replaced by Theresa May, the interior minister who also backed remaining.

DIVORCE PROCESS TRIGGERED

May formally triggers the exit process on March 29, 2017, sending a notification letter to Brussels that gives Britain until March 29, 2019, to leave.

DRAFT AGREED

Ending more than a year of acrimonious talks, British and EU negotiators on November 13, 2018, reach a draft divorce deal. But May faces an angry backlash from her own Conservative party over its terms.

TRIPLE REJECTION

On January 15, 2019, British MPs vote against the deal in the biggest government defeat in British parliamentary history. Brussels refuses to renegotiate. The House of Commons rejects the deal again on March 12 and for a third time on March 29.

DEADLINE DELAYS

The EU agrees to delay Brexit until May 22 and then until October 31, 2019. It means Britain is obliged to organise European Parliament elections on May 23, which are won by the newly-formed Brexit Party of anti-EU populist Nigel Farage.



JOHNSON ELECTED

The European election defeat and parliament's refusal to back her Brexit deal forces May to step down as Conservative leader on June 7. On July 23, party members vote for Brexit figurehead Boris Johnson as their new leader. He becomes prime minister the next day. Anxious over Farage's surge in support, Johnson promises to take Britain out of the EU on October 31, with or without a deal. He publishes his "final" Brexit proposals on October 2.

THE ENDGAME

On October 22, British MPs approve in principle a new Brexit deal struck days earlier with the EU. But they reject Johnson's bid to fast-track final approval before October 31. On October 28, EU members agree to postpone Brexit for up to three months until January 31, 2020.

ELECTIONS, GREEN LIGHT

Johnson's resounding win at a December 12 snap general election smoothes his Brexit bill's passage through parliament on January 9, 2020. Queen Elizabeth II gives her formal assent for Britain to leave the EU on January 23, with two top officials in Brussels and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson signing it the following day.

THEN FINALLY ... BREXIT

Divorce happened yesterday. An extendable transition period, during which much in the relationship will not change, has been agreed up to December 31, 2020. More tough talks on the future EU-UK partnership are expected by then.

SOURCE: AFP



British members of the European Parliament from the Brexit Party pose for a photograph as they leave the European Parliament, in Brussels, on the Brexit day yesterday. Inset, Pro-EU anti-Brexit protesters hold placards in Parliament Square in London as UK formally leaves the European Union.

PHOTO: AFP

'New dawn for Europe'

EU chiefs hail as UK quits, warn London would not keep the benefits of membership

AFP, Brussels

The EU's three chiefs hailed Britain's departure from the bloc yesterday as "a new dawn for Europe", warning London would not keep the benefits of membership when it leaves.

Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen and David Sassoli -- the presidents of the EU Council, European Commission and European Parliament, respectively -- used an open letter published in European newspapers to say they would do "everything in their power" to make the new relationship with Britain a success.

Britain's 47-year membership of the bloc ended on the stroke of 2300 GMT -- midnight Brussels time, three and a half years after a shock referendum vote to leave.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has promised to "get Brexit done" and unite the country in a new era of prosperity, but months of difficult negotiations with Brussels about the shape of future ties lie ahead.

The three EU leaders made clear they would not roll over easily or allow Britain to "have its cake and eat it", insisting Britain could not have full access to the EU market unless it

agrees to follow European labour, taxation and environmental rules.

"How close that partnership will be depends on decisions that are still to be taken," they wrote.

"Without being a member, you cannot retain the benefits of membership."

Britain cannot have full access to EU market unless it agrees to follow European taxation, environmental rules

Nothing will immediately feel different during 11-month transition period

Nothing will immediately feel different thanks to an 11-month transition period negotiated as part of an EU-UK exit deal ratified this week.

Britons will be able to work in and trade freely with EU nations until December 31, and vice versa, although the UK will no longer be represented in the bloc's institutions.

While Brexit supporters are celebrating, the

EU leaders said they would approach the day as one of "reflection and mixed emotions", reiterating their deep regret at Britain's departure.

"But tomorrow will also mark a new dawn for Europe," they went on.

"The last few years have brought us closer together -- as nations, as institutions and as people. This is why the Member States of Europe will continue to join forces and build a common future."

During the transition period, Britain will continue to apply EU laws but will no longer be represented in EU institutions, and British diplomats in Brussels will have to surrender their passes to the European Council.

EU officials were reminded this week, ahead of Britain's exit, that they should not disclose confidential information about the bloc's business.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to announce his government's negotiating agenda next week, perhaps -- like Barnier -- as early as Monday. But if a new trade deal is to be agreed it will have to be done in record time -- the post-Brexit "standstill" period when the rules remain the same will expire in 11 months.

CORONAVIRUS SCARE

Myanmar sends back China plane

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar yesterday sent a plane back to China with most passengers still on board -- including French and American citizens -- after one man suspected of contracting the coronavirus was taken to hospital.

No cases of the pathogen that has killed 213 people in China have been reported in Myanmar so far but fears have been growing in the impoverished Southeast Asian nation that shares a border with its powerful neighbour.

A total of 79 people were on board the China Southern Airline flight from Guangzhou, including two Americans, two French, two Myanmar, one Columbian and 72 Chinese nationals, according to airport officials. One Chinese passenger was taken to a nearby hospital after displaying possible symptoms of the virus, said civil aviation department manager Soe Paing.

An AFP reporter saw health-workers wearing full protective gear greeting an airport ambulance.

The two Myanmar nationals were also allowed to disembark and taken to the same hospital for checks, Soe Paing added.

"The rest of the people on the flight were sent back."

An airport police officer also confirmed the passengers' return.

Despite a lack of confirmed cases in the country experts fear its fragile health system is in no way capable of coping with a serious outbreak.

Myanmar is also waiting for permission to evacuate more than 60 students trapped in Wuhan since the city, the origin of the epidemic, was sealed off last week.

REUTERS, Shanghai

The coronavirus is threatening to disrupt large parts of China's manufacturing machine and its global supply chains as the spread of infection and strict public health measures force companies and workers to remain idle.

China's most important holiday was set to end yesterday, when many companies planned to get back to work after a week-long vacation, but authorities have ordered businesses in many areas to stay shut longer in a bid to contain the disease.

Widespread travel restrictions, meanwhile, mean millions of migrant workers may be unable to return to what has often been called the world's factory floor.

The World Health Organization on Thursday declared the outbreak a global health emergency as the death toll in China reached more than 200, with over 9,000 infected.

Brian Miller, 32, owner of Easy



Local residents fill a drone with disinfectant before spray at a village in Pingdingshan, in China's central Henan province yesterday, during the virus outbreak in Hubei's city of Wuhan.

PHOTO: AFP

China Warehouse and a bluetooth speaker company in the southern city of Shenzhen, said labour and production disruptions could ripple through supply chains, from raw materials to final assembly.

"If we can't get back to production quick enough, I'll run out of inventory, and I'll have a few months where we won't be able to sell anything. And that's the catastrophe that we all don't want," Miller told Reuters.

US House votes to repeal Iraq war authorisation

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Refocusing a debate on President Donald Trump's moves in the Middle East in the midst of the Senate impeachment trial, the Democratic-controlled House on Thursday approved measures reasserting congressional authority over war powers.

The House passed a proposal to repeal the 2002 congressional authorisation for the war in Iraq, as well as a plan to prevent tax dollars from being used to take military action against Iran without congressional approval. Repeal of the 2002 authorisation was approved by a 236-166 vote, while the funding measure on Iran passed 228-175.

The actions follow a January 9 vote by the House asserting that President Trump must seek approval from Congress before engaging in further military action against Iran.

Democrats said the three measures,

taken together, would reassert Congress's constitutional authority in questions of war and peace and sending American forces into harm's way.

"For far too long, Congress has been missing in action on matters of war and peace," said Democratic Representative Barbara Lee, who sponsored the measure repealing 2002 war authorisation.

She called the repeal vote long overdue. "It is time to end giving blank checks to any president to wage endless wars," she said.

Republicans said Lee and fellow Democrats were the ones acting irresponsibly.

"After President Trump took decisive action to take out a brutal Iranian terrorist responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans, Democrats now seek to restrain our president and restrict his ability to protect our nation," said Representative Steve Scalise, the number 2 House Republican.



POLICE-REBEL GUNFIGHT

3 militants killed, 1 cop hurt in Kashmir

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

At least three fighters were killed and a policeman sustained injuries during a gunfight between rebels and security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said yesterday.

"So far three terrorists have been gunned down," a police spokesperson told Al Jazeera. "One policeman was also injured in the gunfight."

Police said the gun battle started at around 5:00am yesterday after police intercepted a Srinagar-bound goods truck near a toll plaza in Nagrota on the outskirts of the southern city of Jammu.

The rebels travelling in the truck fired on police leading to an encounter, police said.

A senior police officer said, "As of now the gunfight has stopped but we have cordoned the area and search operation is going on."

"We are searching the area to check if there might be a fourth terrorist as well," said Mukesh Singh, the inspector general of police, Jammu.

The officials suspect the militants might have planned to carry out attack at vital installations as well as security camps along the nearly 300-km highway. Four weapons and large quantity of ammunition and explosives have been recovered, the DGP said. Singh suspected the militants to be foreigners.

Authorities have suspended traffic on the main road in the wake of the firing.

'Biggest gamble'?

UK media express both joy, remorse

AFP, London

Britain's Brexit-day front pages expressed both joy at the country's imminent departure from the European Union and remorse and trepidation yesterday as the UK prepares to go it alone after nearly half a century as part of the bloc.

"Yes, we did it!" said the "Daily Express" tabloid, a fervent campaigner for Britain to leave the EU.

The headline was imposed over a map of the UK made up of front pages from the newspaper from the 43 months since the June 2016 vote, which saw three Brexit deadlines come and go before the British parliament finally ratified the divorce agreement.

"A new dawn for Britain," said its rival and fellow Brexit-supporting tabloid The Daily Mail.

The left-leaning Guardian was more circumspect, leading its front page with the words "Small Island" and describing Brexit as "the biggest gamble in a generation".

"PM wants Canada-style trade deal with Brussels," said the Times, leading with an article on Boris Johnson's attempts to flesh out his ideas for a free trade agreement along the lines of a recent EU deal with Canada.

"Britain bows out of EU with a mixture of optimism and regret," said The Financial Times.

"It's been quite a ride," splashed the business City AM paper over a mock-up of a roller coaster carriage filled with prominent faces from the Brexit saga.

In Scotland -- where a majority of voters chose to remain in the bloc -- the headlines were less jubilant.

In Edinburgh, The Scotsman went with "Farewell, not goodbye", above the word for farewell in 24 European languages.

The tabloid Daily Mirror gave most of its front page to the news that 150 Britons were in quarantine over coronavirus fears. On a smaller section of the page titled "Brexit Day", it said "Now it's time to bring country back together."

Police kill man holding 20 women hostage in India

Police shot dead a man holding around 20 women and children hostage at his house in northern India after a 10-hour standoff, state officials said yesterday. The hostages who were held at gunpoint were safe, principal secretary home Awanish Kumar Awasthi said after the raid at the house in a village in Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh state. The hostage taker was serving a life sentence for murder and was out on parole, he added. Two policemen and a villager were injured in the rescue operation. After the siege, a group of incensed villagers stormed the house where the children had been kept and attacked the hostage-taker's wife, Awasthi said.

Israel strikes Hamas targets after new Gaza rocket fire

Israeli aircraft struck Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip early yesterday in response to new rocket fire from the blockaded territory, the army said. Three rockets were fired at Israel overnight without causing any casualties. Two were intercepted by air defences, a statement said. Israel swiftly retaliated against Hamas, the Islamist movement which rules Gaza and which Israel generally holds responsible for all rocket fire from the territory, regardless of who launches it. The military struck "Hamas targets in the south of the Gaza Strip", the army said. Israel has deployed additional troops to the Gaza border area since US President Donald Trump unveiled a controversial new peace plan on Tuesday that was angrily rejected by the Palestinians.

Greta nominated for Nobel Peace Prize by Swedish MPs



Teen climate activist Greta Thunberg and the global protest movement "Fridays for Future" were nominated Thursday for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize by two Swedish lawmakers. "Greta Thunberg is a climate activist, and the main reason she deserves the Nobel Peace Prize is that despite her young age, she has worked hard to make politicians open their eyes to the climate crisis," Left Party parliamentarians Jens Holm and Hakan Svanenling wrote in a letter to the Norwegian Nobel Committee. The pair added that without the Fridays For Future movement and Greta Thunberg, "the climate issue would not have been on the agenda to such an extent as it is today."

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP