

'Shocking'

Blair, Major chide UK plan to breach int'l law; EU chief says Britain's credibility is at stake

REUTERS, London

Former prime ministers Tony Blair and John Major yesterday said Britain must drop a "shocking" plan to pass legislation that breaks its divorce treaty with the European Union, in a breach of international law.

The British government said explicitly last week that it plans to break international law by breaching parts of the Withdrawal Agreement treaty that it signed in January, when it formally left the EU.

"What is being proposed now is shocking," Major and Blair, who were adversaries in the 1990s as Conservative and Labour leaders, wrote in a joint letter published by the Sunday Times newspaper.

"How can it be compatible with the codes of conduct that bind ministers, law officers and civil servants deliberately to break treaty obligations?"

Theresa May, the predecessor of current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, has also questioned whether international partners would be able to trust Britain in future.

Johnson's Internal Market Bill is aimed at ensuring Britain's four constituent nations can trade freely with one another after leaving the EU, but the government

says that requires overriding part of the withdrawal treaty it signed with Brussels.

British ministers say the bill is a "safety net" in the event there is no trade deal reached with the bloc, but top EU officials say it undermines both the withdrawal treaty and trust in future talks.

European Council chief Charles Michel yesterday warned Britain its international credibility is at stake, saying it must fulfil its responsibility to implement the Brexit withdrawal agreement.

EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier yesterday said that the Withdrawal Agreement on Northern Ireland "is not a threat to the integrity of the UK", and had been agreed by the two sides to protect peace on the island of Ireland. "We could not have been clearer about the consequences of Brexit," Barnier said on Twitter.

His British counterpart David Frost responded by saying London had to reserve powers in the new bill in order to keep the peace in Ireland.

European lawmakers have warned they would not approve any new trade deal unless the withdrawal agreement was fully implemented, while there is also talk of possible legal action.



Opposition supporters take part in a rally against police brutality in Minsk, Belarus, yesterday. At least 100,000 Belarusian anti-government protesters flooded the centre of Minsk yesterday defying government orders, a Reuters eyewitness said. Police detained around 250 people. Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko is facing a groundswell of public anger after declaring a landslide win at last month's presidential election that his opponents say was rigged. Lukashenko denies these allegations.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Clashes in Afghanistan amid Doha peace talks

REUTERS, Kabul

Taliban and Afghan government forces clashed across Afghanistan hours after the start of long-awaited peace talks in Doha on Saturday, officials said, underscoring the uphill challenge of settling a 19-year insurgency.

Talks between the two sides were to begin shortly after a US-Taliban agreement in February, but began only over the weekend after months of delays, caused in part by continuing Taliban offensives in the war-torn country.

"With the start of intra-Afghan talks we were expecting the Taliban to reduce the number of their attacks, but unfortunately their attacks are still going in high numbers," a spokesman for the Afghan defence ministry said.

Representatives from a number of countries who spoke at the inauguration of the peace talks called on the Taliban to announce an immediate ceasefire before negotiators sat down to find a way to end decades of war in Afghanistan.

The Taliban did not say anything about a possible ceasefire at the ceremony.

Achieving a significant reduction in violence and how to get to a permanent ceasefire would be among the first issues the sides would discuss when they meet.

No meeting between the two has been reported by either side in Doha yesterday, but Qatar's state news agency reported teams led by Taliban's political chief Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Abdullah had met the Qatari Emir.

Will Biden get the expected Black votes?

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Racial inequality in the United States came into sharp focus this year, and became a defining topic of the national debate, after police killings of Black Americans ignited months of widespread protests and galvanised the nation to demand racial justice and police reforms.

The unrest has forced US President Donald Trump, a Republican who is running for re-election on a "law and order" platform, and his main challenger, Democratic nominee Joe Biden, to wrestle with the complicated issue of race in America, and try to appeal to Black voters.

But with less than two months before the election, in the middle of a pandemic and record-high unemployment rates, whether Black Americans will be energised to come out in large numbers to vote remains uncertain - potentially defining the outcome of the 2020 election.

A recent poll shows Biden by far outperforming Trump among Black voters, with 78 percent support.

US ELECTION 2020



Data shows that Black voters have overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party since at least the 1960s, when the party passed civil rights legislation that outlawed racial segregation and prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

But Black turnout, which rose in the 2008 and 2012 elections when the US elected and then re-elected the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, waned in 2016 when Hillary Clinton was the Democratic presidential nominee.

Trump's campaign this year has been trying to appeal to Black voters, particularly Black male voters and improve on his 2016

results, when 8 percent of Black people voted for him. According to a recent poll, 13 percent of Black voters said they plan to vote for Trump this election.

Democratic pollster Terrance Woodbury said, according to recent data he compiled, about half of Black voters believe the Democratic Party takes Black voters for granted and may choose to stay home or vote for Trump.

"What we saw at the Republican National Convention was a very overt attempt to speak directly to the issues that are most important to Black men: criminal justice reform and unemployment," Woodbury said.

And yet for many, voting Trump out of office, is a motivation on its own. Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and more recently, he allegedly called Black people "too stupid" to vote for him, according to his estranged former lawyer Michael Cohen.

James Lance Taylor, a professor at the University of San Francisco, said many Black people will vote for Biden for no other reason than "to deal with the emergency of removing Donald Trump from office".

NEWS IN BRIEF

Russians vote in local polls

Russians yesterday voted in dozens of local elections that will be scrutinised for signs of discontent with the ruling United Russia party following the suspected poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. Navalny, 44, had hoped to undermine United Russia's grip on regional power and had urged his supporters to vote against it tactically before he fell gravely ill in what Germany and his allies said was an attempt to kill him last month. United Russia, which backs President Vladimir Putin, dominates regional politics, but the elections come at a time of public frustration over years of falling wages and the government's handling of the pandemic. Seen as a dry run for next September's parliament elections, the regional polls will elect 18 governors and an array of local parliaments and city councils.

Amit Shah admitted to hospital



Indian Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who fought back coronavirus last month, has been admitted to Delhi's AIIMS on Saturday night again since his recovery. Amit Shah was admitted to a private hospital Medanta in Gurugram on August 2 after testing positive for the deadly virus. The 55-year-old BJP leader was admitted to AIIMS for post-Covid care on August 18 after a complaint of fatigue and body ache. At least seven ministers and two dozen lawmakers in India have come under Covid-19 attack. On August 18 also, Amit Shah complained of "fatigue and body aches" for the last 3-4 days after testing negative for coronavirus. He was discharged from hospital on August 14.

Ninety Lebanon peacekeepers contract coronavirus: UNIFIL

Ninety UN peacekeepers in south Lebanon have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, a spokesman for the UNIFIL force said yesterday, the first reported cases of the illness. The confirmed cases were transferred to a special UNIFIL facility equipped to deal with Covid-19 cases, UNIFIL spokesman Andrea Tenenti said in a statement. He said 88 of those infected belonged to the same contingent, but he did not specify the nationalities of the 90 peacekeepers. "We have undertaken robust contact tracing, and applied a thorough regime of testing and isolation" to prevent a larger outbreak, he said. Some 45 countries contribute peacekeepers to UNIFIL, which was set up in 1978 to patrol the border between Lebanon and Israel which are technically at war.

SOURCE: AFP



A woman reacts as she and her partner visit their home gutted by the Almeda fire in Talent, Oregon, on Saturday. Top officials in US West Coast states where record-breaking fires have killed 31 people yesterday accused President Donald Trump of being in denial about climate change, as he prepared to meet emergency services workers in California.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TENSION IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN 'Positive first step'

Greece welcomes return of Turkey vessel to base

AFP, Istanbul

The Turkish research ship at the centre of a row between Greece and Turkey over gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean returned to a port in southern Turkey, local media reported yesterday.

Turkey sent the Oruc Reis research vessel to disputed waters near a Greek island on August 10 and prolonged the mission three times despite repeated calls from the European Union and Greece to stop.

But its deployment was scheduled to end on Saturday and has not been renewed by the Turkish authorities, pro-government newspaper Yeni Safak reported, adding that it had returned to Antalya port.

The decision not to extend the ship's mission was viewed as "a step towards giving diplomacy a chance," the newspaper wrote, linking it to attempts to kickstart talks between Greece and Turkey.

Greek government spokesman Stelios Petsas welcomed the apparent withdrawal in an interview to Skai TV yesterday.

"The fact there seems to be no new NAVTEX (deployment) is a positive step. We assess that as such and we are following the situation," he said.

Nato said earlier this month that officials from both sides had agreed to take part in technical talks to avoid accidents between their navies.

Athens denied this was the case, but the Turkish defence ministry said on Thursday that the first round of talks between Greek and Turkish military delegations took place at Nato's headquarters in Brussels.

While Turkey repeatedly said it was ready for dialogue without preconditions, Greece said there could only be talks once Ankara stopped making "threats".

Tensions escalated after Turkey sent the seismic research vessel and a small navy flotilla to waters claimed by Greece last month. Greece then responded by shadowing the Turkish ships and staging naval exercises with several EU allies and the United Arab Emirates in its own show of force.

Leaders of seven European countries on the Mediterranean met at a summit last week in Corsica where they said they were ready to back EU sanctions on Turkey over the dispute.

TIT-FOR-TAT CURBS ON DIPLOMATS US brands China's actions 'escalation'

AFP, Washington

The US has called a decision by Beijing to impose restrictions on all American diplomats on Chinese soil an "escalation," the latest rebuke in an ongoing tit-for-tat dispute over foreign missions.

Relations between the world's top two economies have deteriorated in recent months, with both sides locked in fierce recriminations over trade disputes, human rights and the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Friday China announced "reciprocal restrictions" against US diplomats, days after Washington announced new restrictions on staff working for Beijing's foreign missions. Beijing said that the unspecified countermeasures will apply to all US embassy and consulate staff, including the consulate-general in Hong Kong and its personnel.

The dispute over foreign missions flared up in July when US ordered the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston, prompting China to shutter the US presence in Chengdu.

The battle over diplomatic outposts is only one front in an escalating confrontation between the powers. Washington has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials over Uighurs, Hong Kong and moved against China tech giants from doing business in US, prompting similar actions from Beijing.

Stop students from calling for monarchy reform

Thailand government tells universities

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thai authorities have summoned the heads of universities to tell them to stop students demanding reform of the monarchy, warning that such calls could lead to violence, a member of the military-appointed Senate said yesterday.

Thailand has faced near daily protests since mid-July calling for the departure of PM Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former junta leader, and for a new constitution and elections.

Some groups have also listed 10 demands to curb the powers of King Maha Vajiralongkorn's Royal Palace, breaking a long-standing taboo in the Southeast Asian country. Among the reforms sought are a reduction in the king's constitutional powers as well as his personal control of the royal fortune and some units of the army.

Senator Somchai Sawangkarn told Reuters that letters had been sent by state-appointed provincial governors to

university heads, summoning them to meetings ahead of protests planned on Sept 19 in Bangkok and elsewhere.

A letter to one university reviewed by Reuters said: "There are concerns about the behavior of some groups taking part in the protest that are inappropriate, for example those that want to topple the monarchy and those that demand voiding Article 112 of the criminal code."

Article 112 refers to Thailand's lese majeste laws, which sets a jail term of up to 15 years for insulting the king.

It said police would take legal action against anyone behaving inappropriately at protests while the digital ministry would take legal action against anyone using social media "to distort and defame the monarchy" or to incite protests.

A participant at one meeting said authorities asked his university to draw up a list of potential troublemakers. Most Thai universities are sponsored by the state.



People protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's alleged corruption and economic hardship stemming from lockdown during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, near his residence in Jerusalem, late Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS