

# Big issues loom over Brexit talks

Britain and the EU begin tough Brexit talks today, trying to complete one of the most complex negotiations in history in less than two years. Here are the key issues as Britain's Brexit minister David Davis and the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier of France, meet in Brussels.

## SEQUENCING

Britain seems to have tacitly accepted the EU's plan for sequenced talks, which will focus first on the terms of Britain's withdrawal, with negotiations on a future relationship and trade deal coming later. In her letter triggering the two-year Brexit process on March 29, May had insisted that Britain wanted to discuss them in parallel. EU officials suggested the apparent climbdown could buy May's unstable government breathing space to actually decide what kind of future relationship it wants.

The EU has set three priority areas: Britain's exit bill, the rights of EU citizens living in Britain, and Northern Ireland.

## THE BILL

The issue most likely to torpedo negotiations is Britain's bill for leaving the bloc. Brussels first mentioned a figure of 60 billion euros (\$3 billion pounds, \$67 billion) but it is now closer to 100 billion, EU sources told AFP. The EU says Britain must honour its contributions to the bloc's budget, which has already been agreed up to 2020, as well as commitments to development programmes for poorer member states. But the true figure could be far lower, as the 100 billion does not account for tens of billions that Britain is set to get back in shared assets and rebates.

## CITIZENS

The EU wants to secure the rights of more than three million Europeans living in Britain -- and over one million Britons living on the continent. Currently, Europeans have the right to live, work, study and claim welfare benefits in Britain, as they do anywhere in the 28-nation union. Brussels insists that those living in Britain now should be able to keep those rights after Brexit. Aware that this is a priority for the EU, May is reportedly set to make a "generous offer" on the issue early in the talks.

## NORTHERN IRELAND

The third key issue is the future of the peace process in the British province of Northern Ireland, and the status of the border with the Republic of Ireland. The EU says it wants to avoid the return of a "hard border" with Ireland that would require passport controls and customs checks, but how that will be possible without Britain staying part of the EU single market or customs union is not clear.

The sensitive issue has been thrown into further doubt by May's efforts to seek a deal with Northern Ireland's ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party to stay in power after the British election. The loyalist DUP has said it will not accept any "special status" for Northern Ireland in the EU after Brexit, which would eliminate one of the leading suggestions for a solution.

## FUTURE

Barnier wants agreement on the withdrawal, and on a transitional path to a future relationship, by October 2018, so that the European and British parliaments can ratify the deal by Brexit day in March 2019. What that future relationship will look like remains anyone's guess. Many in Britain have seen the election result as repudiating May's threats to walk away without a deal. Speculation has also mounted that she could now seek a softer Brexit, which involves staying in either the EU's single market or customs union. But EU officials are sceptical that May's position has changed, just as they are doubtful about the feasibility of either option. SOURCE: AFP



A firefighter rests next to fire combat truck during a wildfire at Penela, Coimbra, central Portugal, yesterday. Inset, a policeman stands near a victim of the forest fire on the IC8 motorway. At least 62 people died and 59 injured in the fire raging since Saturday afternoon.



# Tragedy caused by years of neglect: Sadiq Khan

AGENCIES

The Grenfell Tower fire was a "preventable accident" caused by "years of neglect" by the local council and successive governments, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan said yesterday. Speaking after attending a local church service in memory of the victims, he said the fire was "a national disaster that requires a national response".

Khan has praised the heroism of Christians, Muslims and others in looking after people affected by the Grenfell Tower disaster, reported The Independent.

Flowers and missing persons posters were taped to the gates of the church, while bags of donations were piled outside the door. After having spoken to many members of the congregation as well as others who came in after the service to see him, Khan paid tribute to the local community for its resilience but said a feeling of anger remains.

Speaking as he left the church with his wife Saadiya, Khan said: "I've spent time with the local community, not just the Christian congregation, but members of all faiths here at the church, grieving, sharing their stories. Families who have lost their homes must be supported, he said, grieving people must be helped and lessons must be learned following the tragedy, including ensuring it is not "so hard" for those who need help to find it. He also said: "As the mayor of London I will do my bit to be the advocate, to be the fighter, and to be the champion of these people."

"And I've got to say some of the stories that I've heard will stay with me forever. I've heard stories of heroism, from Christians, from Muslims and from others, looking after their brothers and sisters, their neighbours and doing the job that we expect from this brilliant community because of the fantastic community that is here in this part of London."

He said there was a feeling among people they have been treated badly and not understood by the council because some of them are "poor, some may come from deprived backgrounds, some may be asylum seekers and refugees".

"There's a feeling that the council and successive Governments don't understand their concerns and frankly don't care."

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# Russia slams Trump's policy on Cuba

AFP, Moscow

Russia's foreign ministry yesterday said it regretted US President Donald Trump's policy reversal on Cuba, calling it reminiscent of the Cold War era.

"The new line towards Cuba announced by US President Donald Trump takes us back to already half-forgotten rhetoric in the style of the Cold War," the ministry said in a statement on its website.

Trump vowed Friday to overhaul his predecessor Barack Obama's deal to restore ties with Cuba, promising instead to support the Cuban people against Raul Castro's government.

Moscow said Trump's policy changes showed that "anti-Cuban discourse is still widely in demand. This cannot but cause regret."

It said that easing of sanctions under Obama was a "well-thought-out political decision in which there were no losers except marginal Castro opponents."

Russia said it was reaffirming its "unshakeable solidarity with Cuba."

Despite Trump's campaign pledge to improve relations with Moscow, there has been no significant improvement in foreign policy cooperation between the two countries. Last week, the US Senate voted overwhelmingly to back new sanctions on Russia.

Moscow maintains close ties with Havana, and in March signed a deal to ship oil to Cuba for the first time in over a decade.

Cuban President Raul Castro visited Russia in 2015 while President Vladimir Putin visited the island on a tour of Latin America in 2014, meeting both the president and the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, who died last year.

# Taliban attack kills 5 Afghan cops, injures 22

AFP, Kabul

Taliban attackers stormed a regional police headquarters in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing five officers and injuring 22 people in an assault launched by a suicide bomber.

Of the seven attackers involved, one blew himself up in a car at the entrance to clear the way for the others to rush into the building, the office of the Paktia provincial governor said in a statement announcing the end of the raid.

Special forces killed four of the insurgents but two held out for several hours, it said, adding that nine police and 13 civilians were wounded in addition to the dead.

The attack on the base in the centre of the city of Gardez -- part of the Taliban's all-out assault during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan -- was launched at 6:00 am.

The base houses both regular policemen and police special forces.

"One (attacker) blew up his vehicle at the entrance of the headquarters, opening the way for... others who opened fire on the security forces," regional police commander, Asadullah Shirzad, told AFP.

The head of the police hospital, Dr. Shir Mohammad, confirmed the five fatalities.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the raid.

"Around 6:20 this morning a martyr attack was conducted by our mujahideen against a special forces base in Gardez, Paktia," he said in a statement.

"First a car bomb detonated then our mujahideen entered the building, opening fire on police."

Since they launched their spring offensive in late April, the Taliban have been mounting lethal assaults on positions of the Afghan army and police, who have lost several dozen men in recent weeks.



Ultra-nationalists block a street to try to prevent the gay pride march in Kiev, Ukraine, yesterday. More than two thousand people took part in Kiev's gay pride event amid a heavy police presence as nationalist protesters tried to halt the event and burned a rainbow flag.

# Mosul showdown looms

REUTERS, Mosul

Iraqi forces began storming the Islamic State-held Old City of Mosul yesterday, an assault they hope will be the last in the eight-month campaign to seize the militants' stronghold.

The historic district is the last still under control of the militants in the city which used to be their capital in Iraq.

It is a densely-populated maze of narrow alleyways where fighting is often conducted house by house.

About 100,000 civilians remain trapped there in harrowing conditions, with little food, water and medicine and limited access to hospitals, according to the United Nations.

"This will be a terrifying time for around 100,000 people still trapped in Mosul's Old City ... now at risk of getting caught up in the fierce street fighting to come," the International Rescue Committee (IRC) said in a statement.

"This is the final chapter" in the offensive to take Mosul, said Lieutenant General Abdul Ghani al-Assadi, commander of the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) elite units spearheading the assault.

A US-led international coalition is providing air and ground support to the campaign. The Iraqi government initially hoped to take Mosul by the end of 2016, but the campaign took longer as militants dug in the middle of civilians to fight back.

Islamic State is also using suicide car and motorbike bombs, booby traps and sniper and mortar fire against the troops.

"The buildings of the old town are particularly vulnerable to collapse even if they aren't directly targeted, which could lead to even more civilian deaths than the hundreds killed so far in air strikes across the rest of the city," the IRC said.

"We are trying to be very careful, using only light and medium weapons ... to avoid casualties among civilians," CTS commander Major General Maan Saadi told Iraqi state TV.

Hundreds of civilians were killed near the frontlines in the past three weeks while fleeing the Old City, as Iraqi forces couldn't fully secure exit corridors.

100,000 CIVILIANS STILL TRAPPED IN OLD CITY: UN US-LED COALITION PROVIDING AIR, GROUND SUPPORT

# NEWS IN brief

## Missing US Navy sailors found dead

AFP, Yokosuka

The bodies of US sailors missing after their destroyer collided with a container ship off Japan have been found in flooded sleeping berths, a day after the accident tore a huge gash in the warship's side, the US Navy said yesterday.

## Dead paraded in India's Darjeeling amid unrest

AFP, Darjeeling

Hundreds of protesters yesterday paraded with coffins containing the bodies of two men they claimed were killed in clashes with Indian security forces in Darjeeling, as the hill resort reels from separatist unrest. A spokesman for GJM said the body of third alleged victim was in a hospital awaiting post mortem.

## Gunfire on Syria aid convoy wounds one

AFP, Damascus

At least one person has been wounded after a convoy seeking to deliver aid to a besieged Syrian rebel-held town came under fire, the local Red Crescent said. The incident occurred on Saturday as the convoy attempted to access Harasta in the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus.

## Iran, China conduct naval drill in Gulf

REUTERS, Beirut

Iran and China began a joint naval exercise in the Gulf yesterday, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported. The military drill comes at a time of heightened tension between the Iranian and US military in the Gulf and is likely to be a cause of concern for Washington.

# 25 Yemenis killed in Saudi air strikes

REUTERS, Dubai

At least 25 Yemenis were killed when Saudi-led coalition aircraft struck a market in the northern Saada province, a local health official said yesterday, the latest in a string of deadly incidents in the 27-month-old conflict.

Officials from the Saudi-led coalition could not immediately be reached for a comment on the report.

Yemen has been torn by a civil war in which the exiled government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, is trying to roll back gains made by the Iran-aligned Houthi group which controls most of northern Yemen, including the capital Sanaa.

# Hawaiian canoe makes it round the world

AFP, Los Angeles

A traditional double-hulled canoe has returned to Hawaii after concluding a three-year epic journey around the globe, the first trip of its kind by such a boat.

The Hokule'a vessel and its crew entered the marina at Honolulu's Magic Island peninsula on Saturday after sailing more than 40,000 nautical miles (74,000 kilometres) since its departure from the island of Oahu in 2014.

Large crowds gathered for the homecoming celebration to commemorate the end of the odyssey, which intended to "weave a lei of hope around the world through sharing indigenous wisdom, groundbreaking conservation and preservation initiatives," according to voyage organisers.

The goal was to use only ancient methods of wayfinding - reading the stars, winds and waves -- to guide the journey, just as the first Polynesian settlers who reached the archipelago did hundreds of years ago.

The Hokule'a -- the Hawaiian name for "star of gladness" -- was the first traditional double-hulled Polynesian voyaging canoe built in 600 years, according to the Polynesian Voyaging Society.

The canoe's maiden voyage in 1976 was to Tahiti in French Polynesia. Crews of some dozen people rotated at major ports of call throughout the round-the-world journey after undergoing training.

# France elects parliament

REUTERS, Paris

Voters turned out in low numbers yesterday in the second round of France's parliamentary election, where President Emmanuel Macron is expected to win a landslide majority that should allow him to embark on far-reaching pro-business reforms.

The vote comes just a month after the 39-year-old former banker became the youngest head of state in modern French history, promising to clean up French politics and revive the euro zone's second-biggest economy.

Macron's centrist Republic on the Move (LREM) party is little more than a year old, yet pollsters project it will win as many as 75 to 80 percent of the seats in the 577-seat lower house.

Turnout, though, was on course for a record low, a sign of voter fatigue after seven months of campaigning and voting - and also of disillusionment and anger with politics that could eventually complicate Macron's reform drive.

Interior Ministry data showed turnout reached 17.75 percent by 1200 (1000 GMT), its lowest ever at that time of day for a second round of parliamentary elections since at least 1997.

"People know it's already a done deal," Alex Mpo, a 38-year-old security guard told Reuters TV, echoing the apathy of many voters who intend to abstain.



Macron cast his vote early in the morning in the seaside resort of Le Touquet before flying to a ceremony outside Paris to mark the anniversary of Charles de Gaulle's 1940 appeal for French resistance to Nazi Germany's occupation. Polls show Macron is on course to win the biggest parliamentary majority since de Gaulle's own conservatives in 1968. Polling stations close at 6:00 pm local time (1600 GMT) in small and medium towns and at 8:00 pm local time (1800 GMT) in Paris and other big cities. At that time, pollsters will give projections of the result and official results will start trickling in.