

SECOND BREXIT REFERENDUM

Tony Blair sees 50-50 chance

REUTERS, London

Former British leader Tony Blair said there was a 50-50 chance of another Brexit referendum as Prime Minister Theresa May will be unlikely to secure a parliamentary majority for any divorce deal.

Less than six months before UK leaves the EU, there is little clarity about how post-Brexit trade between the EU and the world's fifth largest economy will function. If May can strike a deal with the EU, her minority government then has to get it approved by a deeply-divided House.

"Whatever Brexit is on offer today is going to result in significant economic harm," Blair, former prime minister from 1997 to 2007, told Reuters. "I think the odds are now 50 percent that you will get another (referendum) vote."

"I still believe it is possible that Brexit is stopped," he said. "There is no majority in parliament for any proposition that the prime minister brings back."

Both opponents and supporters of Brexit agree that the divorce is Britain's most significant political and economic move since World War Two, though they cast vastly different futures for the \$2.9 trillion UK economy and the world's biggest trading bloc.

Blair has repeatedly called for reversing Brexit, echoing other critics, including French President Macron, who have suggested Britain could still change its mind.



#METOO MOVEMENT

Victims must show proof: Melania

AFP, Washington

US First Lady Melania Trump has spoken out about the #MeToo movement, saying she supports women who have come forward with claims of sexual misconduct, but wants them to offer "hard evidence."

The comments from the 48-year-old Trump came in a wide-ranging interview given to ABC News last week in Kenya, during her four-nation solo trip to Africa.

"I support the women and they need to be heard. We need to support them. And also men, not just women," she said.

But the first lady said accusers must back up their allegations with firm proof. "We need to have really hard evidence," she told ABC.

"You cannot just say to somebody... 'I was sexually assaulted' or 'You did that to me.' Because sometimes the media goes too far and the way they portray some stories, it's not correct. It's not right."

Her husband President Donald Trump has faced multiple allegations of infidelity and sexual harassment -- all claims he has repeatedly denied or swatted aside.



DISAPPEARANCE OF PROMINENT SAUDI JOURNALIST FROM CONSULATE IN TURKEY

Saudi crown prince ordered op

Claims Washington Post as international pressure mounts on Riyadh

AGENCIES

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged Saudi Arabia to release footage of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and President Donald Trump demanded answers over his fate, as the kingdom faced growing pressure yesterday to provide a convincing explanation for his disappearance.

The Washington Post, the daily to which Khashoggi was a contributor, added to the mystery by reporting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had ordered an operation to "lure" the critical journalist back home.

Khashoggi has not been seen since October 2 when he went to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain official documents for his upcoming marriage. Turkish officials quoted in media have said he was killed but Riyadh denies that.

The mystery has captivated the world but also threatens to harm brittle Turkish-Saudi relations and hurt efforts by the crown prince to improve the image of his country with a reform drive.

Erdogan challenged Saudi Arabia to provide CCTV images to back up its version that Khashoggi had left the consulate safely, indicating he did not find the current Saudi explanations sufficient.

"Is it possible there were no camera systems in a consulate, in an embassy?" Erdogan told Turkish reporters in comments published in newspapers.

"If a bird flew, or a fly or a mosquito appeared, the systems would capture this; they (Saudi Arabia) have the most cutting-edge systems," he was quoted as saying.

"It's not possible for us to stay silent regarding an incident like this," Erdogan added.

The consulate said CCTV cameras were not working that day and dismissed the murder claims as "baseless".

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt also warned that Saudi Arabia faces "serious consequences" if the suspicions of Turkish officials that journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul turn out to be true.



A demonstrator dressed as Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (C) protests with others outside the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, on Monday, demanding justice for missing Jamal Khashoggi. PHOTO: AFP



Trump speaks to Saudi authorities 'at the highest level', demands answer

Erdogan presses Riyadh for footage of missing journalist

UK warns of 'serious consequences' if Khashoggi claims true

22 US senators force human rights probe that may trigger sanctions

The case is also threatening the strong relationship the Trump administration has built with Prince Mohammed, who wants to turn the oil-rich conservative kingdom into a hub for innovation and reform.

The two sides have worked together on challenging Iran despite growing concern over the prince's campaign against dissidents, which critics say has shown up the true face of his rule.

In a reversal from Washington's initial low-key response, Trump demanded answers after he spoke to Saudi authorities "at the highest level".

Trump later said US investigators

were working with both Ankara and Riyadh to probe the suspicious disappearance.

On Wednesday, twenty-two US senators forced a US investigation of whether human rights sanctions should be imposed over the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi.

In a letter, the senators said they had triggered a provision of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act requiring the president to determine whether a foreign person is responsible for a gross human rights violation.

The Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senators Bob Corker and Bob Menendez, and their counterparts on the Appropriations subcommittee that funds the State Department, Lindsey Graham and Patrick Leahy, triggered the Magnitsky action.

But the 18 others also signed the letter to send Trump a strong bipartisan message of support for a serious US response to Khashoggi's disappearance, Senate aides said.

The Global Magnitsky Act requires a report within 120 days of the letter with a decision on the imposition of sanctions on anyone deemed responsible for a serious rights violation such as torture, prolonged detention without trial or extrajudicial killing of someone exercising freedom of expression.

Khashoggi is a former government adviser who fled Saudi Arabia

in September 2017 and lived in the US fearing arrest back home.

In his columns for the Washington Post and comments elsewhere, Khashoggi was critical of some policies of Mohammed bin Salman as well as Riyadh's role in the war in Yemen.

Friends of Khashoggi told the Washington Post that for several months, senior Saudi officials were offering him protection, "even a high-level job working for the government" if the critic returned to the kingdom. Khashoggi was sceptical of such offers.

Turkish police are looking into a team of 15 Saudis who they say were at the consulate at the same time as Khashoggi and arrived in Istanbul on October 2 on board two private planes. Turkish media have said the 15 were an "assassination team" and that they took the consulate's footage with them.

After images of the men and their names were published by pro-government Sabah daily, media identified most of them as senior figures in Riyadh or close to the crown prince.

Turkish police are also analysing CCTV footage which showed a vehicle that went inside the consulate and then to the consul-general's residence nearby after 1200 GMT, two hours after Khashoggi had entered the mission.

Turkish authorities have been given permission to search the consulate -- Saudi sovereign territory -- but it has not yet taken place.

WHAT ANGERED SAUDI LEADERS?

For years Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was a modest voice for progressive change in the tightly run, conservative Islamic kingdom. Even that got him in trouble. But his disappearance last week in Istanbul, Turkey, amid accusations that he was kidnapped or murdered inside the Saudi consulate, has drawn attention to Khashoggi's rising calls for democratic reforms over the past year, which put him at odds with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's most powerful figure. Here are excerpts from Khashoggi's recent interviews and writings:

"If a prince can pay \$1 billion in return for his freedom, how much will a prisoner of conscience have to pay? How much will we all pay to get our freedom?"

- On Twitter, on November 29, 2017, after Prince Mohammed locked up dozens of businessmen and royals in a luxury hotel and demanded they hand over their fortunes.

"I still see him as a reformer, but he is gathering all power within his hand. And it would be much better for him to allow a breathing space for critics, for Saudi intellectuals, Saudi writers, Saudi media to debate.... As we speak today, there are Saudi intellectuals and journalists jailed. Now nobody will dare to speak and criticize..."

- On Prince Mohammed's reform program, on Al Jazeera television, March 23, 2018.

"He appears to be moving the country from old-time religious extremism to his own 'You must accept my reform' extremism, without any consultation..."

- On Prince Mohammed in The Guardian on March 6, 2018, writing with Robert Lacey.

"The Palestinian in Ramallah is much freer than me in Jeddah or Riyadh, he still can go on the street and demonstrate against the deal when I cannot do that."

- In an analysis of the Trump administration's plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, to the BBC on October 1, 2018.



Russia's Soyuz MS-10 spacecraft carrying the members of the International Space Station (ISS) expedition 57/58, Russian cosmonaut Alexey Ovchinin and Nasa astronaut Nick Hague, blasts off to the ISS from the launch pad in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, yesterday. Inset: The astronauts embrace their families after an emergency landing. They were rescued without injuries after an engine problem forced the spacecraft to abort its mission. PHOTO: AFP

Tobacco giants cry foul after hard-line UN treaty

AFP, Geneva

Big tobacco companies yesterday moved to counter the hard line taken by a global tobacco control treaty, including its decision that new "vaping" products should face the same restrictions as cigarettes.

A meeting of state parties to the UN health agency's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) concluded last week with a number of anti-industry rulings, including increased efforts to curb industry influence and a call to crack down on new products.

Philip Morris International (PMI) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) responded by releasing surveys suggesting the public would prefer a more industry-friendly approach.

PMI and other companies say such products are far less dangerous than traditional cigarettes, and insist they can help smokers unable to quit completely switch to "safer" alternatives.

These alternatives are key to halting a smoking epidemic that causes some seven million deaths annually, the industry says.

But the World Health Organisation's FCTC dismissed that argument, calling Saturday for the same bans on advertising, promotion and sponsorship deals that

apply to cigarettes.

FCTC chief Vera Lúiza da Costa e Silva argued that the tobacco industry was disingenuously trying to suggest that promoting heated tobacco could be part "of a harm reduction strategy."

Anti-tobacco activists are meanwhile quick to point out that the companies' claims that their new products are safer are based only on industry-backed scientific studies.



"On multiple occasions, they have duped governments about the relative safety of their new products," Matthew Myers, head of Tobacco Free Kids, told AFP last week, pointing to past industry claims when filtered cigarettes and low-tar cigarettes first emerged.

The treaty parties decided to strengthen measures to keep tobacco company representatives and anyone with tobacco ties out of its meetings.

No aid if Iran stays

Says Pompeo on post-war Syria reconstruction assistance

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday it will refuse any post-war reconstruction assistance to Syria if Iran is present, expanding the rationale for US involvement in the conflict.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaking to a pro-Israel group, vowed an aggressive push to counter Iran across the Middle East and said that Syria was a decisive battleground.

"The onus for expelling Iran from the country falls on the Syrian government, which bears responsibility for its presence there," Pompeo told the Jewish Institute for National Security of America.

"If Syria doesn't ensure the total withdrawal of Iranian-backed troops, it will not receive one single dollar from the United States for reconstruction," Pompeo said.

Pompeo's speech effectively broadens the official explanation for why the United States is involved in Syria's civil war, which a monitoring group says has killed close to 365,000 people since 2011. Some organiza-

tions put the number much higher.

Pompeo acknowledged that Assad was stronger thanks to Iranian and Russian help and said that, with IS "beaten into a shadow of its former self," new priorities had emerged.

"Defeating ISIS, which was once our primary focus, continues to be a priority. But it will now be joined by two other mutually reinforcing objectives," Pompeo said.

"These include a peaceful political resolution to the Syrian conflict and the removal of all Iranian and Iranian-backed forces from Syria."

Iran, ruled by Shia Muslim clerics, has deployed both troops and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah to prop up Assad, a secular leader who belongs to the Alawite sect and is facing down hardline Sunni Muslim forces.

Pompeo warned that Iran, a sworn foe of Israel, would open a new front against the Jewish state if it remained in Syria.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has similarly warned that he will never accept an Iranian presence in Syria.

'Michael' wreaks havoc in Florida

Weakens to tropical storm, kills 2

AFP, Panama City

Michael weakened to a tropical storm yesterday after wreaking havoc along Florida's Gulf Coast, flooding homes and streets, ripping away roofs and snapping trees and power lines as it roared ashore as a raging Category 4 hurricane.

Two deaths were blamed on the hurricane -- one in Florida and one in Georgia as the storm raced across the neighboring state, heading northeast.

Florida officials said Michael, packing winds of 155 miles per hour (250 kilometers per hour), was the most powerful storm to hit the state's Panhandle area since record-keeping began more than a century ago. It was also one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to hit the United States.

On its current track the storm is headed for the Carolinas, where cities and towns are still recovering from Hurricane Florence last month.

After being battered for nearly three hours by strong winds and heavy rains, roads in Panama City were virtually impassable and trees, satellite dishes and traffic lights lay in the streets.

Nearly 370,000 people were left without power, mostly in Florida, but also Alabama and Georgia, news reports said.



Haley Nelson stands in front of what is left of one of her fathers trailer homes after hurricane Michael passed through the area on Wednesday in Panama City, Florida. The hurricane hit the Florida Panhandle as a category 4 storm. PHOTO: AFP