

UK PARLIAMENT'S FEUDING FACTIONS

Here are the main camps in the Brexit battle among members of the 650-seat lower House of Commons:

FOR PM'S DEAL

The government: Everyone on the government payroll must back government policy -- or resign. Gareth Johnson quit his junior government post on Monday but there was no last-minute flood of resignations. Heavyweight cabinet Brexiteers like Michael Gove and Liam Fox are backing the deal for now. Conservatives have 317 seats in the House.

May loyalists: Backbench Conservative MPs who are firmly behind the government and are happy with the deal. Alarmingly few in number. With decision time approaching, a handful of Tories have changed their minds in recent days in favour of the deal.

Get it done: Conservative MPs who have reservations but just want to get a deal done and feel it is the least bad option. May's Downing Street office hopes to swell their ranks in the final hours.

AGAINST PM'S DEAL

Conservative Brexiteers: Led by Jacob Rees-Mogg, this faction also includes former foreign secretary Boris Johnson and former Brexit secretary David Davis and Dominic Raab, who believe the deal delivers vassalage rather than independence.

Labour Party: Most of Labour's 256 lawmakers are pro-EU and will follow the party line. Leader Jeremy Corbyn wants to defeat the deal, then launch a vote of no confidence in the prime minister and trigger a general election, in which he would campaign to go ahead with Brexit, but renegotiate the deal. If this plan fails, the party is open to backing a second Brexit referendum.

Other opposition parties: The 35 Scottish Nationalists, 11 pro-EU Liberal Democrats, plus four Welsh nationalists and the sole Green MP are pro-EU and anti-Conservative.

DUP: May relies on the 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs for a majority in parliament but they remain firmly against the deal, despite attempts to reassure them over the Irish border.

Conservative Remainers: A chunk of pro-EU Conservative backbenchers who also support the People's Vote campaign. They are led by former attorney general Dominic Grieve.

WAVERERS

Labour MPs in Leave-voting seats: May's best chance of victory could lie in persuading them to back the deal. She met with some Labour pragmatists last week and there are signs that they could be persuaded.

No-deal dilemma: Conservative and Labour MPs who have problems with the proposed deal but are also scared by the prospect of no-deal as the alternative. Will they blink first?

SOURCE: AFP

What next for Brexit?

Three main scenarios if PM May's deal fails to pass parliament

AFP, London

What next? With the Brexit deal between Britain and the EU facing defeat in the British parliament in a crucial vote, that's the question on everyone's lips. Here are the three main scenarios facing Britain while the clock ticks down to March 29, 2019 -- the day it is scheduled to depart the European Union after 46 years:

Deal: This is the Brexit that the British government and EU leaders want -- and one which many MPs in the British parliament object to. May promised lawmakers she would wring concessions from Brussels but a series of clarifications in a letter from EU leaders on Monday failed to persuade many sceptics. There appears to be little chance of victory for May when MPs vote on the same draft later yesterday, with speculation focused more on the likely scale of defeat. If it loses the vote, the government has hinted it might simply reintroduce slightly tweaked versions of the same deal until parliament accepts it.

No-deal: This is billed as the doomsday scenario that threatens to trigger a recession in Britain and markedly slow the European Union's economic growth. It is the default option if the



British parliament votes against the deal and there are no other solutions.

May's agreement was meant to keep trade rules between the world's fifth-biggest economy and its largest export market almost unchanged for a transition period running to the end of 2020. A sudden shift to different standards would impact almost every economic sector -- and possibly see the costs of everyday products in Britain rise as well as create disruption at logistical hubs such as ports. The government has conducted visible displays of its ramped-up no-deal preparations

over the past few weeks, but many MPs are promising to prevent such a scenario, should May be defeated.

The Sunday Times said a group of senior cross-party backbench rebels were plotting to change House of Commons rules to enable them to override government business if the deal falls.

Second referendum: EU supporters have been calling for another vote ever since the first one backed Leave by 52 to 48 percent in June 2016. There is no law keeping Britain from doing it all over again, but many question whether this would be democratic. It also threatens to be just as divisive, with opinion polls showing the country is still split over the issue.

The first step would be to extend Britain's departure date, with bookmakers rating such an outcome an 80 percent likelihood, even before the vote. The EU is reported to be mulling an extension.

Calls for another vote have ramped up over the last few months. Such a scenario would provoke huge anger from Leave supporters. May has warned another vote "would do irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics".

South drops 'enemy' reference to N Korea

AFP, Seoul

Seoul crossed out a reference to nuclear-armed North Korea as its enemy in a defence white paper published yesterday, amid rapidly warming ties despite stalled nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

The 1950-53 Korean War ended with an armistice rather than a peace treaty, placing a heavily fortified border across the peninsula and leaving it still technically at war.

For years South Korea and the United States have carried out large-scale military drills against potential attacks from the North, while Pyongyang has repeatedly threatened to turn Seoul into a sea of fire.

But ties between the two Koreas have warmed significantly in recent months under the South's dovish President Moon Jae-in, who has held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un since taking office in May 2017.

The biennial report -- a blueprint for South Korea's defence and security goals for the next two years -- said "any external force" that threatened the country's sovereignty or territory would be considered an enemy.

It also described Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction as a threat but did not apply the term to its military provocations or cyber attacks.

In the previous white paper, dated 2016, Seoul described Pyongyang as posing "major threats" to national security, adding that "the North Korean regime and its military will remain an enemy" as long as such threats persist.

Turkey to set up Syria 'security zone'

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said that Ankara would set up a "security zone" in northern Syria suggested by US President Donald Trump.

Erdogan's comments came a day after he held a telephone call with Trump in a bid to ease tensions after the US leader threatened to "devastate" the Turkish economy if Ankara attacks Kurdish forces.

Turkey has welcomed Washington's planned withdrawal of some 2,000 US troops from Syria but the future of US-backed Kurdish militia forces labelled terrorists by Ankara has poisoned ties between the Nato allies.

Erdogan said he held a "quite positive" telephone conversation with Trump late on Monday where he reaffirmed that "a 20-mile (30 kilometre) security zone along the Syrian border... will be set up by us."

Trump on Sunday tweeted the United States would "devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds", a threat that drew angry retorts from Ankara.

Turkey is home to over three million Syrian refugees. Since early in the conflict, Ankara has called for a safe area backed up by a no-fly zone on its border with Syria to protect civilians from air and ground attacks.

Erdogan's announcement came a day after he spoke with Trump

New envoy in Syria to revive UN mediation efforts

The Turkish leader however dismissed any presence of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in that zone.

Meanwhile, the new special UN envoy to Syria began his first trip to Damascus yesterday, facing the daunting task of rekindling moribund peace talks and succeeding where his three predecessors failed.

Norway's Geir Pedersen, who replaces Staffan de Mistura, is the fourth negotiator to have been appointed UN special envoy to Syria since the civil war broke out in 2011.

BREXIT IN DATES

From the shock Brexit referendum result to yesterday's momentous vote on Theresa May's unpopular divorce deal with the European Union, here are the milestones on Britain's rocky road out of the bloc after 46 years.

BRITONS VOTE TO LEAVE: In a referendum on June 23, 2016, Britons choose to end their membership of the 28-nation EU by 52 percent to 48 percent. It prompts the resignation the next day of Conservative prime minister David Cameron, who had called the referendum and led the campaign to remain in the EU.

MAY BECOMES PM: In a race to replace Cameron, key Brexit campaigner Boris Johnson does not put himself forward as expected and May, the interior minister who had backed remaining in the bloc, becomes prime minister on July 13. On January 17, 2017, May said Britain will also leave Europe's single market in order to control immigration.

EXIT PROCESS TRIGGERED: On March 13, Britain's parliament gives final approval to a bill empowering May to trigger Article 50 of the EU treaty which lays out the process for leaving the union. With a letter to EU President Donald Tusk on March 29 formally announcing the intention to leave, the government sets Article 50 in motion. Its two-year timetable for withdrawal puts Britain on course to exit on March 29, 2019.

POLLS GAMBLE BACKFIRES: To capitalise on the perceived weakness of the opposition Labour party and strengthen her hand in Brexit negotiations, May calls a snap election for June 8, 2017. Her gamble backfires as the Conservatives lose their parliamentary majority. They are forced to strike a deal with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to govern.

FIRST TERMS AGREED: Britain and the EU reach an outline agreement on December 8 on three key areas of the divorce: Britain's financial settlement to the union, citizens' rights and the Irish border. EU leaders give the go-ahead for the next stage of Brexit talks, including on how Britain will continue to trade with the bloc after the split. A bill enacting the decision to leave the EU becomes law on June 26, 2018.

TOP MINISTERS QUIT: On July 6, 2018, May wins agreement from her warring cabinet to pursue "a UK-EU free trade area" that would retain a strong alignment with the EU after Brexit. But two days later David Davis, the eurosceptic Brexit minister, quits saying May is giving "too much away too easily". Johnson, now foreign secretary, resigns on July 9, becoming a leading critic of May's plans.



DRAFT DEAL AGREED

The European Union on November 13 publishes contingency plans for a "no-deal" Brexit. But a few hours later, May's office says negotiating teams have reached a draft agreement for the divorce. On November 14, her cabinet backs the agreement. However the following day four ministers, including new Brexit secretary Dominic Raab, quit in protest. EU leaders approve the accord on November 25.

PARTY CONFIDENCE VOTE: May's deal faces intense criticism in parliament over the "backstop" provision designed to prevent border checks in Ireland. On December 10, May postpones a House of Commons vote on the deal due the following day, acknowledging she faced a heavy defeat. She heads off to Europe for further talks, but EU leaders reject any substantive renegotiation. On December 12, May survives a confidence vote brought by her own party challenging her leadership. The result meant May is immune from further internal party challenges for a year.

PARLIAMENT VOTE: On January 15, the House of Commons, Britain's lower house, finally gets its chance to vote on the draft withdrawal agreement that May struck with EU leaders in December. The vote is expected from 1900 GMT.

SOURCE: AFP

CRISES AT MEXICO BORDER

US extends troop deployment

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon said Monday it would extend until September 30 the deployment of active-duty soldiers and Coast Guard members at the US-Mexico border, while expanding the mission to include surveillance and detection.

Lengthening the troops' mission past a January 31 deadline, the Pentagon said it was "transitioning its support at the southwestern border from hardening ports of entry to mobile surveillance and detection, as well as concertina wire emplacement between ports of entry."

"DoD will continue to provide aviation support," the statement added, referring to the Department of Defense.

The Pentagon already has about 2,350 active-duty troops stationed along the boundary, deployed under a controversial order President Donald Trump gave last year before midterm elections in November as several thousand Central American migrants made their way to the border to seek asylum from violence and poverty in their own countries.

Critics decried Trump's order as a costly political stunt to galvanize supporters ahead of the vote, in which his Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives.

Trump spoke of a "national emergency" and an "invasion" -- initially suggesting US troops could shoot migrants if they threw stones at the US border.

Trump is unwavering in his demand for a border barrier to prevent illegal migrants and drugs, which has triggered a major impasse with legislators and a partial government shutdown that is entering its fourth week.



Indian sadhus (Hindu holy men) take a dip at the holy Sangam -- the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers -- during the auspicious bathing day of Makar Sankranti at the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, yesterday. State authorities in Uttar Pradesh are expecting 12 million visitors to descend on Allahabad for the centuries-old festival, which officially began yesterday and continues until early March.

PHOTO: AFP

Game of 'hostage politics'

Death sentence heightens China, Canada tensions

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday vociferously defended a court's decision to impose the death penalty on a convicted Canadian drug smuggler, escalating a diplomatic row that experts say has descended into a high-stakes game of "hostage politics".

China's foreign ministry blasted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's "irresponsible remarks" after he criticised the death sentence imposed on 36-year-old Robert Lloyd Schellenberg.

Beijing and Ottawa have been squabbling since last month, when Canada arrested the chief financial officer of top Chinese telecom company Huawei on a US extradition request related to Iran sanctions violations.

In a move observers see as retaliation, Chinese authorities detained two Canadian citizens -- a former diplomat and a business consultant -- on suspicion of endangering national security.

Then authorities revisited the little-known case of Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in November for drug offences.

A month later, an upper court took up his appeal and ordered a hasty retrial in the northeastern port city of Dalian after ruling that the punishment was too lenient.



Robert Lloyd Schellenberg

by an acquaintance, has 10 days to appeal to the same high court that rejected his first appeal.

The timing and swiftness of Schellenberg's sentence, and the inclusion of new evidence presenting him as a key player in a plan to ship 222 kilograms (490 pounds) of methamphetamine to Australia, raised suspicion among observers.

"Playing hostage politics, China rushes the retrial of a Canadian suspect and sentences him to death in a fairly transparent attempt to pressure Canada," Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth said in a tweet.

Donald Clarke, a George Washington University professor specialising in Chinese law, coined an even grimmer term for the situation: "death threat diplomacy".

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed "extreme concern" that China had "chosen to arbitrarily" apply the death penalty.

But Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying denied Beijing had politicised Schellenberg's case, calling on Canada to "respect China's judicial sovereignty... and stop making such irresponsible remarks."

Ottawa had issued a new travel advisory urging citizens to "exercise a high degree of caution in China due to the risk of arbitrary enforcement of local laws."

'Never worked for Russia'

Trump slams his alleged Moscow ties as 'big fat hoax'

AFP, Washington

Standing outside the snow-covered White House on Monday, Donald Trump made an astonishing declaration for a US president: no, he has never been an agent of Russia.

"I never worked for Russia," Trump told reporters on the South Lawn. "It's a disgrace that you even ask that question. It's all a big fat hoax."

Trump's angry comments sought to bat down a mounting controversy over his alleged ties to the Kremlin, but the fact that he even had to issue such a denial illustrates how far the unprecedented scandal has already gone.

The statement, delivered in freezing temperatures before taking off in the Marine One helicopter for a trip to New Orleans, followed two bombshell reports.

One, in The New York Times, said that the FBI opened an investigation into whether Trump was acting on Russia's behalf soon after he became president.

Another, in The Washington Post, detailed what it said were the unusual lengths taken by Trump to hide the contents of his conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This, of course, comes on top of the huge

investigation led by special prosecutor Robert Mueller, who is looking into Russian efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election -- and the possibility it colluded with Trump's campaign.

Trump was given an opportunity to respond to the report of the FBI investigation on Saturday when he gave an interview to his favorite Fox News channel.

But instead of a clear cut denial, he fueled a mounting outcry in Washington by merely saying that the question was "the most insulting thing I've ever been asked."

His response Monday took the entire alleged Russia collusion affair head on.

"It's a lot of fake news," Trump said. He called the then-leaders of the FBI who decided to investigate him "known scoundrels, I guess you could say dirty cops."

But the latest twists mean that the president -- currently embroiled in a damaging political battle with Congress over funding a Mexico border wall -- can't escape the Russia shadow, regardless of what he says.

The details of the latest reports are especially shocking because they are so concrete, in contrast to the often complex and carefully withheld workings of the almost leak-proof Mueller probe.



'I felt I had nothing to lose'

Saudi teen in Canada details family abuse

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Saudi teenager Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun, who was granted asylum in Canada, said she was physically and mentally abused by her family since the age of 16, forcing her to risk her life and flee the kingdom.

Speaking to the media for the first time since landing in Toronto on Saturday, the 18-year-old detailed the mistreatment by her family saying she hoped her story would encourage other Saudi women to be "brave and free".

Last week, she fled to Thailand while visiting Kuwait with her family. Her case drew international attention on social media after she barricaded herself in a Bangkok airport hotel room after Thai authorities threatened to deport her and live-tweeted her desperate attempt to flee.



"My life was in danger and I felt I had nothing to lose. I wanted to tell people my story and about what happens to Saudi women," she told Canada's CBC news and the Toronto Star on Monday.

Mohammed, who has dropped "al-Qunun" from her name after learning about her family disowning her, said she was beaten up for not praying and locked in the house for six months for cutting her hair short.

"I was exposed to physical violence, persecution, oppression, threats to be killed," she said. "It's daily oppression," Mohammed added. "We are treated as an object, like a slave. We could not make decisions about what we want."

Mohammed told reporters she plans to learn English, rejoin school and find work in her adopted homeland.