

# UK Brexit team faces sceptical EU

## Customs and border experts meet today for technical talks after Johnson defeat

British and European customs and border experts meet today for technical talks, as Boris Johnson's government struggles to convince anyone it is serious about negotiating a revised Brexit withdrawal deal.

Johnson lost his first parliamentary battle as British prime minister on Tuesday when rebel and opposition MPs opposed to a "no-deal" departure from the European Union stripped him of his governing majority.

But London's Brexit "sherpa", senior diplomat David Frost, was due in Brussels for closed door talks with an EU task force to explore possible alternatives to the "Irish backstop" clause in a withdrawal treaty.

EU leaders see the backstop as the only way to protect their single market and the Northern Ireland peace agreement -- and they accuse Johnson of failing to come up with any credible alternative suggestion.

**FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM**

At home, Johnson's opponents accused him of carrying out a sham negotiation while hurtling towards an economically disastrous no-deal Brexit on October 31, and British MPs are trying to pass a law to force him to ask for a delay.

But British officials point to Frost's visit yesterday as evidence they are engaging in good faith with Brussels and in turn seeking ideas from the European side to break the impasse.

A British official source told AFP the talks would go on all month and "intensify", arguing the prime minister "wants to get a deal and is ready to work in an energetic and determined way to get it done".

The team intends for the talks to "run through a range



of issues, including the removal of the backstop," he said.

"Discussions so far have shown that the two sides remain some distance apart on key issues but are willing to work hard to find a way through," he said.

"The fundamental problem is that the British government and parliament disagree on what they want," the European official told AFP.

**A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY**

Any of the "alternative arrangements" promoted by Johnson for the Irish border must thus protect the integrity of the single market, prevent a hard border and respect the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement.

Frost's delegation represents what the British official called "an expert team from across government that has expertise in regulations and customs".

But London won't make any proposal public only to see it shot down by sceptical Europeans, and EU experts say that without a physical border -- something all sides insist they want to avoid -- the backstop is the only plausible failsafe.

"If I were a fraudster, it's a business opportunity, for sure," an EU anti-corruption official told journalists of the prospect of a free-for-all on the Northern Irish border after a "no deal" departure.

SOURCE: AFP



An aerial view shows devastation after hurricane Dorian hit the Abaco Islands in the Bahamas on Tuesday, in this still image from video obtained via social media. Dorian churned towards the United States yesterday after leaving seven dead in the Bahamas, where the prime minister said terrified residents had endured "days of horror" at the hands of the monster storm.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Putin, Modi vow to boost military, energy, trade ties

## Call for UNSC's reform to reflect global realities

AFP, Vladivostok

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday praised his "close friend" Russian President Vladimir Putin as the pair said they would work to boost military, trade and energy ties.

The leaders met on the first day of Russia's economic forum in the Pacific coast city of Vladivostok, an annual event since 2015 as Moscow looks to bolster relations with Asia amid tensions with the West.

"I'm very grateful to my close friend Vladimir Putin for this opportunity," Modi said at a press conference following talks and a tour of a naval shipyard.

"We have reached a new stage in collaboration," he said, adding that the pair discussed "unprecedented" mutual investment in oil and gas industries.

A joint statement called for cooperation in military and technological spheres, with the possibility of creating joint ventures in India



to develop and manufacture civilian aircraft.

It also called for a reorganisation of the UN Security Council to reflect the "global realities" of a multipolar world.

For his part, Putin hailed his "great friend, Mr Modi" and said India was "our strategic partner."

"Special attention was paid to trade and economic cooperation in the talks," he said, though details of major trade deals were not immediately announced.

Putin was spending most of his time yesterday with Modi, who in an interview ahead of the meeting spoke of the "special chemistry" he shared with the Russian leader.

"With each meeting with President Putin, we get closer and our relationship grows," he told the newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta.

India is a key client for Russia's arms industry and trade between the two countries amounted to approximately \$11 billion in 2018.

### US-TALIBAN PEACE DEAL

# Kabul 'concerned', seeks clarification

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan government yesterday expressed doubts about a prospective deal between the US and the Taliban, saying officials need more information about the risks it poses.

US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was in Kabul this week, when he shared with Afghan officials an agreement "in principle" that Washington has forged with the Taliban and would lead to a pull-out of American troops.

The prospect of a US-Taliban deal has caused much concern among many Afghans, who feel sidelined from the process, worry the hardline Islamists will return to power, and see a beaten America selling out their interests in a bid to escape Afghanistan after 18 years of gruelling war.

Sediq Sediqqi, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's spokesman, said that while the Kabul administration supports any progress in an eventual peace process, it wants to prevent any negative consequences.

Kabul is "concerned, therefore we seek clarification about this document so that we can carefully analyse the risks and potential negative consequences, and prevent any danger it may cause," Sediqqi said on Twitter.

The statement is Kabul's first such reaction to the prospective deal, which Khalilzad presented on Monday.

Ghani and his government have until now been largely sidelined in negotiations between the US and the Taliban, who see the Afghan president as illegitimate and have insisted on dealing first with the Americans.

# NEWSIN brief

## 4 declared terrorists under India terror law

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday declared three Pakistanis Jaish-e-Mohammed terror group chief Masood Azhar, Lashkar-e-Taiba founder Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, 2008 Mumbai terror attack accused Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and fugitive Indian underworld don Dawood Ibrahim as individual terrorists under a new tough anti-terror law. The decision were taken nearly a month after parliament approved a crucial amendment to The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 1967.

## Blast in Indian factory kills 14 people

REUTERS, New Delhi

A blast at a fireworks factory in India yesterday killed 14 people, police said, weeks ahead of a Hindu festival marked by the lighting of millions of fire crackers. It was not clear if the factory in the northern state of Punjab was a legal facility or one of the many illegal fireworks factories dotted across the country with lax safety standards. "We have recovered 14 dead bodies," said police officer Mukhtiar Singh. Videos posted by media showed rescue workers and dozens of people milling around a large collapsed structure.

## US teen kills 5 family members: police

CNN ONLINE

A 14-year-old has been charged with five counts of murder after confessing to shooting his family members in their Elkmont, Alabama, home, police said Tuesday. The victims are: John Sisk, 38, the boy's father; his stepmother, Mary Sisk, 35; his 6-year-old stepbrother; his 5-year-old stepsister; and his 6-month-old stepbrother, Limestone County Sheriff's Office spokesman Stephen Young told reporters. Earlier, authorities said the child victims were siblings. Investigators have yet to establish a motive.



# Rouhani gives Europe 2 months to save nuke deal

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday gave European powers another two months to save a 2015 nuclear deal, but warned that Tehran was still preparing for further significant breaches of the agreement if diplomatic efforts failed.

His statement came as Iranian officials appeared to give a guarded welcome to a French proposal to save the atomic pact by offering Iran about \$15 billion in credit lines until the end of the year if Tehran comes fully back into compliance.

Rouhani said talks with European powers were moving forward, raising hopes of at least a pause in a diplomatic confrontation between Iran and the West that has stoked already heightened tensions across the region.

Iran emerged from years of economic isolation after agreeing a deal with world powers in 2015 to curb its nuclear development programme in exchange for sanctions relief.

However, US President Donald Trump pulled out of the deal last year, arguing it did not go far enough, and re-imposed sanctions.

Tehran responded with two separate moves that breached some of the terms of the deal, although it says it still aims to save the pact.

### XENOPHOBIC ATTACKS

# S Africa, Nigeria beef up security

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa and Nigeria yesterday stepped up security after deadly attacks on foreign-owned stores in Johannesburg triggered reprisal assaults on South African businesses in Nigerian cities.

The centre of Johannesburg and the impoverished suburb of Alexandra were calm as police stepped up patrols following two days of looting, AFP reporters saw.

Shops cautiously began to open again, as some residents sifted around in wrecked stores, rummaging for food and anything usable.

Amid mounting concern for relations between South Africa and its neighbours and Nigeria -- the continent's most populous market -- President Cyril Ramaphosa reiterated his condemnation of the violence.

"We face a huge challenge. A number of people (are) taking the law into their own hands," he said in Cape Town, ahead of a three-day meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) due to be attended by 15 African leaders.

Five people, most of them South Africans, have been killed and 289 have been arrested since the violence flared on Sunday. Dozens of shops have been destroyed in Johannesburg and nearby Pretoria, the country's political capital.



People walk on a flooded street during heavy rain showers in Mumbai yesterday. Heavy overnight rain caused water-logging in several parts of the city, triggering air and rail traffic disruptions. The civic authorities have declared a holiday in schools amid a heavy rain warning.

PHOTO: AFP

# Venezuela on alert

## Maduro alleges Colombian plot to attack, orders military exercises

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Tuesday ordered the armed forces to be on alert for a potential attack by Colombia's government and announced military exercises on the border amid the rearmament of a group of former guerrilla commanders.

Former FARC guerrillas on Thursday announced a rearmament in a video that Colombian authorities believe was filmed in Venezuela, spurring concern of a worsening of the Colombian armed conflict and expansion of armed groups in Venezuela.

"I've ordered the strategic operations commander of the Bolivarian Armed Forces and all the military units on the border to declare an alert ... in the face of the threatened aggression by Colombia toward Venezuela," Maduro said in a televised broadcast.

A set of military exercises that are carried out each year will be held between Sept. 10 and Sept. 29 in the states of Zulia, Tachira, Apure and Amazonas, which border



Colombia, Maduro said. They are the third such exercises this year.

Despite the dramatic rhetoric, the statements are consistent with frequent disputes between the two nations for over a decade that at times included troop movements for political effect. Previous spats have ended in grudging reconciliation.

Colombia's Foreign Ministry declined to comment. Colombian authorities have repeatedly denied planning to attack Venezuela.

The United States, which has launched a broad set of sanctions against Maduro's government in efforts to hasten his departure, says Venezuela's government provides a safe haven to Colombian armed groups.

Earlier, Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido backed the use of satellites to help locate guerrilla groups that have crossed into Venezuela. "We are going to authorize the use of satellite technology to facilitate the location of these irregular groups, of camps within the country's borders," Guaido said in a televised presentation.

### DRAFT BILL ON MASS MEDIA

# Nepal undermines free expression: HRW

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's proposed media and communication laws will have a "chilling effect" on its citizens' right to free speech, Human Rights Watch warned yesterday as it called for the bills to be amended.

The government -- which is drafting and has tabled bills on media, IT and mass communications -- has said the laws are necessary to improve media reporting and discourage disinformation.

But journalists and right activists say they could be used to suppress freedom of expression, with the ruling party showing less and less tolerance for dissent since coming to power in 2017.

In a letter to Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli published online, HRW said the draft laws as well as previous amendments to the penal code criminalised speech in a way that was "extremely broad" and "unacceptably vague".

"These provisions carry extremely severe penalties, which will have a chilling effect on free speech," said HRW.

The 10-page letter included a detailed analysis by the rights body on how the amendments and bills "violate international standards on upholding the right to free speech and expression".

If passed in their current form, the laws would "undermine the freedoms that Nepal's fought so hard to achieve" HRW's South Asia director Meenakshi Ganguly said in a statement.

One proposed piece of legislation, the Media Council Bill, gives the government regulator the power to fine reporters and editors up to a million rupees (\$8,600) for violating its code of conduct.

## Issue IDs to those included in Assam NRC: CPI(M)

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has asked the government to issue photo identity cards to the 3.11 crore people who have been included in Assam's updated National Register of Citizens (NRC) that was released on August 31. The party cited the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003, to raise this demand. Some NGOs and political leaders in Assam have felt the need for some kind of "NRC-included" proof, especially for daily-wagers who move to other States for work. One of the reasons is a drive against "foreigners" in the States adjoining Assam after the release of the final NRC.

## Judge orders White House to reinstate reporter's pass

The White House was ordered Tuesday by a federal judge to reverse its suspension of a reporter's press credentials. Playboy reporter Brian Karem's White House pass was temporarily revoked after he argued with President Donald Trump's former aide Sebastian Gorka at a July Rose Garden event. Karem's "hard pass" -- a long-term White House press pass -- was suspended for 30 days in August by Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham, who cited his lack of "professionalism" and "decorum." But US District Court Judge Rudolph Contreras determined the standards for press behavior had not been made clear before the event and granted a preliminary injunction restoring Karem's pass.

## Teenager dies in Kashmir in month-old lockdown



The army in Indian Kashmir said yesterday a teenager has died after being hit by stone-pelting protesters in the restive region that has been under lockdown for a month. Asrar Ahmed Khan died on Tuesday night after succumbing to wounds he received on August 6, senior army officer Lieutenant General Kanwal Jeet Singh Dhillon said at a news conference in Srinagar. "This makes it the fifth civilian death in the (Kashmir) Valley in the last 30 days," Dhillon said. "These deaths have happened because of terrorists, stone pelters and puppets of Pakistan," he said. But he added: "This is the calmest period in the history of Kashmir, if I can say that."

SOURCE: THE HINDU, AFP