

WHAT'S NEXT AFTER BREXIT?

Britain left the European Union on Friday, ending more than four decades of economic, political and legal integration with its closest neighbours. But things will feel the same for many months, owing to a transition period intended to allow both sides time to agree the terms of their future partnership. Three Brexit deadlines came and went before the British parliament finally ratified the divorce agreement. Britain left the European Union 43 months after the country voted for Brexit in a June 2016 referendum. Nothing will change for most people in Britain thanks to the transition period intended to allow both sides time to agree the terms of their future partnership. It lasts at least until December 31, 2020. But Britain will lose its representation and voting rights in the EU institutions. This includes having no British members of the European Parliament. Here are the key moments ahead: February/March: trade talks begin: Britain says it is ready to start trade talks on February 1, but EU members states are still discussing what they want from the negotiations. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is to flesh out his ideas for a free trade agreement along the lines of a recent EU deal with Canada, in a speech in early February. The EU mandate could be approved by national ministers on February 25, officials in Brussels suggest, which would mean talks could begin around March 1. Britain is hoping to open trade talks with the United States and other non-EU countries around the same time. Trade is not the only issue that must be resolved with Brussels, however. Britain and the EU closely cooperate on security and law enforcement, education and energy among many other issues. July 1: extension deadline: The transition period is scheduled to last until December 31, 2020. Britain can ask to extend this for one or two years, but must inform the EU of its request by July 1. Johnson insists he will not do this, saying that Britain must be free of EU rules and regulations as soon as possible. December 31: transition ends: Without an extension or a trade agreement, relations between Britain and the EU will be severed at the end of 2020. A new deal would allow the two sides to embark on a new partnership. Failure to agree would see cross-Channel trade, transportation and a multitude of other ties severely disrupted overnight. SOURCE: AFP



A Palestinian demonstrator uses a sling shot to hurl rocks at Israeli security forces during clashes at the northern entrance of the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump lifts ban on landmines

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump's administration on Friday lifted US restrictions on landmines, saying new technology made them safer, outraging campaigners for the abolition of the explosives that maim thousands of civilians each year.

In the latest reversal of a policy of his predecessor Barack Obama, Trump gave the green light to a new generation of "non-persistent" landmines that can be switched off or destroyed remotely rather than staying active in the ground forever.

Obama in 2014 banned the use of anti-personnel landmines with the exception, under pressure from military planners, of the Korean peninsula where the explosives dot the last Cold War frontier with North Korea.

The White House said the US military will now be free to deploy landmines around the world "in exceptional circumstances."

In rescinding the White House directive, the Trump administration said policy would now be set by the Pentagon, which said it was still prohibiting traditional landmines that cannot be turned off or destroyed remotely.

The new mines are set to self-destruct within 30 days but can be destroyed in as little as two hours if necessary, Vic Mercado, the Pentagon official in charge of the policy, told reporters.

More than 160 countries, including most of the Western world, are party to the 1999 Ottawa Convention that aims to eliminate anti-personnel mines. A study found that 6,897 people worldwide were killed or injured by mines or leftover explosives from war in 2018.

Maldives back in Commonwealth

AFP, Colombo

Commonwealth nations yesterday welcomed back the Maldives 40 months after it angrily quit the organisation over criticism of its human rights record under strongman president Abdulla Yameen.

The move is a new step in ending the international isolation that the Indian Ocean holiday destination suffered under Yameen's rule from 2013 to 2018.

The group of mainly former British colonies said an application to return made by the Maldives had been approved after "due diligence" including a country assessment.

The country has sought to repair its image after Yameen suffered a shock defeat in a 2018 election to Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

The Maldives government said Solih telephoned Commonwealth secretary general Patricia Scotland to state that renewed membership was "symbolic of this administration's commitment to both engage with the international community and to deliver on our domestic pledges to citizens in good faith."

The Commonwealth said reforms underway in Maldives were in line with the group's values and they encouraged Solih to pursue the measures.

"Together we will support Maldives to realise its ambitions," Scotland said.

Arab League rejects Trump's plan

Warns Israel against force; Palestinians cut all ties with Israel, US

AGENCIES

The Arab League has completely rejected US President Donald Trump's Middle East plan during an emergency meeting in Egypt's capital, saying it would not lead to a just peace deal.

In a statement yesterday, the pan-Arab bloc said it "rejects the US-Israeli 'deal of the century' considering that it does not meet the minimum rights and aspirations of Palestinian people."

Arab states also agreed "not to ... cooperate with the US administration to implement this plan," adding that Israel should not to implement the initiative by force. They insisted on a two-state solution that includes a Palestinian state based on borders before the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

They also called for East Jerusalem to be the capital of the future Palestinian state.

Arab leaders also vowed "not to ... cooperate with the US administration to implement this plan". They insisted on a two-state solution that includes a Palestinian state based on borders before

the 1967 Six-Day War -- when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza -- and with east Jerusalem as its capital.

The US plan suggests that Israel would retain control of the contested city of Jerusalem as its "undivided capital" and

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annex settlements on Palestinian lands. Trump said the Palestinians would be allowed to declare a capital adjacent to Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas yesterday announced a cut of all ties with

Israel and the United States, including security cooperation.

"We are informing you that there will be no relations with you (Israel) and the United States, including on security cooperation," Abbas said at an extraordinary meeting of the pan-Arab bloc in Cairo.

The Palestinian leader said he would go to the United Nations Security Council soon to call for an international conference to re-launch negotiations with Israel.

He added that the US plan was in "violation of the (autonomy) accords" launched in Oslo in 1993 by Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel will have to "bear responsibility as an occupying power" for the Palestinian territories, Abbas said, adding that Palestinians will press ahead with their legitimate struggle under peaceful means.

This struggle will be under the auspices of the diplomatic Quartet comprised of the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia, Abbas said.

"But we will not accept the US alone. We have tried it already," he added.

Britain embarks on its future outside EU

Johnson plans full border checks on EU goods

AGENCIES

Britain began an uncertain future outside the European Union yesterday after the country greeted the historic end to almost half a century of EU membership with a mixture of joy and sadness.

There were celebrations and tears on Friday as the EU's often reluctant member became the first to leave an organisation set up to forge unity among nations after the horrors of World War II.

Thousands of people waving Union Jack flags packed London's Parliament Square and sang the national anthem to mark that reality as Brexit became law at 11 pm (2300 GMT) -- midnight in Brussels.

In an address to the nation, Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed a "new era of friendly cooperation" acknowledging there could be "bumps in the road ahead" but predicting the country could make it a "stunning success".

The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported that Johnson was preparing to impose full customs and border checks on all European Union goods entering Britain from next year, in an attempt to increase pressure on the bloc in trade talks.

"We are planning full checks on all EU imports - export declarations, security declarations, animal health checks and all supermarket goods to pass through Border Inspections Posts," Saturday's Telegraph quoted a senior government source as saying.

"This will double the practical challenge at the border in January 2021," the source added.

Brexit has exposed deep divisions in British society and many fear the consequences of ending 47 years of ties with their nearest neighbours.

Brexit has also provoked soul-searching in the EU about its future after losing a country of 66 million people with global diplomatic clout and the financial centre of the City of London.

French President Emmanuel Macron described it as a "historic warning sign" that should force the EU and its remaining nations of more than 440 million people to stop and reflect.

In Scotland, where a majority voted to remain in 2016, Brexit has revived calls for independence.

In Northern Ireland -- soon to be a new EU frontier -- there are fears Brexit could destabilise a hard-won peace after decades of conflict over British rule.



Activists attend an anti-Conservative government, pro-Scottish independence, and anti-Brexit demonstration outside Holyrood, the seat of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Readying coronavirus vaccine will take months'

AFP, Paris

No manufacturer will have a coronavirus vaccine ready for use before the middle of 2020, despite an intensive global effort, a biotech executive told AFP on Friday.

Stephane Bancel is chief executive of Moderna Therapeutics, one of several entities involved in an all-out international effort to create a vaccine as soon as possible for the deadly SARS-like virus, also known as nCoV-2019 that has already killed more than 259 people.

Moderna is working in coordination with the US National Institutes of Health, while Inovio Pharmaceuticals and the University of Queensland in Australia are pursuing alternative tracks.

Bancel said: "once we have managed to master the technology that works on humans, things could go very quickly because

it is always the same manufacturing process... for messenger RNA against the flu or against the coronavirus, it is the same method of manufacturing, the only difference is the order of letters that code the proteins.

"Our teams near Boston are making a vaccine now, and as soon as it is ready, it will be sent to the NIH which will carry out clinical phase 1 trials" Bancel said in reference to initial safety tests on humans.

Asked if a vaccine could be developed in time to respond to the epidemic, he cautioned that "the vaccine will have to undergo several clinical trials.

"The challenge is that it could quickly be given to millions of people. The responsibility for its safety is therefore very important. Even going quickly with technology like mRNA, no manufacturer will be able to have a vaccine ready by the summer, or even by the autumn."



China slaps restrictions on weddings, funerals

AFP, Beijing

China has asked couples to delay their nuptials from a popular wedding date and families to scale down funeral services to help slow the spread of the country's viral outbreak.

The appeal came as the death toll from the new coronavirus soared to 259 and the total number of cases neared 12,000 nationwide.

"Where marriage registrations have been announced or promised for February 2 this year, you are advised to cancel it and explain the situation to others," a civil affairs ministry statement said.

February 2 this year is being considered a lucky date for wedding ceremonies because the sequence of numbers "02022020" reads the same backwards as forwards. Beijing, Shanghai and other cities had earlier decided to offer wedding registry services on the date, despite it falling on a Sunday when offices are usually closed.

The ministry said it would temporarily halt marriage counselling services and asked the public not to hold wedding banquets.

It also said funerals should be held in a "simple and expeditious manner to avoid gatherings of people" and the bodies of any victims of the coronavirus should be cremated as soon as possible.

Officials in Hubei yesterday announced that they would suspend all marriage registrations from Monday until further notice.

Trump's travel ban targets Myanmar, 5 other countries

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump issued an expanded version of his travel ban on Friday that targets prospective immigrants from Myanmar and five other countries, a move that could affect thousands of people and reignite debate on whether the policy is discriminatory.

Of the six countries added to the ban, four are African nations and three have Muslim-majority populations. Democrats and immigration advocates accuse the Trump administration of seeking to expand its original 2017 ban that targeted Muslim-majority countries and of disproportionately focusing on African countries.

Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said during a call with reporters that the six countries failed to meet US security and information-sharing standards, which necessitated the new restrictions.

Belarus, which had been under consideration for inclusion, took steps to remedy deficiencies in recent months and will not face visa restrictions, Wolf said.

The United States will suspend the issuance

of visas that can lead to permanent residency for nationals of Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Nigeria, a presidential proclamation said. Temporary visas for tourists, businesspeople, students and workers from those nations will not be affected, it said.

The US government also will stop issuing "diversity visas" to nationals of Sudan and Tanzania, the proclamation said. The visas, which Trump has criticized, are available by lottery for applicants from countries with low rates of immigration.

The original travel ban barred nearly all immigrants and travelers from seven countries with majority Muslim populations. The policy was revised amid court challenges, but the US Supreme Court ultimately upheld it in June 2018.

The existing version of the ban includes Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. North Korea and Venezuela also face visa bars, but those measures affect relatively few travelers. Those restrictions will remain in place.

The new travel ban will take effect on Feb 21, according to the proclamation.