

International

UK minister breaks the ranks with no-deal Brexit warning

'It is my strong view that we need to come together now'

LONDON: Britain's business minister yesterday warned that the prospect of crashing out of the European Union without an agreement would be "disastrous" for the country, as fractious MPs prepare to vote on a contentious Brexit deal. Greg Clark's comments contradicted official government policy of not ruling out a no-deal Brexit and exposed further divisions after embattled Prime Minister Theresa May suffered a series of setbacks in parliament.

A no-deal Brexit would be "a disastrous situation in which we move to the most rudimentary terms of trade with our closest partners," Greg Clark told BBC radio. In such a scenario, Britain would be forced to trade with the EU on World Trade Organization terms, which could mean much higher tariffs for some products such as cars. As things stand, Britain will leave the EU with no official deal on March 29 if parliament fails to approve an agreement the government has struck with the bloc. MPs are set to vote on the agreement on Tuesday.

"It is my strong view that we need to come together now, we need to act to avoid no-deal because I don't think there is anything remotely like a majority in parliament that will tolerate it," he said. Brexit supporting MPs are opposed to the deal, and May has already pulled the vote once with defeat looming. Most MPs supported staying in the EU in the 2016 referendum, and many have vowed to do everything within their power to prevent a no-deal scenario.

As Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits Britain on Thursday, Clark said of Japanese businesses: "We need to resolve this concern, this very real concern that they have of us crashing out on March 29". Japanese firms have invested billions of pounds in Britain, and are especially crucial in the car industry, using the country as a business-friendly home from which to trade across the continent. The car sector was rocked on Thursday by reports that Jaguar Land Rover is set to announce up to 5,000 job cuts, with Brexit uncertainty cited as a factor.

Parliamentary fireworks

May is making a desperate last push to win MPs over to her Brexit deal, ahead of Tuesday's vote. She faces daunting odds in getting the deal passed, and suffered a stinging defeat on Wednesday when MPs voted for an amendment demanding she produce new plans within three days if the agreement is voted down.

Aiming to capitalize on her weakness, opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was to make a Brexit speech in Wakefield, northern England, in which he was expected to call for a general election to resolve the deadlock. "Let there be no doubt: Theresa May's deal is a bad deal and Labour will vote against it next week in parliament," he was to say, according to extracts released by his office.

"If the government cannot pass its most important legislation, then there must be a general



LONDON: Britain's Minister of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Claire Perry (L) and Britain's Business Secretary Greg Clark (R) leave after attending the weekly meeting of the cabinet at 10 Downing Street. —AFP

election at the earliest opportunity." Many in his party hope that he will call for a second referendum, but the veteran leftist, a long-time critic of the European Union, has so far resisted. MPs were also set to hold the second of five days of debate ahead of the historic vote, after explo-

sive scenes in the House on Wednesday. Brexiters accused speaker of the house John Bercow of anti-Brexit bias when he apparently ignored the advice of Commons officials and selected the amendment demanding May bring forward new plans in the event of defeat. —AFP

Italy minister furious after migrant deal

ROME: Italy's populist coalition has reached agreement on the fate of 10 migrants the country agreed to take from Malta despite the fury of far-right anti-immigrant Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. Disagreement over the migrants, who arrived in Malta on Wednesday after being rescued in the Mediterranean and spending weeks stranded aboard an NGO vessel, has shaken Italy's coalition.

Salvini, fellow deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, held talks late into the night on Wednesday. "There is convergence within the government on a hard line: ports closed, fight against smugglers and NGOs," Salvini said yesterday. "And I add that any new arrival must not cost Italian citizens a cent," Salvini said, insisting that "it's the interior ministry that handles immigration."

While Salvini has for months repeated that Italian ports are closed to migrants, Di Maio last week said that Italy should take in several women and children rescued before Christmas but stranded at sea after no port would allow them to dock. Conte, who was named premier by Salvini and Di Maio, agreed with the latter, whose M5S does not have the same hard-line anti-immigrant position as Salvini's League.

Italy became one of eight EU nations that on Wednesday agreed to take in some migrants from Malta. Salvini was infuriated by that decision and a compromise was agreed by which Italy's Waldensian Evangelical Church would take in the 10 migrants. The church has been involved with so-called "humanitarian corridors" that help asylum seekers come to Italy, assisting them with housing, Italian language learning and skills training. But Salvini also demanded that other European nations fulfil their promises to take migrants from Italy.

In July 2018, Germany, France, Portugal, Spain and Malta agreed each to take in 50 of around 450 migrants disembarked in Sicily by the Italian coastguard vessel Diciotti after being rescued at sea. According to Salvini, France has taken its 50, but Germany only 23, Spain 21, Portugal 19 and Malta none. Ireland, which said it would take in 20, has received 16 migrants, he said.

The Maltese government yesterday voiced "disdain and surprise at the inaccurate allegations by Minister Salvini", pointing out that Italy had promised to take 50 migrants from Malta and that the two countries had agreed the two deals cancel each other out. Salvini remained adamant. "We're not going to take any lessons from Malta, which closed its eyes for years so that boats could head for Italy," said Salvini. "The music has changed, you can only come to Italy if you have a permit. We've already taken in too many, it's time for others to wake up." —AFP

Four men on trial in Berlin deny giant gold coin heist

BERLIN: Four Berlin men who went on trial yesterday denied involvement in the spectacular museum theft of a giant commemorative gold coin called the "Big Maple Leaf" and valued at 3.75 million euros (\$4.3 million). Police had "presented not a single shred of firm evidence", argued Toralf Noeding, defense lawyer for the three alleged thieves, brothers Ahmed, 20, and Wayci Remmo, 23, and their cousin Wissam Remmo, 21.

Noeding also charged that his clients had suffered prejudice from broad media coverage on their extended family with roots in Lebanon, several of whose members have been jailed for involvement in violent or organized crime. Police have found no trace of the 100-kilogram Canadian coin since the late-night heist in March 2017 from the German capital's Bode Museum, located close to Chancellor Angela Merkel's apartment.

Police assume the nearly pure-gold treasure, which has a face value of one million Canadian dollars, was either cut up, molten down or taken abroad. Police staged raids in July 2017 involving 300 officers on premises in and around Berlin linked to the Remmo clan to gather evidence. They confiscated guns, luxury cars and more than 100,000 euros in cash. If found guilty of theft in

the juvenile court case, the three suspects, all registered as unemployed, would face jail terms of up to 10 years. Also in the dock and claiming innocence was 20-year-old former museum security guard Denis Umut W, the alleged inside man, accused of giving the others crucial information for the break-in. His lawyer Marcel Kelz denied media reports that his client had made major purchases, including an 11,000 euro gold chain, and shown interest in buying a Mercedes Benz car and property months after the heist.

Fear of crime clans

The "Big Maple Leaf", one of five minted in 2007 with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, is considered the world's second-largest gold coin after the one-ton Australian Kangaroo issued in 2012. The coin, which has a diameter of 53 centimeters, was on loan from an unidentified collector to the Bode Museum, which bills its exhibition of coins and medals as a "chronicle of human history forged in metal". Security camera footage from the night shows three young men wearing dark hoodies, scarves and baseball caps make their way to the museum.

They broke in through a window, smashed a glass case with an axe and used a rope, wooden beam and a wheelbarrow to lift the coin onto adjacent elevated urban railway tracks. The coin was probably damaged when the thieves dropped it twice — once on the tracks that pass the museum and cross the Spree river, and again in Monbijou park on the opposite river bank, from where they took it away in a car. —AFP