

International

British PM vows to pursue Brexit deal after new blow

Johnson slams opposition for voting against a call for snap election

LONDON: Beleaguered British Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed to continue his attempts to strike a new Brexit deal with Brussels, after losing yet another vote yesterday during a chaotic parliamentary session. Johnson slammed the opposition for voting against his call for a snap election in the final minutes of a stormy late-night debate ahead of a controversial suspension of parliament called by the prime minister.

He said he would "strive to get an agreement" at a summit in Brussels next month - the alternative being a "no-deal" departure that critics warn would spark economic chaos. Johnson accused his opponents of shirking their duty by blocking an early election. He held a cabinet meeting later on to plot his next move after a series of defections and expulsions left him far short of a parliamentary majority and unable to garner enough votes from MPs to hold an early election.

He was also due to meet with Arlene Foster, leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), amid rumors that he may be softening his negotiating demands over the key issue of the Irish border and associated trade condi-

tions after Brexit. Foster, whose party wants Northern Ireland to remain part of Britain, warned Johnson that the province must not be sacrificed in talks. "What people are talking about is the break-up of the United Kingdom," she told Sky News. "That is not something that any prime minister in the United Kingdom is going to in any conscience go along with."

'Will not delay Brexit'

There were dramatic scenes in parliament as the current session drew to a close yesterday. Opposition Labor MPs waved signs reading "silenced" and shouted "Shame on you!" at government lawmakers during a ceremony for the suspension of parliament. The move is normally a simple formality but Johnson was accused of acting high-handedly by calling an extended suspension as the Brexit date looms.

House of Commons speaker John Bercow earlier in the debate announced he would be stepping down in a strongly-worded speech in which he warned the government against trying to "degrade" parliament. Johnson also lost a separate vote, calling on the government to publish

confidential papers about the potential impact of a no-deal Brexit.

The opposition has said it will not allow an early election, which under British law requires a two-thirds majority in parliament in favor, until Johnson has either struck a deal or delayed Brexit beyond October 31. But the prime minister insisted he would not delay, despite a bill being rushed through parliament in the past few days that could force him to do so if he fails to reach an agreement with the EU. "This government will not delay Brexit any further," he insisted.

'Significant gaps' remain

Britons voted in 2016 to leave the EU, but after three years of political wrangling, parliament still cannot decide how to implement that decision. Johnson took office in July promising to deliver on the 2016 referendum vote for Brexit, even if that means leaving without exit terms agreed with Brussels.

But many MPs have rejected a no deal divorce and supported new legislation forcing Johnson to request a three-month delay if he fails to strike a deal. His last chance to reach an agreement is at the



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson attends a year four history class with pupils during a visit to Pimlico Primary school in London yesterday. — AFP

two-day EU summit starting on October 17. Some commentators have said Johnson may be forced to resign if he does not want

to make the delay request. Ministers have also hinted at a potential legal challenge against the law. — AFP

After Dorian, US weather service rocked by storm

WASHINGTON: Dorian may have blown out to sea, but the US weather service now finds itself buffeted by strong political winds, with senior government meteorologists in open rebellion against Donald Trump. It all started on September 1, when the president tweeted that states including Alabama "will most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated" a few days after the fierce Atlantic storm became a hurricane.

Exactly 20 minutes later, the National Weather Service in Birmingham, Alabama tweeted directly contradicting the president: "Alabama will NOT see any impacts from #Dorian. We repeat, no impacts from Hurricane #Dorian will be felt across Alabama." Trump hit back with eight more tweets in the following days, and a now infamous episode in which he presented a forecasting map that was doctored to include the southern state, apparently using a black Sharpie pen.

Dorian never touched Alabama, but by Friday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the agency which oversees the NWS, backed Trump and chastised the authors of the tweet from NWS Birmingham for dealing in "absolute terms." The probability of relatively strong winds hitting Alabama ranged from zero to 20 percent at the time of the NWS tweet - but there was no prediction for hurricane force winds. That has not stopped commerce secretary Wilbur Ross from threatening to fire senior officials if they do not issue a public communique



MARSH HARBOUR: People push a shopping carts past debris in the "Mudd" neighborhood in Marsh Harbor, Great Abaco in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian. — AFP

defending the president, the New York Times reported Monday.

Standing ovation

Meteorologists were stunned by what they saw as political interference, and the head of the NWS, Louis Uccellini, publicly defended his employees at an annual conference held Monday - in Alabama. "When the phones and the social media lit up about 10:00 am Central Time on September 1st, they did what any office would do," he said.

"With an emphasis they deemed essential, they shut down what they thought were rumors." "The Birmingham office did this to stop public panic, to ensure public safety, the same goal as all the National Weather

Service offices were working toward at that time," he added, before asking the audience to join him in applauding those responsible. The hall responded with a standing ovation.

"This has become a political situation, and it shouldn't be, because we're trying to save lives," Bill Murray, the president of the Weather Factory private forecasting firm in Birmingham, who attended the meeting said. "We totally stand with the National Weather Service in Birmingham, all meteorologists do," he added. Crucial policy decisions depend on weather forecasts - and the stakes are even higher when it comes to hurricanes, which are tracked by the National Hurricane Center in Miami, a small operation based in Miami that falls under the NOAA. — AFP

'Racism, intolerance' escalating in Finland

HELSINKI: Racist and abusive language is "commonplace" online in Finland and is on the rise in political discourse, a report by the Council of Europe warned yesterday. Although the Nordic nation frequently tops international comparisons regarding happiness, gender equality and quality of life, the population has the lowest share of foreign-born residents in western Europe, at 6.6 percent, and anti-immigrant sentiment is widespread.

The hardline Finns Party, which campaigns on a platform of staunch opposition to asylum, has been the second-largest party in the past two general elections. "Racist and intolerant hate speech in public discourse is escalating; the main targets are asylum-seekers and Muslims," the council's Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) said in the report.

Meanwhile online "expressions of racism and xenophobia containing anti-immigrant rhetoric as well as targeting

persons of African descent, LGBT persons and the Jewish community are commonplace, as is abusive language when referring to Roma," the authors said. Last year, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency found that people of African descent in Finland suffered the highest levels of perceived racial harassment and violence out of 12 member states studied.

Although ECRI welcomed recent measures to try and address the problems, it said that "the responses of the Finnish authorities to these incidents cannot be considered fully adequate". Finnish authorities recorded 1,165 hate crimes in 2017, but the report criticized the patchy collection of data which it said prevented accurate year-on-year comparisons. Nonetheless, it noted that civil society groups have marked an increase in hate incidents since 2015.

Ethnic profiling by the police appears to still be common practice, despite being outlawed in 2015, ECRI said, and criticized the lack of diversity in the police, which it says does not reflect the make-up of Finland's population. The report also singled out Finland's so-called "trans law", which requires people to undergo sterilization before they can be recognized as another gender. In June new prime minister Antti Rinne pledged to overturn the widely criticized sterilization requirement. — AFP

Rwanda agrees to take in refugees stuck in Libya

ADDIS ABABA: Rwanda agreed yesterday to take in hundreds and potentially thousands of African refugees and asylum-seekers stranded in Libya, a deal the African Union hopes to replicate with other member states. "We will be receiving the initial number of 500 in a few weeks," Hope Tumukunde Gasatura, Rwanda's ambassador to the AU, told a news conference after signing a memorandum of understanding alongside representatives of the AU and the UN refugee agency UNHCR.

The first group "is principally made up of people originating from the Horn of Africa," the AU and the UN said in a statement. They will be housed in a transit centre in Rwanda before being resettled elsewhere unless they agree to return to their home countries, if it is safe to do so. Germaine Kamayirese, the Rwandan minister for emergency management, told journalists in Kigali that "some may be given permission to remain in Rwanda". In the chaos that followed the fall and killing of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 uprising, Libya became a key transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants seeking to embark on dangerous journeys to Europe.

The UN says some 42,000 refugees are currently in Libya. "We have been desperately searching for solutions for those people," said Cosmas Chanda, UNHCR's representative to the AU at the news conference in Addis Ababa, the seat of the pan-African body. The Rwandan government is prepared to

take in as many as 30,000 Africans from Libya, though the plan is for the process to unfold in batches of 500 to prevent the country from becoming overwhelmed.

"Fewer countries around the world are more than prepared to admit refugees," Chanda said. Rwandan President Paul Kagame first offered to take in Africans stuck in Libya back in November 2017, the same month a CNN report showed what appeared to be a slave market there. The issue took on new urgency in July when more than 40 people were killed in an air strike on a migrant detention centre in the Libyan town of Tajoura.

Lessons from Niger

The UN has been criticised for its handling of a transit mechanism for evacuees from Libya established in 2017 on the other side of the continent, in Niger. The facilities there have struggled with overcrowding and the slow pace of resettlement. Rwandan and UN officials "have learned from the Niger experience and we have fine-tuned the procedure," Chanda said. But he said the process would still be "very lengthy". Tumukunde Gasatura, the Rwandan ambassador, said refugees and asylum-seekers would be housed in facilities that have previously been used for Burundian refugees fleeing that country's political crisis in 2015.

The AU hailed the deal with Rwanda as an example of African governments stepping up to solve the continent's problems. "It is a historical moment because Africans are extending their hands to other Africans," said Amira Elfadil, the AU's social affairs commissioner. "We kept on talking about finding durable solutions. My belief is this is part of the durable solutions." Officials hope that other African countries will offer similar assistance, though Elfadil said so far none have been forthcoming. — AFP

House steps up Trump impeachment probe

WASHINGTON: Democrats moved Monday to intensify their impeachment investigation of President Donald Trump as whiffs of new scandal surrounding the White House emerged related to Trump's business and his lawyer's involvement in Ukraine. While the Democrat leadership remains reluctant to go all-in on impeachment, given that the Republican-controlled Senate would vote down any effort to oust Trump, the stepped-up investigation could add further pressure on the embattled president 14 months before the next elections.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler moved to formalize an investigation that had up to now avoided officially declaring the aim to impeach Trump and put him on trial in the Senate. He laid out new procedures that he said would govern "the committee's investigation to determine whether to recommend articles of impeachment with respect to President Donald J. Trump."

He also defined the investigation along four specific lines: allegations that Trump illegally interfered with the Russia election meddling investigation, that he took part in hush payments to alleged former mistresses, that he has used his office to enrich himself, and that he offered pardons to government and campaign officials to protect him.

"No one is above the law," Nadler said in a statement. "The unprecedented corruption, coverup, and crimes by the president are



ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE: US President Donald Trump holds a meeting aboard Air Force One on Hurricane Dorian with North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper (left), House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (standing), among others. — AFP

under investigation by the committee as we determine whether to recommend articles of impeachment or other Article I remedies," he said, referring to the US Constitution's section on legislative powers.

In recent weeks more than half of the 235 Democrats in the House of Representatives have endorsed impeachment, even as senior party officials, especially House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, continue to resist it. Pelosi has made clear she believes the party needs to focus its energies on defeating Trump and the Republicans in the November 2020 election. Nadler's new rules, which are expected to be passed by the committee tomorrow, will govern how witnesses will be called and questioned and how Trump's lawyers will be involved.

They are also expected to provide the committee with a broader ability to subpoena witnesses and documents, in the face of resistance by the White House. "We will not

allow Trump's continued obstruction to stop us from delivering the truth to the American people," Nadler said. Meanwhile the Democratic heads of three other House committees announced an investigation into alleged efforts by Trump and his lawyer Rudy Giuliani to pressure the Ukrainian government for their own political ends, including by withholding US security assistance.

They allege that Trump and Giuliani have pressured Kiev to prosecute Ukrainians who provided evidence against Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort in the Russia meddling investigation. They also alleged that Kiev was pressured to provide damaging information on the son of former Democratic vice president Joe Biden, who could face Trump in next year's presidential election. Hunter Biden worked for a Ukrainian gas company beginning in 2014, while his father was vice president. — AFP