

# Business

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## UK to offer 10,500 post-Brexit visas to counter worker crisis

### Minister blames industry rep for petrol-buying frenzy

LONDON: Britain will issue up to 10,500 temporary work visas to lorry drivers and poultry workers to ease chronic staff shortages, the government announced Saturday, in a U-turn on post-Brexit immigration policy. The short-term visas, to run from next month until late December, come as ministers grapple with a huge shortfall in drivers and some other key workers that has hit fuel supplies and additional industries.

A tanker drivers shortage has caused large queues at petrol stations in recent days, as people ignore government pleas not to panic-buy fuel after some garages closed due to the lack of deliveries.

The decision to expand the critical worker visa scheme is a reversal by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose government had tightened post-Brexit immigration rules insisting that Britain's reliance on foreign labor must end. It had resisted the move for months, despite an estimated shortage of around 100,000 heavy goods vehicle (HGV) drivers and warnings from various sectors that supplies would run short. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps nevertheless insisted he was taking action "at the earliest opportunity" and that a broader package of measures announced would ensure pre-Christmas preparations "remain on track".

Meanwhile, Britain's transport secretary yesterday accused lorry industry representatives of helping to spark petrol panic-buying, as he defended a U-turn on post-Brexit immigration policy to ease an escalating supply crisis. Grant Shapps's comments came hours after the government said it will issue up to 10,500 short-term work visas to lorry drivers and poultry workers to ease chronic staff shortages that have hit supplies to various sectors.



Disruption spread to fuel retailers this week after a number run by BP and ExxonMobil-owned Esso were forced to close to customers due to a lack of deliveries—immediately prompting long queues forming at numerous petrol stations.

But in broadcast interviews yesterday claimed a road haulage association leak to the media about potential fuel delivery shortages had contributed to the panic-buying, and blamed the industry for being "counterproductive". "There has been some pretty irresponsible briefing out by one of the road haulage associations which has helped to spark a crisis and that's very, very unhelpful," he told Sky News.

Shapps, who insisted there was no actual fuel shortfall at UK refineries and storage facilities, accused the haulage industry of being "desperate" to employ more European drivers and "undercutting British salaries". "I know that's been their ask all along," he added. But Rod McKenzie, of the Road Haulage Association—reportedly alleged to have



CAMBERLEY, UK: A security guard assists drivers queuing to fill up at a Tesco petrol station in Camberley, west of London yesterday. —AFP

made the leak—called the claim "nonsense".

He said the government needed to encourage a "holistic" approach to the numerous problems the industry faces. "The industries must also play their part with working conditions continuing to improve and the deserved salary increases continuing to be maintained in order for companies to retain new drivers," he added. But one business leader dismissed the new measures as inadequate.

**Millions of pounds for 'skills bootcamps'**  
"This announcement is the equivalent of throwing a thimble of water on a bonfire," said Ruby

McGregor-Smith, president of the British Chambers of Commerce. The additional testing would take time to impact while new visa numbers were "insufficient" and not "enough to address the scale of the problem", she added. The new measures will focus on rapidly expanding the number of new domestic drivers, and include deploying Ministry of Defense driving examiners to help provide thousands of extra tests over the next 12 weeks. Meanwhile the education ministry and partner agencies will spend millions of pounds training 4,000 people to become HGV drivers, creating new so-called "skills bootcamps" to speed up the process. —AFP

### Brexit, COVID put brakes on cross-Channel classic car sport

CHICHESTER, UK: As vintage vehicles of all shapes and sizes from the last century roared around England's Goodwood Motor Circuit last weekend, something stood out to seasoned observers: far fewer cars and drivers from Europe. Meanwhile, historic racing events on the European mainland have seen a dramatic drop in UK classic vehicle owners and teams competing—a bigger loss to a pursuit Britain has always dominated.

Industry insiders blame the shift on the travel-throttling coronavirus and Brexit, which has made transporting cars and tools across the Channel more costly and onerous. Opinion differs over the long-term impacts of both on the economically valuable sector, with some predicting busy but more insular UK events alongside less competitive races on the continent.

"The British are the number one in

terms of classic cars... so without the British, probably you get 50 percent less people and competition," said owner Calilo Sielecki, whose collection includes a UK-based 1954 Aston Martin DB3S. A two-time runner-up at France's famous Le Mans races—and a similar model to those driven by James Bond, the British agent in the blockbuster 007 film franchise—it was among the British absentees from April's Monaco Historic Grand Prix. That event recorded nearly half as many UK-based drivers or vehicles participating compared to 2020.

"We didn't go... because it was complicated about the pandemic and also because of moving the cars," Sielecki told AFP from Goodwood's annual Revival meet, where his son Mathias competed in the DB3S. The 63-year-old Argentinian said taking it to Monte Carlo next year was "not impossible" but the "tough" new transport requirements could prove an obstacle.

#### 'Damaging'

Carol Spagg, managing editor of Historic Motor Racing News, cautioned it was "too early to tell" whether Britain's departure from the European Union would have a lasting effect.

"The COVID situation has meant



CHICHESTER, US: People attend the Goodwood Revival meeting 2021, north of Chichester in southern England. As vintage cars of all shapes and sizes spanning the last century roared around England's Goodwood Motor Circuit last weekend, one thing stood out to seasoned observers: far fewer Europe-based drivers. —AFP

that cars have not been crossing borders in anything like the usual numbers," she noted. Spagg is keeping a keen eye on next week's Spa Six Hours in Belgium, another major meet, where a "healthy" 106 British-based drivers are registered for its main endurance race.

Patrick Peter, head of France's Tour Auto events, noted its signature rally from Paris to near Marseille this month attracted just three UK-based drivers, compared to 18 in 2019. "We don't

know what's happened for what (reason)," he explained. "But clearly there is some negative impact from Brexit."

Others argue ending the easy cross-Channel movement of cars on trailers and mechanical items since January could mean permanent and damaging change. "You've got to sort out all sorts of paperwork... it's damaging—mainly on the continent," said Hans Hugenholtz, a Dutchman living in Belgium who owns a fleet of classic cars, including seven he races. —AFP

### Kabul's carpet, antique dealers struggle after foreigners flee

KABUL: Traders of carpets, antiques and souvenirs on Kabul's famed Chicken Street said yesterday business has completely dried up since the vast majority of foreigners left the Afghan capital as the Taliban took over.

The once-bustling hotspot, where aid workers and adventurous tourists would shop for vintage tribal rugs, pottery and metalware, is almost empty of visitors looking for a bargain. "Business has drastically changed because we don't have a lot of foreigners going here and there in Kabul," carpet seller Abdul Wahab told AFP outside his empty showroom.

"So that has affected our business, like carpets, jewelry and the tribal things of Afghanistan," Wahab said most of his customers had been expats, such as NGO staff and diplomats, but almost all of them evacuated by the end of August, after the Taliban stormed to power in the weeks before.

Vintage rugs can fetch thousands of dollars, which means only foreigners and the richest of Afghans are Wahab's target market. Asked how many rugs he now sells per week, the dealer said: "Now, it's none."

#### 'Hippie trail' fame

Chicken Street was hugely popular in the 1960s and '70s among Kabul's "hippie trail" visitors, who stayed in nearby guesthouses and shopped for clothes and hashish. Tourism plummeted during and after the Soviet-Afghan war that started in 1979, but the street experienced a rebound after the US invasion in 2001.

Wahab said that, despite the recent lack of custom, he remained "very optimistic" that trade would pick up in the coming months. "Our business only depends on security. If the security is good, foreigners will come, and then they will buy carpets or other textiles that are available in Afghanistan."

Another dealer, 64-year-old Qadir Raouf—who owns a family carpet shop across the street—agreed.

"For the future, when there is peace, we can do good business," he said.

"There are no foreigners to come. I hope the situation will be quiet and people are coming, starting business again." Originally from Herat in western Afghanistan, Raouf has had his carpet shop in Kabul for more than 45 years, sourcing old and new rugs from



KABUL, Afghanistan: Workers carry carpets on their shoulders at Chicken Street in Kabul yesterday. —AFP

all over the country.

"These are our national things," he said of his carpets. "We show them to all the world: Afghan people can make carpets."

#### 'I want to serve'

Haji Jalil has been selling porcelain artefacts—some of them up to 300 years old—for almost 30 years.

"Our business has not been good for the last two years," he said in his Chicken Street shop, blaming the COVID-19 crisis for the start of the

downturn. "This street is fully dependent on the economy," he told AFP. "If people's financial situations are good, they come and buy the decorative goods such as carpets, handicrafts, precious and semi-precious stones."

"Now businesses all over Afghanistan are not doing well." However, the 65-year-old said he had no plans to leave. "I want to serve the people of my country," he said. "Our business may be good outside Afghanistan and foreigners may come and buy our products. —AFP

### How US debt limit became 'a hostage that's worth ransoming'

WASHINGTON: A decade ago, a standoff between Democrats and Republicans over increasing the United States' authority to borrow brought the country days away from a default and caused a major ratings agency to downgrade its credit for the first time. In the aftermath, top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell described the debt limit to The Washington Post as "a hostage that's worth ransoming," and a decade later, it's in captivity once again.

The ceiling on how much debt the United States can take on is the subject of fierce negotiations in Washington between Democrats who control Congress but can't rally enough votes to increase it unilaterally, and Republicans who refuse to vote for any increase at all. The dispute has unusually high stakes because absent an increase, the United States could default on its bills in October, likely devastating its economy and undercutting a pillar of the international financial system.

Lawmakers have bargained over increasing the debt limit for decades.

But the willingness to push the world's largest economy to the brink dates back to 2011, when ascendant Republicans were committed to reining in spending by Democrats, and used the limit to achieve that. "Most of the (Republican) leadership sees the 2011 debt limit standoff as ultimately a success in that they were able to force (then-president Barack Obama) to sign what was the biggest spending cut bill in decades without actually having any default," said Brian Riedel, who was then chief economist to Republican Senator Rob Portman.

The deal they cut was meant to lower the government's spending over the course of years. It did not stick: the US national debt and budget deficit have soared in the years since due to spending by both Republican and Democratic presidents. Others involved in the 2011 standoff warn that even without a default, the brinkmanship has its own consequences.

"The ways that it could be affecting our country and its economic strength are difficult to measure, but it's likely they're occurring under the surface, that our credibility is being eroded," said Shai Akabas, Director of Economic Policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center, who a decade ago worked with now-Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell in analyzing a default's effects. —AFP