

May accused of misleading MPs over Brexit deal

British Prime Minister Theresa May was accused on Wednesday of misleading MPs over her Brexit deal as her government published legal advice likely to increase opposition to the agreement ahead of a crucial vote next week.

Scottish National Party (SNP) lawmaker Ian Blackford was twice reprimanded by the House of Commons speaker for suggesting May had misled MPs "inadvertently or otherwise", before withdrawing the claim, AFP reported.

May replied that she had always been clear about the implications of the deal's provisions on Northern Ireland, which risk keeping Britain tied to the EU's economic rules for years after leaving next March.

But she emphasized neither side wanted this to happen, and repeated that the withdrawal agreement struck with Brussels last month was the only viable option.

May on Tuesday suffered a series of stunning defeats in Parliament which threaten her government and ultimately could change the course of Brexit.

She effectively lost her majority in the Commons after the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland on which she relies sided with the Labour Party to find her ministers in contempt of Parliament for failing to publish in full the legal advice on the Brexit deal.

Meanwhile, 25 of her own Conservative MPs voted with Labour to give the Commons a bigger say in what happens if, as expected, the Brexit deal is voted down on December 11.

The government on Wednesday finally



REUTERS

published the six-page advice from the attorney general to cabinet, which warns of the "legal risk" inherent in a clause intended to keep open the border with Ireland.

It confirms Britain risks remaining "indefinitely" in the so-called backstop, which could keep the whole country in an EU customs union for years after Brexit, while also keeping the province of Northern Ireland in the bloc's single market.

MPs on Tuesday also voted to approve an amendment tabled by Conservative former attorney general Dominic Grieve,

which allows Parliament to determine what happens if the deal fails.

If May loses the vote next week, the government has 21 days to return to MPs to propose what happens next.

Grieve's amendment could allow MPs to amend that statement, raising the possibility they could demand a renegotiation, a second referendum or even staying in the EU.

International Trade Secretary Liam Fox aired that concern, saying that a majority in favor of staying in the EU in Par-

liament "may attempt to steal Brexit from the British people".

May opened the first of five days of debate on the Brexit deal on Tuesday evening and Wednesday's discussion was to focus on security.

On Tuesday, opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn called May's plan "a huge and damaging failure for Britain".

There are few people who believe May's deal will survive the vote next Tuesday but the question of what happens next remains wide open.

Some Conservative MPs are pushing for a second referendum, with a choice of staying in the EU.

But May warned on Tuesday that another Brexit vote would do nothing to settle bitter debates about Britain's place in Europe that have raged since it joined the bloc in 1973.

"We cannot afford to spend the next decade as a country going round in circles," she argued.

Many MPs want May to return to Brussels to renegotiate her deal, and she is due at a summit two days after next week's vote.

However, EU leaders have repeatedly said they will not reopen the divorce deal.

In Brussels, the European Commission on Wednesday began the process of ratifying the Brexit deal.

Some eurosceptic Conservatives believe Britain can leave without any deal at all, although a government assessment last week found this risked causing a major recession.

If her deal fails, May would likely face a confidence vote in the Commons, or a challenge by her own Conservative MPs.

China's Xi seeks deeper cooperation with EU, Portugal

China wants to deepen cooperation with the European Union, China's President Xi Jinping said during a visit to Portugal.



PEDRO NUNES/REUTERS

China's President Xi Jinping (L) and Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa shake hands during a news conference in Lisbon, Portugal, on December 4, 2018.

a country he said was an important link to Europe.

"Chinese-Portuguese relations are entering their best period in history," Xi

said in a speech after meeting Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Reuters reported.

Xi said the two countries could benefit from Beijing's belt and road initiative, to build business partnerships, including in third countries along the old Silk Road from China to Europe.

Xi said that having Portugal as a partner, "We will deepen our ... strategic partnership between China and the European Union." He made no mention of Beijing's trade spat with Washington.

Portugal has been one of Europe's biggest investors of Chinese investment in the past few years and Chinese companies have large stakes in the energy sector, banking, insurance and healthcare.

Italian PM says can change 'a few little things' on budget

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was quoted as saying on Wednesday he was ready to amend slightly some of the measures included in the country's 2019 budget in a bid to overcome a rejection by the European Commission.

"If I have the chance to reduce the economic impact of some measures I'm here," Conte told the Italian daily of La Repubblica, Reuters reported.

"I'm the one who is entitled to speak with the European Commission ... and I never halted discussions. Right now if I can recover some funds, tweak the final figure, change a few little things, it doesn't mean I'm backtracking," he said.

"If they bring me calculations which allow me to write 2.3 percent or 2.1 percent I'm still carrying out proposed reforms," he added in reference to next year's deficit goal of 2.4 percent of gross domestic product.

Rome and Brussels have been engaged in a blistering battle of words since European Commission rejected Italy's draft budget for 2019.



AGUSTIN MARCARIAN/REUTERS

Italy has insisted it needs to increase its deficit to 2.4 percent, which breaks EU fiscal rules that are designed to protect the eurozone.

The European Commission said the deficit is too high, and has called on Rome to change its fiscal plans.

Given the refusal of the Italian government to reduce its budget deficit forecast next year from 2.4 percent of annual GDP, analysts expect Italy will be subject to EU sanctions under so-called excessive deficit procedures, which could take months.

Bulgaria will shun UN migration pact

Bulgaria will not join a United Nations accord on regulating the treatment of migrants worldwide and would not attend the conference marking its formal adoption in Morocco next week, its government decided on Wednesday.



REUTERS

The Black Sea state's government said it would also abstain in a subsequent vote on a resolution in the UN General Assembly to endorse the already adopted pact in a move that highlights how Europe has turned colder on accepting foreigners.

At least five other EU countries, including Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, have already shunned the accord - a sign of how the bloc has turned increasingly restrictive on accepting refugees and migrants alike since a 2015 spike in arrivals.

"At this stage, the Bulgarian government believes that the decision not to join the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, protects to the fullest extent the interests of the country and its citizens," it said.

The pact, which addresses issues such as how to protect people who migrate, how to integrate them into new countries and how to return them to their home countries, was approved in July by all 193 member nations except the United States, which backed out last year.

It followed the biggest influx of migrants into Europe since World War Two, many fleeing conflicts in the Middle East and beyond.

The issue has led to a government crisis in Belgium. Austria has said it will not sign up and opposition from Italy's interior minister, Matteo Salvini, has thrown Rome's support into doubt.

Outside of the EU, Australia has also quit. Bulgaria, a Balkan country with a population of seven million, lies on one of the main migratory routes from the Middle East to western Europe, says it is already taking steps to stop illegal migration and protect the EU's external borders.

Turkey seeks arrest of two...

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"There is zero question in my mind that the crown prince directed the murder and was kept apprised of the situation all the way through," Corker said after the closed-door briefing with CIA Director Gina Haspel and a handful of senators. "Zero question in my mind."



Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina who has often been a Trump ally, said the only conclusion was that Prince Mohammed, known as MBS, is responsible for the killing.

"There's not a smoking gun, there's a smoking saw," Graham said, in an apparent reference to reports that the columnist was beheaded, dismembered and his fingers were severed.

"You have to be willfully blind not to come to the conclusion and that this was orchestrated and organized by people under the command of MBS and that he was intricately involved in the demise of Mr. Khashoggi," Graham said.

Graham said he won't support arms sales to Saudi Arabia while Prince Mohammed is in power. AFP and Bloomberg contributed to this story.

Germany looks beyond Merkel as party elects successor

A knife-edge vote on Friday will determine Angela Merkel's successor as head of her party after 18 years at the helm, with the German chancellor's own political fate and legacy on the line.

Merkel, the European Union's most powerful leader, stunned observers in October with the announcement following a state election setback that she would not stand again as chairwoman of her center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), AFP reported.

After years of turmoil within the party and the electorate over her disputed decision to keep the border open to more than one million asylum seekers, Merkel has said she will leave politics when her term ends in 2021.

Whether she can hold on to power until then will depend in large part on who the CDU elects to replace her at a party conference in Hamburg, with a Merkel loyalist and a longtime nemesis running



AFP

neck-and-neck.

"Sooner or later, whoever becomes the leader of Germany's biggest party will probably become chancellor," political scientist Eckhard Jesse of the University of Chemnitz told AFP.

Widely seen as Merkel's anointed crown princess is Annegret Kramp-Karnerbauer, 56.

Known as AKK for short, she is the CDU's centrist general secretary and former premier of the tiny state of Saarland.

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