

ELSEWHERE



U.S. revokes ICC prosecutor's visa

THE HAGUE
The United States has revoked the visa for the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda, her office said on Friday, over a possible investigation of American soldiers' actions in Afghanistan. AFP

David Malpass named World Bank president

WASHINGTON
David Malpass, a senior U.S. treasury official in President Donald Trump's administration, was unanimously chosen on Friday as the president of the World Bank. Since the bank's creation, all of its heads have been Americans, following an unwritten rule that also ensures European leadership at the top of its sister institution, the International Monetary Fund. AFP

Christchurch gunman to undergo psychiatric tests

CHRISTCHURCH
Brenton Tarrant, the man accused of shooting dead 50 Muslim worshippers in a Christchurch mosque, sat impassively on Friday as a New Zealand judge ordered him to undergo tests to determine if he is mentally fit to stand trial for murder. AFP

U.S. citizens among 7 held in Saudi crackdown

DUBAI
Saudi Arabia has arrested at least seven writers and bloggers, including two U.S. citizens, in an apparent crackdown on supporters of detained women activists, campaigners said on Friday. Prisoners of Conscience, a Saudi group that tracks political prisoners, put the number of people arrested at 10. AFP

May asks EU for a further Brexit extension till June 30

European Council president Donald Tusk proposes a one-year 'flexextension'

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

The U.K. and European Council president Donald Tusk appeared to be nearing a consensus on a further Brexit extension.

Prime Minister Theresa May has written to Mr. Tusk, asking for an extension till at least June 30 this year.

It comes as Mr. Tusk himself was reported to be proposing a "flexextension" – an extension that could last till April next year, but could also last a much shorter period were the U.K. to break the EU deadlock before that.

In her letter, Ms. May acknowledged that if the U.K. still fails to ratify the agreement and be prepared to leave the EU by May 23, it would be under a "legal obligation" to hold the European parliamentary elections between May 23 and 26. "The government is therefore undertaking the lawful and responsible preparations for this contingency," she assured Mr. Tusk in her letter. "The government is determined to bring this process to a resolution quickly."

It came as the BBC reported that Mr. Tusk was considering proposing a 12-month flexible extension that could be cut short if ratification happened before that.

Earlier this week, Ms. May adopted a new approach to Brexit, after her withdrawal agreement was defeated by MPs last week. Ms. May is engaged in talks with Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and has extended an "open invitation" to MPs to achieve a consensus.

The government has indicated that it is not willing to open up the text of the legal



A lose-lose scenario? Anti-Brexit activists staging a demonstration outside the British Parliament in London on April 1. AFP

treaty itself but is ready to negotiate on the political declaration on future relations that accompanies it. Labour is pushing for this declaration to require the U.K. to remain in a customs union with the EU (ensuring tariff-free movement of goods into and out of the EU) as well as to guarantee that the U.K. would continue to match the EU's high standards on worker and consumer rights and environmental protections.

Flawed vision

They are also discussing the possibility of holding a confirmatory referendum. The move to talk to Labour has put Ms. May at odds with many in her party, who fear it will lead to a "softer" version of Brexit, while some in the Labour Party fear it is merely an empty gesture made by the government in an effort to force Labour to share responsibility for its (in their view) flawed vision of Brexit.

However, with regard to

the extension, much uncertainty remains. Ms. May faces resistance to any form of extension within her party. While an unsuccessful party no-confidence motion in her last year means she cannot be challenged again in this way, some have suggested that if there is an extension, they would try to be as "difficult as possible".

"We could veto any increase in the budget, obstruct the putative EU army and block [French President Emmanuel] Macron's integration schemes," suggested Jacob Rees-Mogg, a vocal Brexititeer.

Even on the EU side, there are increasing concerns about whether granting an extension would be harmful to the EU. A long extension would "risk giving the keys of the EU's future to a Boris Johnson or a Michael Gove," warned Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's interlocutor on Brexit, referring to the two MPs who cam-

paigned vigorously to leave the EU, and who could push Brexit in a very different direction to Ms. May.

"For those in the EU who may be tempted to further extend the Brexit saga, I can only say, be careful what you wish for," he added on Friday, pointing to Mr. Rees-Mogg's comments. And while German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that "till the very last hour" Germany is determined to do everything possible to avoid a no-deal Brexit, others including French President Emmanuel Macron have signalled frustration. He has warned that the EU could not be held "hostage" to Britain's internal Brexit battles.

An emergency meeting of the European Council is due to take place on Wednesday, April 10 at which Ms. May would need to have a clear road map to be able to persuade the remaining EU 27 leaders to back her in attempting to avoid a no-deal.

Brexit leaves leading political parties divided

Both Conservatives and Labour face internal challenges

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

When David Cameron made an election manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership back in 2015, he faced accusations of putting his party before his country. In fact, European Council president Donald Tusk told the BBC earlier this year that even Mr. Cameron had acknowledged to him that it was about his own party.

The Conservative Party has long been split on the country's relationship with the EU, with many opposing it from the outset and pressing for Britain to leave ever since it joined the union. Hard-Brexititeer Jacob Rees-Mogg's father had even attempted to take the government to court to prevent Britain from ratifying the Maastricht Treaty (the EU's official treaty) in 1993.

Now, several years on, both the Conservative Party and Labour remain as divided as ever, with the route ahead on Brexit revealing deep fractures that could have a profound long-term impact on them and on Britain's political landscape.

Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to engage in talks with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn this week has angered many MPs within her party. Two Ministers resigned in protest.

Their opposition centres around both the Labour push for customs union membership as well as the calls for any deal to be subject to a confirmatory vote.

They also dislike the idea of a long delay to Brexit that would require the U.K. to participate in European parliamentary elections on May

A second referendum would have a corrosive impact not only on our politics, but on trust

KWASI KWARTENG
Junior Brexit Minister

23. Even ahead of the talks between the government and Labour, some Conservatives signalled that they might be willing to vote against the government if the Labour Party brought a no-confidence motion to Parliament.

No compromise

David Davis, the former Brexit Secretary, estimated that up to 20 of his fellow Conservative MPs could vote against the government in such a vote. This would be despite the fact that it could trigger a general election, and despite the fact that some polls put Labour ahead of the Conservatives.

Other Conservative MPs fear the government hasn't been flexible enough. On Monday, after the attempt to find a solution by putting different proposals to a vote failed, MP Nick Boles said he was leaving the Conservative Party because it wasn't willing to compromise.

Three other MPs had already left the party earlier this year to join the Independent Group of MPs, which also brought together eight former Labour MPs. They're collectively pushing for a second referendum and have applied to become a political party called "Change UK".

Within the government, there are some who believe a referendum may offer the route ahead. Chancellor Philip Hammond told an ITV

news programme earlier this week that there was a "credible case" for a referendum on any Brexit deal. Others have strongly disagreed: "A second referendum would have a very corrosive impact not only on our politics, but on trust," warned junior Brexit Minister Kwasi Kwarteng.

However, Brexit has proved just as divisive for Labour. The shadow cabinet's insistence that it wants to respect the result of the referendum has divided MPs.

Some – particularly those with constituencies in the north of England that voted strongly to leave the EU – believe this is the right strategy. Others are critical of the party's failure to come out decisively to support a second referendum. Some are equally critical of the potential of a second referendum being raised by Mr. Corbyn in his talks with Ms. May. This week, 25 Labour MPs signed a letter to Mr. Corbyn urging him to avoid a second referendum that "would be exploited by the far right" and could hurt the party's chances in the future.

More recently, the party's leadership has faced criticism for its insistence on ending freedom of movement with the EU. Labour (like the government) says it wants a managed migration.

Among those condemning this approach is the group Labour for Freedom of Movement – whose members include five MPs. "European freedom of movement is far from perfect, it's limited and doesn't protect everyone. However, the answer is not to scrap or further limit it," the group said in a statement.

134 homes destroyed in South Korea forest fires

4,000 people forced to flee homes



Up in flames: A house in Goseong, South Korea, that was hit by the wildfires that broke out on Thursday. AP

REUTERS
SEOUL

South Korea mobilised more than 15,000 firefighters and soldiers to help douse most of the wildfires that have killed one person and forced more than 4,000 to flee their homes, authorities said on Friday.

Thursday's fires broke out in the eastern province of Gangwon, razing about 525 hectares and about 134 homes, seven warehouses and other structures, the government said in a statement.

Late on Friday, just 275 people remained in gymnasiums and schools, of more than 4,000 citizens who had been taken there. About 52 schools were closed.

The fire in two areas in Gangwon has been contained, the government said, while about 80% of the fire in nearby Inje county was contained by Friday

evening. The cause of the fire was suspected to be sparks triggered by power lines, the government said, without elaborating.

President Moon Jae-in, who has ordered the use of all available resources to put out the fires, visited evacuation shelters and talked to victims.

About 872 fire trucks and 3,251 firefighters from all over the country worked to contain the wildfire, the National Fire Agency said.

The U.S. military said it supplied two helicopters with specialised buckets to drop water.

Subsidies of about 4 billion won (\$3.5 million) will fund the effort to rein in the fires and clear debris, while disaster relief funds of 250 million won (\$2,20,000) will help accommodate evacuees and provide necessities, the Interior Ministry said.

A colourful end to campaigning in the Maldives

MDP hopes to get a parliamentary majority in Saturday's polls to push through legislature the reform agenda it promised

MEERA SRINIVASAN
MALE

Scores of Maldivians gathered at the seafont in capital Male on Friday to participate in their final rally on the eve of the island nation's parliamentary election.

Waving flags in different hues, they walked and rode bikes in groups, swaying to peppy campaign music. The city had closed down for the weekend and Friday prayers, but hours after lunch, the streets were teeming with people, as if it were a carnival.

The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the chief constituent of the ruling coalition, held a final rally where President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and former President Mohamed Nasheed, who is

running for a seat in Male this election, shared centre stage, flanked by other candidates and prominent party members.

Speaking at recent poll rallies, President Solih has slammed his predecessor Abdulla Yameen's administration for "widespread corruption". The MDP, which led an eclectic coalition in 2018 and dislodged Mr. Yameen from power, is hoping to garner a parliamentary majority in Saturday's polls to push the reform agenda it promised through the legislature.

"People of the Maldives are very keen to see that democracy survives here. They made sure that President Yameen is no more in power, and I am sure very confident that they are going

to follow it through [in this poll] and make sure we have a majority in Parliament," Mr. Nasheed told *The Hindu*, after the rally.

Uneasy partners

Given the former President's earlier proposal on the Maldives shifting to a parliamentary system, his possible entry into Parliament is said to have made some coalition partners in the ruling alliance uneasy, political sources here said.

The MDP's decision to go it alone further exposed the fissures within the alliance. Amid growing tensions within, President Solih is widely credited with holding much of the coalition together – except for the Speaker and leader of the Jumhooree Par-

People of the Maldives are very keen to see that democracy survives here

MOHAMED NASHEED
Former President

ty (JP) Qasim Ibrahim, who has reportedly veered towards Mr. Yameen recently. The main opposition force is Mr. Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), but the party's pre-poll activity was noticeably subdued. Its candidates are contesting in some two dozen seats out of the total 87, and the party is backing select independent candidates in other constituencies.

Following Mr. Yameen's arrest in February for alleged corruption – he was released

last week – and a court order freezing his bank accounts until recently, party members complained about being denied access to their leader and party funds. After his release, Mr. Yameen made no public appearance on an election platform, but has addressed supporters at rallies over telephone, played over speakers.

Over 2.6 lakh persons are eligible to vote in Saturday's elections. Voters voiced diverse views, ranging from hope to cynicism, on the eve of the polls.

"We have not seen leaders deliver in the past, so many people have lost interest and faith in the polls," said Ajmed Sajid, a Male-based businessman. "For the moneyed class, the polls are in-

variably about backing a family member. There is no wider solidarity around issues or principles," he said.

With a nearly-4,00,000 population, the Maldives is home to a close-knit community where familial ties, business interests and political loyalties overlap. There are no clear election issues this time, say many, but housing has emerged a key talking point for many candidates. If capital Male is confronted with massive congestion, the atolls just do not have enough housing units for the people. Rent in Male has soared in recent years and according to residents, it is impossible to find a small, two-bedroom apartment in Male for anything less than \$1,200-\$1,500 a month.

Amal Clooney appointed U.K.'s media envoy

A panel led by her will seek to strengthen legal mechanism to protect journalists

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

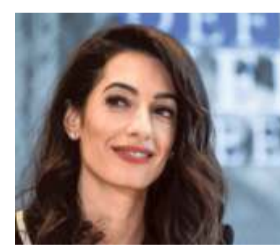
Amal Clooney has been appointed the U.K.'s special envoy on media freedom, as the U.K. prepares to host an international conference this July in the wake of attacks on journalists across the world.

Ms. Clooney pointed to India as one of the five countries where journalists were most at the risk of "political assassination for their work" as she also noted that such attacks happened in Europe as well. She also highlighted

the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last year.

"We are here because it's never more dangerous to report the news," Ms. Clooney said at a press conference in London, alongside Britain's Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Canadian Minister for Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland, who are co-hosting the conference in London on July 10-11.

Ms. Clooney will chair a panel of legal experts who will work to "support coun-



Amal Clooney. AFP

tries to repeal outdated and draconian laws and strengthen legal mechanisms to protect journalists." Among the steps that could be taken by the panel include making

proposals to countries around national laws that don't comply with international standards, particularly around issues such as blasphemy and stringent anti-defamation rules.

She said the panel could also prepare mechanisms that could be used internationally to "raise the cost of non-compliance" with international standards, such as advising on sanctions regime that could be put in place relating to regimes that abused journalists.

WikiLeaks fears Assange's expulsion from embassy

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON

British police stationed armed officers outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London on Friday after tweets from WikiLeaks quoted what it said were high-level sources saying that Julian Assange could be kicked out of the building within "hours to days".

WikiLeaks on Thursday tweeted: "BREAKING – A high level source within the Ecuadorian state has told WikiLeaks that Julian As-

sange will be expelled within 'hours to days'... and that it already has an agreement with the U.K. for his arrest."

Another tweet said it had received a secondary confirmation from another high-level source. But a top official said while Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno was angered by the apparent hacking of his personal communications, he denied WikiLeaks' claim and said no decision had been taken to expel Mr. Assange from the embassy.