

U.K. threatens to pull out of EU trade talks

Boris Johnson's govt. rejects EU demands for common trading standards and continued fishing rights

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

Britain put the prospect of a chaotic Brexit back on the table on Thursday as it set out its red lines for trade talks with the European Union.

In its mandate for the negotiations that will start on Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government rebuffed EU demands for common trading standards and continued fishing rights.

And it warned it could walk away from the talks if a "broad outline" of a deal is not agreed by a meeting planned for June.

This would see Britain's currently seamless trading arrangements with the EU, forged over half a century, abruptly end after a post-Brexit transition period expires in December.

"We want the best possible trading relationship with the EU, but in a pursuit of a deal, we will not trade away our sovereignty," senior government Minister Michael Gove told MPs.

The European Commission, which is negotiating on behalf of the EU's 27 mem-



Tough stand: Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaking in the House of Commons in London on Wednesday. •AFP

ber states, said it was preparing for all scenarios.

"The Commission maintains its capacity to prepare for no deal following the result of those negotiations," spokeswoman Dana Spinant said.

She added that the mid-year meeting was "a very fair timeline" to take stock of whether a deal was possible.

No alignment

Britain left the EU on January 31, but both sides agreed to a standstill transition period

lasting until December 31 to allow time to strike a new partnership.

Mr. Johnson wants a free trade agreement similar to the EU's deal with Canada, set alongside separate agreements on issues such as fishing, energy and aviation.

But Brussels says Britain's geographical proximity and existing close ties make it a different case, fearing it could gain an uncompetitive advantage by relaxing costly environmental and labour laws.

It says Britain must mirror EU standards if it wants to continue freely trading goods with the bloc's huge single market.

However, Mr. Johnson argues this would undermine the whole point of Brexit, even if that means increased barriers with what is currently Britain's largest trading partner.

"We will not agree to any obligations for our laws to be aligned with the EU's," the official U.K. mandate says.

Brussels also wants its state aid rules to apply in the U.K. — something London rejects.

Financial services

Another potential flashpoint is financial services, a key concern for Britain that it wants resolved by June to allow firms to keep working in the EU after December 31.

The European Commission spokeswoman refused to commit the EU to completing so-called equivalence assessments by June.

In the British Parliament, opposition politicians decried the government's hard

line approach. "This is nothing other than a routemap to the cherished no-deal — the real ambition of these Brexit zealots," said Scottish National Party MP Pete Wishart.

On Tuesday, when the bloc published its mandate, EU negotiator Michel Barnier said he would not strike a deal "at any price".

One crucial issue for both sides in the upcoming negotiations is fishing rights. But it is also vital for many EU countries, notably France, where fish and seafood caught in U.K. waters account 30% of sales for fishermen.

Brussels wants to maintain the right of its fleets to fish in U.K. waters, warning that failure to agree on this could scupper the wider trade talks. But Mr. Gove warned: "We will take back control of our waters as an independent coastal State and we will not link access to our waters to access to EU markets."

U.K. proposes that fishing be negotiated annually, based on stock levels.

Abe calls for closure of all schools in Japan over virus

It's a bid to prevent the spread of infection among children

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TOKYO

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Thursday urged schools nationwide to close for several weeks to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus, as authorities reported the country's fourth death linked to the outbreak.

The move comes as crew members from the Diamond Princess, a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship quarantined off Japan, began leaving the vessel, where more than 700 people have tested positive for the disease.

"The government considers the health and safety of children above anything else," Mr. Abe said.

"We request all primary, junior high and high schools... across the nation to close temporarily from March 2 next week until their spring break."

The spring break for public schools usually starts in late March in Japan and lasts several weeks.



Safety first: Elementary school students on their way home in Ichikawa, Japan, on Thursday. •GETTY IMAGES

Local media said the call would not extend to nurseries and daycare facilities.

Many public elementary schools in northern Hokkaido, where the death of a man in his 80s infected with the virus was confirmed on Thursday, were already closed after a cluster of infections prompted the governor to request public schools close for about a week.

The city of Osaka also said it will close its kindergar-

tens, elementary and junior high schools from Saturday for two weeks.

Mr. Abe's call comes after the government urged organisers of major events to consider cancelling them, and called on businesses to allow employees to work from home.

Authorities have said the coming two to three weeks will be critical in determining whether they can stem the outbreak of the virus, which has infected nearly 200 people in the country.

UN rights chief 'regrets' Sri Lanka's decision

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Thursday said she "regretted" the new government's "very different approach" to commitments that Sri Lanka previously made to the Council.

"I regret that the new government has announced a very different approach to the commitments previously made in the resolution which risks setting back ef-

forts to advance reconciliation, accountability and human rights," she said in her oral update at the UNHRC's ongoing session in Geneva.

Urging Sri Lanka to implement the 2015 resolution, which drew from domestic processes, including those initiated by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Ms. Bachelet said the measures in it were "essential" for a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka.

The High Commissioner's

remarks came a day after Sri Lanka's Foreign Relations Minister Dinesh Gunawardena officially notified the Council on Wednesday that Sri Lanka was withdrawing from co-sponsoring the UN resolution on post-war accountability and reconciliation, instead promising a process that was "domestically designed and executed". His remarks were in line with earlier announcements made by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and PM Mahinda

Rajapaksa.

However, Ms. Bachelet observed that domestic processes have "consistently failed to deliver accountability", and consequently, "victims remain denied justice and Sri Lankans from all communities have no guarantee that past patterns of human rights violations will not recur."

Further, underscoring the need for independent institutions, she said she was "troubled by the recent

trend towards moving civilian functions under the Ministry of Defence or retired military officers, and renewed reports of surveillance and harassment of rights defenders, journalists and victims." The "increasing levels" of hate speech, and policy measures seemed "discriminately and disproportionately directed against minorities", both Tamil and Muslim, she added.

Ms. Bachelet urged the Council to "remain alert".

Trump names Pence to lead U.S. response

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump declared on Wednesday that the U.S. is "very, very ready" for whatever COVID-19 threat brings, and he put his Vice-President Mike Pence in charge of overseeing the nation's response.

Mr. Trump sought to minimise fears of the virus spreading widely across the U.S. But he said he was ready

to spend "whatever's appropriate," even if that meant the extra billions of dollars. "We're very, very ready for this, for anything," even if it's "a breakout of larger proportions," Mr. Trump told reporters.

Mr. Pence will be working with the government's top health authorities, including the coronavirus task force, to oversee the response.

Iran COVID-19 death toll jumps to 26

REUTERS
DUBAI

Iran said on Thursday the death toll from COVID-19 had risen to 26 and the total number of infected people now stood at 245, the highest number of deaths from the virus outside China.

Authorities called off the Friday prayer in Tehran, state TV reported.

ELSEWHERE



Canada won't pay for Harry, Meghan's security

TORONTO
Canada said on Thursday it won't provide security for Prince Harry and his wife Meghan when they step back from royal duties. The government said assistance will cease in the coming weeks, in keeping with the couple's change in status. AP

'Pakistan can counter any threat to its sovereignty'

ISLAMABAD
The Pakistan Air Force is fully prepared to counter any threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar said here on Thursday, a year after IAF jets bombed a terror camp in Balakot. PTI

Putin quashes rumours of using body double

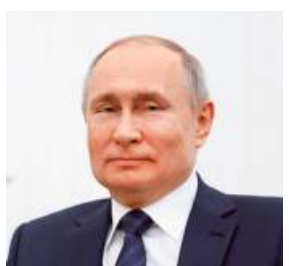
Russian leader says he rejected plan

REUTERS
MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin has acknowledged he was offered the chance to use a body double to make appearances in public for security reasons, but said he vetoed the offer and never used one.

Mr. Putin, 67, who has dominated Russian politics for more than two decades, has long been the subject of conspiracy theories in Russia — all of them unsubstantiated — that he uses a body double or even a small army of them.

During an interview with TASS news agency aired on Thursday, Mr. Putin was shown a list of popular Internet searches purportedly associated with his name,



Vladimir Putin

one of which was entitled "Putin body double evidence".

Asked "Are you real?" by the interviewer, Mr. Putin replied "Yes" before going on to deny that he uses a lookalike for public appearances for his own safety.

But he said he had been offered the opportunity. "I declined these body doubles....," he said.

Parliament will pick new PM: Mahathir

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KUALA LAMPUR

Malaysian interim leader Mahathir Mohamad said on Thursday that Parliament will pick a new Prime Minister next week following the collapse of the ruling alliance, and that snap elections will be called if the vote ends in an impasse.

But his former ally rejected the announcement, saying that only the King has the power to appoint the Prime Minister under the Constitution.

Mr. Mahathir, who met the King, said the monarch couldn't find a candidate with a clear majority to lead the nation after consulting all 222 lawmakers over the last two days.

'We need liberal trade arrangements'

Minister says Australia is open for business and seeks greater access

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN
BENGALURU

Despite bushfires that have ravaged a part of the Australian countryside, the country very much remained "open for business", said visiting Australian Trade Minister Simon Birmingham. He added that Canberra had announced an additional A\$1 million this week to keep selling packages around the T20 World Cup events.

Reports in some sections of the media, particularly in the U.S., had led to misinformation about the extent of the impact of the bushfires, the Minister said, including some maps that showed almost all of Australia in flames.

Not only tourism, but bilateral trade and investment across resource, agribusi-

ness and produce, and higher education services sectors are expected to get a boost, Mr. Birmingham said to *The Hindu*, as Australia pushes forward with implementing its 'India Economic Strategy' (IES). To that end, he said, the recent India-Australia Business Exchange, a 120-strong business delegation visiting India this week, would help spread awareness about investment opportunities and the business landscape in this country.

Trade partnership

While India was Australia's eighth-largest trading partner and fifth-largest export market in 2018-19, driven by coal and higher education, and two-way goods and services trade with India was \$30.3 billion, the ambition



Simon Birmingham

behind the IES is to expand Australian exports to India from \$14.9 billion in 2017 to around \$45 billion, and outward Australian investment to India from \$10.3 billion to over \$100 billion. "We trust that we continue to be a trusted, valued supplier of resources and energy to meet the growing needs of Indian industry and manufacturing," Mr. Birmingham said, in this context.

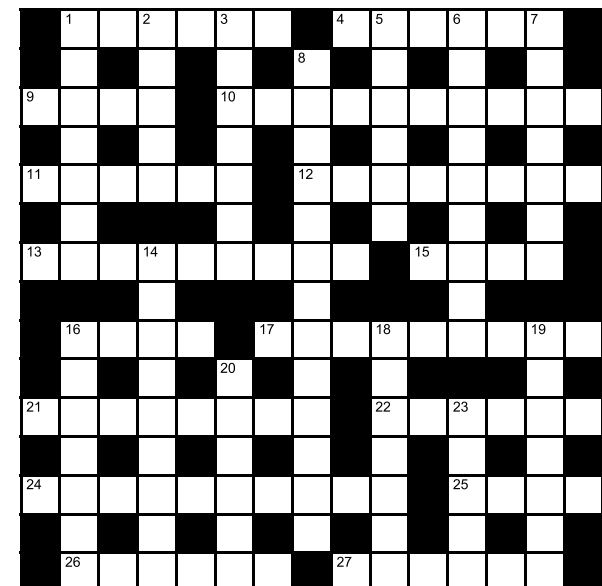
To achieve such goals, ho-

wever, it would require progress on the trade barriers that exist, the Minister noted. "Australia has had great success in achieving more liberal trade arrangements, with a number of other bigger trading partners over recent years. We think that achieving greater trade access for each of us with one another is a further way to grow the flow of trade and investment."

Reflecting on the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on China's trading partners, he noted, "I would expect, particularly following the events of Coronavirus and its impact especially on trade and travel sectors, that businesses will re-evaluate those risks. In some cases that may present opportunities for economies like India."

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12870

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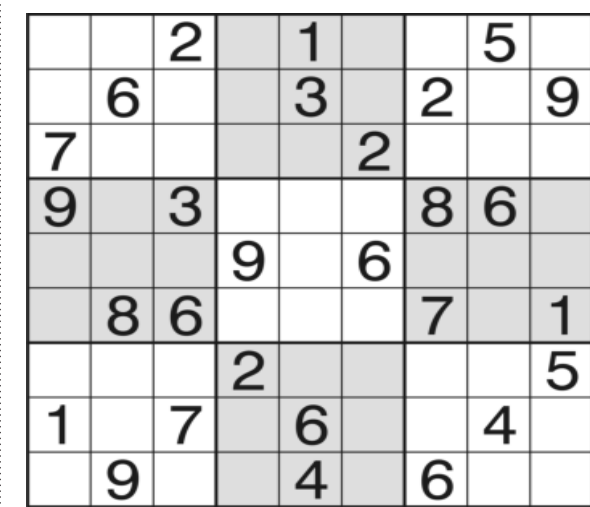
ACROSS

- 1 Legal officer taken in by woman's loss (6)
- 4 Get used to Bill's hanging around flat (6)
- 9 Fox trot on the heels of this resounding tone (4)
- 10 Fail to pull out useful scrabble tile (4,1,5)
- 11 Jack's doctor is inattentive (6)

- (set by Skulldugger)
- 12 Warship incapable of being penetrated by cold rain at sea (8)
 - 13 Speak contemptuously of domesticated lamb mixing with wild sheep (9)
 - 15 Nice pals in Guam island (4)
 - 16 Cutback for presses! (4)
 - 17 Thespian essentially concerned with maturity as a function of intelligence (9)
 - 21 Posh officer groomed by hairstylist (8)
 - 22 Moderator's university supplanted by European conglomerate (6)
 - 24 Waffle design hero developed framed by artist (10)
 - 25 Colt for a stick-up (4)
 - 26 Go steady so far (2,4)
 - 27 Secretary position temporarily free (6)
 - 1 Unit of volume! (7)
 - 2 Low, extremely secretive creature (5)
 - 3 Maker removed roof off cage to halve expenses (2,5)
 - 5 Monster to persist (6)
 - 6 Law enforcers, professional killers pursuing American politician (9)
 - 7 Footwear made of wood and string originally (7)
 - 8 Rico hugs momma, tripping on hallucinogen (5,8)
 - 14 Fig adorns sculpture with poise (9)
 - 16 Religious leader dispersed troops around Vatican city (7)
 - 18 Picked up flour arrangement in a bake off! (7)
 - 19 Hamburger with cheese ultimately appropriate (7)
 - 20 Hunt animal (6)
 - 23 Optimal info regularly typed out with keyboard (5)

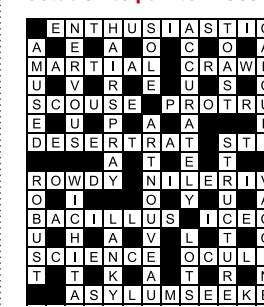
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SUDOKU

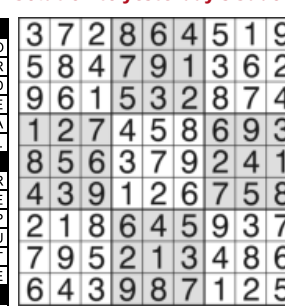


DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to puzzle 12869



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



FAITH

He keeps His word

While the Dasavataaras of Vishnu are celebrated by the Azhvars in their verses, the avataaras are not listed in order under one section by any of them, except Thirumangai Azhvar. In two places in his Peria Thirumozhi, he gives Vishnu's avataaras. In one section of his Peria Thirumozhi, he devotes one verse to each of the first nine avataaras. In the last verse, he sums up all the nine briefly, and finally adds the Kalki avatara too, said M.A. Venkatakrisnan in a discourse. In another instance, he talks about the ten avataaras of Vishnu, but here he omits the Balarama avatara and includes instead the Hamsa avatara. Parasara Bhatta, in his commentary on the Vishnu Sahasranama, shows how the names of the Lord can be taken to indicate His avataaras.

Each avatara has its own uniqueness. In the Vamana avatara, we see how the Lord helps those who seek His aid, and yet at the same time, He ensures that He keeps His word to others involved in the matter. When He killed Hiranyakasipu during His Narasimha avatara, He gave a promise to Prahlada that He would not kill any descendant of his. Mahabali was Prahlada's grandson, through his (Prahlada's) son Virochana. While Mahabali was banished to the netherworld, the Lord did not kill him. First of all, Bali was not wicked, and so, did not deserve to die. But more importantly, he was the grandson of Prahlada, which meant that the Lord would not kill him, for He had already given His word to Prahlada.

The Vamana avatara shows how he retrieved Indra's rajya from Mahabali, and at the same time spared Mahabali's life. And the Lord's promise to Prahlada continued in the Krishna avatara too. Krishna spared the life of Banasura though He was wicked. The reason was that Banasura was also a grandson of Prahlada.