

Britain

EU fears 'paralysis'

Brexit 'boost' for May as rebel ranks waver

LONDON, March 18. (RTRS): Cracks appeared in the ranks of rebel Conservative lawmakers opposed to Prime Minister Theresa's May's Brexit plans on Monday but she had yet to win over enough hardliners to get her EU departure deal through parliament.

One of the most influential Brexit-backing lawmakers in May's party, Jacob Rees-Mogg, gave the strongest hint to date that rebels might back her, saying that a bad exit deal was better than staying in the European Union.

May has warned lawmakers that unless they approve her Brexit divorce pact after two crushing defeats, Britain's exit from the EU could face a long delay which many Brexiters fear would mean Britain may never leave. A vote could come this week.



May

After two-and-a-half years of negotiations with the EU, the final outcome remains uncertain - with options including a long delay, exiting with May's deal, a disorderly exit without a deal or even another EU membership referendum.

May is scrambling to rally support ahead of a summit of EU heads of government on Thursday and Friday where she has warned she will ask for a long Brexit delay unless parliament ratifies the deal she struck in November.

Rees-Mogg, chairman of the European Research Group of eurosceptics in Britain's House of Commons, said he had not yet made up his mind how to vote on May's deal but any Brexit was better than staying in the bloc.

"No deal is better than a bad deal but a bad deal is better than remaining in the European Union in the hierarchy of deals," Rees-Mogg told LBC radio. "A two-year extension is basically remaining in the European Union."

Rees-Mogg said his dream option would be a no-deal exit on March 29, the official departure date, but that he felt May - a former supporter of EU membership who won the premiership in the turmoil following the 2016 Brexit referendum - would seek to prevent a no-deal.

"The question people like me will ultimately have to answer is: can we get to no-deal instead? If we can get to no-deal instead, that is a better option ... but I am concerned the prime minister is determined to stop a no-deal."

Deal

May's deal has in the past few days been publicly backed by several prominent pro-Brexit Conservative politicians and campaigners, but other senior Brexiters say they are holding out against the prime minister.

May's blueprint, an attempt to retain close trading and security ties with the EU while leaving the bloc's formal political structures, was defeated by 230 votes in parliament on Jan 15, and by 149 votes on March 12.

If she could get the deal approved after the biggest parliamentary defeat for a government in modern British history, it would mark a spectacular and surprising turnaround and by far the biggest achievement of her crisis-riven tenure.

To do so, May must win over at least 75 MPs - dozens of rebels in her own Conservative Party, the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which props up her minority government, and some opposition Labour MPs.

Despite Rees-Mogg's comments, there remains a hard core of pro-Brexit Conservatives who are not yet ready to swing behind May and who hope that Britain will leave the EU on March 29 without her deal, which they see as not offering a clean break.

The biggest issue for the Brexiters and the DUP is the so-called Northern Irish border backstop, an insurance policy aimed at avoiding post-Brexit controls on the United Kingdom's border with EU-member Ireland.

Many Brexiters and the DUP are concerned the backstop will trap the United Kingdom in the EU's orbit indefinitely, and have sought guarantees it will not.

For their part, almost all opposition lawmakers and some pro-EU Conservatives see the deal as leaving Britain worse off by keeping it with one foot in and one foot out of the EU, subject to various bloc rules without a say in making them.

May's finance minister, Philip Hammond, held talks with the DUP on Friday but said the government did not yet have support it needed and would only put the deal to a third vote if it felt it could win.

"There are some cautious signs of encouragement ... but there is a lot more work to do," Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt told the BBC on Monday.

Talks with the DUP were continuing, Downing Street said. Party leader Arlene Foster was not planning to travel to London, the DUP said, amid media reports that no breakthrough between the party and May's government was expected on Monday.

Stepping up the pressure on the prime minister, Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, said he could trigger another confidence vote in May's government if she fails again to get her deal adopted by parliament.

Former British foreign minister Boris Johnson said on Sunday it was not too late for the government to get "real change" to May's deal and cautioned against holding another parliamentary vote on the agreement this week.

Johnson, a prominent Brexit campaigner who might influence other lawmakers on which way to vote over May's deal, said in his column in the Telegraph newspaper that this week's EU summit offered a chance "to get real change to the backstop".

Also:

LONDON: European Union foreign ministers fear a Brexit paralysis and they want the issue resolved, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said after a meeting with his EU counterparts on Monday.

"Spent the morning discussing Brexit with Foreign Ministers in Brussels," Hunt wrote on Twitter. "General curiosity and concern about Brexit votes in Parliament. Like us though they want it resolved and fear Brexit paralysis."

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said he would encourage his government to agree to a Brexit extension ahead of a European Union summit this week.

"My own government is going to discuss this issue next Tuesday, in preparation for a Thursday and Friday European Council. What is important of course is that there is clarity by Thursday from the UK government," he told Sky News.



A body is covered with a white sheet after a shooting in a tram in Utrecht, The Netherlands on March 18. Police in the central Dutch city of Utrecht say on Twitter that 'multiple' people have been injured as a result of a shooting in a tram in a residential neighborhood. (AP)

Gunman kills 3 on Dutch tram, mayor says terror likely

A gunman killed three people and wounded nine others on a tram in the central Dutch city of Utrecht on Monday morning in what the mayor said appeared to be a terror attack, touching off a manhunt that saw heavily armed officers with dogs zero in on an apartment building close to the shooting.

Authorities immediately raised the terror alert for the area to the maximum level. Dutch military police went on extra alert at Dutch airports and at

key buildings in the country as the Utrecht manhunt took place.

A few hours after the shooting, Utrecht police released a photo of a 37-year-old man born in Turkey who they said was "associated with the incident." The photo showed a bearded man on board a tram, dressed in a dark blue hooded top.

Police warned citizens not to approach the man, who they identified as Gokmen Tanis, but call authorities instead.

The Utrecht attack came three days after 50 people were killed when an immigrant-hating white nationalist opened fire at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand during Friday prayers.

There was no immediate indication of any link between the two events.

Police, including heavily armed officers, flooded the area after the shooting Monday morning on a tram at a busy traffic intersection in a residential neighborhood.

They later erected a white tent over an area where a body appeared to be lying next to the tram.

Utrecht police said trauma helicopters were sent to the scene and appealed to the public to stay away.

Heavily armed anti-terror officers gathered in front of an apartment building close to the scene.

A sniffer dogs wearing a tactical vest with a camera mounted on it was also seen outside the building. (AP)



This image made available on March 18 from the Twitter page of Police Utrecht shows an image of 37-year-old Gokmen Tanis, who police are looking for in connection with a shooting incident on a tram. (AP)



Parrikar



Kovind

Subcontinent

Former minister Parrikar dies:

India's former defence minister and serving chief minister of the western state of Goa, Manohar Parrikar, died on Sunday, officials said.

A technocrat turned politician, 63-year-old Parrikar was a senior member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He had been suffering from cancer.

"Extremely sorry to hear of the passing of Shri Manohar Parrikar, Chief Minister of Goa, after an illness borne with fortitude and dignity," Indian President Ramnath Kovind tweeted on Sunday.

Parrikar passed away at his residence in Goa, local news channels reported.

As defence minister, he oversaw the controversial deal to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets from French aircraft manufacturer Dassault Aviation for around \$8.7 billion, the country's first major acquisition of combat planes in two decades.

The deal has been the centre of allegations from India's main opposition party, Congress, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government paid too much and that it forced Dassault to accept Indian businessman Anil Ambani's Reliance Defence as its Indian partner even though the company had no such prior experience in defence contracting. (RTRS)

Land laws cause confusion: The sheer number and complexity of India's land laws make them inaccessible to most people, researchers warned on Monday, with many sparking the types of conflicts that they are supposed to help resolve.

A study of just eight of India's 29 states published by the New Delhi-based think tank the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), showed that there are more than 1,200 laws related to land, alongside about 150 federal laws.

The laws largely deal with reform, acquisition, taxation, land use and records, said Namita Wahi, head of the Land Rights Initiative at the CPR, adding that some dated back to the colonial era, and many contradict each other.

"We have so many laws but there is no publicly available database where someone can easily access them," she told a land conference in New Delhi.

New Zealand

'Time to act is now'

PM vows tough new gun laws

CHRISTCHURCH, March 18. (RTRS): New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Monday she would announce new gun laws within days, after a lone gunman killed 50 people in mass shootings at two mosques in the city of Christchurch.

Australian Brenton Tarrant, 28, a suspected white supremacist, was charged with murder on Saturday. Tarrant was remanded without a plea and is due back in court on April 5 where police said he was likely to face more charges.

"Within 10 days of this horrific act of terrorism we will have announced reforms which will, I believe, make our community safer," Ardern told a news conference after her cabinet reached in principle decisions on gun reform laws in the wake of New Zealand's worst ever mass shooting.

In addition to the 50 killed, dozens were wounded at two mosques in the South Island city during Friday prayers.

The owner of gun shop Gun City, David Tipple, said the suspected gunman had legally bought four weapons and ammunition online from it between December 2017 and March 2018, but it did not sell him the high-powered weapon used in the massacre.

"The MSSA, military-style automatic, reportedly used by the alleged gunman was not purchased from Gun City. Gun City did not sell him an MSSA, only A-category firearms," Tipple told a news conference in Christchurch.

Under New Zealand gun laws, A-category weapons can be semi-automatic but limited to seven shots. Live-streamed video of a gunman in one of

the mosques showed a semi-automatic weapon with a large magazine.

Tipple said he supported Ardern's decision to reform gun laws as the Christchurch shootings had raised legitimate concerns.

Ardern did not give details on new laws, but has said she supports a ban on semi-automatic weapons following the Christchurch shootings.

Australia introduced some of the world's toughest gun laws after its worst mass killing, the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in which a lone gunman killed 35 people using a semi-automatic AR-15 - the same weapon used in the Christchurch massacre.

Banned

Australia banned semi-automatic weapons, launched a gun amnesty in which tens of thousands of weapons were handed in, and made it much tougher to own them.

Ardern encouraged gun owners who were thinking of surrendering their weapons to do so.

"The clear lesson from history around the world is that to make our community safer, the time to act is now," she said.

"I strongly believe that the vast majority of gun owners in New Zealand will agree with the sentiment that change needs to occur."

New Zealand's top online marketplace Trade Me Group said it was halting the sale of semi-automatic weapons in the wake of Friday's attack.

New Zealand, a country of only 5 million people, has an estimated 1.5 million firearms.

Radio New Zealand said in a report based on police data secured through

an Official Information Act request, that more than 99 percent of people who applied for a firearms licence in 2017 were successful.

A New Zealand standard A-category firearm licence is issued after a police and background check. Only firearm owners are licensed, not weapons, so there is no monitoring of how many weapons a person may possess.

Still, violent crime is rare in New Zealand and police do not usually carry guns.

Before Friday, New Zealand's worst mass shooting was in 1990 when a man killed 13 men, women and children in a 24-hour rampage in the seaside village of Aramoana. He was killed by police.

Ardern said an inquiry will be held into what authorities knew or should have known about Tarrant and the events leading up to the massacre, to see whether the attack could have been prevented.

There were 250 detectives and specialists across the country working on the investigation, said police.

Tarrant had declined to be represented by a lawyer but the court appointed duty lawyer Richard Peters to handle the case.

Peters told media Tarrant was lucid and understood the situation facing him.

"He was lucid," Peters told Australian TV network Channel Nine. He seemed to appreciate what he was facing and why he was there."

Ardern was the first person to sign a national condolence book that she opened in the capital, Wellington.

"On behalf of all New Zealanders, we grieve together. We are one. They are us," she wrote.

"With so many laws, and with the added complication of the colonial legacy and post-colonial structure, there are invariably disputes and conflicts," said Wahi, who is now analysing the land laws of the remaining 21 Indian states.

Matters related to land and property make up about two-thirds of all civil cases in India, according to a 2016 study by Bengaluru-based legal advocacy Daksh, which found that most involved people with low incomes and only basic educa-

tion. (RTRS)

'Crackdown disrupting life':

Military roadblocks on Kashmir's main highway are delaying ambulances carrying patients and leading to confrontations with motorists that occasionally turn physical, residents and medical staff say, as India's crackdown on separatists in the region causes major disruption to daily life.

Tensions in Kashmir, a mountainous region claimed by both India and Pakistan, have been elevated since a suicide car bomb attack killed 40 Indian paramilitary police in the region on Feb 14.

The nuclear-armed neighbours, who have fought two wars over the territory, which is divided between them, both launched airstrikes last month, forcing world powers to urge calm.

Tensions between the two countries have temporarily eased. But India has kept up pressure on militant groups on its side of the contested border, boosting its military presence there and arresting hundreds of alleged separatists. Hundreds of thousands of Indian troops patrol the valley, and motorists say security around military convoys has increased delays.

Roadblocks on a 100-kilometre (60-mile) stretch of NH-44, Kashmir's picturesque main highway linking the summer capital of Srinagar with the rest of India, are sometimes trebling the time it has taken for sick patients to reach hospitals in the capital, several users of the road told Reuters. (RTRS)



Congress party General Secretary and eastern Uttar Pradesh state in-charge Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, (center), wears life jacket as she takes a boat ride to the Sangam, the confluence of sacred rivers the Yamuna, the Ganges and the mythical Saraswati, in Prayagraj, India on March 18. Gandhi kicked off her election campaign with a three-day Ganges river ride to Varanasi. (AP)