

World News Roundup

Britain

Last days of May?

UK leader in 'peril' as Brexit offer slammed

LONDON, May 22, (AP) — British Prime Minister Theresa May faced a chorus of calls Wednesday to rip up her tattered Brexit blueprint and call an end to her embattled premiership after her attempt at compromise got the thumbs-down from both her own Conservative Party and opposition lawmakers.

May received a flurry of criticism and hostile questions in the House of Commons as she implored lawmakers to support a bill implementing Britain's departure from the European Union that she plans to put to a vote in Parliament in June.

Almost three years after British voters opted to leave the EU, May said "we need to see Brexit through, to honor the result of the referendum and to deliver the change the British people so clearly demanded."

She said that if Parliament rejected her deal, "all we have before us is division and deadlock."

That appears to be a fair summary of the current situation.

Lawmakers have already rejected May's divorce deal with the other 27 EU countries on three occasions, and Britain's long-scheduled departure date of March 29 passed with the country still in the bloc.

In a last-ditch bid to secure support for her Brexit plan, May on Tuesday announced concessions including a promise to give Parliament a vote on whether to hold a new referendum on Britain's EU membership — something she has long ruled out.

"I have compromised. Now I ask you to compromise too," she said.

But there was little sign her plea was being heeded. Pro-EU and pro-Brexit lawmakers have only hardened their positions during months of political trench warfare, and are in no mood to compromise.

Pro-Brexit Conservatives accused May of capitulating to pro-EU demands, and opposition Labour Party lawmakers dismissed her offer as too little too late.

"The rhetoric may have changed but the deal has not," said Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

"She did not seek a compromise until after she had missed her own deadline to leave, and by the time she finally did she had lost the authority to deliver."

May's authority as Conservative leader has been shredded by her loss of the party's parliamentary majority in a 2017 election and her failure to lead Britain out of the EU as promised.

The party's powerful euroskeptical wing wants to oust May and replace her with a staunch Brexit supporter such as Boris Johnson, a former foreign secretary.

May has said she will announce a timetable for her departure once Parliament has voted on her Brexit bill. But with defeat of that bill looking highly likely, a growing number of Conservatives is pressing her to cancel the vote and quit even sooner.

May survived a no-confidence vote among Conservative lawmakers in December, leaving her safe from challenge for 12 months under party rules.

Brexit-backing lawmaker Nigel Evans said he would urge the party committee that oversees leadership contests to change the rules when it meets Wednesday so that May can face a new challenge within days.

"There is a growing discontent with the way Theresa May has handled this," Evans said.

"Let's have somebody who has a clean sheet and will be able to reboot the (Brexit) negotiations."

Pressure on May is likely to increase when results come in from this week's European Parliament elections, in which the Conservatives expect to receive a drubbing.

Many British voters on both sides of the Brexit debate look set to use the election to the EU legislature to express displeasure over the country's political gridlock. Opinion polls show strong support for the single-issue Brexit Party — largely from angry former Conservative voters — and for pro-EU parties including the Liberal Democrats and the Greens.

The election is being held Thursday in Britain, but results won't be announced until all 28 EU countries have finished voting late Sunday.

May said the Brexit withdrawal bill would be published Friday so that lawmakers can study it.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove would not confirm that the bill would definitely be put to a vote the week of June 3, as May has promised.

"We will reflect over the course of the next few days on how people look at the proposition that has been put forward," he said.

Also:

BERLIN: A UN human rights expert on Wednesday sharpened his criticism of cuts to social support in Britain, pointing to "record levels of hunger and homelessness" in the country and describing recent changes as window-dressing.

Philip Alston, the UN Human Rights Council-appointed expert on poverty, visited Britain in November and was critical at the time of British policy. Releasing a new report in Geneva, he said there are 14 million people — one-fifth of the population — living in poverty, and cited increases in homelessness and food banks.

"The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos," he wrote.

Alston said the government has acted on some issues he raised previously, delaying the rollout of a new welfare program known as Universal Credit and improving it. But, he added, despite a booming economy and "for all the talk that austerity is over, massive disinvestment in the social safety net continues unabated."

Britain's Conservative-led government enacted spending cuts in welfare as part of austerity programs to balance the books after the 2008 financial crisis. In October, Prime Minister Theresa May declared that the end is nigh for austerity.

"It is difficult to see recent changes as more than window dressing to minimize political fallout," Alston said. "The situation demands a new vision that embodies British compassion and places social rights and economic security front and center."

His report also raised concern over the potential impact of Britain's exit from the European Union.



May



People lay flowers in St Ann's Square in Manchester, England on May 22 to remember the second anniversary of the Manchester Arena terror attack where twenty-two people were murdered when suicide bomber Salman Abedi detonated a device in the foyer at the end of Ariana Grande show. (AP)



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II visits a replica of one of the original Sainsbury's stores in London on May 22 on the occasion of their 150th anniversary. (AP)



Kaczynski



Le Pen

Europe

Europe holds important vote: Europeans start voting on Thursday in four days of elections to the EU parliament that will influence not just Brussels policy for the next five years but, to some extent, the very future of the Union project itself.

In 2014, nationalists hostile to the EU doubled their presence in the assembly, topped the poll in Britain and won a referendum there that yanked out one of the bloc's biggest members. Almost.

Five years on, polls show eurosceptics gaining again. But Brexit is yet to happen, and may not; Brussels' enemies will still struggle to top 20%; and the far-right goes into the weekend hit by scandal over its Austrian flagbearer's videotaped collusion with a supposed Russian oligarch's niece eager to buy favour.

Others who want to halt or reverse federalist trends if not scrap the European Union altogether, also face headwinds. Some who are tasting national power must also face disillusioned supporters — notably Italy's co-rulers the League and 5-Star.

The European project is facing a list of challenges, including unprecedented transatlantic slights from a US president who fetes Europe's populists, border rows over migrants and an economy hobbled by public debt and challenged by the rise of China.

But parties seeking collective continental action on shared issues such as trade, security, migration or climate change should still dominate the chamber, albeit with a smaller overall majority.

Europeans are preparing to remember events that shaped the Union — 75 years since Americans landed in France to defeat Nazi Germany and since Russian forces led the Germans crush a Polish bid for freedom; 30 since Germans smashed the Berlin Wall to reunite east and west Europe.

But memories of wars, hot and cold, have not sufficed to build faith in a united future. Jean-Claude Juncker, the Luxemburger who will be replaced as EU executive head after the election, warns of a rising tide of nationalism, not just on the fringes.

Mainstream parties pushing closer integration of the euro currency economy are struggling to capture the imagination of a public jaded with political elites. (RTS)

Quake shakes Netherlands: A magnitude 3.4 earthquake has shaken the northern Dutch province of Groningen, the latest in a series of tremors blamed on decades of gas

Housing

Study turned up deep pockets of discontent

US military families negative about housing

NEW YORK, May 22, (RTS) — US military families are expressing far deeper dissatisfaction with their housing conditions than their private landlords claim, according to a granular survey of tenants at more than 100 bases across the country that was recently presented to Congress.

The survey, conducted by the non-profit Military Family Advisory Network, was initially publicized in February. Three months later, the group has released a more detailed analysis of the results, providing a base-by-base look at the survey findings and a window into the problems most frequently cited.

For more than a year, Reuters has exposed slum-like conditions dogging the Department of Defense housing privatization program, describing how private landlords reap billions in payments even as tenants clamor for repairs. The armed forces began privatizing base housing for military families two decades ago.

The Department of Defense said it couldn't discuss the survey, but is "confident that privatizing housing was the right thing to do," a spokeswoman said. "However, we also recognize there has been a lapse in overseeing implementation of DoD's housing privatization program."

The survey results, built from responses by 15,000 families living in 46 states and 158 bases, echo the Reuters reports of widespread concern about housing conditions among military tenants. In all, 55% of families who responded gave a negative view of their base housing. Just 16% gave positive marks, with the rest neutral.

The survey results stand in stark contrast to those reported by private military housing operators, who annually poll a subset of their residents and release results that often list satisfaction rates above 90%. Those annual survey results can help companies earn Defense Department bonuses that, cumulatively, total in the millions of dollars a year.

In all, more than 100 bases had an

overall negative satisfaction score, with 6,629 reports of housing-related health problems, 3,342 of mold, 1,564 of pest infestations and 46 of carbon monoxide leaks.

The study turned up deep pockets of discontent:

■ At Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State, landlord Lincoln Military Housing reported 70% to 90% of residents were satisfied with housing in 2016. The nonprofit's survey, by contrast, found 10% of respondents had a positive view, and 58% a negative one. Tenants cited 204 reports of poor maintenance, 92 of excessive filth at move-in, and 78 of structural concerns. Lincoln Military Housing did not respond to an interview request.

■ At Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico, a survey commissioned by Hunt Military Housing said 90% to 94% of residents were satisfied with housing in 2016. The new survey found just 15% held a positive view, and 59% a negative one. Kirtland families cited 43 reports of mold, 24 of vermin infestations and 3 carbon monoxide leaks. A Hunt spokesperson said a survey conducted earlier this year by base command found 88% of residents were satisfied with their housing at Kirtland. Still, the company said it is working with the Air Force to address concerns and has "further improved our processes and procedures," including adding a "Hunt Promise Helpline" allowing residents direct contact with corporate management.

■ At Fort Hood in Texas, 71% to 79% of residents liked their housing in 2016, according to a survey commissioned by the installation's Australian-based landlord LendLease Group and the Army. The new survey found only 15% of base families had a positive view, and 54% a negative one. Driving these results: 121 reports of poor maintenance, 82 of mold and 67 of dilapidated housing. In a statement to Reuters, LendLease said it has confidence in the results of the surveys it obtained from a third-party research firm. The company said it couldn't comment on

the new report without a better understanding of its methodology.

The three companies are among more than a dozen private real estate developers and property managers operating military housing on bases across the country under a flagship government privatization program that has been expanding since the early 2000s.

The Air Force acknowledged airmen don't believe privatized housing is meeting their needs, spokesman Mark Kinkade said in a statement to Reuters. "We heard that message loud and clear," he said.

Following Senate hearings in February, leadership at Air Force bases visited 11,534 homes and found 5,102 health and safety concerns, he said. The Air Force and private landlords have addressed 3,855 and are tracking the remaining 1,247.

Army and Navy officials say they have yet to see the expanded results of the Military Family Advisory Network's survey. The Navy said the new figures may not reflect recent efforts to improve housing.

Last week, Army Secretary Mark Esper, Navy Secretary Richard Spencer and Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson met with senior executives from nine private companies that manage military housing to discuss a proposed tenant bill of rights, modifications to incentive fees paid to the companies and other means of improving living conditions.

"We are taking immediate steps to resolve both individual and systemic issues to provide the quality housing and proactive management we envision," Wilson said in a statement.

A Reuters reporting team visited 16 federal bases last year and spoke with hundreds of families, finding swaths of housing plagued by hazards that can pose serious health risks to tenants. Residents on military bases often lacked basic rights renters can rely on in civilian communities, such as the ability to withhold rent from derelict landlords.

extraction from underground reserves.

The country's meteorological institute says the quake early Wednesday near the village of Westerwijtwerd was one of the most powerful ever to hit the Netherlands.

There were no immediate reports of any injuries. The lucrative Groningen gas field is one of the world's largest natural gas reserves but quakes caused by extraction have damaged thousands of homes.

The Dutch government already has cut gas extraction in the region and said last year it must be halved by 2022 or earlier, with more cuts later leading to "zero" extraction. (AP)



Italian Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (right), addresses a rally in Putignano, Southern Italy on May 22. Some 400 million Europeans from 28 countries head to the polls from Thursday to Sunday to choose their representatives at the European Parliament for the next five years. (AP)

■ ■ ■ **Kaczynski slams Le Pen party:** Poland's nationalist ruling party leader said political groupings in some European Union states, including Marine Le Pen's party in France, are "obviously linked to Moscow and receive its support."

Jaroslaw Kaczynski's comment in the Gazeta Polska weekly that was published Wednesday suggest that his party's wariness toward Russia could be an impediment to working with Le Pen's National Rally or the right-wing League party of Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who is also friendly toward Russia.

Salvini has positioned himself at the forefront of a growing movement of nationalist leaders seeking to free the EU's 28 nations from what he called Brussels' "illegal occupation."

He gathered nationalists, including Le Pen, from across Europe in Milan on Saturday seeking unity ahead of this weekend's elections to the European Parliament.

Salvini also visited Warsaw earlier this year seeking to woo Law and Justice to his grouping, but found limits to cooperation due to Poland's bitter memories of occupation and control by Moscow over centuries. (AP)