
UK STEPS UP HARD BREXIT PLANS WITH 3,500 SOLDIERS ON STANDBY

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The British government on Tuesday (18 December) said it was allocating two billion pounds (££££ billion) to fund Brexit and putting 3,500 troops on stand-by after ministers agreed to make no-deal planning an operational priority.

The news came amid continued opposition to Prime Minister Theresa May draft divorce deal, just 14 weeks before the country leaves the EU.

Following a meeting of her cabinet □ the last before parliament breaks for Christmas and New Year □ Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said around 3,500 troops would be on stand-by to help deal with the any contingencies from a no-deal outcome.

But Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay said ministers still hoped to secure backing for Mays agreement in a House of Commons vote delayed until next month.

He added that any responsible government would intensify preparations for the default option of leaving the European Union without a deal on 29 March next year.

We agreed that preparing for no deal will be an operational priority within government, Barclay said. But our overall priority remains to secure a deal.

He said departments would step up their advice to businesses on how best to prepare for the scenario, which many fear could be catastrophic for the British economy.

Businesses will be provided with a 100-plus page online preparation pack and emails will be sent to 80,000 of those most likely to be impacted over the next few days, according to Downing Street.

The Commission said it will publish its own hard Brexit preparedness papers on Friday.

Divisions

Finance minister Philip Hammond insisted in a statement Tuesday that the PMs deal is the only way to deliver on the referendum while protecting jobs, businesses and prosperity.

The same government statement said that Hammond was making arrangements to ensure that government departments can fund measures to address civil contingencies in a no deal scenario.

The Home Office, which will get the biggest share of the Brexit funding, will use it, among other

things, to increase Border Force capability with hundreds of new officers, it said.

Mays cabinet is divided between ministers who want the government to embrace a no-deal outcome and those who favour parliament having a final say in a series of votes on potential scenarios for Brexit.

One option is the prime ministers own Brexit deal, but that is hanging by a thread after she was forced to pull a vote on it last week in the face of huge opposition from within her own Conservative Party.

Earlier Tuesday, Downing Street reportedly blocked opposition leader Jeremy Corbyns request Monday for a non-binding no-confidence motion in May. That had followed her telling MPs they will not get to vote on her deal this week, but would have to wait until the week beginning 14 January.

The delay prompted accusations that the prime minister is stalling to increase pressure on MPs to back her plan □ and fresh calls for Labour to initiate a binding no-confidence vote against the whole government.

However, such a move faces likely defeat after Conservative Brexit hardliners and the Democratic Unionist Party, which props up her government, both said they would back May.

Running down the clock

May insisted Monday that she was continuing to seek assurances from the EU over elements of her plan, although EU officials said no meetings were planned.

The postponed vote has left members of her own party and Labour opposition politicians infuriated.

The prime minister has cynically run down the clock, trying to manoeuvre parliament into a choice between two unacceptable outcomes — her deal or no deal, Corbyn said.

May is also facing calls for a second referendum to resolve the impasse, with dozens of MPs from all sides now supporting another plebiscite and reports that Mays officials are also considering the possibility.

But the prime minister argued that this would betray the 2016 Brexit referendum result and undermine public confidence in politics.

Let us not break faith with the British people by trying to stage another referendum, she told parliament on Monday.

Another vote * would do irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics, May said, adding that it would also likely leave us no further forward.