

May Makes Last-Ditch Plea to EU to Help Break Brexit Impasse

- EU makes new offer that doesn't deliver what U.K. demanded
- May needs new concessions to convince Parliament by Tuesday

U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May on Friday will tell the European Union that the outcome of a historic vote on her Brexit deal next week is in its hands, as signs emerged that the two sides are at least trying to make progress toward a deal.

The European Union made a new offer in a bid to break the Brexit impasse, though it falls short of what Britain has demanded, people familiar with the EU side of the negotiations said.

May will on Friday seek to shift the blame onto the EU and say she still hopes to get legally binding changes ahead of the vote next week in the British Parliament on whether to approve her Brexit deal.



Theresa May — Photographer: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg

“We are working with them, but the decisions that the European Union makes over the next few days will have a big impact on the outcome of the vote” she will say in a speech in Grimsby, an English fishing port that voted strongly for Brexit in 2016.

Increasingly Gloomy

Negotiators are racing against the clock to make additions and assurances that everyone can agree on. Talks have been acrimonious as the EU and U.K try to find a way to make the so-called Irish backstop more palatable.

With the March 29 deadline looming, European and British officials were becoming increasingly gloomy about the prospect of a breakthrough, with Britain accusing the bloc of intransigence and European negotiators irritated by the latest negotiator May has sent in to seek concessions, Attorney General Geoffrey Cox.



Geoffrey Cox — Photographer: Luke MacGregor/Bloomberg

Talks are expected to continue into the weekend, and if they fail, Parliament will likely vote against May’s deal for the second time, plunging the country into

political chaos.

It's unclear if the EU's new proposal will be enough. But it aims to bolster the review system that's already set out in the deal, according to the people who spoke on condition of anonymity. These check-ins are scheduled every six months to help track and speed up the process of replacing the backstop with a better solution.

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Many U.K. lawmakers say the backstop risks binding the U.K. to EU rules forever, especially since the U.K. cannot exit it unilaterally. Now officials are trying to deliver legally binding assurances to them that it won't happen.

The EU's new plan goes further than concessions outlined in a letter to May from European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Council President Donald Tusk in January, according to the officials.



Jean-Claude Juncker — Photographer: Jasper Juinen/Bloomberg

But they fall far short of the demands made by Cox this week, which the EU flatly rejected. He wanted a change to the arbitration system set out in the deal to

make it easier for the U.K. to leave the backstop without the EU's approval. The EU is waiting for the U.K. to respond.

That would be tantamount to reopening the Brexit deal — agreed by the two sides in November — which European leaders have said must not happen.

Pessimism

Even if May accepts the latest proposal, EU officials are still pessimistic about whether it will work in convincing British lawmakers to back the deal in a vote Tuesday. Just two months ago, Parliament rejected the deal in the largest defeat for a U.K. government in over a century.

Some European governments have given up hope of much progress before the U.K. is scheduled to leave the bloc March 29 and believe a Brexit delay is inevitable. If May's deal fails to pass next week, she has promised MPs they will be able to vote on whether to leave the EU without a deal at the end of the month or delay Brexit.

Officials say the next 72 hours are crucial as negotiators continue to thrash out ideas for the backstop. May could go to Brussels to finalize the deal before the vote, but this is by no means certain, EU officials said.

There is no agreement yet over how the concessions will be formalized, the people said. Possibilities include a further exchange of letters between the two sides, a joint declaration that interprets the original deal, or legal statements from each side.

— *With assistance by Andrew Atkinson*

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