

Merkel says EU must forge free UK trade deal very quickly

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Britain and the European Union need to conclude a free trade agreement as soon as possible after Britain's exit from the bloc, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Thursday, hours after the two parties sealed a divorce deal.

Merkel told a news conference after EU leaders discussed Brexit that the exit deal allowed an orderly Brexit and a transition period until the end of 2020, so giving time for a free trade agreement to be settled.

"There is an essential difference compared with when Theresa May was prime minister. Then it was not clear how future relations would look, whether there would be membership of the customs union or not," she told reporters.

"Now it is quite clear that Great Britain will be a third country and with this third country we must sort out a free trade agreement very quickly," she continued.

The deal still faces a test when British lawmakers give their verdict in an extraordinary session of parliament called for Saturday.

Merkel said that the EU leaders had not engaged in wondering what would happen if the House of Commons rejected the deal.

"It is now a matter of putting faith in the British parliament to take its decision. It is an old, experienced and wise parliament... So we didn't get into the 'what would happen if' questions. It is a free decision of the British parliament," she said.

She added that European Council President Donald Tusk would consult with EU countries whichever way that vote went.

"We did not negotiate this to have it rejected, but Boris Johnson has told us he will do everything to ensure there is a majority in favor," Merkel said.

Reporting by Philip Blenkinsop; Editing by Alexandra Hudson

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