

European Union gives UK two more weeks to sort out Brexit impasse



Brussels, March 22 (RHC)-- European Union leaders have given Prime Minister Theresa May two weeks' reprieve, until April 12, before Britain could exit out of the EU if she fails to persuade lawmakers to back the withdrawal treaty she concluded with Brussels.

But after seven hours of summit brainstorming on Thursday, her 27 peers kept a host of options open, ramping up pressure on parliament to support May, giving Britain an outside chance of staying in for much longer -- but also preparing to deflect blame for the chaos of any no-deal Brexit.

May had wanted to be able to delay Britain's departure until June 30 to tie up legislative loose ends, and tried to reassure the EU that she could overturn two heavy defeats to clinch a last-gasp parliamentary ratification of her deal next week, so allowing a status-quo transition period to come into effect.

EU leaders had planned to endorse a shorter extension, to May 22, the eve of EU parliamentary elections, and leave any discussion of how to deal with May losing until next week. But diplomats said the prime minister singularly failed to reassure them she could win. Some sensed she did not believe it herself.

After May left the room, and with French President Emmanuel Macron pitching a surprise ultimatum for Britain to be out, deal or no deal, by May 7 -- the eve of a summit on the EU's post-Brexit future -- the meeting plunged into frantic debate.

The outcome, with which May declared herself satisfied, was that the May 22 date will apply if parliament rallies behind her next week. If it does not, Britain will have until April 12 to offer a new plan or choose to quit without a treaty.

That date corresponds to the six weeks' legal notice required for the EU election -- which the Union would insist Britain hold on May 23 if it remains a member. If it does not hold the election, leaders said, the very last date Britain must leave would be June 30, before the new EU parliament convenes.

Until April 12, said summit chair Donald Tusk, "all options will remain open and the cliff-edge date will be delayed." He told a news conference: "The UK government will still have a choice between a deal, no deal, a long extension or revoking Article 50 (the withdrawal notice)."

If Britain decides by April 12 against holding the EU election, it could then leave the EU without a deal at any time up to May 22nd. May said she would not cancel Brexit or seek a long delay that would mean asking people to vote in EU elections three years after voting to leave. She claimed she could secure a deal next week.

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