

U.K. wants new trade deal for N. Ireland

European Union rebuffs Britain's demand for renegotiation on post-Brexit trading arrangements

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

Britain demanded on Wednesday that the European Union renegotiate post-Brexit trading arrangements for Northern Ireland after rioting and business disruption hit the province, but the EU immediately rejected the offer.

London stopped short of suspending the so-called Northern Ireland Protocol – introduced at the start of the year, and which requires checks on goods arriving from mainland Britain – and instead called for “significant changes”.

It wants the European Union to indefinitely abandon ad-hoc grace periods for certain border checks and freeze legal action launched against the U.K. for non-compliance, as part of a “stand-

still period” allowing for fresh negotiations.

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis said while Britain had negotiated the protocol “in good faith”, its real-world application by the bloc had entailed “considerable and continuing burdens”.

“Put simply, we cannot go on as we are,” he told U.K. lawmakers.

“We urge the EU to look at it with fresh eyes and work with us to seize this opportunity and put our relations on a better footing.”

‘Creative solutions’

But within hours, the EU – which has long insisted that it is up to London to implement what it agreed in their drawn-out Brexit divorce – had ruled out any renegotiation.



Smooth passage: A file photo of a truck near the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. ■ AFP

“We are ready to continue to seek creative solutions, within the framework of the Protocol, in the interest of all communities in Northern Ireland,” European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic said in a statement. “However, we will not agree

to a renegotiation of the Protocol.”

The protocol was painstakingly negotiated to avoid a hard border with Ireland, by effectively keeping Northern Ireland in the EU’s single market.

Northern Ireland, which

suffered three decades of sectarian conflict until a peace agreement in 1998, has been rocked by violence this year, in part against the protocol. Many pro-U.K. unionists see it as creating a de facto border in the Irish Sea with mainland Britain and say they feel betrayed.

U.K. proposals

In its proposals, Britain urged the EU to stop broad checks and focus more squarely on goods “genuinely” at risk of entering its single market via Northern Ireland. The government insisted for all other goods, a light touch was needed to preserve Northern Ireland’s integral status as part of the U.K. It also wants the removal of any oversight role by the European Court of Justice.