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AFP

Britain sees 'new dawn' in farewell to EU

LONDON: Britain on Friday night ended almost half a century of integration with Europe, finally making its historic departure from the EU to begin a new — but still uncertain — future, with emotions running high following years of wrangling and several false starts.

As the clocks struck 11pm — midnight in Brussels — Britain became the first country to leave the 28-member bloc and would go it alone for the first time since 1973.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has backed Brexit since the 2016 referendum vote to leave, which triggered deep bitterness and division. But he has promised to unite the country in a new era of prosperity.

“This is not an end but a beginning. This is the moment when the dawn breaks and the curtain goes up on a new act,” he said.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel called Britain’s departure a “sea-change” for the bloc, although nothing would immediately feel different because of an 11-month transition period negotiated as part of an EU-UK exit deal ratified this week.

Britons will be able to work in and trade freely with the EU nations until Dec 31, and vice versa, although the UK will no longer be represented in the bloc’s institutions.

But legally, Britain is out — with no easy way back. And while the exit terms have been agreed, Britain must still strike a deal on future relations with the EU, its largest trading partner. Both set out their negotiating positions on Monday.

“We want to have the best possible relationship with the United Kingdom, but it will never be as good as membership,” European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said in Brussels.

“Our experience has taught us that strength does not lie in splendid isolation, but in our unique union.”

However, getting this far has been a traumatic process. Despite Britain’s resistance to many EU projects over the years — it refused to join the single currency or the Schengen free travel area — the 2016 vote to leave was a huge shock.

It unleashed political chaos in London, sparking years of bitter arguments that paralysed parliament and forced the resignations of two prime ministers.

Johnson brought an end to the turmoil with last month’s decisive election victory and parliamentary majority to ratify the Brexit deal.

But Britons remain as divided as they were nearly four years ago, when 52 per cent voted to leave and 48 per cent voted to remain in the EU.

Friday's newspapers reflected that continued split, with best-selling euro-sceptic tabloid The Sun triumphantly declaring "our time has come" on its front page alongside an image of Big Ben.

But pro-European The Guardian opted for the headline "small island", calling Brexit "the biggest gamble in a generation".

Johnson, himself a polarising figure, has emphasised unity and is avoiding any major celebrations that might exacerbate divisions.

The Conservative leader was hosting a special cabinet meeting in the north-eastern city of Sunderland, which was the first to declare for Brexit in the 2016 vote.

"I'm pleased, it's about time; this has took far longer than it should have," said Eric Horsley, 67, from Hartlepool, northeast England.

Anthony Latham, a nursing assistant, 36, added: "I think there's been a lot of scaremongering going on, but I feel ultimately I think it's going to be a positive thing, given time for the UK."

But not everyone was celebrating, with vigils planned by pro-EU supporters.