

EU leaders deadlocked over COVID recovery plan



Brussels, July 18 (RHC)-- EU leaders failed to make headway in negotiations over a massive stimulus plan to breathe life into economies ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, returning to their hotels in Brussels shortly before midnight to rest and try again in the morning.

Many of the 27 heads declared on arrival for their first face-to-face summit for five months that a deal was crucial to rescue economies in free fall and shore up faith in the European Union.

But officials said a thrifty camp of wealthy northern states led by the Netherlands stood its ground on access to the recovery fund, in the face of opposition from Germany, France, southern nations Italy and Spain, and Eastern European states.

The proposed sums under discussion include the EU's 2021-27 budget of more than one trillion euros (\$1.14 trillion) and the recovery fund worth 750 billion euros (\$85.7 billion) that will be funnelled mostly to Mediterranean coast countries worst affected by the pandemic.

Diplomats said the 27 remained at odds over the overall size of the package, the split between grants and repayable loans in the recovery fund and rule-of-law strings attached to it.

As the leaders broke up for the day, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki tweeted that they were divided by a bundle of issues and said it was "highly probable" that they would fail to reach a deal on Saturday or even on Sunday if the summit drags past its scheduled two days.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was also cautious on chances for an agreement, envisaging "very, very difficult negotiations."

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