

DESPITE SETBACK, INDIA, U.K. OFFICIALS HOPE TO CONCLUDE TALKS ON TRADE PACTS SOON

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Despite a setback to trade talks over comments by the British Home Secretary last week, officials in both the U.K. and India said they hope to conclude the India-U.K. Free Trade Agreement fairly soon, if not ahead of its “Deepavali deadline” of end-October.

Officials confirmed to *The Hindu* that a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being planned for early November, when a framework FTA would be signed between Mr. Modi and British Prime Minister Liz Truss on broad areas of agreement, while other unresolved issues would be dealt with later.

When asked on Wednesday about whether the British government still hoped to conclude the deal by Deepavali (October 24), Ms. Truss’s spokesperson said, “Yes, we are working on this high-ambition free trade deal that would put the U.K. at the front of the queue to supply India’s growing middle class,” according to the *Reuters* news agency.

In written responses to *The Hindu*, the U.K. Department for International Trade spokesperson said the FTA was a “high-ambition” agreement and they wouldn’t comment on “live negotiations”. “We remain clear that we won’t sacrifice quality for speed, and will only sign when we have a deal that meets both countries’ interests,” the spokesperson added.

Braverman’s remarks

Talks between Indian and U.K. trade officials faced a setback after critical comments made by the British Home Secretary Suella Braverman last week over illegal Indian migrants, which India had countered. Meanwhile, pending issues including over mobility, data localisation regulations, reducing tariffs on Scotch whisky as well as access for legal services remain unresolved, despite a push from the top on both sides to conclude the deal which was discussed at the Modi-Johnson summit in April this year.

“There are several sticking points on both sides. From U.K. side, they are pushing India to allow financial and legal services for U.K. firms while from India, it’s pushing for favourable immigration and visa regime,” a person familiar with the developments told *The Hindu*.

The official added that the remarks and the stand taken by Ms. Braverman who had expressed “reservations” about an agreement that would increase Indian migration and mobility, have only aggravated the issue. However, the source said that despite differences, both sides have decided to sign a “broader FTA” at the earliest while continuing to negotiate on the sticking points, and even indicated that Mr. Modi could be in the U.K. as early as November 7-8.

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