**Beat: Local**

# Britain, Scotland sign deal for independence referendum

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**USPA News -** British Prime Minister David Cameron and Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond on Monday signed an historic agreement which will allow the Scottish government to hold a referendum to decide whether Scotland should break away from the United Kingdom. Cameron and Salmond met at St. Andrews House in Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, where the two leaders signed the so-called "Edinburgh Agreement" which grants the Scottish government special powers necessary for the independence referendum.

It follows months of negotiations on the specific details of the agreement. "What`s really important about this is, it sets out now, for the first time, an agreed process by which Scotland can become an independent country," said Salmond, whose Scottish National Party (SNP) gained a majority with 69 of the 129 seats at Holyrood during the May 2011 elections and a mandate to govern until the next election in 2016. The agreement grants the Scottish government the power to legislate a single-question referendum on Scottish independence before the end of 2014. The referendum is expected to take place in the autumn of 2014, but referendum legislation to be introduced by the Scottish parliament in the coming months will determine the exact date. "The governments are agreed that the referendum should meet the highest standards of fairness, transparency and propriety, informed by consultation and independent expert advice," the agreement signed by Cameron and Salmond said, adding that referendum legislation by the Scottish parliament will also set out the exact working of the question, rules on campaign financing and other rules of conduct. All those entitled to vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections will be able to participate in the referendum, but the referendum legislation is also expected to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote for the first time. "It will be for the Scottish Government to decide whether to propose extending the franchise for this referendum and how that should be done," the agreement said on the matter. "This marks the beginning of an important chapter in Scotland`s story and allows the real debate to begin," said Cameron, who has vowed to keep the United Kingdom united. "It paves the way so that the biggest question of all can be settled: a separate Scotland or a United Kingdom? I will be making a very positive argument for our United Kingdom." Speaking in Edinburgh after Monday`s signing at St. Andrews House, he added: "It is now up to the people of Scotland to make that historic decision. The very future of Scotland depends on their verdict. It is that important. This agreement delivers the people`s referendum." But there are signs that support among Scots for independence is slipping. A survey released by pollsters TNS-BMRB last week indicates that only 28 percent of Scots are currently in favor of Scotland becoming an independent state, while 53 percent of those asked said they are not in favor of independence. About 19 percent said they were not sure.

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United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com