

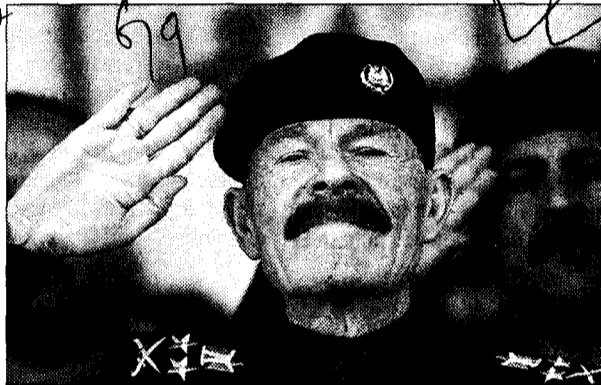
France hopes hostages will be released soon

DOMINIQUE RODRIGUEZ
PARIS, SEPTEMBER 5

FRANCE remained hopeful on Sunday that two French hostages in Iraq will be freed, although its Foreign Minister returned empty-handed from a West Asian mission intended to secure their release.

"We have serious reasons to believe both of them are in good health and that a favourable outcome is possible," Foreign Minister Michel Barnier said after discussing the hostage crisis with President Jacques Chirac. "Our top priority remains to secure their release. Our priority is their safety," he said. "We are working hard, calmly, cautiously and discreetly."

Journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot have been held by militants in Iraq since August 20. Comments by government officials have become increasingly cautious since hopes that they would be released on Friday



Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, a senior aide to Saddam Hussein, was caught in Tikrit on Sunday by members of Iraq's National Guard. He was sixth on the US list of the 55 most-wanted members of Saddam's regime. Reuters

proved unfounded.

Barnier, who returned from Amman late on Saturday, spent an hour with Chirac and was due to meet PM Jean-Pierre Raffarin and senior Cabinet members later on Sunday. A Muslim delegation which went to Iraq to try to help the hostages said the main obstacle seemed to be difficulties in arranging a safe handover.

French leaders are aware

that efforts to secure the two men's release could easily be upset, and fresh violence in Iraq could complicate efforts.

There was no fresh word from the Islamic Army in Iraq, which stunned France when it seized the men and demanded Paris revoke a law banning Muslim headscarves in state schools. France refused the demands and the law went into force on Thursday. —Reuters

6 SEP 2004

Al-Sadr calls for end to Iraq fighting

Reuters
Baghdad, August 30

REBEL SHIA cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has ordered his militia to end attacks on US and Iraqi government forces and will soon unveil plans to pursue his goals through politics rather than conflict, aides say.

Iraq's interim government has been pressuring Sadr, whose Mehdi Army militia launched two bloody uprisings in Iraq this year, to renounce violence and to enter the political arena ahead of elections due to be held in January.

"The Mehdi Army is now turning to peaceful struggle. We will have to see in the future — that could change. But now it is peaceful," Sadr aide Sheikh Mahmud al-Sudani said on Monday. "Muqtada will declare his participation in Iraq's political process. He will not participate directly in elections but he will appoint and back someone from his side or elsewhere."

Sadr's fighters battled US and Iraqi forces in the holy city of Najaf for three weeks this month until the country's most revered Shia leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, returned from his London hospital bed on Thursday to broker a peace deal.

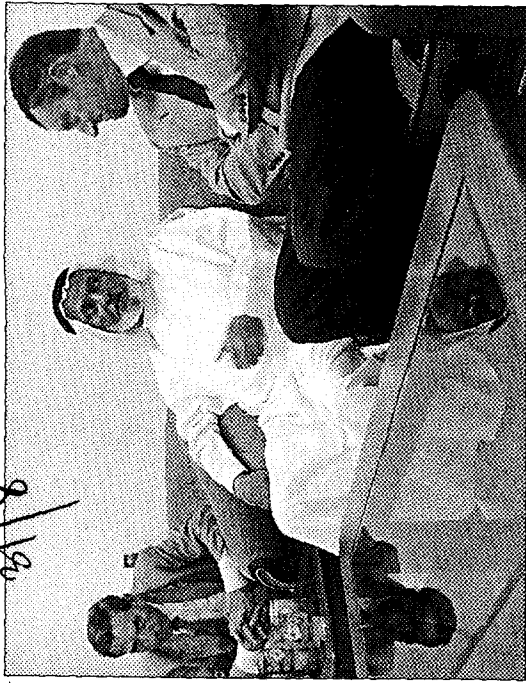
France firm on headscarf ban

Agencies
Cairo, August 30

EVEN AS France's Foreign Minister Michel Barnier arrived in Cairo and appealed on Monday for the release of two French journalists abducted in Baghdad for whom the clock was ticking down — saying he was in West Asia to explain that his nation respects all religions and that he was not ruling out a trip to the Iraqi capital — a French government spokesman rejected a demand by the kidnappers to revoke a law banning Muslim headscarves in public schools by late-Monday in order to free the men.

"The law will be applied", spokesman Jean-Francois Copé said on Monday, adding France would not compromise its national values in the pursuit of winning the hostages' release.

In Cairo, Barnier noted that Muslim leaders in France, too, had called for the journalists' release. "I call for their release... for all these reasons, and especially because the respect for human life is sacred", Barnier said at the French Embassy in Cairo, reading a prepared statement. Barnier said French officials were going to Baghdad to help the embassy there handle the situa-



AP
French Ambassador to Iraq, Bernard Bajolet (right) and French foreign ministry envoy Huberts Colin de Verdiere (left) meet an Iraqi Sunni cleric at Umm al-Qura mosque in Baghdad on Monday.

tion. Asked if he would go, he said, "Nothing is excluded". Barnier was expected to meet Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Amir Moussa, secretary-general of the Arab League later on Monday. The contacts were an attempt to secure the freedom of reporters Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, seized on August 19 about 20 miles from Baghdad on the way to the southern city of Najaf.

Chesnot works for Radio France-Internationale and Radio France and Malbrunot for RTL radio and the dailies Le Figaro and Ouest-France. Militants calling themselves the Islamic Army in Iraq demanded that France revoke a law banning Islamic headscarves in public schools. They described the law as "an aggression on the Islamic religion and personal freedoms", according to Arab TV station

Fourth Opp strike in a week cripples Dhaka

BANGLADESH WAS brought to a standstill by the fourth general strike in a week called by the Opposition, which has stepped up its campaign to oust the government since an assassination attempt on its leader.

Security was tightened for the shutdown called by the Awami League, which coincided with demonstrations planned on Monday by the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party to protest at the August 21 attack on an Opposition rally. The streets of the capital Dhaka were largely deserted, with only rickshaws and a few three-wheel taxis and buses roaming the city. Most educational institutions and businesses remained closed.

Much of Bangladesh was similarly shut down by Awami League strikes last Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday. Monday's shutdown was called by the Awami League's women's wing in protest against the assassination attempt on party leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed, which killed 20 other people including the wing's leader Ivy Rahman.

Around 8,000 police and paramilitary troops were patrolling the city, the same as during Saturday's strike, Dhaka Additional Police Commissioner Mizanur Rahman said. "We have made adequate arrangements to avoid any mishap because of the ruling party demonstration and opposition's strike," he said.

The strike also shut down many other cities and towns across the country, according to police. "We have deployed maximum number of police and we are quite worried about today's situation as the ruling party and the opposition both will be on the streets," said Akbar Ali, deputy police commissioner of the southwestern city of Khulna.

AFP, Dhaka

Putin okays arms sale to Baghdad

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin has signed a decree permitting Russian organisations to sell weapons and military equipment to Iraq's provisional government, the Kremlin said on Monday. The order says that, under the June UN Security Council resolution endorsing Iraq's new government, arms embargoes imposed by previous resolutions do not apply to "arms and property needed by the interim government of Iraq or multinational forces" to carry out their mission.

AP, Moscow

Al-Jazeera, which showed parts of a tape received on Saturday from the group. The militants demanded the ban on headscarves be overturned within 48 hours — a deadline that expires late on Monday.

Barnier did not address the militants' demand in his statement, but, in briefly responding to questions afterwards, said, "This ultimatum is incomprehensible, given the reality of French society".

France in frantic appeal to free hostages

Cairo, Aug. 30 (Reuters): France scrambled to secure the release of two French journalists kidnapped in Iraq by militants who have given Paris an ultimatum to drop its ban on Muslim headscarves in schools.

French foreign minister Michel Barnier, visiting Egypt as part of a French mission to rally support in Iraq and the region, made an impassioned plea to the Islamic Army in Iraq to free Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot.

The militant group, which last week said it had killed Italian journalist Enzo Baldoni,

on Saturday gave the French government 48 hours to rescind the headscarf ban, without saying what would happen to the two Frenchmen if it failed to comply.

"We will continue, come what may, to follow all contacts ... with civil and religious personalities to explain the reality of the French republic ... and obtain the release of these people," Barnier said in Cairo.

Iraqi Sunni and Shia groups and Islamic groups outside Iraq urged the kidnappers to release the journalists, noting France's opposition to the Iraq war and saying jour-

nalists were not combatants.

The crisis stunned France, which campaigned against the US-led war and so had considered itself relatively safe from militant attack. France also opposed the 1990-2003 economic sanctions on Iraq.

Chesnot of Radio France Internationale and Malbrunot, who writes for the dailies *Le Figaro* and *Ouest France*, disappeared on August 20 on their way from Baghdad to Najaf, the day after Baldoni was seized.

Protests were held across Paris against the kidnappings while French diplomats ex-

plored possible solutions.

"Their kidnapping is incomprehensible to all those who know that France ... is a land of tolerance and of respect for others," Barnier said before meeting Arab League chief Amr Moussa and Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit.

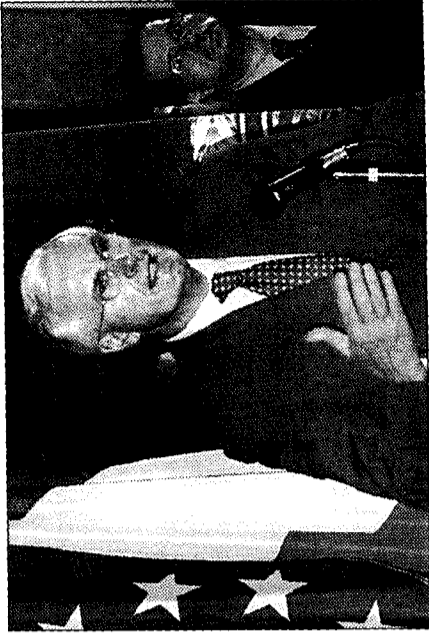
"I urge everyone who has power, or has the capabilities, to set the journalists free as soon as possible so that the situation does not become more complicated," Moussa said.

Aboul Gheit also called for the hostages to be released. Barnier said foreign min-

istry secretary-general Hubert Colin de Verdiere arrived in Baghdad today for crisis talks. Barnier is expected to visit Amman and Qatar, but not Iraq.

Islamic groups in Iraq sympathised with the French.

"France's position toward Iraq is good. But we also are against kidnapping all journalists," said Sheikh Abdel Sattar Abdel Jabbar, a top official in the Muslim Clerics Association. Outside Iraq, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world's largest Islamist organisation spoke out against the kidnapping.



French foreign minister Michel Barnier in Cairo. (AFP)

1 AUG 2004

France restores ties with Baghdad

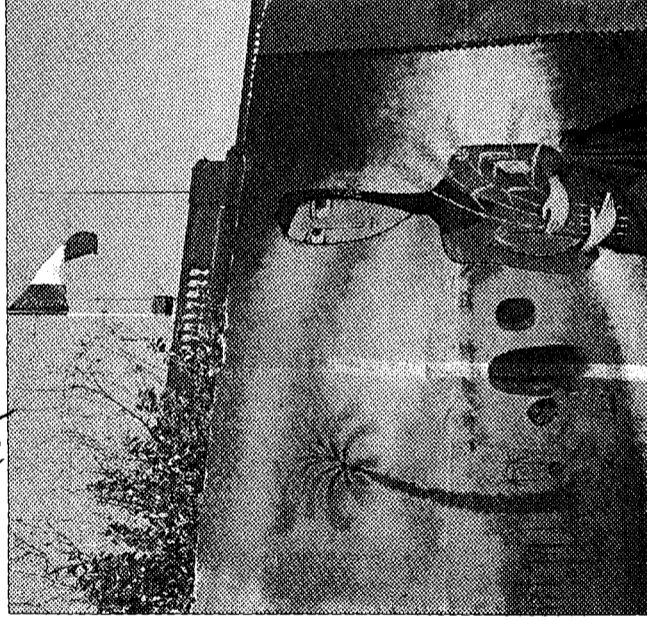
Death to militants, threatens Iraqi Prime Minister

Associated Press
Baghdad, July 12

FRANCE AND Iraq restored diplomatic relations that were severed before the Gulf War 13 years ago. Also on Monday, Iraqi interim President Ghazi al-Yawar threatened to use a "very sharp sword" to fight insurgents threatening the security of the country, a day after three US soldiers died in attacks north of Baghdad.

Bernard Bajelet is now France's highest diplomatic representative in Iraq, and has been in discussions with Iraqi officials about restoration of ties that Saddam Hussein broke off in 1991.

Al-Yawar spoke two weeks after the US handed sovereignty over to an interim Iraqi government. The handover, however, has not quelled the violence that has wracked the country since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Foreign and local insurgents have launched numerous attacks in Iraq in an effort to force the coalition forces to leave and to thwart the country's post-war reconstruction. The attacks have killed scores of US



AP
FRENCH CONNECTION The French flag flies over the nation's embassy in Baghdad on Monday.

troops and hundreds of Iraqi civilians. "Terrorism isn't just killing and blowing up bombs — whoever threatens the lives of ordinary people is a terrorist", al-Yawar said.

Filipino hostage wins reprieve

CAPTORS THREATENING to behead a Filipino truck driver have given Manila another 48 hours to agree to withdraw its troops from Iraq, a Philippine official said Monday. Militants had said they would kill Angelo de la Cruz on Sunday unless Manila pledged to bring its 51-strong contingent home by July 20, a month earlier than scheduled.

"I think there are now new signals that the extension of the deadline has been given another 48-hour life", Philippine Labour Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas said. It was not immediately clear how Filipino officials had learned of the extension.

Kidnap groups holding the Filipino and two Bulgarian truck drivers have

won huge publicity in recent days and forced governments in Manila and Sofia to weigh their commitments to US-led forces in Iraq against the safety of the hostages. The hostage crisis is among many challenges for Iraq's new interim government, pursuing a carrot-and-stick policy to curb an insurgency that grew during the 14-month US occupation.

Amnesty plan

Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawar was quoted on Monday as saying the government would introduce an amnesty for rebels who have been fighting US-led forces in Iraq within "a couple of days".

Reuters, Baghdad

Strike against privatisation blows up on homes of Prime Minister and other politicians



An EDF worker holds the electricity meter of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin's house on Tuesday. (AFP)

Paris power-set powerless

Paris, June 15 (Reuters): French power workers today cut electricity to the homes of the Prime Minister and other politicians on a day of targeted blackouts, strikes and marches to stop the part-privatisation of Electricite de France (EDF).

The cut at Jean-Pierre Raffarin's country home in the Vienne area of west France was one of several commando-style operations carried out in protest at the shake-up of the state electricity utility.

"We took the (electricity) meter away with us just now. As of now there's no power at Mir Raffarin's house," an official at the CGT labour union said.

Workers also cut power for spells at homes of other politicians, such as Centre-Right former state radio boss Jean-Marie Cavada, as well as Socialists who have not taken a stand against privatisation. They included former culture minister Jack Lang and former Prime Minister Michel Rocard. Power was also cut at the holiday home of Ernest-Antoine Seilliere, head of France's main business federation, MEDEF.

Finance minister Nicolas Sarkozy later presented a draft law to parliament that would change EDF's status to pave the way for selling off up to 30 per cent of the group to private investors.

Striking workers also cut about 12 per cent of EDF's output, according to officials from the Communist-linked CGT union, but there were no immediate reports of the power utility having to reduce or cut residential electricity supplies.

EDF said workers tried to cut off a link through which the utility exports electricity to Italy but that remedial action was taken by management and supplies were unaffected.

The battle is another headache for President Jacques Chirac after his governing UMP party was savaged in European elections on Sunday, a second drubbing in three months for a conservative government unpopular over unemployment, reform and cost-cutting.

Unions see the government's plan to sell some EDF shares as an attack on France's strong tradition of public services and fear jobs could be lost. They also say household bills could rise and the service could deteriorate.

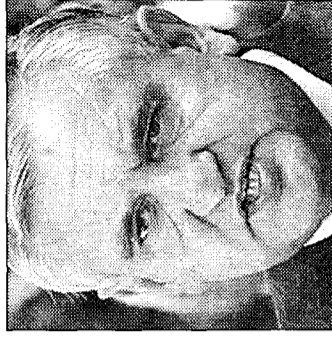
In Paris, several thousand EDF employees walked towards parliament behind an EDF truck with a dummy electricity worker hanging by the neck. There was a deafening noise of sirens, horns, firecrackers and carnival music.

"Today is a day that'll count for our future and our lives," sa-

Jean Mengual, a mechanic with EDF for almost 30 years. CGT officials said 70,000 marched or stopped work across France.

Separately, some 1,000 firemen demonstrated in Paris for better pension rights and thousands across France protested against the government's planned health care reforms.

EDF and ministers vowed to stand by the reform despite the protests. "There is no going back," EDF chief Francois Roussey told Europe 1 radio of the proposed partial privatisation.



French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin

Chirac calls for general polls after regional rout

Agencies
Paris, March 29

FRENCH PRESIDENT Jacques Chirac woke up on Monday to calls for general elections or dramatic cabinet shake-up after his centre-right government's overwhelming defeat by the Left in Sunday's regional elections.

The resurgent Socialist Party, combining forces with the Communists and the Greens, won 20 out of mainland France's 22 regions, holding on to the eight it already ran and conquering 12 others.

Voters were choosing regional councils, which decide local issues from building schools to improving public transport, but the elections were seen as a referendum on the increasingly unpopular government.

Pundits predicted that Chirac, who is midway through a five-year term, would respond by revamping his cabinet within days to reassure voters he has heard their message. Many predict he will sack his prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

However, Socialist Party leader, François Hollande, said: "The answer cannot be found in a government shuffle, no matter how big it is, but in a profound change of political direction."

The Left-leaning Libération newspaper said the election "marks the end of Jacques Chirac's reign". It qualified this by saying "of course, regional elections are not national elections" but the "institutional logic of the Fifth Republic... should force the head of state to put the question of confidence to the voters by deciding to ... dissolve the national assembly."

Unpopular reforms to save the social security system from bankruptcy and bring France's budget deficit in line with EU rules have turned wide swaths of French society against Chirac's governing conservatives.

However, Raffarin, whom Chirac lifted from the provinces to the premiership two years ago to carry out the reforms, remained defiant. "The reforms must continue simply because they are necessary," he insisted.

The region he presided over for 14 years, Poitou-Charente in western France, was among those that fell to the Socialists. His chosen successor, Elisabeth Morin, was trounced by the former Socialist minister Ségolène Royal by nearly 20 points.

Among the other rightwing heavyweights to fall was the former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, defeated in his home region, the Auvergne, after 16 years under his command. "This is a seismic shift," one analyst, Pierre Le Marc, said. "The national vote of censure in the first round has been confirmed and amplified. The president cannot ignore it. There will be sweeping changes to the government."

Results from four overseas regions were not immediately available but Chirac's conservative Union for a Popular Movement party ended with only one region secured — Alsace, in eastern France — and possibly Corsica.

Nineteen of the government's 38 ministers were candidates in the regional races, and all of them lost.



French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin met President Jacques Chirac on Monday to discuss the aftermath of the government's defeat in the regional elections.

The reverse for the right was worse than the pollsters had predicted, which was that six regions could fall to the left rather than a full dozen. Chirac's conservatives had hoped to save some face by taking the Paris re-

gion, the richest and most populous, from the Socialists — but failed there, too. Citizens have taken to the streets in a succession of protests, angered by the cuts in social benefits and other reductions to save the social security system and bring down the budget deficit.

The conservative *Le Figaro* newspaper said the government had been "severely punished" and that a "red wave" had "submerged the country".

AFP

France votes to ban symbols of religion in public schools

By Elaine Sciolino

11-13
France
Paris: The National Assembly voted by an overwhelming majority on Tuesday to ban Muslim head scarves and other religious symbols from public schools, a move that underscores the broad public support for the French secular ideal but is certain to deepen resentment among France's large Muslim population.

The 494-to-36 vote, with 31 abstentions, came hours after the minister of national education,

Luc Ferry, said in a radio interview that the law would stretch much further than religious symbols and require all students to attend physical education classes and accept what is taught on the Holocaust and human reproduction.

Three weeks ago, Mr. Ferry, a philosopher and best-selling author, said bandanas and excessive hairiness would be banned from public schools if they were considered religious signs.

The draft law bans 'ostensibly' religious signs, which have been defined by President Jacques Chirac and a government advisory commission as Islamic head scarves, Christian crosses that are too large in size and Jewish skullcaps. Sikh turbans are also likely to be included.

But the legislation also includes a lengthy preamble that demands that public schools guarantee total equality, including "coeducation of all teachings, particularly in sports and physical education." Schools, it said, are "the best tool for planting the roots of the republi-

can idea."

On Tuesday, Mr. Ferry made clear that religious beliefs could not be used as an excuse to avoid gym or biology classes, and that questioning the veracity of the Holocaust would not be tolerated. Mr. Ferry also said the law "will keep classrooms from being divided up into militant religious communities," noting that there had been a "spectacular rise in racism and anti-Semitism in the past three years."

In recent years, teachers have complained

that some Muslim students have been so disruptive in rejecting the veracity of the Nazi slaughter of the Jews that it is impossible to teach the subject.

Teachers have also said some Muslim girls have boycotted classes on human re-

production because they are too graphic, and have demanded sexually segregated gym classes. There are also reports that male and female Muslim students have demanded prayer breaks within the standardized baccalaureate exams at the end of high school and a ban on pork in school cafeterias.

In the Europe 1 interview, Mr. Ferry did not single out Muslims for censure, but he did not have to. Most Orthodox Jewish schoolchildren who would object to mixed-sex gym and biology classes, for example, go to private Jewish schools that are already sex-segregated, keep kosher kitchens and teach the Torah. The first and only private Muslim high school in all of France opened last fall in Lille. NYT News Service



Wearing a headscarf will no longer be allowed in schools

Juppe move to appeal court verdict draws flak

By Vajju Naravane

PARIS, FEB. 4. The decision by Alain Juppe, former French Prime Minister and leader of President Jacques Chirac's ruling conservative Party, the UMP, to appeal a guilty verdict in a high profile corruption case has been sharply criticised by the press and the opposition in France.

On prime time television yesterday, Mr. Juppe said he would appeal the court's verdict that gave him an 18-month suspended sentence and barred him from public office for ten years. Workers of Mr. Chirac's party were

given jobs in the municipality while they continued with their political activities, while the municipal council paid for their fictitious jobs.

The ruling, which, if unchallenged, would oblige Mr Juppe to resign his current elected positions as Mayor of Bordeaux, MP and the president of the UMP, was described as "grossly unjust" by his party members.

The Prime Minister, Jean Pierre Raffarin, said it was "provisional" while Mr. Chirac urged him to appeal.

The media has, however, expressed surprise at the ease with which the ruling majority has trashed the judgment as

"biased." The independent daily *Le Monde* described the reaction among Mr. Juppe's supporters as "unbelievable." "The Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin," the paper said, "set the tone by speaking of his 'surprise' at the court's judgment."

And Mr. Chirac did not hesitate to publicly praise his close personal friend and former Prime Minister. In France going the Berlusconi way, asks *Le Monde*, referring to Italy's Prime Minister who does not hesitate to publicly vilify the country's magistrates when they hand down judgments that go against him.

"This hypocrisy and rank opportu-

ism disgusts me, and I am a right wing voter, mind you," said teacher Laurence Dupre. "The fact that Mr Juppe is an able man and that he is personally honest is not the point. The question is that as financial director of the municipality, he knew of and condoned fictitious jobs for party workers funded by the municipal budget. The law should be the same for everyone. He should not be exonerated just because he is powerful," she said.

Political observers feel a reversal of the sentence by the appeals court would encourage extremists of both the left and the right in next month's regional elections

French debate 'secularism' law

410-15
2/12

By Vajju Naravane

PARIS, FEB. 3. The French Parliament today started a debate on the draft bill banning the wearing of 'ostentive' religious symbols in state schools.

Though the wording of the bill does not mention any specific religion, it is seen as an attack primarily on the Islamic headscarf worn by an increasing number of defiant Muslim schoolgirls. France has the Europe's largest Muslim population, estimated at five million, made up mainly by immigrants from France's former colonies in North Africa.

The move to introduce a law against religious symbols in state schools provoked angry response from the Muslims. On Saturday, France's small Sikh community also protested against the law. The so-called 'secularism' law, approved by the Cabinet a week ago, states that in schools "the wearing of ostentive signs or clothes which display a pupil's religious affil-

iation is prohibited". If passed, the law will ban the wearing of headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skull caps and large crosses.

Almost 70 per cent of the population supports such a law. The bill is expected to coast through both Houses of Parliament. The Socialist Party and the Greens that make up the bulk of the Opposition in France have asked for a few amendments. There is every likelihood they will back the Government. Several political and religious figures have, however, expressed concern, arguing that the proposed law is badly drafted, unworkable and inflammatory. On the left, some deputies believe it should be toughened to replace the word 'conspicuous' with 'visible'.

The French President, Jacques Chirac, told the Government to draft the law in December after accepting the recommendations of a committee of experts which said the separation of religion and state needed to be reinforced. It fol-

lowed an outcry over the growing numbers of girls reported to be wearing the Islamic headscarf. Confusion over the law's application grew after the Education Minister, Luc Ferry, tried to define what constitutes 'conspicuous' religious symbols — including in the list bandanas and even beards if they were deemed to be worn with a religious intent. While most UMP members have lined up behind the bill, some such as the former Prime Minister, Edouard Balladur, have said they will abstain, while Francois Bayrou — who heads the UMP's coalition partner, the Union for French Democracy (UDF), said he would oppose the law because "the disadvantages outweigh the advantages".

The Foreign Minister, Dominique de Villepin, was quoted as warning the Government that the law would damage French relations with predominantly Muslim nations in the Middle East (West Asia) and Asia. However, the Foreign Min-

istry officially denied he made the remarks. Several politicians have warned that the controversy over the bill is playing into the hands of the far-right leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who is hoping to make big electoral gains at regional elections in March. Four members of the Stasi committee whose recommendations led to the law said on Tuesday that the spirit of their report had been betrayed because of an excessive focus on the headscarf in schools.

"The political response is absurd and laughable. It feeds the illusion that all we have to do is vote through a law to solve the problem of integration," said historian Rene Remond in *Le Monde* newspaper.

"The veil is a decoy which draws attention away from the main issue: France's capacity to integrate its new populations and the willingness of these populations to accept the law. We are in a twist about the problem of an ultra-minority," he said

France toeing a soft line against US in Iraq

71-1A
8711
By Jal Taraporevala
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: As the pressure mounts on the Bush administration on the exaggerated intelligence reports of the biological, chemical and nuclear weapons capability of the Saddam Hussein regime in the build-up to last year's Iraq conflict, France, which had led the opposition to the war, is responding to unfolding events in a relatively low-key manner. Although France has continued to justify its pre-war line on the issue of Weapons of Mass Destruction, it has tactical reasons not to publicly highlight the inadequacies of Washington's stand.

The failure of the White House-appointed Iraq Survey Group to find biological or chemical weapons in Iraq and the resignation of its chairman, David Kay, have dented the credibility of the Bush administration. This, in turn, has indirectly served to vindicate the pre-war stance of the French government. Even so, the Jacques Chirac administration has decided not to score political points on the subject because it is not in its politico-strategic interests to further antagonise Washington at this juncture.

After all, given the fluid political equation in Iraq, the country's oil reserves and the substantial debt owed to Paris by Baghdad, the Chirac administration is keeping open the possibility that it could play some kind of an indirect role in Iraq through the aegis of the United Nations in the future. The French move, not to openly and strongly criticise the US at this stage is, therefore, aimed at not undermining its long-term interests in Iraq. However, whether France is able to play such a future role in Iraq through the UN will hinge on such factors as the security situation in the country and the fate of the American plan to transfer sovereignty to an Iraqi transitional government at the beginning of July.

VEILED TRUTHS

⁶⁻¹⁰
^{France}
Looking for defiance is hardly wise statesmanship. Unfortunately, for the president of France, Mr Jacques Chirac, and his government, the attempt to defend the hard-won secular ideals of France has provoked an enormous outburst of indignation from Muslims, not just in France, but in other countries as well. Mr Chirac's new bill proposes to ban the Muslim headscarf, the Jewish skullcap, outsize Christian crosses and other overt signs of religious affiliation within state schools. The question of secularism of the state is always a confusing one. The state shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, and it shall not endorse any particular religion. The line in between is blurred and shifting. So, behind the thousands of marching Muslim women, proclaiming the freedom to wear the *hijab*, loom the shadows of the most difficult of today's questions: about identity and freedom, about discrimination, oppression and equality, about the overlapping grids of religion, nationhood, gender and ethnicity.

²³¹
France's dilemma is obvious. If such a bill were to become the law, it would, instead of integrating the Muslim community in the country with the mainstream, add further to its sense of marginalization. Inevitably, such a law would be grist to the mill of extremist forces. While the headgear, being the signature of a religion, is perceived as divisive in a secular state, a law to ban it would turn out to be frighteningly more so. The confusion runs deep into the concept of secularism, itself a result of the struggle between the church and the state. In France, "outsize" crosses would be banned by the same law — but who would decide on size, and do crosses equal headgear? It is an accident of history and regional custom that most lay Christians do not carry overt signs of their religion among their apparel. This, together with the history of secularism, has created a peculiar situation. In Christianity-dominated Western countries, all religions except Christianity are "marked" religions. This is enough to obfuscate the more important issues that lie at the heart of the problem. The debate in feminism, for example, between those who feel that the women's headscarf is a sign of male oppression, and those who feel that there is here an element of women's choice of identity, is conducted on a completely different plane. In the case of a ban by the state, it has to be decided whether suppressing "signs" of religion falls within the domain of secularism too. The next step would be to discuss whether beards must be shaved off as well. This kind of argument promises dizzying descents into the absurdity of trying to decide which beard is religious and which is not.

THE TELEGRAPH

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