

FRENCH RIOTS FOLLOW-UP

Immigration tightened

John Lichfield in Paris

Nov. 30. — The French government has toughened controls on immigration following riots in poor suburbs earlier this month.

Bowing to pressure from right-wingers in his own party, the Prime Minister, Mr Dominique de Villepin, yesterday announced plans to restrict the re-unification of immigrant families and to impose tighter selection rules on foreign students from outside the European Union.

The French government will also make it harder to win the right to come to France, or become French, by marrying a French citizen. Marriages between French men and women and non-EU foreigners have more than doubled to 34,000 a year in the last decade and are now the biggest single source of immigration to France.

In future, a foreigner will have to prove that they have lived with their French spouse for two years before they earn the right to French citizenship.

Left-wing politicians and anti-racist campaigners yesterday challenged the relevance of most of the measures announced by the prime minister. They pointed out that of the 4,000 young people arrested during the riots, only 120 were born outside France.

Mr Villepin also called for tougher enforcement of existing French laws against polygamy.

— The Independent

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Immigrant Polygamy Is a Factor in French Unrest, a Gaullist Says

By ELAINE SCIOLINO
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PARIS, Nov. 17 - In the search for explanations for the riots that have rocked France, some politicians and intellectuals are pointing to a novel one: polygamy.

In an interview with RTL radio on Wednesday, Bernard Accoyer, the parliamentary leader of President Jacques Chirac's Gaullist party, the Union for a Popular Movement, called polygamy "certainly one of the causes, though not the only one" for France's worst unrest in four decades. He blamed the former Socialist government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin for being "strangely lax" in enforcing the ban on polygamy. Pierre Cardo, a deputy in Parliament from Mr. Chirac's party, said that the most difficult juvenile delinquents were "often products of polygamous families."

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Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, one of the country's most eminent historians and the permanent secretary of the Académie Française, was even more pointed. "Everyone is astonished; why are African children in the streets and not at school?" she said on Russian television in Moscow on Sunday. "Why can't their parents buy an apartment? It's clear why. Many of these Africans, I tell you, are polygamous. In an apartment, there are three or four wives and 25 children." Even the interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, has suggested that polygamy makes it harder for North African Arabs and sub-Saharan Africans to integrate into French life.

"There are more problems for a child of an immigrant of black Africa or of North Africa than for a son of a Swede, a Dane or a Hungarian," said Mr. Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian father, in an interview with France 2 television on Nov. 10. "Because culture,



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Philippe Huguén/Agence France-Presse
- Getty Images
Firemen extinguished a burning car
last week during a night of violence
near Lille in northern France.

because polygamy, because social origins contribute to more hardships for him."

The remarks have set off an uproar in France and charges of racism. In a statement on Wednesday, MRAP, an antiracist group, accused political leaders on the right of "playing an extremely dangerous role in feeding our country with the racism that causes the damage we know."

No official figures are available on polygamy in France, although some women's rights groups estimate the number of polygamous families as high as 30,000. They come mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, including Mali, Senegal and Gambia. The practice is less prevalent among the much larger and older immigrant population of North Africa.

Bigamy is illegal in France, and punishable by a year in prison and a \$53,000 fine. But the practice of polygamy among immigrant families from countries where it is part of the culture and tradition is more complicated. Polygamy was effectively banned by a 1993 law that prevented second wives from getting visas. But it created difficult situations for families that had lived in France for years, and pushed many wives to enter France illegally. Polygamy is therefore largely tolerated, particularly if the marriages took place before the 1993 law went into effect.

To end polygamous living arrangements, local authorities encourage wives to seek separate accommodations. "We tell them, 'It may be legal in Africa, but in France, it's not,'" said a City Hall spokeswoman who would not allow her name to be used, citing City Hall policy.

The issue also has caused a furor in the French news media. Le Monde put the article on its front page Thursday afternoon. An editorial Thursday in Le Courrier Picard, a northern French newspaper, said, "Then like this, it's because Papa is polygamous that the son burns cars." It called such statements "a call for a new and hypocritical apartheid."

In an effort to calm the waters, Jean-François Copé, a Chirac spokesman, sought to distance the government from remarks linking polygamy and the unrest. "You cannot draw such a tight link between polygamy and urban violence," he said Thursday in a radio interview. "The crisis of disadvantaged neighborhoods has multiple causes."

Community groups acknowledge there is a problem of polygamous families, but say the causes of the riots run much deeper. "A culprit has to be found," said Claudette Bodin, co-

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president of Afrique Partenaires Services, a support group for families from sub-Saharan countries in France, in a telephone interview. "It's easier to accuse polygamous families than to question your own society." Daniel Vaillant, the Socialist mayor of the 18th Arrondissement, which has a large number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, also said the problem was much larger. "You cannot say that polygamy created or aggravated the riots," he said in a telephone interview. "This is transferring the blame." The root problems, he said, were "those of jobs, of housing, of bitterness."

Ariane Bernard and H el ene Fouquet contributed reporting for this article.

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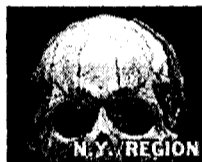
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Riots engulf France, 258 arrested

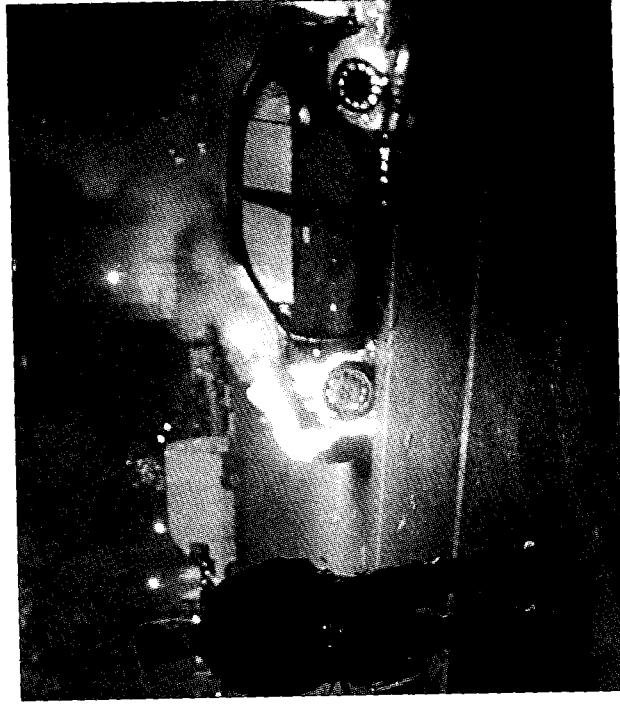
AGENCIES
Paris, November 5

MARAUDING YOUTHS torched nearly 900 vehicles, attacked an ambulance, stoned paramedics and burned a nursery school in the ninth night of violence that spread from Paris suburbs to towns all over France, police said on Saturday. In an unprecedented sweep, authorities arrested more than 250 people overnight. A chopper was used to chase down youths armed with gasoline bombs who raced from arson attack to arson attack.

The violence, which started in areas with large African and Muslim populations but has since spread, has forced France to address the simmering anger of its suburbs, where immigrants and their French-born children live on the margins of society.

With 897 vehicles destroyed by daybreak on Saturday, it was the worst one-day toll since unrest broke out. Five hundred cars were burned the night before. In a particularly malevolent turn, youths in the eastern Paris suburb of Meaux prevented paramedics from evacuating a sick person from a housing project, pelting rescuers with rocks and torching the waiting ambulance, an Interior Ministry official said.

A nursery school was gutted in Acheres, west of Paris. The town had previously escaped the vio-



REUTERS

One of 900 vehicles set ablaze by rioters on Saturday.

Lille, in Toulouse in the southwest and in the Normandy city of Rouen. In Suresnes, a normally calm town just west of the capital, 44 cars were burned in a lot. In Torcy, east of the capital, looters set fire to a youth centre and a police station. An incendiary device was tossed at the wall of a synagogue in Pierrefitte, northwest of Paris. A police officer at the Interior Ministry oper-

ported in the northern city of

Ethiopia clashes leave 46 dead

At least 46 people have been killed and 150 injured in four days of clashes in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa as police battled protesters in country's worst political unrest in months. Violence spurted after Prime Minister Meles Zenawi won his third term in power in an election allegedly marred by widespread rigging. On Saturday, security forces, backed by armoured personnel carriers, opened fire to scatter hundreds of demonstrators who formed makeshift barricades, hurled rocks and smashed windcreens. Foreign observers have broadly endorsed the official election results, but did note some irregularities.

AP



AFP

Paris residents during a silent march in protest against the riots.

'Police not to blame'

Anger against police was fanned days ago when a tear gas bomb exploded in a mosque in Clichy-sous-Bois, north of Paris — the same suburb where the youths were electrocuted. Youths suspected a police operation, but Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin met the head of the Paris mosque on Saturday and denied that police were to blame.

258 arrests

Police arrested 258 people overnight, almost all in the Paris region, and dozens of them will be prosecuted, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said.

Old foes unite under pressure

AS PARIS burns, two prospective future presidents of France — Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy — have had to put their public feud-ing on the backburner.

With both their political futures hinging on their ability to tame the rioting, Sarkozy and Villepin have called an uneasy truce. "Our duty is to work hand in hand, in total trust," Sarkozy said on Thursday. "There can't and won't be divisions because the problem is too serious," he said.

Their differences are fundamental. While Sarkozy is plain-speaking, Villepin is a debonair and intense man. Sarkozy presents himself as the solution to France's "obsoleto" systems. Villepin is more for gradual reform and "profoundly attached to the French model."

Chirac put them in office together to reinvigorate his government after a humiliating poll defeat.

AP

লাগাতার দাঙ্গায় বিশ্বস্ত প্যারিস

প্যারিস, ৪ নভেম্বর: ফ্রান্সের শহর প্যারিস এখন হিংসা আর আতঙ্কে ঘেরা। গত এক সপ্তাহ ধরে প্যারিস ও শহরতলিতে কৃষ্ণাঙ্গ যুবকদের সঙ্গে পুলিশের যে দাঙ্গা চলছে, তা কাল রাতে আরও ভয়ঙ্কর আকার ধারণ করে। দাঙ্গা ছড়িয়ে পড়ছে অন্তত ৮টি নতুন এলাকায়। প্রায় ১৫০ গাড়িতে আগুন ধরিয়ে দেয় বিক্ষোভরত কৃষ্ণাঙ্গ যুবকেরা। আগুন ধরিয়ে, পাথর ছুড়ে বেশ কিছু বাড়ি, স্কুল, শপিং মল, বাজারও পুড়িয়ে দিয়েছে উত্তেজিত যুবকেরা। পুলিশের সঙ্গে সংঘর্ষে তারা অত্যাধুনিক আগ্নেয়াস্ত্র ব্যবহার করেছে। পুলিশ দাঙ্গাকারীদের ছত্রভঙ্গ করতে রাবার বুলেট ও কাঁদানে গ্যাসের সাহায্য নেয়। তবে দাঙ্গাকারীদের হাতে পুলিশেরও হেনস্থা হয়েছে।

ঘটনার সূত্রপাত ২৭ অক্টোবরে। প্যারিসের উত্তর-পূর্ব শহরতলির সোন-সাঁ-দেনি এলাকায় আফ্রিকান বংশোদ্ভূত দুই কিশোর পুলিশের হাত থেকে পালায়। তারা পুলিশের চোখে ধুলো দিতে একটি ট্রান্সফর্মারের কাছে লুকিয়ে ছিল। সে দিনই ওই ট্রান্সফর্মারেই তড়িৎদাহত হয়ে মারা যায়। কিন্তু উত্তর আফ্রিকা ও সাহারা অঞ্চলের কৃষ্ণাঙ্গ অধ্যুষিত প্যারিসের শহরতলি সোন-সাঁ-দেনি ওই কিশোরদের মৃত্যুর ঘটনা মেনে নিতে পারেনি। তার পর থেকে অত্যন্ত গরিব, অভিবাসী অধ্যুষিত অন্তত ২০টি শহরতলি এলাকায় হিংসা ক্রমশ বেড়েই চলেছে। প্রতি দিন রাতে দাঙ্গা বাড়ে। অলনো-সো-বোয়া বা ক্লিশি-সো-বোয়া অঞ্চলেও একই চিত্র। দাঙ্গার ভয়ে দিন-রাত রাস্তাও জনশূন্য। এখনও পর্যন্ত অন্তত ৪০০টি

গাড়ি ও ৩০টি বাস জ্বালিয়ে দিয়েছে বিক্ষোভকারী কৃষ্ণাঙ্গ যুবকেরা। দাঙ্গায় আহত হয়েছে ১০ জন পুলিশও।

এখানকার কৃষ্ণাঙ্গ যুবকদের ক্ষোভ, তাঁরা ফরাসি সমাজে অস্বস্ত। সাফল্য বা প্রতিষ্ঠা তো দূরের কথা, ফ্রান্সে কোনও রকম সুযোগ বা গুরুত্বও পান না তাঁরা। পান না যোগ্যতা অনুযায়ী চাকরিও। বর্ণবৈষম্য ও বঞ্চনাই তাঁদের নিত্যসঙ্গী। ফলে, ক্ষোভ আর হতাশা থেকেই এই প্রতিবাদ ও দাঙ্গা।

তবে প্রশাসন কড়া হাতে এই দাঙ্গা মোকাবিলা করছে। এর মধ্যেই গ্রেফতার করা হয়েছে ৬০-৭০ জন কৃষ্ণাঙ্গকে। দাঙ্গাপীড়িত এলাকায় মোতায়েন করা হয়েছে প্রায় আড়াই হাজার অতিরিক্ত পুলিশ।

অভিভাবকদের কাছে স্থানীয় মেয়র অনুরোধ করেছেন, “আপনাদের ছেলে-মেয়েদের বাড়িতে আটকে রাখুন। তারা এ ভাবে ফ্রান্সের শান্তি নষ্ট করলে আমরা তা শক্ত হাতে দমন করব।” এক পুলিশকর্তা আজ জানিয়েছেন, গত সপ্তাহের থেকে কাল পুলিশের সঙ্গে দাঙ্গাকারীদের মুখোমুখি সংঘর্ষ কম হয়েছে। তাঁর আক্ষেপ, “প্রশাসনের বিরুদ্ধে নিজেদের ক্ষোভ প্রকাশ করতে গিয়ে এই সব কিশোরেরা কেন গাড়ি, স্কুল, বাজার জ্বালাচ্ছে, কে জানে। তবে অনেকে আবার শুধু মজা করার জন্যও এ সমস্ত হামলা চালাচ্ছে।”

ফ্রান্সের প্রধানমন্ত্রী ডমিনিক দ্য ভিলেপ্যাঁ বলেছেন, “দেশে শান্তি বজায় রাখতে আমরা প্রত্যেকেই দায়বদ্ধ। বিক্ষোভকারীদের অনুরোধ করছি দাঙ্গা থামাতে। না-থামলে আমাদের আরও কড়া হতে হবে।” — এ এফ পি, এ পি

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600 cars torched on Day 8 of Paris riots

AGENCIES
Paris, November 4

GANGS OF youths torched more than 600 cars and pelted police with stones overnight on Thursday in the worst of eight straight nights of street violence in the Paris region, sparking fears that racial and social divisions were fuelling the violence. Police have arrested more than 200 people.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy the number one and number two in President Jacques Chirac's embattled government, huddled in Villepin's offices to discuss ways to tackle the trouble. Overwhelmed police have already declared themselves powerless to stop the conflagration.

The rampages have gripped the poorer immigrant-populated outskirts of Paris since October 27, after two youths were electrocuted in a low-income suburb north of Paris as they hid in an electrical sub-station to flee a police identity check.

The violence, however, spread, for the first time, to other parts of the country, to Dijon, Marseille and Normandy, and inside the

capital itself. They also took on an increasingly dangerous tone, with buckshots fired at riot squad vans and a handicapped woman being set on fire. According to prosecutors, the 56-year-old woman was unable to get off a bus targeted by a Molotov cocktail late on Wednesday. She was allegedly doused with petrol by a youth, then others threw a flaming rag on her. The driver took her to hospital with severe burns.

Worst hit on Thursday, was the Seine-Saint-Denis region north and east of Paris, where 205 cars were set ablaze. Trouble was reported in almost 90 towns around Paris, more than twice as many as the previous night.

Official buildings were attacked across the Paris region, including a post office, a bus depot, a primary school, a courthouse, a city hall and a police station. At Trappes, a fire gutted a bus depot, with 27 vehicles inside.

The violence has rattled the Chirac government, which wavered between the "zero tolerance" policies of hardliner Sarkozy and calls for a more conciliatory approach to take account of the rioters' grievances.

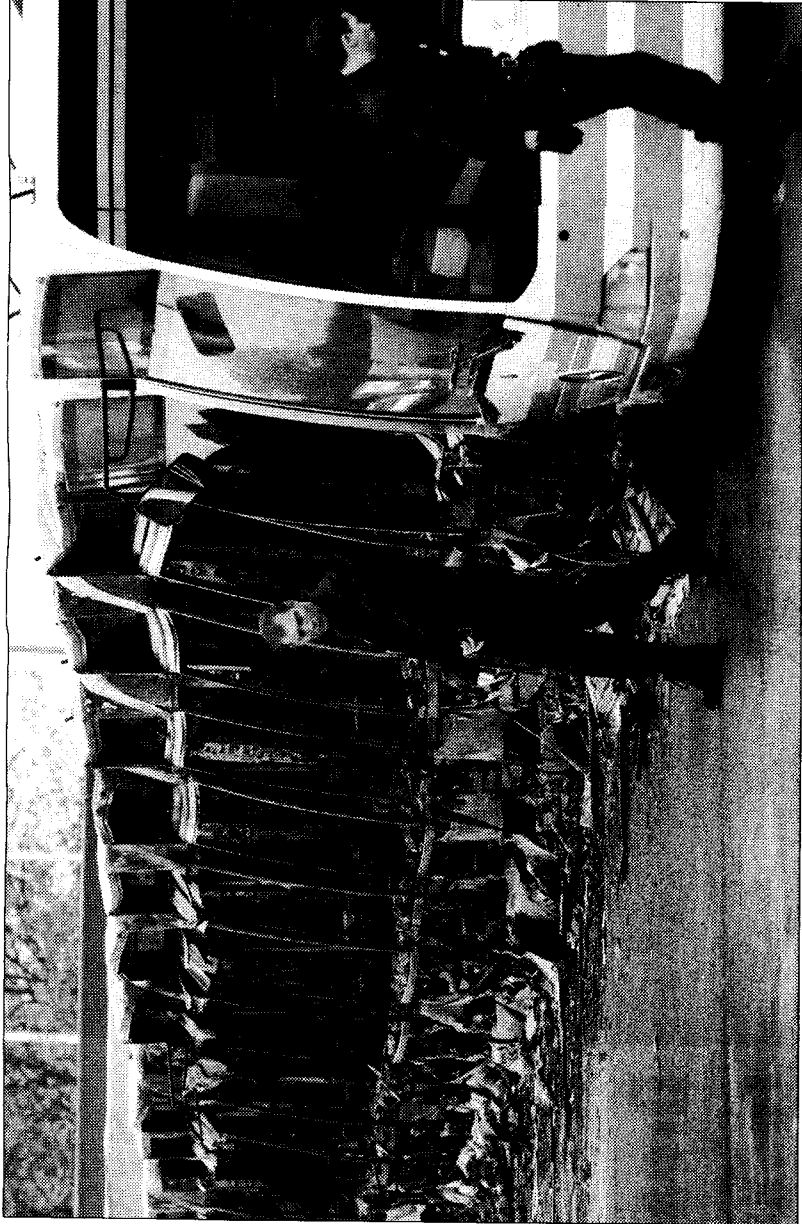
Speaking on French television on Thursday, Sarkozy said the violence was being orchestrated by unknown organisers. "What we have been witnessing ... has nothing spontaneous about it. It was perfectly organised."

He rejected accusations that his tough rhetoric had fuelled the rioters' anger. He has described delinquent suburban youth as "racaille" or rabble, and said crime-ridden areas need to be "cleaned with a power-hose."

Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë of the opposition Socialist Party meanwhile has warned against hastily lumping together "one religion, Islam, and a few extremists" in apportioning blame.



Nicolas Sarkozy
Hard times



Police officers stand guard at a bus depot in Trappes, west of Paris, where 27 buses were torched on Friday. AP

Fresh trouble brews in Birmingham

HT Correspondent
London, November 4

DOZENS OF Muslim gravestones were found smashed in a cemetery in Handsworth, Birmingham, on Friday. Leaflets bearing insults against Muslims were also found scattered around the graves.

West Midlands Police cleared away the leaflets and said that it was treating the matter as "racially aggravated criminal damage".

The roughly photocopied leaflets, carrying messages referring to last

GRAVES DESECRATED

month's riots in Birmingham, will be forensically examined by police. The BBC attributed the vandalism to the recent tension between Asian and Black youths following claim that a 14-year-old black girl had been raped. Two youths had died and several injured in the violence.

The needle of suspicion points to

the group, Black Nation, about which not much is known.

After a visit to the cemetery, the Perry Barr MP, Khalid Mahmood, said: "These are disgraceful events, deliberately done to incite trouble. They are definitely trying to cause more problems particularly on this day when Muslims are coming to pay their respects."

He called on the Muslim residents not to react violently to the vandalism. "We can't point the finger at a single community; someone has done this but we are not sure who."

Prophet image sparks furore

VIJAY DUTT
London, November 4

A LEADING Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, stirred a hornets' nest recently when it published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. Images of the Prophet are considered blasphemous under Islam.

The act led to an huge outcry with thousands of Muslims taking to the streets in protest, the Ambassadors of 11 Islamic countries calling on the Danish Prime Minister to urge him to take "necessary steps against the defamation of Islam", and employees of the daily receiving death threats. The caricatures will also be on the agenda at an Islamic summit in Mecca in December, an Egyptian diplomat said in Copenhagen on Friday.

However, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who heads a centre-right minority coalition dependant for survival on an anti-foreigner policy, called the cartoons a "necessary provocation" and refused to take action. "I will never accept that respect for a religious stance leads to the curtailment of criticism, humour and satire in the Press," he said.

The editor of the daily too refused to apologise, saying he would not dream of saying sorry. Many people have come out in his support, citing the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by an Islamist as reason for the refusal to apologise.

One of the cartoonists said he had intended no offence. "But I live in 2005, not 905 and I use my quill in the way the Danish law allows me to."

A Dutch MP said: "Do you really feel that every Muslim in 2005 should follow the way the Prophet had led his life 1400 years ago?" Debate has been raging in Denmark on how to integrate Muslims into mainstream society, and controversy over special nursery school menus and women-only hours for swimming pools have become core issues.

Chirac appeals for calm as riots spread

Over 80 persons arrested and two dozen police personnel hurt since the start of the violence last week

PARIS: The French Government was reeling on Wednesday after nearly a week of suburban rioting outside Paris spread to other areas around the capital, laying bare what observers said was the country's failure to address deep problems of poverty and immigration.

Gangs of stone-throwing youths clashed with police and torched cars overnight in several towns north and west of Paris in an escalation of dusk-to-dawn

violence that erupted last Thursday following the death of two teenagers in the north-eastern suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois.

Vehicles torched

More than 34 persons were arrested and 60 vehicles torched in the rampages, prompting President Jacques Chirac to call for calm and vow to investigate the teens' deaths.

"Tempers must calm down," a spokesman quoted him telling

his Cabinet. "A lack of dialogue and an escalation of disrespectful behaviour would lead to a dangerous situation," he said.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin delayed a trip to Canada on Wednesday to attend a parliamentary session in which he called the violence "extremely serious."

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy cancelled a trip next week to Pakistan and Afghanistan to deal with the worsening situa-

tion. In all, more than 80 persons have been arrested and two dozen police personnel hurt since the start of the riots last week.

Tensions running high

They were triggered by the accidental electrocution of two youths, aged 15 and 17, who had scaled an electrical relay station's walls to escape a police identity check in the street.

Since then, tensions — punc-

tuated by the nighttime confrontations — have run high in the low-rent, high-immigrant suburbs that surround Paris.

The firing of a police teargas grenade against a mosque in Clichy-sous-Bois during clashes late on Sunday also sparked rage in the suburb's large Muslim community.

The grievances have been further fuelled by headline law-and-order policies implemented by Mr. Sarkozy. — AFP

22 held in Paris riots

Paris: French police have taken 22 youths into custody for questioning after three nights of riots in a north-eastern suburb of Paris, officials said on Sunday. Overnight, groups of young people threw bottles, rocks and set more than a dozen cars ablaze. Nobody was hurt but nine people were detained by police. Thirteen youths were taken into custody on Friday night, police and local officials said.

The violence began three days ago among residents of Clichy-Sous-Bois over deaths of two teenagers who were electrocuted while fleeing



Police officers arrest a youth during the riot

police. "There were cars ablaze and arrests, but nothing like what we saw the two previous nights," a police spokesman said, noting the rioting did not last as long.

On Friday night, youths set garbage bins and cars ablaze and also fired a shot at police in the suburb, where many of the 28,000 residents are immigrants, mainly from Africa. Hundreds of residents marched through the suburb on Saturday in an appeal for calm and to pay their respects to the two dead teenagers. Reuters

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EMERGENCY IN FRANCE

Associated Press
 PARIS, Nov. 8. — French President Mr Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency today to impose curfews on France's riot-hit cities and towns, an extraordinary measure to halt the country's worst civil unrest in decades after violence raged for a 12th night.

The state-of-emergency decree allowing curfews, where needed, became effective at midnight and has an initial 12-day limit. Police — massively reinforced as the violence has fanned out from its initial flash point in the northeastern suburbs of Paris — are expected to enforce the curfews. The army has not been called in. Local officials "will be able to impose curfews on the areas where this decision applies", Mr Chirac said at a Cabinet meeting. "It is necessary to accelerate the return to calm."

The recourse to a 1955 state-of-emergency law that dates back to France's war in Algeria was a measure both of the gravity of mayhem that has spread to hundreds of French towns and cities and of the determination of Mr Chirac's sorely tested government to quash it.

"I have decided... to give the forces of order supplementary measures of action to ensure the protection of our citizens and their property," Mr Chirac said.

Curfew violators could face up to two months imprisonment, and local government officials will be able to put people under house arrest, demand that weapons be handed over and close public spaces where gangs gather.

PM admits to discrimination

Also today, Prime Minister Mr Dominique de Villepin told parliament that restoring order "will take time". He, however, also reached out to the heavily immigrant

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suburbs, acknowledging that racial discrimination there is as a "daily and repeated" fact of life. Combating it "must become a priority", he added.

Mr Villepin said job-seekers with foreign-sounding names are sometimes not given equal consideration as those with traditional French-sounding names when they present their CVs. "We must be lucid: The Republic is at a moment of truth," he said. "What is being questioned is the effectiveness of our integration model."

'Violence on the wane'

"The intensity of this violence is on the way down," National Police chief Mr Michel Gaudin said, adding that there were fewer attacks on public buildings and direct clashes between youths and police. He said rioting was reported in 226 towns across France, compared to nearly 300 the night before. The violence started on 27 October as a localised riot in a north-east Paris suburb.

Reading the riot act

THE state of emergency declared on Tuesday — allowing curfews to quell rioting across France — invoked a 1955 law designed to deal with unrest in Algeria during the war that led to its independence from France.

| The law says: "A state of emergency can be declared (...) in the event of imminent peril resulting from grave threats to public order, in events that by their nature or their gravity are characterised by public calamity (such as floods or earthquakes)."

| Only the Cabinet can declare a state of emergency. The decree becomes effective at midnight on Tuesday and has an initial 12-day limit. Parliament must vote on any extension beyond that.

| The law was also applied in France in 1958 amid fears that unrest would spill over from Algeria.

| Curfew violators could face up to two months imprisonment and/or a fine of euro 3,750 (\$4,400). Minors face one month of imprisonment.

| The interior minister can put under house arrest anyone "whose actions are proven to be endanger security and public order". The interior minister can order bars, theaters, and meeting venues closed and ban gatherings. — AP

France grapples with globalisation

The French are struggling with threats to their traditional way of life.

HD-11
19/7

Sushma Ramchandran

"I VOTED 'no' in the referendum because I don't like Jacques Chirac. He is the worst President we ever had," said the middle-aged gentleman vehemently. The till then mild-mannered doctor was chatting with us while enjoying a solitary lunch at a neighbouring table in an open-air Paris café. Smiling benignly and helping our Indian group select from the menu, the good samaritan turned out to be multi-lingual knowing languages ranging from Japanese to Russian. The conversation inevitably turned to politics, the European Union and the referendum on its new constitution. His warmth turned to anger as he declared Mr. Chirac to be responsible for all the ills currently facing France.

The strong reaction on the EU referendum reflected concerns closer home as the French are grappling with threats to their traditional way of life as a result of globalisation. The stinging 'no' to the EU constitution, as our friend pointed out, had little to do with the EU and more with the government's management of the economy. Despite numerous public debates on the issue, even the most sophisticated and intellectual French citizens viewed a positive vote as a route to creating more inflation and inviting immigration from newly inducted members of the EU such as Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia. Turkey's entry into the EU is also perceived as a threat though few realise that negotiations for its entry are set to begin in October despite the setback to the new constitution.

High unemployment rate

One of the reasons for the French 'no' has clearly been worry over low wage workers taking over French jobs in a country where unemployment is as high as 10 per cent. The constant examples being cited in the media are of the ubiquitous "Polish plumber" who will wipe out French plumbers by offering services at rock bottom rates. Fears have not been erased by EU stipulations that curb movement of workers from the new member-countries for up to seven years in many cases.

The EU's expansion from 15 to 25 has made this enlargement the scapegoat for the economic strains being faced by the original group. In addition, fears are rising over reports of emerging economies such as China and India forging ahead in outsourcing and creating even more job losses.

Judging by meetings with politicians, industry, and bureaucrats, France is deeply concerned over its role in a globalising world. Used to a relatively high standard of living with all the comforts of a welfare state, the French are anxious to prevent lifestyle changes that seem to be looming inevitably



French anti-globalisation activist Jose Bove ... manning the barricades. - PHOTO: AFP

on the horizon. The huge subsidies of the welfare state have got them used to free and high quality education, a safety net for the unemployed and underemployed and lesser hours of work than many other countries.

These comfort levels are made possible only by high individual and corporate taxes. Even so, the country is facing domestic fiscal strains along with pressure from other members in the EU - notably the United Kingdom - to cut back on its traditionally high agriculture subsidies.

Many analysts are now suggesting that France must rethink economic policies and adopt the new economic model typified by Ireland, which has quickly become one of the most affluent European nations. Officials and executives, on the other hand, are quick to point out that though the French work less hours, the productivity is much higher than elsewhere in Europe. Besides, subsidies on education are perhaps the reason France has long been a centre for high technology in key areas, including nuclear

power, aircraft, and pharmaceuticals.

The easy French environment for inward investment has also made it one of the top destinations for investors globally. The U.S., for instance, continues to be the largest investor in France despite the two countries' fluctuating political ties.

Interestingly enough, Indian companies have jumped onto the bandwagon and begun to take over French companies. The takeover route is quicker than fresh investment while efforts are being made to ensure that jobs are not only retained but increased which makes Indian companies more welcome now in the French market.

The "Invest in France" agency says Indian corporates are increasingly looking to French companies as a way of setting up a base from which to access the expanding EU market.

Interestingly, language is no longer a barrier for investments as most French executives are now multi-lingual, largely because of the need to operate in several countries in

a more integrated Europe. Even the man on the street in major cities such as Paris and Lyons tends to know a smattering of English and is good humoured enough to help out the hordes of Indian tourists swarming his country in recent years.

Apart from tourists, France is keen on weaning Bollywood film-makers away from their fondness for Swiss locales. Lyons, capital of the Rhone-Alpes region, managed to have at least one film shot there last year; shooting for another was going on last month.

In spite of all the worries, France has begun to change slowly but perceptibly to meet the challenges of globalisation. Aggressively seeking inward investments to deal with the spectre of rising unemployment, it is taking a pro-active approach even with emerging economies such as India. It may not change its approach to economic policymaking but has definitely recognised the need to become a more flexible player in a globalising world.

Villepin named French PM

John Lichfield in Paris

May 31. — To a chorus of boos on the left and some anger on the right, President Mr Jacques Chirac today appointed Mr Dominique de Villepin, an unelected member of the French mandarin class, as Prime Minister.

Mr Chirac had promised a change of direction, and a "new impetus" for his presidency, after Sunday's cataclysmic rejection of the EU Constitution by 55 per cent of French voters.

Mr Villepin (51) is best known for his defence in the UN of France's stand against the Iraq war in

any political office.

His appointment was met with derision on the left and disappointment and fury among some members of parliament in Mr Chirac's centre-right party, the UMP. There was even talk among a minority of UMP deputies last night of voting against Mr Villepin when it comes to a vote of confidence in the National Assembly.

Many UMP deputies wanted Mr Chirac to give the job to the party president, Mr Nicolas Sarkozy, the rising star of the French right and the likely centre-right presidential candidate in 2007.

The outgoing Prime Mi-

nister, Mr Jean-Pierre Raffarin, came to office three years ago amid a fanfare of boasts that he would run an aggressive, reforming government for "La France d'en bas" (the lower echelons of France).

His popularity has plunged to an all-time prime ministerial low, in the mid-30s, in recent weeks.

In a brief farewell statement, Mr Raffarin said that he was proud of his reforms. He left office with the lament of many French Prime Ministers: that it is impossible to try to improve life for the French without becoming desperately unpopular.

— **The Independent**



OUT YOU GO: Mr Dominique de Villepin (left) jokes with outgoing Prime Minister Mr Jean-Pierre Raffarin. — AFP

March 2002. He has been prior minister but he has never stood for election to foreign minister and inte-

Villepin is new PM of France

- Falling Euro drops further
- Sarkozy could join Cabinet

Reuters
Paris, May 31

FRENCH PRESIDENT Jacques Chirac named loyalist Dominique de Villepin as his new prime minister on Tuesday in a shake-up of the government following his crushing defeat over the European Union constitution. Villepin replaces the unpopular Jean-Pierre Raffarin who quit earlier on Tuesday. He is a former interior and foreign minister who angered the US but won French hearts with his fierce opposition to the US-led war in Iraq.

He now has the task of reshaping government policy after voters showed their distaste for Raffarin's economic policies and high unemployment in Sunday's vote on the EU charter. Chirac and Villepin, 51, did not immediately unveil the new government, which is expected to be announced on Wednesday. Some political commentators predict a slimed-down cabinet.

The euro which was already falling, dropped even further on the announcement of Villepin's appointment. Economists said Villepin was too close to Chirac and unlikely to re-introduce economic reforms.

"It's like re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Chirac has a lame duck government now and the problems of rejuvenating the reform process are huge," said David Brown, chief European economist at investment bank Bear Stearns.

But National Assembly speaker Jean-Louis Debré, also a Chirac loyalist, hailed Villepin's arrival as "the best choice we could have made because it is a choice that unites us."

"The president has heard our fellow citizens. There is a new government, there is a team. I hope will be dynamic and will decree a state of emergency for jobs," he told reporters.

Villepin has little experience

in the rough and tumble of domestic politics. An aristocrat, sometime poet and career diplomat, he has never stood for election and has prickly relations with deputies from the governing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party he now relies on.

In 1997, Villepin was a prime mover behind Chirac's early dissolution of parliament, which saw a conservative majority blown away by a Socialist-led coalition. The disaster earned him the nickname Nero, a reference to the emperor who famously left Rome in flames.

Villepin won applause at the UN and plaudits at home on the right and the left for opposing the US-led war in Iraq, but angered Washington. The two capitals have since been rebuilding ties but his appointment is likely to go down better with European allies. He speaks English, Spanish and Italian well.

In an address to the nation, Chirac was expected to make job creation the new government's priority — as it has been for previous governments for many years — with unemployment of 10.2 per cent at a more than five-year high.

Villepin detractors question if an unelected aristocrat can embody a more caring policy that voters demanded, focus groups showed, in rejecting the EU constitution.

Chirac could also use his television appearance to announce the surprise return to government of his bitter presidential rival Nicolas Sarkozy, who leads the governing Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) party, as interior minister and Villepin's number two.

"I cannot confirm anything for the moment...I'm waiting for the President's broadcast this evening," one UMP official said.

Chirac forced Sarkozy to resign in November. Should Chirac recall Sarkozy to the post, it would underscore Chirac's political weakness.

'No need for UK referendum as French said no'

Britain wants EU treaty killed

VIJAY DUTT
London, May 31

DOWNING STREET has started a behind-the-scenes attempt to kill the European Union constitution, defying growing international pressure to carry on with a British referendum. Tony Blair is heading for a battle with a series of EU leaders as a result of his insistence that the constitution has perished with France's no vote on Sunday, and that it cannot be revived by a British yes.

He is facing angry calls from Greece, Ireland, Spain and Luxembourg to press ahead in the hope that French voters may change their minds in a second vote if the question is phrased differently.

Blair has spoken to French President Jacques Chirac and told him that he believed it was now time to draw a line under the constitution. But sources said Chirac objected, saying Britain should carry on.

Peter Mandelson, Britain's EU Commissioner, hinted: "France will have to consider whether it's going to ... to revisit the question and possibly come forward with a different view."

His words were picked up with fury by the French media — in what may have been a warning shot to Chirac that Britain can make life difficult for him.

Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, said Britain would wait until tomorrow's Dutch referendum before giving its reaction but, in interviews, he repeatedly spoke about the constitution in the past tense.

Blair has called for a cooling-off period, over which time British diplomats hope the French government will accept that a second referendum

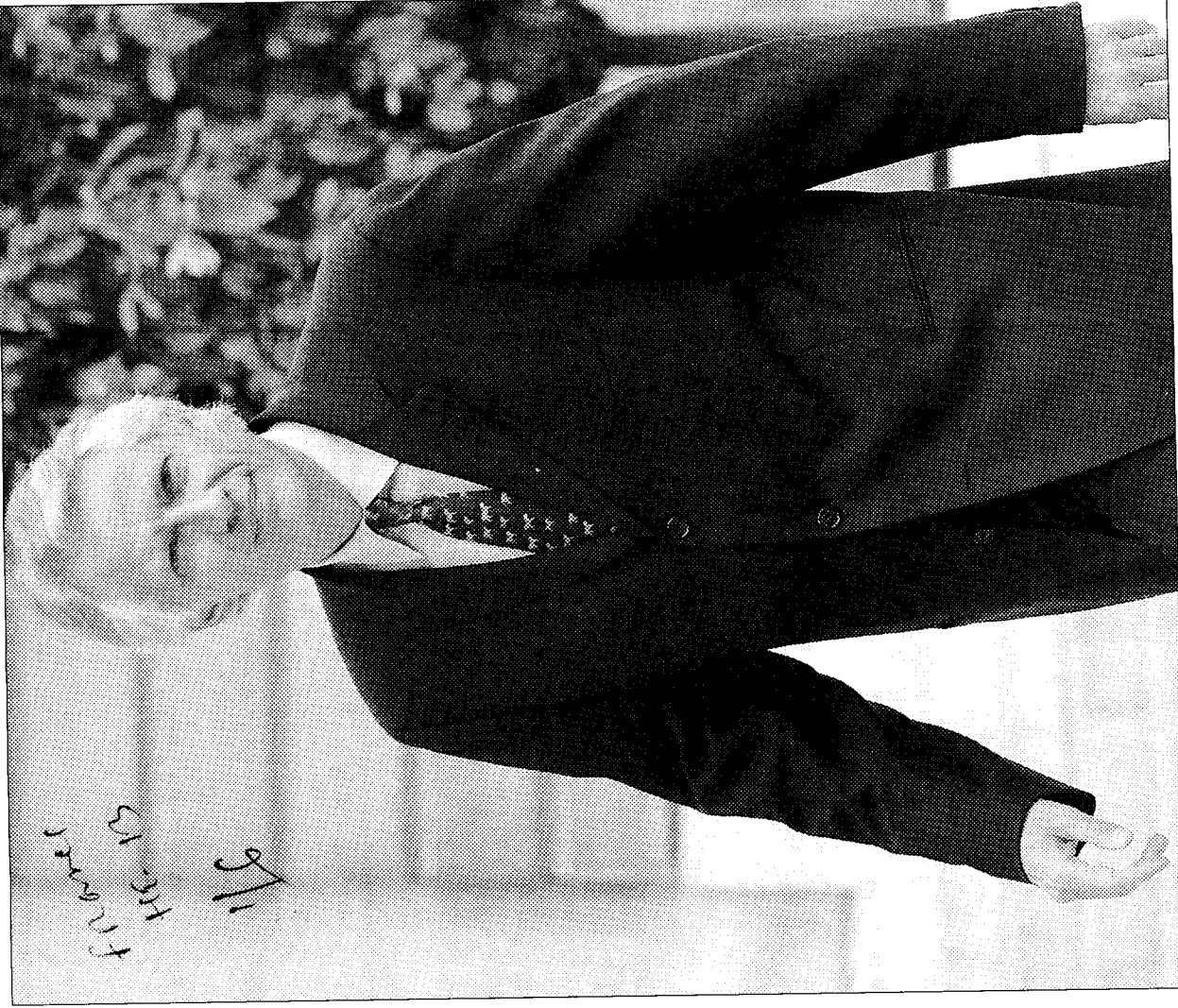


Tony Blair

would be impossible. "What is important now is to have time for reflection, with the Dutch referendum in a couple of days' time and the European Council in the middle of June," said Blair.

Blair has however received help from opposition parties, backing the government in declaring the constitution dead, and rejecting the idea that Britain should still hold a referendum. Liam Fox, the Tory foreign affairs spokesman, declared that "France has done Europe a favour" by killing the issue, and called on Blair to declare the constitution to have expired.

The Liberal Democrats, who are in favour of both the EU constitution and the single currency, also dropped their call for a referendum. "Without the acquiescence of the French, you can't really make meaningful progress on this constitution," said Charles Kennedy, the party leader.



Dominique de Villepin arrives at the Elysee palace in Paris on Tuesday.

Dutch no vote could kill off European Union blueprint

THE EU constitution could be killed off on Wednesday when voters in the Netherlands take part in a referendum that is expected to provide an even more crushing defeat for the yes campaigners. With the result from France still reverberating around Europe, a second no vote, which is overwhelmingly predicted by the polls, will mark a historic watershed in a country that was one of the

GNS, Amsterdam

FRENCH 'NON' VOTE HAS EUROPE IN A TIZZY

THE DECK RUMBLES

Dutch still hope for 'Yes' despite French 'No'

THE HAGUE: The Netherlands wants the EU to push on with its new constitution even after France rejected it and hopes Dutch voters will back the treaty in a referendum on Wednesday, a minister said on Monday. "In a way it's even more important to go for a vote and to say 'Yes' after this French 'No'," European Affairs Minister Atzo Nicolai said in an interview. "Most people in the Netherlands don't want to just follow the French example, perhaps on the contrary, perhaps the people will say: 'Why should we do what France has done? We take our own position and that's hopefully a 'Yes'." "I am still optimistic about the outcome in the Netherlands but even then I see a gap in the Netherlands between people and politics," the minister said. "In the Dutch situation I have absolutely no plans for a second referendum. I don't see an opportunity for renegotiating," he said. "If the Netherlands also says 'No' then we have a big problem for Europe."

Portugal plans treaty vote

LISBON: Portugal will go ahead with its referendum on the European constitution in October, despite France's rejection, Foreign Minister Diogo Freitas do Amaral said. He said French voters' strong 'No' vote did not block other EU members from holding a referendum. Portuguese political leaders have "said and resaid... that we will carry out a referendum next October, unless very extraordinary circumstances completely alter the process and put all Europe truly on a new path," Amaral said. Prime Minister Jose Socrates said he will seek a referendum, with the vote likely to be held simultaneously with municipal elections in October.

Turkey shrugs off French 'No'

ANKARA: Turkey's government and financial markets shrugged off France's rejection of the EU constitution, but lawmakers and political analysts said it could damage Ankara's bid to join the EU. "This result is something which concerns the French public... not Turkey," the state Anatolian news agency quoted Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as saying. "What would prevent Turkey starting the negotiations is doing things contrary to EU standards or not fulfilling the things it has promised to do." Turkey is due to start EU entry talks on October 3. —Reuters



Non voters celebrate after France voted against the ratification of the European constitution in Paris on Sunday night. Reuters

French Socialists in crisis

KERSTIN GEHMLICH
PARIS, MAY 30

FRANCE'S rejection of the EU charter has thrown the Opposition Socialist party into crisis, opening a bitter leadership battle and raising questions over strategy ahead of the 2007 presidential election.

Socialist leader Francois Hollande suffered a major defeat on Sunday when a majority of Socialist voters rejected the charter—against his advice and just a few months after party members approved the treaty in an internal vote.

The 'No' vote also came as a shock to pro-treaty party leaders still struggling to get over the defeat of Socialist Lionel Jospin in the 2002 presidential election. It boosted party rebels like former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, 58, who defied the official party line and campaigned for a 'No'. But Fabius could find it hard to unite the party, analysts said.

Signalling that a battle lies ahead, Hollande said he would not hand the party leadership to Fabius, the party's No 2. "(Giving up my job) for those who have not respected the members' vote? For those who have messed up the campaign? For those who have profoundly divided the party? Frankly, no!" Hollande told France Info radio.

Socialist leaders are to debate the party's divisions in the coming days. Analysts say the 'No' could divide Hollande and Fabius so badly that former Finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn could emerge as candidate for 2007.

The soft-spoken Hollande, 50, and the ambitious Fabius, who is deeply unpopular with many inside the party, are set to clash openly at a Socialist Congress at the end of the year. The meeting is set to define policies for the 2007 elections. Socialist voters celebrating the 'No' victory on Sunday were clear where they wanted to see their party heading—further to the Left. —Reuters

'EU expansion not linked to constitution'

REUTERS
BRUSSELS, MAY 30

EUROPEAN Union enlargement, including plans to start accession talks with Turkey, should not be linked to the ratification of the bloc's constitution, the executive European Commission said on Monday.

"The ratification process and the enlargement process are two independent procedures," Commission spokeswoman Francoise Le Bail told a news conference. "The European Council (EU governments) took decisions concerning future enlargements. Also, the future enlargement including Croatia and Turkey."

MARK JOHN
PARIS, MAY 30

FRANCE and Europe reeled on Monday from a resounding French "No" vote that could sound the death knell for a proposed constitution for the European Union.

Defeated in one of France's biggest referendum turnouts for years, President Jacques Chirac hinted he could replace Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who told reporters after meeting Chirac to expect unspecified political developments by Tuesday.

In a turnout of 69.7 per cent, many voters used the poll to punish Chirac's conservatives over France's fragile economy and high unemployment. The 72-year-old leader promised changes but ignored calls from some opponents to step down.

The charter, designed to ensure smooth decision-making in the enlarged bloc, requires the backing of all member states to enter into force. EU leaders said the treaty was still alive but acknowledged the French result hit its chances elsewhere in the 25-nation bloc, notably in Wednesday's vote in the Netherlands.

"There is a risk of contagion," European Commission President Jose Manuel Durao Barroso told French LCI Television after results of Sunday's referendum showed 54.87 percent of French voters voted "No", a higher margin than most expected.

A Dutch rejection is seen making it harder for EU leaders to call repeat votes in countries that turn down the charter.

"It cannot be positive for the economy of Europe," Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of current EU presidency-holder Luxembourg, told French RTL radio.

Nine countries representing nearly half the EU's 454

French gov't rejects idea of dissolving parliament

PARIS: French government spokesman Jean-Francois Cope on Monday dismissed the idea of dissolving parliament, a precursor to fresh elections, after France's voters rejected the European Union constitution on Sunday. "Oh no. I don't think that's the issue today," Cope said when the idea was put to him during a round-table discussion on LCI television. President Jacques Chirac hinted on Sunday he could replace Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who told reporters after meeting Chirac to expect unspecified political developments by Tuesday. However Chirac has ignored calls from some in the 'No' camp for himself to step down. —Reuters

million citizens have approved the constitution and leaders from Greece, Poland and Denmark said the process must continue as planned.



French PM Jean-Pierre Raffarin gestures as he arrives at a government crisis meeting in Paris on Monday. Reuters

With a renegotiation of the charter seen impossible, Barroso said EU leaders would study options at a June 16-17 summit. EU rules leave open what would happen in the event of one or more rejections, and EU officials

stress they have no 'Plan B'. The heavy defeat leaves Chirac appearing a lame duck two years before presidential and parliamentary elections and speculation grew that he would announce a cabinet shake-up.

Raffarin left a 30-minute meeting at Chirac's Elysee Palace on Monday morning promising "developments later in the day... or tomorrow". He did not say whether he had offered to resign.

Political analysts said the sheer size of the 'No' vote could make Nicolas Sarkozy, ambitious leader of Chirac's ruling UMP party, favourite for the post after he called for a radical overhaul of economic and social policy after the result.

Analysts agreed a key factor in the resounding defeat of the 'Oui' camp was anger at unemployment—now at a 5-year high of 10.2 per cent—and at Chirac's unpopular economic reforms.

Constitution critics successfully portrayed the charter as enshrining pro-market policies that would cost French jobs and put business interests ahead of social concerns.

Some said the 'Non' camp had captured public concern about France's declining role in an EU of 25 countries to argue the constitution would mean a loss of sovereignty and a shift of more powers to Brussels. —Reuters

France bids AdiEU

THE UNQUALIFIED French 'non' to the European Union's first ever constitution is a serious setback to Europe's plans for a complete political union. Although the negative vote in Sunday's national referendum was expected, the very high turnout and the sheer number of nay-sayers (over 55 per cent) are somewhat of a shock, considering the historical role played by France in European integration in the first place. Since it was a national referendum, though on a European issue, it was also layered over by domestic politics which is now looking towards the 2007 presidential campaign. And, in that context, French President Jaques Chirac, who backed the constitution, is certainly the big loser. As far as Europe is concerned, the two biggest decisions confronting the EU were the need for a consensus on the constitution, which was meant to smoothen the functioning of the enlarged grouping, and negotiations with Turkey on its membership.

French voters, already battered by high unemployment, ascribed to the influx of cheaper eastern European labour, have not been particularly enthused over the prospect of Turkey's

entry and this may have been a factor in their decision. The prospect of the entry of an overwhelmingly Muslim nation into the EU may also be catalysing the concerns of other members over their common identity. Similar issues confront the Netherlands, whose referendum is expected in a few days and it is possible that the French decision will deepen the opposition to the constitution already manifest there. In fact, support for the hard-negotiated compact seems to be rapidly draining away even in those core countries that were previously enthusiastic about European integration.

One possible outcome of this could be efforts to push the super-core states of the EU — France and Germany — towards closer integration between themselves. Perhaps the message of the referendum is that Brussels should curtail its political ambitions and let the EU return to its origins as a trade zone where capital, goods, services and people can move about freely. The French vote suggests that the EU constitution may stand a better chance of success if it actually reflected the will of the Europeans, instead of that of unelected bureaucrats in Brussels.

... socialist style

31 MAY 2005

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

TUESDAY, MAY 31, 2005

A post-mortem on France's 'Non'

France's emphatic rejection of the European Union constitution treaty in Sunday's referendum is a stunning political defeat for the 448-article treaty nine countries have already ratified, for the cause of united Europe, and for President Jacques Chirac – who has publicly admitted that the verdict “creates a difficult situation for the defence of our interests in Europe.” The outcome of a bitterly divisive campaign at the end of which 70 per cent of the country's 41.8 million registered voters turned out, and 16 million of them came up with 'Non', reflects the tremendous complexities of creating a transnational federation while retaining the sovereignty of nation states. Since the European Charter cannot come into force unless it is endorsed by all 25 EU member states, the objective of leveraging Europe's clout internationally in the areas of external affairs and security has received a setback. The body blow delivered to the constitution project in France, a founder member of the six-country grouping that grew into the European Union, is expected to affect Wednesday's vote in neighbouring Netherlands; opinion polls predict a setback there also, largely on account of unpopular economic reforms and a growing perception of the country's diminishing weight in an enlarged Europe. Unfortunately, the French referendum debate did not address the real issues at stake for Europe, and neither Europhiles nor Europhobes came to grips with the core issues. The commitment to peace and prosperity in post-war Europe, embodied in the Schuman Declaration, and the substantial success the region has recorded in the past five decades appeared far removed from the discourse on the proposed European Constitution.

The steady surge in support for the 'Non' vote in recent weeks was framed by deep unhappiness among the mass of French voters over the troubled economic situation, and the policies of President Chirac and the Centre-Right Government. The unemployment rate is 10 per cent, the working week has been lengthened from 35 to 48 hours, and fears have been stoked over the adverse implications of the constitution treaty for France's redoubtable social security system. The 'Nons' further exploited the situation by characterising as 'coercion' the Europhile argument that there was no alternative to a 'Yes' to the constitution. Nationalism runs strong in Europe, and, in many ways, the exercise in France has been a referendum on the performance of the Centre-Right Government. The idea of a united Europe has certainly taken root but it is not so powerful as to relegate to second place popular feelings, negative or positive, on key domestic issues. The imperatives of Europe's political integration tend to get entangled with domestic issues, especially those centring on livelihood, social security, and the future of ordinary citizens. The French 'Non' demonstrates dramatically that there is no escape from such entanglement.

THE HINDU

It is all over for Chirac, however France votes

Paris, May 29

WHATEVER THE outcome of the French referendum on the European Union Constitution on Sunday, the debate leading up to it has profoundly changed France's political landscape.

Even if the yes camp wins, both the center-right government of President Jacques Chirac and the opposition Socialist Party look badly wounded, and with the two main pillars of French democracy weakened, strategists of the far right and far left sense opportunities to enter the mainstream.

The debate over the constitution has become a funnel for discontent over Chirac's government. Elected to his second term three years ago, with 82

per cent of the vote, Chirac is now so weak that a third run in 2007 looks impossible, and his center-right government is adrift, in need of new leadership and ideas, said politicians, political analysts and party officials.

The Socialist leader, François Hollande, meanwhile, is siding with Chirac, and in an internal referendum in December, 58 per cent of party members endorsed the charter. Yet a number of senior Socialists, including former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, have continued to campaign for a no vote. Those no votes could prove decisive, but however the referendum goes, the party is in need of an ideological transformation and, some Socialist officials say, is at risk of breaking up.

The upshot is that France faces a long political season of account-settling at home — in addition to the reckoning it faces with its European partners if voters reject the treaty on Sunday.

The morning after is likely to be hardest for Chirac, who just passed his 10th anniversary as President. Recently, he has seen his approval rating nose dive to 32 per cent, tying his record low.

"The party of the president is no longer behind him — that is not a very stable situation," said François Bayrou, head of the Union for French Democracy, an outspoken critic of Chirac. If Chirac was ever pondering a run for a third term in 2007, that now seems impossible, Bayrou said.

The New York Times

One in four casts ballot

A divided France voted on Sunday in a referendum on the European Union's first-ever constitution, with opinion polls pointing towards a "no" vote that would send a shockwave across the whole continent and virtually kill the treaty. Polling stations opened at 8:00 am to the country's 42 million eligible voters, and were to remain open until 8:00 pm — except at Paris and Lyons where they would be open two hours longer. At midday, one in four registered voters had cast ballots.

Exit polls were not to be released before 01:30 IST on Monday.

AFP, Paris

It's down to the wire in France

A "no" by France could set back the project of European construction by at least a decade.

Vaiju Naravane

ONLY A high rate of abstention can now save the "yes" vote in France, analysts and pollsters say as the country swings into its final days of campaigning before next Sunday's referendum to accept or reject the new European Constitution.

The three latest polls published in France all show the "no" camp ahead with 53 per cent of the vote. Only a last minute turnaround, which now appears unlikely, or a very significant rate of abstentions will save the "yes" vote. It is, however, not ruled out that the "yes" vote could just squeak through.

"Socialist leader Lionel Jospin, the former Prime Minister who was edged out of the last French presidential race by extreme right candidate Jean Marie le Pen, will be on TV tonight. This is the second time he is emerging from almost total political retirement to help the "yes" camp. And President Jacques Chirac is to address the nation on Thursday. How the French will react will depend greatly on the content of Mr. Chirac's speech. If he makes the French understand exactly what they will be losing by not voting for the constitution — the capacity to negotiate a better deal for the French and retaining a strong say in European affairs, and if he makes them realise that the Leftist and extreme Right "no" is not based on any real alternative project, but is mainly destructive and obstructionist, he might be able to convince people, if not to vote "yes" then at least to vote blank or abstain. But if he lectures them or talks down to them telling them this is the only way to go, he will be ruining his own chances," Christophe Barbier, a commentator with the newsmagazine *l'Express* told *The Hindu*.

For Roland Cayrol, Director of the prestigious polling and market research institute CSA, there is no doubt that the "no" vote is on top. "The "no" camp is truly galvanised. Leftist voters have found some sort of psychological relief through this campaign, where they have been able to shout out their unhappiness at the state of affairs in France. The question is, will they be able to carry out their threat of voting "no", when everyone else is telling them they will be responsible for denting France's clout and influence in



STRIDENT OPPOSITION: The "no" camp organised a big rally in Paris over the weekend against the proposed European Constitution. A referendum is to be held in France on May 29. — PHOTO: AFP

Europe and around the world. Will they get cold feet at the last moment? Many things can happen when a person is alone in the voting booth and he finally weighs up the consequences of his action before slipping his ballot into the urn. Many Leftist voters will find themselves asking: Do I really want France to become weak? What alternative project has the Left really offered me? Do I want to join up with the extreme right? And he might vote blank or vote "yes". That is the only factor the "yes" camp can now count on," he told *The Hindu*.

Analysts feel a "no" vote would certainly damage President Chirac. But it would prac-

tically destroy France's other mainstream political groupings, the Socialists and the Greens. There has been a terrible fratricidal war within the socialist party. The party held an internal referendum on December 1, 2004 in which the rank and file supported the "yes" vote.

Despite the party's official line, rebels such as the former Prime Minister, Laurant Fabius, who is the party's number two, have openly campaigned against the document, effectually splitting the party down the middle. The Extreme Right — Jean Marie le Pen's National Front and Philippe de Villier's Movement for France — has taken its

usual anti-Brussels, ultra-nationalist stand and does not risk losing voters.

The extreme Left too, in the shape of the Communist party, the Trotskyist Party and the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) has attracted the disgruntled and the disenchanted, those afraid of losing their jobs to cheap labour from the poorer nations of eastern Europe.

As events in France speed to an almost certain photo finish next Sunday, diplomats and politicians in Brussels and other EU capitals are watching with bated breath. A French "no" could set back the project of European construction by at least a decade.

25 MAY 2005

THE HINDU

France on edge over EU Constitution

The French are undecided as the May 29 referendum on the European Constitution nears.

Vaiju Naravane

WITH JUST under two weeks to go before the referendum on the European Constitution, public opinion in France is like a yoyo. Latest opinion polls indicate the "no" vote will carry the day on May 29 with a convincing 53 per cent.

Last week the same was being said about the "yes" vote and the week before the "no" camp was again on top.

Pollsters and analysts are convinced that a large chunk of the French electorate is still undecided, agonising over whether it should be voting for what "yes" politicians have derided as "narrow, outdated, strictly French interests in a globalised world" or whether it should see France "embrace a greater unity since strength lies in size and numbers in an increasingly competitive world."

The "yes" camp has warned that one "cannot be European and still vote 'no'; that a 'no' would seriously undermine French influence and prestige not just within Europe but in the rest of the world; that a 'no' would deal a body blow to France and to European construction from which it would take decades to recover.

Anger against Government

But with a groundswell of resentment against the sheer ineptitude of the Government led by Jean-Pierre Raffarin, with a Jacques Chirac who appears old, jaded and out of touch, the French are quite likely to seize this opportunity to deliver a resounding slap in the face to their rulers.

Over the last two months almost 20 opinion polls have confirmed the "no" trend with indications that between 53 and 55 per cent of those casting their vote will reject the landmark Constitution. Pierre Giacometti, who heads the IPSOS polling institute, believes the "no" camp will win. "Not because people are angry with the government, but because they are seriously convinced this is not a good document."

France is one of the founding members of the European Union and has been, with Germany, a key player in all EU affairs. It was one of the most enthusiastic backers of the Constitution project and manoeuvred endlessly to have former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing elected to be president of the Constitutional Convention. The document European nations are now being asked to ratify is the first major step towards unification.

It is supposed to simplify the decision-making process, and make the Union more democratic by giving increased powers to the EU parliament. It is also expected to spawn a new foreign and defence policy and set Europe on its way to becoming a feder-



LIVELY DEBATE: French President Jacques Chirac answers questions on the European Constitution during a live televised debate for young people in Paris recently. - PHOTO: REUTERS

ation of states that could one day rival the United States.

A French "no" to the document will in all likelihood bury those dreams. The text will become inapplicable and meaningless.

A majority of the French population was in favour of approving the document until a couple of months ago when doubts began creeping in and the "no" camp began making serious inroads into what was complacently assumed to be a given. The country's two major parties, the Socialists and President Jacques Chirac's ruling right wing UMP, are both supporting the "yes" vote, although there is a fringe of rebellious MPs within both groupings campaigning hard for a rejection of the document.

Ironically, the extremes from both sides of the political spectrum, the Communists and the ultra-nationalists such as Jean-Marie Le Pen and Philippe de Villiers, find themselves on the same side of the fence. The ultra-nationalists oppose the treaty on several grounds — it will open the way for the accession of Muslim Turkey with its huge population and frightening demographics, that it will allow more foreigners to snatch jobs away from the French and that France will lose its sovereignty. The Leftist parties oppose the Constitution saying it

will destroy France's generous policies on health, employment and retirement and put an end to the country's mixed economy by opening doors to ultra-liberal policies prevalent in the rest of Europe.

"We have a 35-hour working week. We have a high order of social protection and job security. These rights have been won after a long struggle. We do not wish to give that up so that big capital can do what it wants — hire and fire at will. This Constitution has been designed with big money and large corporations in mind, not with the little people who make up our societies," Communist leader Marie Georges Buffet told *The Hindu*.

Demonstrations

With the "no" camp taking serious strides forward, President Chirac has tried in vain to use national television to convince his compatriots that a "no" vote would seriously damage France's prestige and position in the world. But he has apparently failed in his mission since the "no" camp appears to be growing each day.

Mr. Chirac said there was no "Plan B," no fallback solution, if the French rejected the Constitution. "What do we re-negotiate? We took over ten years to agree to this docu-

ment and now we go back to tell them we want to re-negotiate. Renegotiate what," he asked theatrically. But then Jacques Delors, one of the most respected former Presidents of the European Commission stepped in to say the treaty could be re-negotiated. "It will take time but we can ask for a fresh document," he said. Mr. Delors' remarks fuelled the "no" camp still further forward.

Despite "yes" camp politicians' attempts to scare people into voting for the document by suggesting there is no "Plan B", officials in Brussels suggest there might be a way out. They say the treaty's "constitutional" sections such as changes to the EU's voting system, new powers granted to the European parliament, other institutional changes and the charter of fundamental could be retained while the detailed functioning of the EU is re-negotiated.

However, it is likely that other European leaders might not wish to cede to what they see as French petulance and bullyboy tactics. A "no" vote would throw Europe into serious confusion. For the moment the two sides are running neck and neck with a slight advantage to the "no" camp. But the worm might yet turn with a last minute change of heart. May 29 might still reserve a few surprises.