

## International

# French government urges end to protests after Strasbourg attack

## Police launch manhunt for suspected killer Cherif Chekatt

**STRASBOURG:** The French government yesterday urged “yellow vest” protesters not to hold another round of demonstrations this weekend as police hunted for a second day for the fugitive gunman who attacked a Christmas market in the eastern city of Strasbourg. Government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux called on the anti-government protesters to be “reasonable”, citing the strain on security forces after the attack in Strasbourg on Tuesday evening.

Police across several European countries have launched a manhunt for the main suspect, a 29-year-old Strasbourg native, who killed two and injured 13 after opening fire on shoppers. The suspected killer, identified as Cherif Chekatt, is thought to have been injured after exchanging fire with soldiers, but managed to escape and has not been seen since. “Our security forces have been deployed extensively these past few weeks,” Griveaux told CNews television.

“It would be better if everyone could go about their business calmly on Saturday, before the year-end celebrations with their families, instead of demonstrating and putting our security forces to work once again,” he added. So-called “yellow vest” protesters, known for their fluorescent high-visibility jackets, had called for a fifth round of protests this Saturday against President Emmanuel Macron. The protests began on November 17 over fuel tax increases, but snowballed into a revolt over living standards as well as Macron’s perceived indifference to the problems of ordi-

nary citizens. The appeal came as authorities announced that a sixth person had died since the start of the protests, after a 23-year-old was hit by a truck in southern France near Avignon. Even before Tuesday’s attack in Strasbourg, the government had scrapped a fuel tax increase slated for January, a core demand of the protesters, who mainly live in rural areas and smaller towns and rely heavily on their cars. Macron also announced a hike in the minimum wage, tax relief on overtime work and a rollback on taxes for many pensioners in a televised address to the nation on Monday night.

Last Saturday nearly 90,000 police were mobilized across the country for the protests, with 8,000 officers and a dozen armored vehicles deployed in the capital, where scores of stores, museums and monuments were closed. While some of the movement’s representatives have said they are open to halting the protests to negotiate with the government, others have said Macron’s concessions are not enough.

### Wide search

Hundreds of police in France are now hunting for Chekatt, whose picture was published late on Wednesday in a bid to track a career criminal who has at least 27 convictions in four European countries. His mother and father, as well as two brothers, were detained for questioning Wednesday. Strasbourg’s location at the crossroads of France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Luxembourg, makes the search more complicated. Chekatt, who



**STRASBOURG:** French gendarmes walk past flowers and candles laid in the street in tribute to the victims of a deadly shooting two days ago, in central Strasbourg. — AFP

lived in a rundown apartment block a short drive from the city centre, was flagged by French security forces in 2015 as a possible Islamic extremist while in prison. Prime Minister Edouard Philippe

announced Wednesday that France’s anti-terror Sentinelle operation, which counts around 7,000 soldiers nationwide, would be boosted by a total of 1,800 troops over the coming days. —AFP

## Migrants cross Strait of Gibraltar despite bad weather

**TARIFA, Spain:** A radio message comes in from a Spanish maritime rescue boat to the service’s command centre in the southern town of Tarifa: “34 migrants rescued”. The onset of autumn, with the cold, storms and fog, has not stopped migrants from crossing the Mediterranean from Morocco to Spain, a journey that has this year claimed the lives of hundreds of youths. From the heights of Tarifa, veteran sailors work in shifts behind radar screens at the rescue service command centre monitoring the Strait of Gibraltar, through which 100,000 ships transit every year.

“When the weather is good we can see homes in North Africa from here,” said its head, Adolfo Serrano. Just 14 kilometers separates northern Morocco from Spain’s southern Andalusia region at the Strait’s narrowest point. “But with a quickly changing sea, strong currents, fogs that can surprise you, it’s a dangerous crossing,” added Serrano.

It is especially perilous because human traffickers put migrants on packed inflatable boats or plastic canoes that can easily overturn, he said.

### ‘Many can’t swim’

“I can’t remember an autumn like this. Boats keep arriving with pregnant women, children,” said Jose Antonio Parra, a mechanic of 25 years experience with the Guardia Civil police force’s maritime unit. The 34 migrants rescued from an inflatable boat—including six females who appeared to be in their teens — were taken to the port of Algeciras, where they were first at-

tended to by the Red Cross before being handed to police.

Small migrant boats are hard to detect by radar. They are often only located when the migrants themselves sound the alarm by telephone. Rescuers did not detect the boat which sunk on November 5 during a storm off the coast of the town of Barbate, an hour’s drive west of Algeciras, killing 23 young Moroccans. Only 21 people on board survived.

“There was a hell of a storm. Many of them did not know how to swim,” said spokesman for the Guardia Civil in Cadiz province, Manuel Gonzalez. Andalusia’s regional government took charge of nine minors who survived, while police jailed two passengers suspected of having steered the boat. The other 10 adults who were on board were ordered back to Morocco under an agreement between Madrid and Rabat.

### Toy-style boat

Since then, more bodies have washed ashore on other beaches. Nine sub-Saharan African migrants drowned after spending a week adrift at sea, according to the only survivor of the ordeal, a Guinean teenager who saw his brother die, said Gonzalez. The migrants had paid 700 euros each for what they had been told would be a trip on board a rigid-hulled inflatable boat with an engine but were instead forced to take a “toy-style boat” with just one oar, he added.

Between January and December 2, 687 migrants died trying to enter Spain by sea, more than three times as many as last year, according to International Organization for Migration (IOM) figures. More migrants have died trying to reach Italy and Malta this year—nearly 1,300 — but Spain has become the main entry point for migrants trying to reach Europe by sea. More than 55,000 migrants have arrived in the country so far this year.

Rescuers describe two types of migrants: Sub-Saharan African migrants, who sing when rescuers arrive to pluck them from the sea, and Moroccans who try at all costs to reach the shore without being detected because they face deportation back to Morocco if caught. —AFP

## Chaos as Hungarian MPs pass laws on overtime and judiciary

**BUDAPEST:** Rare scenes of chaos gripped the Hungarian parliament Wednesday as it passed a controversial judicial reform, as well as labor legislation that critics call a “slave law”. Prime Minister Viktor Orban attended the session during which opposition lawmakers blew whistles, sounded sirens and blocked access to the speaker’s podium in an effort to prevent votes from taking place.

Orban’s right-wing Fidesz party won a third consecutive two-thirds parliamentary majority at an election in April and habitually steamrollers bills through the assembly. But speaker Laszlo Kover, a loyal Orban ally, had to open Wednesday’s session from the floor rather than the podium with opposition MPs accusing Fidesz counterparts of “unlawful” voting by breaking a series of technical rules.

The opposition’s “attempt at obstruction was unprecedented in 28 years of Hungarian democracy,” Kover said later. Tabled by Fidesz lawmakers, the controversial labour code change hikes the maximum annual overtime hours that employers can demand from 250 to 400 hours. It also triples the time period for calculating overtime payments to three years.

The government argues the changes will benefit both those wanting to work more hours and employers who need more manpower. “We have to remove bureaucratic rules so that those who want to work and earn more can do so,” Orban said Tuesday. —AFP