

International

France accuses Australia, US of 'lying' in escalating crisis

France calls off meeting with Swiss president over jet snub

PARIS: France has accused Australia and the United States of lying over a ruptured Australian contract to buy French submarines, warning a grave crisis was underway between the allies. Australia's decision to break a deal for the French submarines in favor of American nuclear-powered vessels sparked outrage in Paris, with President Emmanuel Macron recalling France's ambassadors to Canberra and Washington in an unprecedented move.

The row has sparked a deep rift in America's oldest alliance and dashed hopes of a post-Donald Trump renaissance in relations between Paris and Washington under President Joe Biden. Speaking to France 2 television, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian gave no indication Paris was prepared to let the crisis die down, using distinctly undiplomatic language towards Australia, the United States and Britain, which is also part of the three-way security pact. "There has been lying, duplicity, a major breach of trust and contempt," Le Drian said. "This will not do."

He described the withdrawal of the ambassadors for the first time in the history of relations with the countries as a "very symbolic" act that aimed "to show how unhappy we are and that there is a serious crisis between us". But Australia has rebuffed French accusations of betrayal, with Defense Minister Peter Dutton insisting Canberra had been "upfront, open and honest" with Paris about its concerns over the deal.

Yesterday, Australian Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said his country had informed the French government "at the earliest available opportunity, before it became public". He told national broadcaster ABC that it was "always going to be a difficult decision" to cancel the French deal. "We don't underestimate the importance now of... ensuring that we re-establish those strong ties with the French government and counterparts long into the future," he added. "Because their ongoing engagement in this region is important."

The third wheel

Le Drian also issued a stinging response to a ques-

tion over why France had not recalled its ambassador to Britain, which was also part of the security pact that led to the rupture. "We have recalled our ambassadors to (Canberra and Washington) to re-evaluate the situation. With Britain, there is no need. We know their constant opportunism. So there is no need to bring our ambassador back to explain," he said.

Of London's role in the pact under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, he added with derision: "Britain in this whole thing is a bit like the third wheel." NATO would have to take account of what has happened as it reconsiders strategy at a summit in Madrid next year, he added. France would now prioritize developing an EU security strategy when it takes on the bloc's presidency at the start of 2022, he said. Admiral Rob Bauer, chair of NATO's Military Committee, earlier played down the dangers, saying it was not likely to have an impact on "military cooperation" within the alliance.

'Resolve our differences'

Biden announced the new Australia-US-Britain defense alliance on Wednesday, in a pact widely seen as aimed at countering the rise of China. It extends American nuclear submarine technology to Australia, as well as cyber-defense,

applied artificial intelligence and undersea capabilities. The move infuriated France, which lost a contract to supply conventional submarines to Australia that was worth Aus\$50 billion (\$36.5 billion, 31 billion euros) when signed in 2016.

Le Drian has described it as a "stab in the back" and said the behavior of the Biden administration had been comparable to that of Trump, whose sudden changes in policy long exasperated European allies. State Department spokesman Ned Price on Saturday stressed the "unwavering" US commitment to its alliance with France. "We hope to continue our discussion on this issue at the senior level in coming days, including at UNGA next week," he said, referring to the United Nations General Assembly, which both Le Drian and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will attend.

Row sparks a deep rift in US oldest alliance



PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron (right) speaks with presidential diplomatic advisor as they take part in the Cedre conference at The Foreign Affairs Ministry in Paris. France has recalled its ambassadors to US, Philippe Etienne, and Australia, Jean-Pierre Thebault, for consultations in a ferocious row over the scrapping of a submarine contract.—AFP

Australia has also shrugged off Chinese anger over its decision to acquire the nuclear-powered submarines, while vowing to defend the rule of law in airspace and waters where Beijing has staked hotly contested claims. Beijing described the new alliance as an "extremely irresponsible" threat to regional stability, questioning Australia's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and warning the Western allies that they risked "shooting themselves in the foot".

France calls off meeting

In another development, a long-planned meeting between the Swiss president and his counterpart in Paris has been called off due to French anger about Bern's decision to purchase US, not French, fighter jets,

media reported yesterday. Two Swiss dailies, Le Matin Dimanche and SonntagsZeitung, reported that the French had pulled the plug on Swiss President and Economic Affairs Minister Guy Parmelin's talks with President Emmanuel Macron in November.

Citing unnamed diplomatic sources, both newspapers said that France had opted to drop the meeting due to anger over how the Swiss had conducted their negotiations in the run-up to their June decision to buy 36 Lockheed Martin F35A jets. According to the sources, Paris charged that the Swiss defense ministry had continued negotiations with other manufacturers, including with French Rafale maker Dassault, after the decision had already been reached to buy the US fighters.—AFP

Amid French fury, UK defends 'hard-headed' security deal

LONDON: Britain's Foreign Secretary yesterday defended the country's new security relationship with Australia and the United States as showing "readiness to be hard-headed in defending our interests," despite more furious reaction from France. As part of the alliance, Australia tore up a deal for French submarines in favor of American nuclear-powered vessels, sparking outrage in Paris which recalled France's ambassadors to Canberra and Washington in an unprecedented move.

Liz Truss wrote in the Sunday Telegraph that the pact, announced this week, "shows our commitment to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region" and demonstrated the government's ambition to build a "Global Britain" following its departure from the European Union. "Our new security pact will not just make us safer at home, it could also create hundreds of new and high-skilled jobs," she wrote.

"By positioning the UK at the heart of a network of economic, diplomatic and security partnerships... we are making our country safer and more competitive, standing up for our values." Truss, who was promoted to the role on Wednesday, said the move highlighted Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "vision for Global Britain". But her French counterpart on Saturday said Britain was a "third wheel" in the deal as he accused Sydney and Washington of lying over the ruptured Australian contract to buy French submarines, warning a grave crisis was underway between the allies.

Speaking to France 2 television, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian gave no indication Paris was prepared to let the crisis die down, using distinctly undiplomatic language towards Australia, the US and Britain.—AFP

Burundi rebel group claims airport attack

NAIROBI: A rebel group has claimed a series of mortar attacks launched overnight on the airport of Bujumbura, Burundi's economic capital, a day before President Evariste Ndayishimiye was due to fly out for the UN General Assembly in New York. The attacks, which did not claim any victims or cause damage, were heard as far away as the city centre late on Saturday.

"We fired several shells towards the Bujumbura international airport," RED-Tabara rebels said overnight on Twitter. "We also had at least an hour-long exchange of fire with the military in one of the positions protecting the airport." An airport official, who refused to be named, told AFP he heard "shell explosions and the firing of automatic weapons" overnight. "We were really scared but it didn't last long," he said. "There is no damage, a Kenya Airways plane even landed this morning without any problem." —AFP

Ex-inmates decry worsening state of NY's 'hellhole' jail

NEW YORK: It's held disgraced producer Harvey Weinstein, rapper Tupac Shakur and ex-IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn: New York's notorious Rikers Island prison is now under intense scrutiny over the deaths of at least nine inmates this year. Officials who visited the high-profile jail this week, and former inmates spoken to by AFP, say conditions have worsened dramatically at the sprawling complex due to widespread staff shortages during the pandemic.

"It's the wild, wild West in there," said Johnny Perez, who was in and out of Rikers between 1996 and 2001 on robbery and gun possession charges. Glenn Martin - who spent three days in Rikers, where he was stabbed four times in an attack, after a shoplifting arrest as a 16-year-old in the late 1980s - calls it a "hellhole."

"It's described as a gladiator school for a reason," the 49-year-old told AFP, listing another of Rikers' monikers: "torture island." Marvin Mayfield, detained for a total of 22 months over two stretches in the 1980s and 2007 for burglary, said Rikers leaves "a stain on the soul of everyone" who goes there. The jail, which opened in 1932 and also housed John Lennon killer Mark David Chapman and the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious, has long had a reputation for

being a hotbed of violence.

Incidents against inmates and guards have in part been blamed on its remote location in the East River between The Bronx and Queens boroughs. But lawmakers and activists say the situation has spiraled out of control in recent months, with conditions becoming unsafe for both prisoners and officers. They say basic sanitary needs are not being met and rates of self-harm are rising. "What I witnessed was a humanitarian crisis. A horror house of abuse and neglect," said New York State assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, who visited this week. "There's garbage everywhere, rotting food with maggots, cockroaches, worms in the showers, human feces and piss," Gallagher tweeted, adding that broken limbs were not being treated. New York City's department of corrections (DOC) says nine people have died at Rikers this year, up from seven last year and three in 2019. Local media has reported 10 deaths in 2021, at least five from suicide. The DOC has been struggling with staffing for months; posts have been unattended with inmates left to fend for themselves.

Closure plans

Some 2,700 guards - almost a third of the city's entire prison force - are currently not working, some because of coronavirus which spread through US jails. Prison officers unions say guards are overworked from triple shifts while others are recovering from the effects of Covid-19 and injuries inflicted by

Haitian migrants' tortuous journey ends in limbo

TAPACHULA: After weeks on the road, traversing mountains and jungles, risking assault and drowning, thousands of Haitian migrants hoping to reach the United States have instead found themselves stranded in Mexico. Many embarked on the journey encouraged by family and friends already living the American dream - but who often failed to mention the dangers that lay in wait. Tens of thousands of migrants, including many Haitians previously living in South America, are stuck in the southern Mexican city of Tapachula, waiting for documents that would allow them to continue.

Those who tire of waiting or run out of money try crossing Mexico anyway, hoping not to be caught by the authorities and deported to Guatemala. But when they reach the border with the United States, they find themselves trapped again. Thousands of migrants, many of them Haitians, are now crowded

under a bridge in Texas after crossing the Rio Grande river, hoping to be allowed into the country. Despite the hardships, migrants keep pouring into southern Mexico from Guatemala.

Fleeing quake fallout

Every night, Murat "Dodo" Tilus wakes with an excruciating pain in his arm - the result of a fall on a Colombian mountain on his way to the United States, where he hopes to join his brother. He set off from Chile with his wife, daughter and two grandchildren on August 8, leaving a country that had welcomed him following the 2010 earthquake that left 200,000 dead in Haiti. "My house collapsed (in the quake), my relatives died, then I decided with my wife to go to another country," the 49-year-old electrician said.

But the "Chilean dream" began to fade in 2018 when the government imposed measures making life harder for migrants. These days in Chile, "it's very difficult to get a work permit. Everything became more expensive, so people want to leave to look for a better life," he said. He and his wife Rose Marie raised about \$5,000 for the journey, setting off by bus. After a month-long odyssey crossing 10 countries, they arrived in Tapachula. Now they



NEW YORK: In this file photo, this aerial image shows the Rikers Island jail complex in the Bronx borough of New York City.—AFP

inmates. They add that many are forced to stay away because conditions have become too dangerous, but officials say some are abusing an unlimited sick leave policy. Mayor Bill de Blasio launched an emergency relief plan for Rikers this week, boosting staffing and implementing 30-day suspensions for officers who go AWOL.

The proposal included emergency contracting to repair broken doors and clean facilities. On Friday, Governor Kathy Hochul announced the immediate release of 191 inmates to help temper what she called a "volatile" situation. The number of inmates at Rikers has fallen from around 20,000 in the 1990s to almost

6,000 today. The vast majority are awaiting trial. They are also overwhelmingly from Black and Hispanic communities. Perez has made return visits for advocacy work and says the jail has not improved since his release. "It's ten times as worse," he said.

In June, the DOC launched initiatives to increase staffing and safety and says it is making "every effort" to improve conditions. Lawyers and criminologists have been calling for the prison's closure for years, citing its age and reputation for violence. It is due to close by 2026 under a \$8.7-billion proposal by de Blasio to replace it with four smaller facilities. But he leaves office at the end of this year.—AFP



TAPACHULA: Haitian and Central American migrants march to the Siglo XXI Migratory Station in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico.—AFP

sleep in a room in a home that they share with four other Haitian families, while they wait for an appointment to process their refugee claim.

It is only thanks to money sent by Tilus's brother that they are not sleeping in the streets like some migrants. The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance is struggling with a backlog

of requests for documents. So far this year, it has arranged about 77,559 permits for migrants, compared with 70,400 for all of 2019. Hundreds of migrants tried to cross Mexico on foot this month in caravans but were blocked by the Mexican authorities. "I want to continue (to the United States) legally," Tilus said.—AFP