



NICE: In this file photo, police officers stand by medical personnel attending a person on the ground in Nice, southern France, next to the lorry that had been driven into crowds of revelers. With the scars and threat of extremist violence looming over France's presidential election, voters will cast ballots under a state of emergency that is becoming a part of the fabric of French life. — AP

FEARS, SCARS OF EXTREMISM LOOM OVER FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

FAR-RIGHT LEADER VOWS TO RID MUSLIMS OF EXTREMISTS

PARIS: The scars of extremist violence run deep in today's France, and the threat of new attacks hangs heavy over the upcoming presidential election. Voters will cast ballots under a state of emergency that is increasingly stitched into the fabric of French life. Yet terrorism is not the No 1 campaign issue for France's two-round presidential election on April 23 and May 7; jobs are. Georges Salines wants to make sure the next president doesn't forget how extremist attacks have damaged France. His daughter Lola was killed when Islamic State fighters stormed Paris' Bataclan theater in November 2015, the deadliest of several attacks to hammer this country since French voters last chose a leader in 2012.

"Mr or Madame President, this question of terrorism is very important, very difficult and we request a comprehensive approach," he says. "You have to act all the time, from the time when the person is in danger of becoming a terrorist to the aftermath of an attack ... you have to act at the international level, the national level, at the local level of the families and even individuals." Lola, a 28-year-old who edited children's books, played the ukulele and adored roller derby, went to the Bataclan for a concert on Nov 13, 2015, and never came home. In the chaos of the attack's ensuing hours, her father and brother launched a desperate search for her on social media.

Extremist attacks

Today, she rests in Paris' Pere-Lachaise cemetery. Extremist attacks on France have claimed more than 230 other lives since 2015. They include cartoonists at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, shoppers at a kosher market, children watching holiday fireworks on the French Riviera, an elderly priest celebrating Mass in Normandy, young people dancing to music. "These are tragedies of enormous importance. And behind one victim, there are many, many other indirect casualties, because we all grieve and suffer the loss of our loved ones," Dr Salines said in his medical office.

He now heads an association, called November 13 - Fraternity and Truth, that has sent a letter to France's 11 presidential candidates asking them to lay out their counterterrorism plans. Those candidates will all compete in the April 23 first-round vote, with the top two vote-getters moving on to the presidential runoff on May 7. Already two attackers have tried to target Paris sites during this presidential campaign - one at the Louvre Museum, the other at Orly Airport. Other, more deadly attacks have hit countries around Europe in recent months.

Far-right leader

Across the political spectrum, the French candidates are pledging more military spending and more robust intelligence -

promises that resonate with an electorate that has gradually shifted to the right on security issues. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen has been the most outspoken, blaming a surge in immigration and lax attitudes toward Islamic fundamentalism for France's recent attacks. She vowed in a speech Monday to crack down on criminals who risk turning to jihad and to rid France's Muslim population of fundamentalists who intimidate peaceful believers. She would add 50,000 soldiers to France's 200,000-strong military and buy more jets, ships and armored vehicles. Independent centrist Emmanuel Macron - whom polls consider the front-runner in the unpredictable race - wants an international initiative to press US social media giants to halt the spread of "Islamist propaganda" and to force internet firms to provide data encryption keys to police when needed in a counterterrorism investigation.

30,000 fake accounts

Facebook said it has targeted 30,000 fake accounts linked to France ahead of the country's presidential election, as part of a worldwide effort against misinformation. It said it has "taken action" against the French accounts, removing sites with the highest traffic. Le Pen, Macron and conservative presidential candidate Francois Fillon all want to boost France's defense spending - and some candidates are talking about reviving the military draft. France's military is on the front line of the fight against Islamic extremism, with operations in Syria, Iraq and Africa's Sahel region, as well as on its own territory.

While tough-on-security rhetoric has become more common among French politicians, French voters aren't necessarily looking for a great protector. Said Frederic Michael, a pollster for Opinion Way. "Unlike in the US, the idea of having a strong leader, a protector of the country, is not among the traits that is most desired for the president of the country. We want him first of all to be honest, and then we want him to be competent, and then to have the stature of a president," Michael said. Fighting extremism will be a top challenge for France's next president, and a complex one, partly because the problem is homegrown.

There are more jihadis from France in the Islamic State group than from any other Western country, including many young French-born men with family origins in France's former colonies in North Africa. Facing dim job prospects and discrimination in poor French suburbs, they are easily wooed by charismatic recruiters online. But violence in France and elsewhere in recent years has shown that there's no single profile of a potential attacker. Some jihadis worked in groups, others worked alone. Their motivations and methods are so varied that authorities admit they can't protect everything all the time. Cracking down too hard is also controversial. — AP

FRANCE'S PRESIDENTIAL RACE TIGHTENS FURTHER

PARIS: France's presidential race looked tighter than it has all year yesterday, nine days before voting starts, as one poll put all four main candidates within touching distance of the two-person run-off round. The Ipsos-Sopra Sterna poll for daily Le Monde showed centrist Emmanuel Macron and far-right leader Marine Le Pen tied on 22 percent each in the April 23 first round, with the far-left's Jean-Luc Melenchon and conservative Francois Fillon on 20 and 19 percent respectively. That 3 percentage point gap among the top four was within the poll's margin of error, suggesting the election is wide open.

Were he to qualify for the second round on May 7, Macron is still seen winning whoever his opponent is, but the most striking trend of the past days has been Melenchon's sharp rise in first round voting intentions since performing well in two TV debates in late March and early April. A second poll published on Friday showed a bigger, six-point gap separating the four main players in a first-round field of 11 candidates. The daily survey by Opinionway had Macron as leader on 23 percent and Melenchon the laggard on 17. Melenchon's progress is, however, worrying investors in view of his hostility to the European Union and plans to repeal pro-business labor reforms. Opinion polls show that, should he reach the second round, he could win against Fillon or Le Pen.

Polls have consistently shown that Le Pen, who is also hostile to the EU and wants to dump the euro currency, would not win the presidency whoever she faced in the run-off. French judges investigating her alleged misuse of EU funds to pay for party assistants have asked for her parliamentary immunity to be lifted, though her legal woes have not been as harmful to her in the polls as the allegations of nepotism that have plagued Fillon's campaign. The Le Monde poll was conducted on April 12 and 13 among 1,509 people. — Reuters

LIBYAN RIVALS CLASH IN NEGLECTED SOUTH

TRIPOLI: Libya's southern desert, long neglected by central authorities, risks becoming an arena for score-settling between rival governments vying for clout across the war-torn country, analysts say. Clashes erupted last week as forces loyal to Libya's eastern authorities battled to seize a key southern airbase from militias that back a United Nations-endorsed unity government.

The offensive by the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by military strongman Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar threatened to trigger a broader conflict with forces allied to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). The unity government, the rival administration in eastern Libya and their respective backers are battling for influence in the North African country which has been wracked by chaos since the fall of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

So far tensions between the two sides had been mainly limited to the country's north. But last week, the LNA launched an offensive on the Tamenhant airbase on the outskirts of the city of Sebha. The most important airbase in the south, it is a base for the "Third Force", one of several powerful pro-GNA militias from the western city of Misrata. Haftar's LNA "wants to achieve a victory in the southern region of Fezzan to boost its position & GNA is mobilizing to prevent that", analyst Mohamed Eljarh of the Atlantic Council tweeted.

Potential for clashes

The UN-backed government, which both Haftar and Libya's eastern-based parliament have refused to recognize, has announced a counter-offensive against the LNA. World powers this week sounded the alarm over the clashes, and in a joint statement, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council called for de-escalation. "We underline the difference between acts against the terrorist threat and acts that can lead to further deterioration of the situation in Libya," they said.

To date, the unity government had largely avoided displaying open hostility towards Haftar, who is accused of wanting to establish a military dictatorship in Libya. But "local armed groups and tribes could be caught into this fight and things could spiral out of control," said Mattia Toaldo, a Libya specialist at the European Council on Foreign Relations. — AFP