

FRONTRUNNER LE PEN HARDENS TONE AS CAMPAIGN NEARS END

STRESSES THREATS OF IMMIGRATION AND TERRORISM

PARIS: Far-right presidential frontrunner Marine Le Pen said yesterday that French people felt "dispossessed" in their own country as she stressed the threats of immigration and terrorism in the final days of campaigning. The 48-year-old former lawyer has spent years trying to broaden support for her National Front party, but she has signaled a return to the core concerns of many of her supporters in recent speeches.

Speaking on BFM television yesterday, Le Pen emphasized how she would pull France out of the European Union, slash immigration, make it harder to get French nationality and crack down on suspected Islamists. "French people have the feeling of being dispossessed of their identity, of their social security system and their sovereignty," Le Pen told the channel.

Polls show a four-way race developing ahead of the first round of the election on Sunday between Le Pen, 39-year-old centrist Emmanuel

Macron, conservative Francois Fillon and far-left firebrand Jean-Luc Melenchon. Two of them are expected to advance to a run-off vote on May 7. After a string of Islamist-inspired assaults in France since 2015, security concerns moved to the centre of the campaign Tuesday following the arrests of two French men suspected of preparing an attack to disrupt the election.

Le Pen has proposed expelling any foreigner convicted of a crime or suspected of being radicalized. Convicted extremists with dual nationality would also be stripped of their French passports. "The measures that I want to put in place would mean that many of these people (Islamist attackers) would not have been on our territory or living freely," she told BFM, repeating a claim from a speech on Sunday night.

French voters have so far been more concerned about unemployment and their spending power than terrorism or security, polls show, though analysts warn this would change quickly

in the event of violence. The two arrested suspects, who were found in Marseille with a cache of weapons and explosives, were being questioned in the southern city yesterday where Le Pen is set to appear later at a rally. Left-leaning Le Monde newspaper warned that Le Pen's claim that she would have prevented attacks that have claimed hundreds of lives was "absurd." "You don't seek votes on the backs of dead people. It's a sort of moral red line," the newspaper said.

Future of EU at stake

Some analysts have also depicted the French election as a sort of referendum on the European Union, with Le Pen proposing to pull France out of the 28-member club and scrap the euro common currency. On Tuesday night, she insisted that the TF1 television channel remove the blue-and-yellow European flag from behind her before an interview. But Melenchon, her



LONS-LE-SAUNIER: French presidential election candidate for the far-left coalition La France insoumise Jean-Luc Melenchon (C) poses for a picture as he visits "Trivolution", a workshop dedicated to industrial recycling. — AFP

euro-sceptic far-left opponent, sought to soften his position on Tuesday night, stating that he did not seek to end the European Union or the euro despite criticising the "ultra-liberal" trading bloc for years. "Don't believe what they tell you, 'He wants to leave Europe, the euro... let's be serious,'" he told supporters on Tuesday night.

The Communist-backed candidate has pledged to renegotiate some of the founding treaties of the bloc, however, which would cast serious doubt on the viability of the postwar project of integrating the continent. Polls show that a majority of French people still support the EU and the euro. — AFP

BRITAIN SET FOR ELECTION IN SHADOW OF BREXIT

LONDON: British lawmakers yesterday overwhelmingly backed Prime Minister Theresa May's call for a snap election, paving the way for a June vote she hopes will give her a "mandate to complete Brexit". The House of Commons voted by 522 to 13 to hold a general election on June 8 — plunging Britain back into political uncertainty just weeks before the start of negotiations on leaving the European Union. May stunned the country on Tuesday when she announced her plan for an early vote, despite having repeatedly said she would wait until the next election scheduled in 2020.

In fiery exchanges in the House of Commons yesterday, May said an early election would strengthen her hand against domestic critics seeking to "frustrate the process" of Brexit, which formally began last month. "I will be asking the British people for a mandate to complete Brexit and to make a success of it," the Conservative leader said, to cheers from her lawmakers sitting behind her. Riding high in the opinion polls, May is seeking to increase her slim majority of 17 in the 650-seat Commons before the battles begin with the EU over Britain's exit bill and future trade and immigration ties.

She insists an early election would provide "certainty and stability" in the negotiations, which will now start after the vote. In a sign of the key campaign issues ahead, May traded barbs in the Commons with opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, whose party is deeply divided and languishing up to 20 points behind the Conservatives. Corbyn accused the government of "broken promises" on health, education and the economy during its seven years in office. May hit back that Labour offered only "bankruptcy and chaos", but denied she was complacent, saying: "We will be out there fighting for every vote."

'Election landslide'

British elections are fixed in law but can be changed with a two-thirds majority in the Commons—a threshold easily passed during yesterday's vote. All sides are now gearing up for the fourth major election in four years, after last June's shock referendum vote for Brexit, the 2015 general election, and the 2014 Scottish independence vote.

Brexit will dominate the campaign, with May—who took office after David Cameron resigned following the EU vote-seeking public backing for her plan to pull Britain out of Europe's single market. A European Commission spokesman said the "real political" negotiations on Brexit will start after the election. Three weekend opinion polls put the Conservatives about 20 points ahead of Labour, and if translated into votes, this could give May an "election landslide" with a majority of more than 100, according to an analysis by The Times.

May, Britain's second female prime minister, also has strong popular support for her handling of the political earthquake unleashed by Brexit. By contrast Labour is wracked by divisions, over Brexit and Corbyn's left-wing leadership, which is opposed by many of his more centrist MPs. So far, Labour's stance on Brexit has been to allow the government to go ahead with the EU divorce, but only under certain conditions, such as retaining strong economic ties with the bloc.

That approach risks satisfying neither its traditional working-class supporters, many of whom backed leaving the EU, or its urban, pro-European members—leaving many commentators predicting an electoral bloodbath. Three Labour MPs have already announced they will not stand again. Former Conservative finance minister George Osborne, a powerful voice in favour of Britain's EU membership during the referendum campaign, also said he would not seek re-election. — AFP

MCDONALD'S ORDER TRIPS UP FACEBOOK SLAYING SUSPECT

CLEVELAND: Facebook slaying suspect Steve Stephens was undone by a 20-piece Chicken McNuggets and an order of fries. The man who police say shot a Cleveland retiree at random and posted video of the killing on Facebook pulled up to the drive-thru window of a McDonald's restaurant outside Erie, Pennsylvania, and waited for his order. It was late Tuesday morning, almost lunchtime, and authorities were in the third day of an intensive manhunt for Stephens.

Now, more than 100 miles from the shooting, his time on the run was nearly up. The attendant who took his money recognized the suspect and dialed 911. Stephens pulled up to the next window, where restaurant owner Thomas DuCharme Jr. and a supervisor tried stalling him by telling him his fries were delayed. Stephens didn't want to wait. He took his McNuggets and whipped out of the parking lot, nearly hitting Gail Wheeler, 54, a retail operations manager from Erie who was on her way home from the grocery store.

"Two seconds later, I hear these sirens, and they come whipping past me," she told The Associated Press. Wheeler followed behind for a couple miles. She said the chase slowed suddenly from 50 mph to about 20 mph when the road narrowed from four lanes to two. One of the pursuing troopers picked his spot — in front of an abandoned school — and hit Stephens' bumper to get him to stop. The Ford Fusion did a half-turn and came to rest at the curb. Police were starting to get out of their cruisers when "I heard a shot. It was loud and distinctive," Wheeler said. — AP

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