

FRENCH MILITARY TO BOOST DEFENSE AGAINST CYBER ATTACKS

PARIS: France is no less vulnerable than the United States to cyber attacks from foreign countries and the French military will boost its resources to defend against them, the French defense minister said yesterday. In an interview with French weekly Le Journal du Dimanche Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said there is a real risk of cyber attacks on French civil infrastructure such as water, electricity, telecommunications and transport, as well as against French democracy and the media. US intelligence agencies said in a report released on Friday that Russian President Vladimir Putin had directed a cyber campaign to help Republican Donald Trump's electoral chances by discrediting

Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Asked whether France was immune from such attacks, Le Drian said "No, of course not, we should not be naïve." France will hold presidential elections in April-May and leading conservative challenger Francois Fillon has said he wants to improve relations with Russia and has been praised by Putin. Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen also favors closer relations with Russia. French-Russian relations have been strained by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014 and over Russia's role in the war in Syria. Outgoing socialist French President Francois Hollande has cancelled the sale

of warships to Russia, and played a key role in imposing sanctions on Russia over Crimea.

Le Drian said that if the US election had indeed been manipulated, it would be an unbearable interference, as targeting a country's electoral means attacking its democratic foundations and its sovereignty. "Our services have discussed the subject, if only to learn lessons for the future," said Le Drian, who also referred to a cyber attack on French TV station TV5Monde in 2015. In April 2015, hackers knocked the station off the air. French judicial sources told Reuters later that Russian hackers linked to the Kremlin could have been behind the attack.

Le Drian said the number of cyber attacks against his ministry doubled every year and that in 2016 about 24,000 external attacks had been blocked by security, including attempts at disrupting France's drone systems.

France should not only be able to defend itself against cyber attacks but should also be able to strike itself when necessary, Le Drian said. He said the French army's number of "digital soldiers" would be doubled to 2,600 by 2019, with support of an additional 600 cyber experts. Le Drian said that in case of a cyber attack, the country could respond in kind as well as with conventional weapons. —Reuters



LISBON: A big portrait of the historic socialist leader and former Portuguese President Mario Soares is displayed on a facade of the Portuguese Socialist party headquarters in Lisbon yesterday one day after his death. —AFP

PORTUGAL'S DEMOCRACY FOUNDER MARIO SOARES DIES AGED 92

'RARE LEADER TO HAVE REAL STATURE IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD'

LISBON: Portugal's former president Mario Soares, widely seen as the father of the country's modern-day democracy, died Saturday aged 92 a fortnight after being admitted to hospital. The founder of Portugal's Socialist party, Soares spent decades in politics and spearheaded the country's entry into the European Union. He was president from 1986 to 1996 after serving as foreign minister and prime minister, and later became a European lawmaker.

Portugal declared three days of national mourning from Monday and his state funeral will be held Tuesday, the presidential office said. "We have lost today someone who has so many times been the face and the voice of our freedom, for which he fought all his life," said the country's current prime minister and fellow Socialist Antonio Costa. Soares had been admitted to hospital in Lisbon on Dec 13, and although his condition initially showed signs of some improvement, he later fell into a deep coma from which he never recovered.

The hospital did not reveal the precise cause of Soares's death, but relatives say he never fully overcame a spate of illnesses in 2013. His health further deteriorated after his wife's death in July 2015. The new United Nations secretary-general, ex-Portuguese premier Antonio Guterres, hailed Soares as "one of the rare political leaders who had real stature in both Europe and the world." Former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff said that Soares was "adored by the people and respected by his adversaries."

'Fighter for freedom'

Born in Lisbon on December 7, 1924, Mario Alberto Nobre Lopes Soares was raised in a family opposed to the dictatorship of Antonio Oliveira Salazar. His father Joao Soares, a defrocked priest, struggled against the regime for decades, suffering long periods of imprisonment and exile. Reassuringly portly, Mario Soares was both a charmer and a humanist known for being spontaneous and warm. A self-defined agnostic, Soares said he believed in "humanity and its improvement", and described himself as being driven by "a great desire to live and by immense curiosity".

"I am a poor man who has been fortunate to have taken stands and to have been right," he told the "I" newspaper in February 2015. His biggest achievement as premier was negotiating Portugal's entry in 1986 into the European Economic Community, the precursor to the European Union. Several politicians, including Costa and President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, had visited Soares in hospital in recent weeks and news of his death brought emotional tributes from all political sides.

"He was a fighter for freedom," said conservative leader Rebelo de Sousa, adding that Portugal must fight for "the immortality of his legacy." "It is a sad day for all Portuguese," added the head of the centre-right opposition Pedro Passos Coelho. There was also sorrow on the streets of Lisbon on Saturday. "His death saddens me. Even in his old age, he was someone who said what he thought," said Paula

Cabecadas, a 60-year-old bookseller. "For me he was like a dinosaur: this huge figure from the past who will be hard to match in the future," said 22-year-old student Miguel Pinto.

Critic of austerity

On the international stage, Soares was also seen as a political giant, "a great European" and the "decisive figure for Portuguese democracy," said Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Soares was "the symbol and the artisan of resistance to the dictatorship and the transition of his country to democracy," said European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker. French President Francois Hollande said Portugal's democracy had lost "one of its heroes; Europe, one of its great leaders; and France, a faithful friend." European Parliament head Martin Schulz described Soares as "more than historical figure: he's an inspiration. He advanced freedom, equality and dignity."

While Soares retired from public life for several months after a crushing presidential election defeat in 2006, he appeared regularly in the media to comment on current affairs. He emerged as a fierce critic of the steep spending cuts Portugal was forced to implement under a 78-billion-euro bailout deal reached in 2011 with the EU and IMF to avert bankruptcy. Soares accused big European nations at the time of being guided by "savage capitalism." He made a final public appearance in July, when he attended a ceremony held in his honor by the ruling Socialist-led government. Visibly frail, he did not make a speech. —AFP

GERMANY'S GROWING ISLAMIST SCENE POSES GREATER CHALLENGES

BERLIN: Germany's domestic security chief warned yesterday that the country's radical Islamist scene is not only growing, but becoming more decentralized, posing greater challenges to surveillance operations. In an interview with national news agency DPA, Hans-Georg Maassen also defended security officials under fire after it emerged that Berlin truck attack suspect Anis Amri had slipped through their net, saying they had done everything they could.

Overall, the number of Salafists-or fundamentalist Sunni Muslims-in Germany has risen to more than 9,700, sharply up from 3,800 people in 2011, said Maassen. "It's of great concern to us that this scene is not only growing, but it is also very diversified. There is not just one, two, three or four people who have a say," he warned. "Rather, there are many people who dominate this Salafist scene. And all these people have to be watched." While in the past, there were a few people who wielded influence, today, there are many small clusters formed by individuals.

"So you can no longer talk about a Salafist scene as a whole, but you have to

deal with many hotspots. That makes things more difficult for us, because we can no longer just watch a few people. We have to monitor many groups," he said. In a defense of security officials under pressure for failing to stop Amri, Maassen said that although officers had watched the Tunisian over a long period of time, they found no evidence to arrest him. "I believe that the security forces, in particular the police, have done everything in their power to assess the danger posed by Amri. But it is also clear that we live under the rule of law, and the legal framework must be respected," he said.

Amri, 24, who was shot dead by Italian police days after ramming a truck into a crowded Christmas market, had been under surveillance since March. But German police dropped their watch in September thinking he was a small-time drug dealer. Public anger also mounted as the rejected asylum seeker and known radical Islamist should have been deported long ago. In the wake of the attack, Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that "the Amri case raises questions" and ordered a sweeping review of Germany's security apparatus. —AFP

SEYCHELLES' FIRST PRESIDENT MANCHAM DIES

VICTORIA, Seychelles: Seychelles' founding president James Mancham, who spent only a year in office before being ousted in a coup, died yesterday aged 77, his nephew and staff said. The former politician and lawyer, who spent his years in retirement writing several books and promoting his island nation, was found dead at home. "This morning his wife told us that Mancham was not moving and we did the necessary to get him transported to hospital," one of his security guards Philippe Figaro said.

"Doctors confirmed he was dead," said the former president's nephew Derick Pothin. Mancham, who initially opposed the Indian Ocean archipelago's breakaway from British rule, won the country's first election by a small margin in 1976. A year later he was overthrown in a bloodless coup by his prime minister, France-Albert Rene, while he was attending a Commonwealth conference in London. Rene set up a one-party socialist state.

In 1981 South African mercenaries led by notorious British soldier-for-hire in Africa Colonel "Mad Mike" Hoare planned a coup to return the pro-Western Mancham to power. The group entered the country disguised as a beer-drinking tourist party called "The Ancient Order of Froth-Blowers." However their plan came undone when an airport inspector found a weapon in their luggage and a gunfight broke out. The men then hijacked an Air India flight and forced the pilot to take them to Durban in South Africa to escape.

South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission later



SEYCHELLES: This picture shows then Seychelles' Prime Minister James Mancham speaking in Paris after receiving the Legion d'Honneur. —AFP

found the apartheid government-keen to do away with leftist powers on the continent-had been involved in planning the attack. After his ouster, Mancham fled into exile until 1993, when multi-party democracy was restored in the islands. Mancham again vied for the presidency in 1998 but lost to Rene. The Seychelles comprise some 115 islands scattered off the east coast of Africa, whose white sandy beaches and turquoise waters have made it a magnet for wealthy foreigners, some of whom also enjoy the country's reputation as a tax haven. —AFP

ISRAEL APOLOGIZES OVER THREATS TO TAKE DOWN UK MINISTER

LONDON: The Israeli embassy in London sought to head off a diplomatic storm yesterday, apologizing after one of its staff was caught on camera threatening to "take down" a British government minister. The Mail yesterday's newspaper posted the footage showing the embassy employee telling an undercover reporter from Al-Jazeera that "I want to take down... the Deputy Foreign Minister" (Alan Duncan) — a long-time critic of Israel, and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's second-in-command. Duncan was "doing a lot of problems," he added.

The embassy issued an immediate apology, saying it "rejects the remarks concerning Minister Duncan, which are completely unacceptable." "The comments were made by a junior embassy employee who is not an Israeli diplomat, and who will be ending his term of employment with the embassy shortly," it added. Ambassador Mark Regev apologized personally to Duncan on Friday, according to the embassy. Britain's Foreign Office confirmed they had received an apology, and that it now considered "the matter closed".

The footage was recorded at a restaurant opposite the Israeli embassy in Kensington, west London, during a meeting attended by Maria Strizzolo, senior aide to Conservative Education Minister Robert Halfon. Strizzolo spoke of her influence in helping Halfon become a minister, prompting the embassy staffer to ask her "can you do the opposite stuff as well?" However, Strizzolo said Duncan would be "impossible to rebuff" due to having powerful "friends", but then suggested "a little scandal, maybe?" The embassy employee also called foreign office chief Johnson an "idiot" and mocked "crazy" opposition Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn and his "weirdo" supporters. —AFP

HISTORIC CYPRUS PEACE IN BALANCE AT GENEVA TALKS

NICOSIA: Rival Cypriot leaders resume UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva today billed as a historic opportunity to end a decades-long conflict on the divided island, but the outcome is far from certain. Both Turkish- and Greek-speaking sides concede all key issues remain unre-

solved but the UN is pulling out all the stops to get a deal over the line. "It is a real possibility that 2017 will be the year when the Cypriots, themselves, freely decide to turn the page of history," United Nations envoy Espen Barth Eide said in his New Year's message.



CYPRUS: A handout picture released by the Presidency of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTCB), shows Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci (C-L) and his spouse walk down the red carpet at Ercan Airport in the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. —AFP

But some experts believe that Geneva is a disaster waiting to happen because Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders are still worlds apart on the most crucial sticking points such as property, territorial adjustments and security. "I will be surprised if there is a comprehensive agreement given the difficulties," Andreas Theophanous, head of the Cyprus Centre for European and International Affairs, said.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkish troops invaded the island in response to an Athens-inspired coup seeking union with Greece. It has always been agreed that some of the territory currently controlled by the Turkish Cypriots will be ceded to Greek Cypriot control in any peace deal. Turkish Cypriots made up just 18 percent of the island's population in 1974, but they currently control more than a third of its territory. Just how much and which land they should give up has hampered four decades of peace talks.

'Real opportunity'

Years of inter-community violence, which culminated with the Turkish invasion and subsequent declaration of a republic on Cyprus' northern third, saw thousands from both sides flee their homes-and they remain displaced to this day. The territory issue is so vital because

both Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci will have to sell any final agreement to their respective sides via twin popular votes.

They remain far apart on how many Greek Cypriots should be able to return to homes they fled in 1974, with Akinci determined to minimize the number of Turkish Cypriots who would be displaced for a second time. And a summit planned for January 12 in Geneva of Cyprus' so-called guarantor powers-Greece, Turkey and former colonial master Britain-will not go ahead unless the leaders agree on final territory swaps.

"I expect neither a success nor a failure but the beginning of a series of final round talks under the participation of the guarantor powers with 'observers' invited from the EU and Security Council," Hubert Faustmann, professor of history and political science at the University of Nicosia, said. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and British Prime Minister Theresa May on Saturday agreed in a phone call that the Geneva talks were a "real opportunity" to end Cyprus' division. But there are also differences over post-solution security arrangements with Anastasiades wanting the tens of thousands of Turkish troops on the island to leave but Akinci insistent on a Turkish military presence. —AFP