

International

Skepticism in France as Macron launches 'great national debate'

'I intend to transform anger into solutions'

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron faced a battle yesterday to convince the skeptical French of his latest move to quell "yellow vest" anger as he kickstarted a two-month national debate on his policies. Macron, who is struggling to end the biggest crisis of his presidency, on Sunday set out 35 questions to be debated in towns and villages across the country between January 15 and March 15.

"We won't agree on everything, that's normal, that's democracy. But at least we'll show we're a people that is not afraid to talk, exchange and debate," he wrote in his "letter to the French". The missive followed a ninth consecutive Saturday of nationwide "yellow vest" rallies which saw an uptick in turnout but less violence than previous demonstrations over the past two months. Macron hopes that returning to more participative democracy — a key feature of his 2017 grassroots election campaign — will satisfy the protesters' demands for a greater say in the running of the country.

"I intend to transform anger into solutions," he wrote, promising "a new contract for the nation". But he made clear there was no question of him resigning, saying the debates, which will revolve around taxation, democracy, the environment and immigration, were "neither an election nor a referendum". Within the ranks of the "yellow vests", reactions were mixed, with some welcoming Macron's letter but many calling it a government smoke-screen.

"A debate means discussing everything. When you say we're going to debate, but not about that, that, that and that...that's called 'shut up and listen to me,'" Maxime Nicolle, one of the movement's most prominent figures,

said in a YouTube video. In its editorial yesterday, the left-wing Liberation daily called the missive an attempt by Macron "to save the three years he has left" as president. "The exercise is all the more perilous given the mood in the country, which is extremely grumpy," the paper added. In an Odoxa-Dentsu poll published last week, 32 percent of respondents said they would take part in the debate but 70 percent said they did not believe it would lead to significant change.

Taxes, environment

The questions that will be debated include: "Which taxes do you think should be lowered first?", "Should some public services that are out of date or too expensive be eliminated?", "What concrete proposals do you think would accelerate our environmental transition?" and "Should we use more referendums?" A question about immigration asked: "Once our asylum obligations are fulfilled, do you want parliament to be able to set annual targets?"

While Macron assured that there were "no forbidden questions", he did say that there was no question of bringing back the death penalty, banning abortion or ending the right to seek asylum. He also said the government would not revisit steps taken "to encourage investment and make work pay more" — seen as a slapdown of the "yellow vests" demand for him to reinstate the fortune tax he partly repealed last year for high earners.

The hard-left France Unbowed party, which has been vying with the far-right National Rally to be seen as chief champion of the "yellow vests" cause, accused him of pre-determining the outcome. "The people may



LE MANS: A protestor carries a placard depicting a cigarette pack and reading "Macron seriously harms health" as he stands in tear gas smoke during an anti-government demonstration called by the "Yellow Vest" (Gilets Jaunes) movement. — AFP

debate, but Jupiter decides," Eric Coquerel, a France Unbowed MP tweeted, referring to Macron mockingly by his nickname, the king of the gods in Roman times. Macron has promised to report back on the consultation

a month after the debates wind up. Today, he will embark on a tour of town-hall meetings around the country, the first of which will be held with local mayors in Bourgtheroulde in northwest France. — AFP

Soaring sexual violence pushes S Leone to face 'rape culture'

FREETOWN: "Mary" was nine years old when her childhood abruptly ended. Three men fed her sedatives then raped her. Her mother, who had been washing clothes in a stream near their home in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, got home to find her child lying on the ground distraught, her legs and dress stained with blood. "They put dirty clothes in my mouth and raped me," the girl told AFP, without giving her real name.

The family reported the attack to the police and identified the rapists, but no charges were ever brought. Thousands of children and young girls were raped last year in Sierra Leone — a silent epidemic of suffering in one of the world's poorest countries. According to police statistics, recorded cases of sexual and gender-based violence almost doubled last year, reaching 8,505 in a population of 7.5 million, up from 4,750 a year earlier. And of that number, 2,579 cases — around a third — involved the rape of a minor. But, as with the incidence of rape in almost every country, this shocking tally is almost certainly an understatement. "Mary" and her family plucked up the courage to report the crime: many do not.

'Culture of rape'

"We have a culture of rape in Sierra Leone," admitted Cherner Bah of the UN's Global Education First Initiative at a demonstration in Freetown last month where more than 500 black-clad protesters took to the streets over violence against women. "The rape of minors is a national problem," rally organiser Asma James said. "The situation is sad, selfish, barbaric and inhuman and requires all of us, women and men, to speak up."

Just weeks before, the country had been shaken by the rape of a five-year-old girl by her 28-year-old relative. Her attacker raped her anally, crippling her spine. Doctors at the Aberdeen Women's Centre in Freetown, which helps women and girls who have suffered from sexual violence and rape, said it was unlikely the child would ever be able to walk again. The attack sparked outrage, with many people demanding that child rapists face a lifetime behind bars — calls echoed by President Julius Maada Bio himself. "Let me be very clear: men who rape girls deserve to be jailed for life," Bio said as his wife launched a campaign called "Hands off Our Girls".

Most victims under 15

Reports of rape and the sexual penetration of minors, as child rape is legally termed, have steadily increased, according to the Freetown-based Rainbo Initiative, which provides free medical services and counseling to victims of sexual and gender-based violence. Figures collated by the centre show that in 2018, 76 percent of rape victims were aged 15 years or younger — including babies. The rest of the victims were aged between 16 and 20. And

every month, an average of 149 victims fell pregnant as a result of rape. "Children are brought to our centers in tattered clothes covered with blood stains," executive director Daniel Kettor told AFP.

In Freetown alone, there were 1,491 cases of sexual abuse reported between January and October 2018, with the youngest victim just seven months old and the oldest aged 85. "Amongst the survivors, six were HIV-positive and 484 fell pregnant after being raped," Kettor said. Doctors at the centre examine the victims, looking for evidence of sperm specimens and blood stains around the genital area before providing them with a medical certificate which is necessary for police to open an investigation.

Rape and war

Those looking for an explanation of Sierra Leone's rape crisis often turn to the country's violent recent past. During a 10-year civil war (1991-2001), thousands of women and girls were subjected to widespread and systematic sexual violence and rape, a 2003 Human Rights Watch report found. In this pervasive environment, there has been little headway toward rooting out attitudes of sexual predation and prosecuting rapists. "Sexual violence against women and girls is a prevalent and destructive practice that still has deep roots in the country, despite various initiatives to eliminate it," Commissioner of Sierra Leone's Law Reform Commission Rhoda Suffian-Kargbo Nuni told AFP. Many attacks go unpunished, and those that are reported often fail to end in indictments or make it through Sierra Leone's judicial system, rights groups and police say.

Court records show that in 2018, only 26 rape cases were successfully prosecuted and led to a conviction. Some cases fail to make it to court due to a lack of adequate facilities to carry out DNA tests to secure the necessary evidence. Others never get off the ground because the victims simply cannot afford the legal costs. "The police have limited resources to investigate sexual and gender abuse," says Superintendent Fatmata Daboh, who heads the Family Support Unit. "Many cases are settled out of court or without going to trial due to the lack of a forensic science lab to prove evidence."

A pledge for change

Sierra Leone's Human Rights Commission in 2017 highlighted systemic failures, including "inefficiencies and corruption in the judicial system" for many cases being settled out of court or never going to trial. Legally, rape is a criminal offence which carries a jail term of between five and 15 years, according to the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 — a law that Sierra Leone reworked and toughened specifically to combat sexual predators. But such sentences are rare. — AFP

Regional lawmaker is Germany's first transgender MP

BERLIN: Lawmakers returning to the Bavarian regional parliament after elections three months ago will find a transgender woman colleague, Tessa Ganserer, on the benches where Markus Ganserer previously sat. Ganserer is believed to be the first transgender person in Germany to hold a regional or national MP's seat, or to change their gender while in office. Just a few weeks after coming out on social media to a burst of publicity, the 41-year-old will make a first appearance before the press Monday to discuss her change of identity. Long a laggard on social issues, some abrupt changes have taken place in Germany in recent years.

Parliament legislated last month for a third gender on birth certificates after a Constitutional Court decision that the documents must respect intersex people. And in summer 2017, MPs pushed through gay marriage after Chancellor Angela Merkel said she would not whip her party on the subject. While Ganserer won her Bavarian parliament seat in October, in the United States Democratic party candidate Christine Hallquist recently failed in her bid to become the first transgender woman governor in Vermont.

'Madam regional MP'

"I am a woman with every fiber of my body and now Madam regional MP as well," Ganserer posted on her Facebook account in early January, announcing her intention to sit in parliament as a woman. Just a few weeks ago, she had said both Markus and Tessa remained a part of her. But from now on she hopes to live as a female politician, wife and mother of two children. While Bavaria is a strongly conservative and mostly Catholic region, the president of the regional parliament Ilse Aigner of the Christian Social Union (CSU) backed the change.

"Mrs Ganserer has taken a very brave and highly personal decision," Aigner said. The CSU usually takes very conservative positions on social questions and opposed the federal gay marriage law. "Our male colleague is becoming a female colleague, that should not be a problem in this house," Aigner said in a public statement after speaking with Ganserer. "A person's personality is always more important than their gender." At the first plenary session of the year from January 23, the Greens party MP — first elected in 2013 and reelected last October — will be registered as a woman.

Protests 'will not change government', says Bashir

KHARTOUM: Defiant Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir said yesterday that ongoing protests will not lead to a change in government, as he addressed a rally of cheering supporters in war-torn Darfur. "Demonstrations will not change the government," Bashir told crowds of supporters gathered in Niyala, the capital of South Darfur state, where just a day ago police had broken up an anti-government demonstration, state television reported.

"There's only one road to power and that is through the ballot box. The Sudanese people will decide in 2020 who will govern them," said Bashir, who is planning to run for the presidency for the third time in elections to be held next year. Deadly protests have rocked Sudan since December 19 when angry crowds took to the streets in towns and villages against a government decision to raise the price of bread.

At least 24 people have died in the protests, which swiftly turned into nationwide anti-government rallies, with protesters calling on Bashir to step down. "Sudan has many enemies and those enemies have few people among us who don't want stability and security," said Bashir, with state television broadcasting footage showing him waving his trademark



KHARTOUM: Supporters of Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir wave Sudanese flags during a rally for him in the Green Square in the capital. — AFP

as supporters chanted "stay, stay". "We will not allow anyone to destroy our homeland by looting and burning our properties," said Bashir. In the initial days of protests, several buildings and offices of Bashir's ruling National Congress Party were set on fire in towns and villages. On Sunday, the first anti-government demonstrations were held in Niyala and El-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur.

'Economic problems'

Darfur, a region the size of France, has been torn by violence since 2003 when ethnic minority rebels took up arms against Khartoum's Arab-dominated government, accusing it of economic and political marginal-

ization. About 300,000 people have been killed in the conflict and another 2.5 million displaced, according to the United Nations. Most of those displaced still live in sprawling camps. Bashir, who seized power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989, has been charged by the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) with genocide and war crimes allegedly committed in Darfur.

Yesterday, he reiterated that Sudan faced "economic problems," but they could not be solved by looting and burning of properties. Sudanese security agents, meanwhile, stopped a group of journalists in Khartoum from holding a sit in to protest the banning of a newspaper this week, witnesses said. — AFP



MUNICH: This combination of pictures created on January 14, 2019 shows Markus Ganserer (L), a member of Bavarian State Parliament posing for a photographer at the Bavarian state Parliament on July 06, 2017 in Munich, and at (R) transgender woman Tessa Ganserer giving a press conference. — AFP

'Getting used to it'

Among fellow MPs, "many definitely still have to get used to it," Aigner said. One member of the pro-business FDP cried "what are you playing at here? A drag queen?" when he first saw Ganserer in a long blonde wig and makeup in the Munich chamber, daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) reported. As for her official identity papers, Ganserer has a little longer to wait.

In late November, she received a medical certificate from a psychiatrist confirming she is transgender. German law requires two medical opinions to back a name change in the official register. Securing that step "meant getting my real birth certificate to me", Ganserer told the SZ. While she has made little public comment, she told the paper that she "discovered" herself as a woman around ten years ago when looking in the mirror wearing a dress.

Since then, she has picked her way through different roles: as man, father, husband, woman, wife, and mother. Now, her doubts are so far gone that she has told her sons, 11 and 6, that "from now on I will always be like this". "Children don't have prejudices. If you present the world to them in a friendly way, they will accept it as it is," Ganserer said. She doesn't plan to undergo any medical procedures, but to mark the definitive arrival of Tessa, Ganserer took a major step: she packed all her ties, shirts and suit jackets into bags and gave them away. — AFP