

International

French apex court backs closure of Muslim NGO for 'inciting hatred'

President vows to crack down on radical Islamist activity

PARIS: France's highest administrative court yesterday rejected appeals against the dissolution of a Muslim NGO and the six-month shuttering of a mosque ordered by the government after the beheading of a teacher by an Islamist radical. President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to crack down on radical Islamist activity in France following the October 16 murder of teacher Samuel Paty who had showed his class cartoons of the Prophet.

The Council of State ruled that the dissolution of the BarakaCity NGO as ordered by the government could be justified on account of comments "inciting discrimination, violence and hatred" by the group's head, it said in a statement. The government had ordered the dissolution of BarakaCity in late October, accusing it of links to "the radical Islamist movement" and "justifying terrorist acts". It said that the group had published violent and discriminatory comments on its own social media accounts and through that of its founder and leader Idriss Si-hamedi. But the group, which insists it has a strictly humanitarian mission to help millions of people around the world, denied the charges and appealed the decision.

In a separate ruling, the court also confirmed the closure for six months of the mosque in Pantin, to the north of Paris, following an appeal against the government's ruling by the local Muslim association. The court said that the closure was justified as the comments made by the mosque's officials and the ideas it discussed were a "provocation" that could lead to acts of violence. It has notably been accused of sharing a video posted by the father of a pupil at Paty's school that publicly attacked the teacher for showing the cartoons in class.

An imam who was on duty at the time had received training in a fundamentalist institute in Yemen and has since left the mosque. The mosque's lawyers William Bourdon and Vincent Brengarth expressed dismay at the ruling saying that it was prepared to give guarantees to allow its rapid reopening. Macron's approach has won praise from supporters inside France who say he is showing the courage to confront radical Islamist activity that has been ignored for too long. But critics, including some in English-language media, have accused the president of going too far and adopting a heavy-handed approach towards France's largest religious minority. — AFP



CONFLANS-SAINTE-HONORINE: A man looks at flowers layed outside the Bois d'Aulne secondary school in homage to slain history teacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded by an attacker for showing pupils cartoons of the Prophet (PBUH) in his civics class, in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, northwest of Paris. — AFP

Russia accuses West of meddling in Belarus

MINSK: Russia's foreign minister yesterday accused the West of interfering in Belarus as he met strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko who has faced months of protests over his disputed re-election. Sergei Lavrov held talks with Lukashenko and other top officials in the capital Minsk, in the latest show of Russia's support for authorities in its ex-Soviet neighbor.

Thousands of protesters demanding Lukashenko's resignation have taken to the streets of Minsk every weekend since an August 9 election that saw the 66-year-old claim a sixth term in office. Protesters believe political novice Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, 38, who took her jailed husband's place in the presidential race, was the true winner. Moscow has continued to back Lukashenko since the protests erupted, with several meetings between senior officials from both sides in recent months.

Speaking at a press conference with his Belarusian counterpart Vladimir Makei, Lavrov accused the United States and several European countries of "gross interference" in the domestic affairs of Belarus. "The wise Belarusian people are able to sort themselves out without any outside prompting and intrusive offers of unsolicited mediation," Lavrov said. Lukashenko has accused Western countries of orchestrating the demonstrations and conspiring to have him removed after 26 years in power.

Lavrov said the West is "using dirty methods of so-called color revolutions, including manipulating public opinion, supporting forces that are openly anti-government and promoting their radicalisation". Several Western leaders have refused to recognize the results of the election and voiced support for Tikhanovskaya, who fled to EU member Lithuania shortly after the vote. The European Union has slapped sanctions on Lukashenko and a number of his allies citing election rigging and a violent police crackdown on demonstrators. — AFP

To ban or not? France debates virginity tests

PARIS: France is split over plans to ban virginity testing, with some campaigners calling the procedure barbaric and others warning of violent repercussions for some Muslim women. Women in at least 20 countries are subjected to virginity tests, sometimes by force, as families, lovers or potential employers use them to assess their virtue, honor or social value, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In Europe, the tests are issued in Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, Sweden and Spain, according to the WHO. In France, it is most commonly used by Muslims and also by some Roma families who want proof of virginity pre-wedlock. The United Nations says the test is painful, inaccurate and a violation of human rights, with no place in modern society. But not everyone agrees, with some experts predicting unintended fallout from France's proposed ban, which is part of a wider Islamic separatism bill due in parliament next month.

Doctors say it could mean women paying excessive fees for illegal tests or risking violent repercussions from family members, partners or putative in-laws if they lack proof. "Penalizing doctors is to close the only door for patients, where they could have found help and advice," said Ghada Hatem-Gantzer, a gynaecologist in Paris and chief medic at the Maison des Femmes, a local women's violence shelter. "It is undoubtedly promoting a black market for certificates that dubious pharmacies will charge dearly for," she said.

Before issuing a virginity certificate, a doctor usually in-

spects a woman's hymen - the thin tissue that may partially cover her private part - checking for tears or measuring the opening. It is not clear how many tests are carried out each year, but doctors say they mostly check teenaged girls or young women, often under family pressure. "There is no data, either official or unofficial, on the number of requests for virginity certificates," said Martine Hatchuel, another Paris-based gynaecologist.

"Personally I have around two to four requests per year...almost always very young girls brought by their mothers." Doctors say single women fear rejection if they cannot show a certificate to families where traditional gender expectations hold sway when it comes to sex before marriage. "Their motivation is always: 'it is my parents/my step family/my in-laws who demand it, if it were up to me I wouldn't ask for anything,'" said Hatem-Gantzer. But she said the girls and young women who came to her were unanimous in declaring: "I don't want to stay an old maid."

Muslims

The French government does not collect such data but think tanks and statistical groups say France has Europe's largest Muslim minority: about 5 million or 7-8% of the population. Virginity certificates can help protect women who are suspected of having illicit sex from possible retribution, said Liza Hammer of Collectif Nta Rajel, a French feminist collective for North African emigrees. "If you want to deal with this issue then women must be taken care of, not prevented from having a piece of paper they need to save their lives," she said. Under draft legislation, President Emmanuel Macron is proposing a year in prison and a 15,000-euro (\$17,875) fine for any medical professional who issues a virginity certificate. The rules are part of legislation aimed at reinforcing secular values and fighting what Macron calls an "Islamist separatism" that he said threatens to overrun some communities. France's interior and health ministries were not available for comment. — Reuters