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PARIS: A view shows pall bearers carrying the coffin of former French President Jacques Chirac as relatives attend a private burial for the late President at the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris yesterday. Former French President Jacques Chirac died on September 26, 2019 at the age of 86. —AFP

France bids farewell to ex-president Chirac

Ex-president opposed US invasion of Iraq; Putin among leaders at funeral

PARIS: World leaders, past and present, stood in silence in Paris yesterday at a funeral service for Jacques Chirac, the French leader remembered at home for his folksy charisma and abroad for opposing the 2003 invasion of Iraq. France's Emmanuel Macron, Russia's Vladimir Putin and former US president Bill Clinton were among the mourners in the aisles of the Saint Sulpice church for the mass in memory of Chirac, who died last week aged 86.

Chirac's coffin, draped in the French flag, rested at the front of the church after having been driven in a procession escorted by police motorcyclists along streets lined by thousands of Parisians. Chirac, who served as president from 1995 to 2007, was feted by many French people for asserting their country's role as a global player, a stance that put him at odds with Washington over the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Chirac was from his earliest years a member of the French establishment, but he also had a knack for con-

necting with ordinary people outside the urban elite. A court conviction after he left office for misusing public funds did little to tarnish his image. "This former president ... had a true love for people, equally at home in the salons of the Elysee or the living room of a farmer," Archbishop of Paris Michel Aupetit told the roughly 2,000 people gathered in the church. He said Chirac embodied a love for his fellow man that is missing from today's society. "Goodbye, and thank you Monsieur Chirac," Aupetit added.

Widow absent

Chirac's widow Bernadette was absent from the funeral mass because of frail health, the archbishop said. Earlier, 86-year-old Bernadette and other members of Chirac's family attended a private service in the Hotel Des Invalides, the public building where Chirac's body had lain in state over the weekend. Other leaders at the Saint-Sulpice funeral included German President

Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. Prince Edward, youngest son of Britain's Queen Elizabeth, also attended. European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker pulled out for health reasons, a spokeswoman said.

President Macron will host the visiting leaders at a lunch at the Elysee Palace, though Putin was expected to fly out before the lunch, the Elysee said. Earlier yesterday, Chirac's coffin was taken from the Hotel Des Invalides - originally a home for wounded servicemen - by a military honor guard. A somber-looking Macron bowed his head in front of Chirac's casket before 10 members of the elite Republican guard lifted the coffin onto their shoulders and marched out of the building's courtyard as a band played Chopin's funeral march.

Venue changed

The last three French presidents to die, Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou and Francois Mitterrand, all

had their funeral masses at Notre Dame cathedral. The Saint-Sulpice church was chosen for Chirac's service because Notre Dame was partially destroyed in a fire in April this year. Chirac is to be buried later on at the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris, in a plot next to his daughter Laurence, who died in 2016. Over the weekend, thousands of people queued outside the Hotel Des Invalides to pay tribute to Chirac. His coffin was on display, draped in the French flag and in front of a large photograph of a smiling Chirac.

Chirac was "someone who had a different idea of his role, of France's role in the international community, who showed it in difficult situations," said Paris resident Remu Issons, who was among the crowd at the lying-in-state. Crowds gathered too at Paris town hall, where Chirac served for 18 years as mayor. "My heart is heavy," said Anne Firmin, who was looking at a display of photographs of Chirac at the height of his political power. "For me, it's my whole youth." —Reuters

Reinforced grave and tamper-proof casket: Battle for Mugabe's corpse

HARARE: After weeks of delays Zimbabwe's former ruler Robert Mugabe was finally buried over the weekend, closing a battle between the state and his family over the fate of his remains. Mugabe was buried at the weekend in a low-key private ceremony at his natal village. But the decision to finally bury him at a private rural home amid tight security came after a battle played out for weeks between Mugabe's family, local traditional chiefs and the government.

Mugabe, who died aged 95 at a Singapore hospital on September 6, was laid to rest 22 days later in a concrete cast grave in the courtyard of his rural Kutama home, 90 kilometers west of the capital Harare. Inside the grave, the coffin was placed in a container and then covered with a maroon lid. At its head, "RG Mugabe" was inscribed on a yellow plate. Heavy rectangular blocks matching the shape of the grave were piled on top of the coffin, an AFP photographer saw.

The original coffin, in which Mugabe's remains were flown from Singapore, was changed, said family spokesman Leo

Mugabe, the former president's nephew. "We wanted a tamper-proof casket because of (the fear of) rituals," he told the Zimbabwe Television Network last week. Mugabe had told his wife to guard his body once he died for fear it could be used by his opponents for ritualistic purposes, he added. "People are after his body or his body parts," Leo Mugabe was quoted as saying.

'Rituals, privatized legacy'

Family members have said the decision to bury Mugabe at the village should not be misconstrued as bad blood between the government, the ruling party and the former first family, but a fulfillment of his wishes. The family had initially agreed to a government-sponsored special mausoleum. Its construction was already underway at a public shrine in Harare, where dozens other liberation war heroes are buried.

But in a surprise about-turn it was announced the burial was going to be Kutama village. It was only at the burial on Saturday that family members explained that Mugabe had indicated that when he died he did not want to be buried at the national shrine because he had been "ridiculed". Mugabe was bitter over his ouster nearly two years ago and the role played by his then deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was elected president after Mugabe was toppled.

A family source told AFP that one family member had even wanted to bury Mugabe

on the grounds of his vast Blue Roof mansion in an opulent Harare suburb, but municipal laws forbid burial in non-cemetery designated space. The burial of the former statesman, who was idolized as a pan-Africanist, has been shrouded in mystery, political intrigue and superstition. On Saturday Mugabe's sister Regina Gata praised his widow Grace for "standing her ground and defending the body so that it would not be defiled".

While she did not name anyone, she said there were people who had wanted to carry out traditional rituals, but "we stood firm because Mugabe was a Christian". Nevertheless, one family member has said that hours before the body was brought out of the house for burial, Grace, a traditional chief and a few other relatives had shut themselves in the room where the Mugabe's body lay in state. "We don't know what they were doing and some family members are suspecting there were some rituals," said the family source, who asked not to be named.

'Political gimmicks'

Fewer than 300 relatives attended the burial, and no top government officials were present, something Leo Mugabe refused to comment on. But for independent political scientist Richard Mahomva, it was tragic that Mugabe's legacy was being "privatized", "trivialized" and "villagized" by having him buried in a private space. "It erases him from his illustrious contribution to the birth of



KUTAMA: A lid bearing a number plate with the name RG Mugabe is seen on the coffin of former Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe as the coffin is lowered at his home village in Kutama on September 28, 2019.

Zimbabwe, it erases him from being an international political stalwart," Mahomva said. There has been a "battle for the corpse of Mugabe" between the state and Mugabe's political allies, he said.

"The state also had interest in the corpse of Mugabe because the state needed legitimacy following the 2017 coup, he added. "It was not just a corpse.... it was a corpse that

was engraved with so much political access for anyone who is interested in legitimizing their political stand." The ruling Zanu-PF said in a statement that it respected the family's wishes to bury him wherever they wanted to. But it added that it was "saddened when manoeuvres that border on political gimmicks begin to unfold on an issue concerning an illustrious liberation icon." —AFP