

International

French leader vows 'unrelenting fight' against Islamist extremists

Macron pays tribute to four police staff stabbed to death

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron vowed an "unrelenting fight" against Islamist extremists yesterday as he paid tribute to the four Paris police staff stabbed to death last week by a radicalized colleague. Mickael Harpon, a 45-year-old computer expert in the police intelligence-gathering department, used a kitchen knife and an oyster shucker to kill three male and one female colleague in a 30-minute rampage that ended when an officer shot him in the head.

The attack in the police's inner sanctum caused shock in France, where the government is being pressed to answer how Harpon's radicalization went unnoticed, despite him having high-level security clearance. "We will wage an unrelenting fight in the face of Islamist terrorism," Macron vowed at a ceremony at the police headquarters near Notre-Dame cathedral where the attack took place.

Macron said it was "inconceivable and unacceptable" that Harpon, who had worked for the police since 2003, had managed to carry out an attack "in the very place where we pursue terrorists and criminals". He blamed the attack on "a distorted, deadly Islam" which he vowed to eradicate and vowed to build in France a "society in a state of vigilance".

At the same time he warned against lapsing into a climate of permanent suspicion, assuring: "This is not a fight against a religion but against the distortion of it which leads to terrorism." Thursday's attack brought to 255 the number of people killed in attacks blamed on, or claimed by Islamist radicals since 2015. Harpon, a father of two, had converted to Islam about

10 years ago and adopted increasingly radical beliefs. He had been in close contact with a hardline Salafist imam in the months before his rampage last week, according to investigators.

Propaganda videos

Le Parisien newspaper reported yesterday that a USB key containing details on dozens of his police colleagues had been found among his possessions. The paper, which citing unnamed sources close to the inquiry, said it was not clear if Harpon had gathered the data as part of his job or had surreptitiously extracted it, as well as whether he had shared it with others. The key also contained several propaganda videos from the Islamic State group, it added. The four victims of the attack - Damien Ernest, Anthony Lancelot, Aurelia Trifiro and Brice Le Mescam - were posthumously awarded the Legion of Honour, France's highest civilian award, at the remembrance ceremony.

Their coffins, which were draped in French flags, were borne into the courtyard of the building by fellow officers. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner has faced opposition calls for his resignation after initially claiming that Harpon never gave the "slightest reason for alarm" before going on the rampage. Yesterday, the minister was subjected to a closed-door grilling by a parliamentary intelligence delegation ahead of questioning later by a parliamentary commission.

He will then be questioned by a Senate panel on Thursday as to why the red flags, including Harpon's



PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron stands in front of coffins during a ceremony at the Prefecture de Police de Paris (Paris Police Headquarters), held to pay respects to the victims of an attack at the prefecture. —AFP

public approval of the 2015 massacre of 12 people at the Charlie Hebdo newspaper, were not included in Harpon's file. Castaner has attempted to fend off the criticism, saying that concerns expressed by Harpon's

colleagues over his behavior were never added to his file. In the wake of the attack the interior ministry set up a dedicated cell to track potential Islamic radicals within the ranks of the security forces. —AFP

Buckle up: US' Syria policy shift 'sign of Trump unchained'

WASHINGTON: Over the span of just a few hours, US President Donald Trump upended his own policy on Syria with a chaotic series of pronouncements, blindsiding foreign allies, catching senior Republican supporters off guard and sending aides scrambling to control the damage. Trump's decision on Sunday to remove some US forces from northeastern Syria, opening the door to a Turkish offensive against US-allied Kurdish fighters in the region, provides a vivid example of how, with traditional White House structures largely shunted aside and few aides willing to challenge him, he feels freer than ever to make foreign policy on impulse.

While Trump's erratic ways are nothing new, some people inside and outside of his administration worry that the risk of dangerous miscalculation from his seat-of-the-pants approach may only increase as he moves into re-election campaign mode facing a number of unresolved, volatile international issues, including Iran, North Korea and Afghanistan. He also made clear on Monday that he was determined to make good on his 2016 campaign promise to extract the United States from "these endless wars," although his plans for doing so are clouded by uncertainty.

It comes as Trump is under growing pressure from a Democratic-led impeachment inquiry over his efforts to get Ukraine to investigate one of his political oppo-

nents, former Vice President Joe Biden. "There's a real sense that nobody is going to stop Trump from being Trump at this stage, so everybody should buckle up," said one US national security official, who cited Trump's firing last month of national security adviser John Bolton as a sign of the president being less restrained than ever by his top advisers.

Trump's policy whiplash on Syria started shortly after a phone call with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday in which he sought U.S. support for Ankara's planned incursion. Afterward, the White House said that US forces "will no longer be in the immediate area," suggesting that Turkey could be given free rein to strike Kurdish forces long aligned with Washington in the fight against Islamic State.

Trump, in a series of Monday tweets, appeared at first to double down on plans for a U.S. troop drawdown, but later threatened to destroy the economy of NATO ally Turkey if it took its military operation too far. That seemed to be an attempt to placate criticism, including from Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, that he was abandoning the Syrian Kurds, who denounced it as a "stab in the back."

Confusion among Trump aides

The latest presidential pronouncements on Syria injected news confusion over US Syria policy. Last December, acting without any kind of formal policymaking process, Trump called for a complete US withdrawal from Syria. But he ultimately reversed himself after drawing strong pushback from the Pentagon, including the resignation of then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, and an uproar in Capitol Hill and among US allies in Europe and the Middle East.

Trump insisted to reporters on Monday



WASHINGTON: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army General Mark A. Milley (2nd left) and others listen as US President Donald Trump speaks during a meeting with senior military leaders in the Cabinet Room of the White House. —AFP

that he "consulted with everybody" on his new Syria decision, although the announcement seemed to catch Congress as well as some within his administration by surprise. "He makes impulsive decisions with no knowledge or deliberation," tweeted Brett McGurk, who served as Trump's envoy for the international coalition to combat Islamic State and quit after the December Syria policy uproar.

Trump's abrupt decision on Syria came after learning in the phone call with Erdogan that the Turks planned to go ahead with a long-threatened incursion, a senior administration official said. "We were not asked to remove our troops. The president when he learned about the potential Turkish invasion, knowing that we have 50 special operations troops in the

region, made the decision to protect those troops" by pulling them back, the official said. The official underscored that Trump's decision did not constitute a US withdrawal from Syria.

Trump made clear to Erdogan that the United States did not support the Turkish military plan, which came as a surprise to the Turkish leader, a senior State Department official said. There was some confusion among senior officials to figure out what Trump had actually decided, a source familiar with the internal deliberations at the White House said. But the senior administration official, speaking on a conference call with reporters, denied that Pentagon officials were "blindsided," and Trump said he had consulted with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. —Reuters

Calm returns in Iraq but political crisis remains

BAGHDAD: Iraq woke up yesterday from its first quiet night after a week of anti-government protests that left dozens dead and sparked a crisis its president said required a "national dialogue". Morning traffic around the city was back to normal, most streets had reopened and an internet blackout in place for most of the past week appeared to ease just hours before parliament was expected to meet.

His voice sometimes breaking during a televised address, President Barham Saleh appealed for "sons of the same country" to put an end to the "discord" that has reigned since protests erupted one week ago. They began in Baghdad, with young demonstrators demanding an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment but then escalated with calls for a complete overhaul of the political system spreading to the Shiite-dominated south.

They were unprecedented because of their apparent spontaneity and independence in a deeply politicized society, but have also been exceptionally deadly - with more than 100 people killed and 6,000 wounded since yesterday. Saleh said those responsible for the violence were "enemies of the people" and proposed a cabinet reshuffle, more oversight to stamp out corruption, and a "national, all-encompassing and frank dialogue" without "foreign interference."

Saleh was not the first to suggest a

way out of the political crisis. Embattled Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi and parliament speaker Mohammed Hal-Halbusi have both proposed a laundry list of reforms to address popular grievances. But protesters have repeatedly told AFP they had "nothing left to lose", and have scoffed at overtures by political and religious figures.

Lawmakers boycott

Parliament is scheduled to meet later on to discuss the protests, but expectations were slim as the body failed to reach a quorum three days ago. Those boycotting included its largest bloc, the 54 MPs led by populist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, who threw his weight behind the demonstrations last week. When the protest movement first erupted, young, mostly male Iraqis gathered in the emblematic Tahrir (Liberation) Square, but security forces began closing off roads to the traditional gathering place and squeezed the protests further east. They were eventually confined to the densely populated, chaotic district of Sadr City - Sadr's stronghold.

On Sunday night, rallies there left at least 13 people dead after they escalated into clashes with troops. The army acknowledged using "excessive force" and said they would hold commanding officers accountable. In videos distributed on social media, protesters could be seen ducking into streets littered with burning tyres as volleys of gunfire and suspected heavy weapons were heard. It was the first time security forces acknowledged using disproportionate force, a step cautiously welcomed by Amnesty International.



BAGHDAD: Iraqi police are seen deployed in Baghdad's predominantly Shiite Sadr City yesterday. —AFP

"The security forces' admission of using excessive force is a first step that must be translated on the ground, to rein in the behaviour of security forces and the army," it said on Monday. "The next step is accountability." The particularly chaotic scenes in Sadr City followed several days of witnesses reporting security forces unleashing tear gas and live rounds to disperse protests while authorities said "unidentified snipers" shoot at both protesters and police.

More footage is expected to emerge online once internet access fully returns across Iraq, where authorities have restricted access since Wednesday night. The internet has been briefly restored during official speeches broadcast on state television - including Saleh's address on

Monday night - but has been cut again afterwards. The tentative calm returning to Baghdad comes a few weeks ahead of Arbaceen, the massive pilgrimage that sees millions of Shiite Muslims walk to the holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad.

Nearly two million came last year from neighboring Iran, which has urged citizens to delay their travel into Iraq in light of the protest violence. Its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Monday "enemies" were trying to drive a wedge between Tehran and Baghdad, in an apparent allusion to the protests. The sentiment was echoed hours later by the powerful Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary force, which warned that those who sought to "defame Iraq will be punished". —AFP

End of statelessness in sight for Shona as Kenya issues birth certificates

NAIROBI: Happiness Kapota will remember forever the day when her children lined up in Nairobi to receive their birth certificates. Joyce, Caleb and Sidet Moyo were among the first children from Kenya's stateless Shona group to receive the government-issued certificates, which will give them opportunities and rights long denied to the Shona.

The day was particularly poignant for Kapota, 25, because she was barred from sitting a key school exam for lack of documents, forcing her to drop out at 15. "My teachers tried to help but there's nothing they could do, so I dropped out and became a housemaid since we were very poor," Kapota said, adding she hoped to return to school one day.

Kenya's move to end the plight of the Shona comes amid a global campaign to eradicate statelessness thought to affect an estimated 10 million people worldwide who are not recognized as nationals by any country. Kenya sent a high-level delegation to a major intergovernmental meeting in Geneva on Monday to discuss progress at the midpoint of the #IBelong campaign, ahead of a 2024 deadline. A person may be stateless as a result of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or gender, the transfer of territory between states, or conflicting nationality laws.

Stateless people often lack documentation necessary to attend school, open a bank account, get a job, passport or mobile phone, or enter government buildings, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). The 3,500-strong stateless Shona community has been in Kenya for more than 50 years, many of them born and raised there, but they are not recognized as Kenyan nationals and have no official status in Zimbabwe from where they arrived in the 1960s.

Kapota's children were among 600 young Shona who received their birth certificates at a ceremony in August, said Wanjia Munaita, Kenya's UNHCR officer on statelessness. About 2,000 adults have also applied and are waiting for their documents to be processed, she added. Kenya set a precedent two years ago when it awarded citizenship to another stateless group, the Makonde, originally from Mozambique, ending 80 years of statelessness for its 8,000 people.

Discrimination

Oliver Muregerera, a community leader from the Shona's Gospel of God Church, said his people have faced widespread discrimination. "We have a lived a life of poverty and squalor since without documents (we) cannot secure a good job, own property or access critical government services," said Muregerera. Shumary Maleon, a government assistant director of registration, said all Shona would be issued with birth certificates. But while this is an important step it does not guarantee the Shona citizenship, a recognition President Uhuru Kenyatta promised in 2017. Kenya has an estimated 18,500 stateless people. George Kegoro of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission said the country could not say it was on course to meet social goals such as improved access to education and health while failing to recognize part of its population as citizens. Kegoro, the charity's executive director, said birth certificates were not enough and it was crucial to keep up pressure until the community received formal recognition.

Better data

Kenya hopes to get a clearer picture of its stateless population when the results of a national census conducted in August are made public next year. "We have been told that the national census has a provision to capture data on stateless people which is important, and UNHCR is appealing to all stateless people in Kenya to come out and identify themselves during the exercise," said the UNHCR's Munaita. African states have increasingly become aware that statelessness is a major problem. A 2017 declaration by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a grouping of 15 countries, highlighted the political will of its member states to tackle the issue. —Reuters