

France

‘Daesh landlord’ in dock

‘Religious symbols’ banned at assembly

PARIS, Jan 25, (Agencies): France’s parliament has banned lawmakers from wearing any religious symbols under a new “neutral” dress code, an extension of the country’s strict secular rules that is seen as going too far by some critics.

Under the change approved late Wednesday, members of the National Assembly must avoid “the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols, uniforms, logos or commercial messages or political slogans.”

The regulation was brought in following an outcry over an MP wearing a football shirt in the parliament, but the inclusion of religious symbols in the new rules quickly became a talking point and a focus of attention.

Until now, lawmakers were instructed to simply “respect the institution”, which generally meant women wearing smart clothes and men sporting a suit and tie, though this latter requirement was relaxed last year.

Some 20th-century lawmakers included priests in religious garb, such as Henri Groues, better known as Abbe Pierre, and several Christian faith leaders were critical of the new restrictions on Wednesday.

The head of the Protestant Federation of France, Francois Clavauroly, said the change had been made “in the spirit of obsessive radical secularism.”

The speaker of the parliament, Francois de Rugy, defended the changes, saying they were in line with a 2004 law that banned schoolchildren and teachers from wearing conspicuous religious symbols.

That was seen by critics as penalising Muslims in particular by banning headscarves and veils, but Jewish kippas were also covered by the regulations.

“We’re adopting a framework and limits... to avoid any sort of provocation,” de Rugy said.

Schoolchildren, teachers — and now lawmakers — are allowed to wear small Christian crosses around their necks, while Jews are permitted to wear a Star of David and Muslims can carry a Hamsa amulet.

The laws and rules are intended to underline France’s commitment to the principle of secularism — the separation of church and state — which was enshrined in a flagship 1905 law.

Some politicians support extending the ban on religious symbols to universities and even to the workplace, while some see secularism as camouflage for an Islamophobic campaign against the veil.

Lawmakers will be allowed to deviate from the new dress rules if they can justify their appearance as traditional clothing, however.

Eiffel Tower may have been target: A new report suggests that the Eiffel Tower may have been among the targets of the Islamic State cell that attacked Barcelona.

The protective wall that surrounds the Eiffel Tower was installed after video of a trip to Paris was found in a destroyed hideout, according to the report by researchers Fernando Reinares and Carola Garcia-Calvo in January’s CTC Sentinel, a research publication into terrorism. The cell attacked Barcelona’s La Rambla and a beachside town, killing 16 people in August.

Only flawed bomb construction prevented a deadliest attack. Their hideout blew up as they were assembling explosives.

According to the report, based on interviews with investigators and court documents, members of the cell traveled to Paris before the attack, for reasons investigators have yet to determine. There, they bought a camera and filmed the Eiffel Tower.

‘Daesh landlord’ in the dock: The first trial stemming from the November 2015 Paris terror attacks opened Wednesday with suspect Jawad Bendaoud in the dock, accused of harbouring two of the jihadists in the aftermath of the carnage.

Bendaoud rented his apartment north of the capital to Abdelhamid Abaaoud — a senior Islamic State jihadist suspected of coordinating the attacks that killed 130 people — and his accomplice Chakib Akrouh.

The 31-year-old drug dealer and landlord became a national laughing stock after a television interview in which he came across as clueless, insisting “I didn’t know they were terrorists” as police raided the hideout.

It provided a darkly comic moment after the deadliest attacks in France since World War II, spawning endless parodies on the internet mocking his apparent naivety.

The trial comes ahead of that of the only survivor among the 10 gunmen who carried out the killing spree, Salah Abdeslam, who is due to appear in court in Belgium early next month.

The start of the judicial process is being followed closely by some survivors who are keen to understand more about the atrocities. Others are still too traumatised to pay close attention.

“We’ve had two years of suffering and now we want to see something happen,” Aurore Bonnet, whose husband was killed at the Bataclan concert hall during the attacks, said Wednesday. “We want them to take responsibility for their actions.”

The trial in central Paris got under way two hours later than expected and with many following proceedings in an overflow room because of a lack of spaces in the court.

Rain keeps Seine rising: The Seine continued to rise Thursday, flooding streets and putting museums on an emergency footing as record rainfall pushed rivers over their banks across northeastern France.

The river which flows through Paris is expected to reach a peak of up to 6.2 metres (20.3 feet) in the capital this Saturday on a scale used to measure its levels, four to five metres above its normal height.

The December-January period is now the third-wettest on record since data started being collected in 1900, according to Meteo France.

Many regions have seen double the rainfall than normal, including Paris, where 183 millimetres (7.2 inches) have been dumped since Dec 1. More rain was forecast for Thursday.

National rail operator SNCF extended service halts within Paris on the busy RER C suburban line through next Wednesday, and all boat traffic on the Seine in Paris and upstream has been stopped, keeping tourists off the capital’s famed sightseeing boats.

The Louvre has started removing works from the basement level of its Islamic arts wing, and the Musee d’Orsay and Orangerie were also on flood alert.

The rising waters have also brought Paris’s rat problem to the surface, as the rodents are flushed out of the sewers in many parts of the city.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (left), Presidential representative to the Volga region Mikhail Babich (second left), the head of Bashkortostan republic Rustem Khamitov (second right), and Chairman of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Russia and Chief Mufti of Russia Talgat Tadzhuiddin (from left), during a meeting in Ufa, Russia on Jan 24. (AP)



An aerial view shows a derailed train at the station of Pioltello Limite, on the outskirts of Milan, Italy on Jan 25. Carabinieri say a commuter train carrying hundreds of people has derailed in northern Italy, killing at least two people and seriously injuring at least 10. (AP)



Schrems

Puigdemont

Europe

Italian train derailed, kills 3: A commuter train derailed Thursday in northern Italy, killing at least three people, seriously injuring 10 and trapping others heading into Milan at the start of the work day, officials said.

The Trenord train derailed near the Pioltello Limite station on the outskirts of the city, halting train traffic into and out of Italy’s financial capital for hours. A piece of the track appeared broken, and officials said a wheel sustained damage as well, though the cause was under investigation.

At least two main cars from the middle of the train peeled off the rails but were still standing, albeit at an angle. Rescue crews gingerly climbed through the crushed sides of the cars trying to get to trapped passengers.

Prosecutors at the scene said at least three people were killed, 10 were seriously injured and dozens more slightly injured. The train was heading from Cremona, in eastern Lombardy, into Milan’s Garibaldi station and suffered some sort of damage to a wheel about 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) from where the train came to a halt, said Umberto Debruto, who is in charge of the railway network in Italy. (AP)

Facebook suit rejected: An Austrian privacy activist cannot bring a class action lawsuit against Facebook for alleged privacy violations but can sue the company himself in his home country, the European Union’s highest court ruled on Thursday.

The Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) said Max Schrems could bring a case against the US company and benefit from consumer law as an individual, but could not bring claims on behalf of the more than 25,000 signatories to his lawsuit.

Schrems alleges Facebook has illegally violated the privacy rights of European users, including by helping a US spy agency. Facebook rejects his assertions, which date back to 2014, and says it has always complied with European data protection laws.

“Mr Schrems may bring an individual action in Austria against Facebook Ireland,” the court said in a statement, referring to Facebook’s European headquarters. (RTRS)

‘Expel foreign criminals’: National courts should be able to expel foreign criminals more easily, Denmark’s prime minister on Wednesday told a European rights body that his country currently chairs.

Denmark’s Supreme Court last year ruled that four Romanians accused in their home country of human trafficking could not be expelled because the conditions in Romania’s prisons would violate their human rights. “It is simply not fair, that countries like Denmark end up housing foreign criminals, because of the poor prison condi-

Germany

Berlin defends arms sales against ‘depravity’ accusations

Immigration concessions ruled out

BERLIN, Jan 25, (Agencies): Senior members of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s conservative bloc stressed on Thursday they would not give ground to the Social Democrats (SPD) on immigration as the two parties prepare to launch make-or-break negotiations on forming a government.

The SPD voted by a whisker on Sunday to start coalition talks with the conservatives but many members are sceptical about a re-run of the “grand coalition” that has ruled Germany since 2013. The SPD got its worst election result in the postwar era in September and many fear a further fall in votes.

Immigration will be one of the most controversial issues in the talks, with the conservatives keen to take a tough line to prevent further losses to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) while the SPD takes a more migrant-friendly approach.

Refugees

Julia Kloeckner, deputy of Merkel’s Christian Democrats (CDU), said the benchmark of 180,000 to 220,000 refugees per year laid out in a coalition blueprint agreed between the parties after exploratory talks earlier this month was crucial.

“We don’t want more immigration and certainly not uncontrolled immigration — the Jusos must accept that,” Kloeckner told Focus magazine, referring to the youth wing of the SPD that has rallied against another grand coalition and criticised the benchmark as being equivalent to a migrant cap.

Dorothee Baer, deputy chair of Merkel’s Bavarian CSU allies, said her party could not give the SPD any concessions on family reunification for refugees, with all possible wiggle room for this exploited during exploratory talks.

She told broadcaster ARD the parties had already negotiated that issue, adding: “We won’t reopen issues that have already been negotiated.”

Meanwhile, Merkel hopes to form a new government by late March, half a year after inconclusive elections, but if there is one man who may yet torpedo the plan, it’s a 28-year-old Young Socialist.

Kevin Kuehnert has burst onto the German political scene as the pas-

sionate leader of a guerrilla campaign against another grand coalition or “GroKo” government which now spells the greatest threat to the veteran leader. The Berlin university student heads the youth wing of the Social Democrats (SPD), Germany’s second biggest party, which has reluctantly agreed to once again negotiate a role as junior partners to Merkel’s conservatives.

To Kuehnert and other like-minded youth wing members such a power pact would spell a betrayal of the over 150-year-old labour party’s cherished ideals that could consign it, after a string of election defeats, to the dustbin of history.

While SPD leader Martin Schulz has made his peace with the idea of playing second fiddle to “Mutti” Merkel, Kuehnert and other next-generation politicians are doing their best to derail the plan.

In his fiery speech at an SPD party congress last Sunday, Kuehnert said that repeated tie-ups with Merkel’s party over recent years were “an endless loop ... that we have to break”.

He urged party comrades to bite the bullet, go into opposition and “be a dwarf today so we can be a giant again one day”. With the mood in the party glum and fragile, the plan to negotiate another loveless left-right alliance was backed with a dangerously thin margin, by 56 percent of the 600 party delegates.

Now Kuehnert’s rebel alliance hopes to bomb the GroKo plan at the end of coalition talks, expected several weeks from now, when the party’s 440,000 rank-and-file members get to have the final word in a vote.

If the young activists, and other internal critics, succeed with their #NoGroKo campaign, this would likely spark snap elections in Europe’s biggest economy, and probably the end of the Merkel era.

Troubles Merkel’s troubles started when, 12 years into her reign, September 24 elections left her short of a governing majority and in need of new coalition partners for a fourth term.

Also:

BERLIN: Germany defended its arms export policy on Wednesday in re-

sponse to accusations of “moral depravity” after sales increased last year to countries beyond its European Union and NATO allies.

Germany is the world’s third-biggest arms exporter, but weapons sales remain a domestically sensitive issue given the country’s World War Two history.

The debate has been further fuelled by a Turkish offensive in northern Syria in which Turkey, a NATO member, has been using German-made Leopard 2 tanks.

“That must be stopped,” Dietmar Bartsch, head of the radical Left’s parliamentary group, told broadcaster ARD, describing the government’s arms export policy as showing “moral depravity”.

German arms sales to so-called third countries — those beyond the EU and NATO — rose to 3.79 billion euros (\$4.69 billion) in 2017 from 3.67 billion euros a year earlier.

Around 20 percent of last year’s third-country exports were accounted for by a warship sold to Algeria. In the past, Germany has also sold arms to Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa and Democratic Republic of Congo.

“The fact is: Germany supplies armaments. The fact is also: Germany has one of the most restrictive and toughest control systems worldwide,” an Economy Ministry spokeswoman told a regular government news conference.

The co-governing Social Democrats (SPD) have promised to place restrictions on sales of weapons to non-allied countries. Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel — a former SPD leader — has pledged to impose more restrictions on export licenses, especially of light arms.

Gabriel called his Turkish counterpart on Monday to express concern about the possible impact on civilians of Turkey’s offensive in northern Syria.

He is under fire from opposition lawmakers and even members of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s conservatives for failing to speak up earlier, and for moving toward approving Ankara’s request to have German arms maker Rheinmetall upgrade its German-built tanks.

tions in their home countries,” Lars Lokke Rasmussen told the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

The Council is a 47-nation human rights body that has no legislative powers. (RTRS)

Catalan leader in court: Spain said Thursday it plans to challenge Carles Puigdemont’s attempt to make a comeback as Catalan leader in court as he is wanted for his role in the region’s failed independence drive. Puigdemont, who fled to Belgium after the Catalan parliament declared independence, was earlier this week chosen as a candidate to lead Catalonia again after December elections saw separatist parties win an absolute majority.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy plans to “challenge in the Constitutional Court the decision by the (Catalan) parliament’s speaker... in which he proposes lawmaker Carles Puigdemont as candidate for the regional presidency.” Rajoy’s deputy Soraya Saenz de Santamaria told reporters. (AFP)



Rajoy

(Catalan) parliament’s speaker... in which he proposes lawmaker Carles Puigdemont as candidate for the regional presidency.” Rajoy’s deputy Soraya Saenz de Santamaria told reporters. (AFP)

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