

Sarkozy, Royal battle on after heated TV debate

AFP, Paris

French presidential rivals Nicolas Sarkozy and Segolene Royal traded fresh barbs yesterday after neither delivered a knock-out blow in a heated television debate seen as a last chance to swing undecided voters.

The socialist Royal went on the offensive during the debate watched by more than 20 million viewers, challenging her rightwing opponent on his record as a member of the outgoing government and angrily accusing him of "political immorality."

Sarkozy, who leads in opinion polls, said he was "surprised by the degree of aggressiveness" shown by his rival during the exchange that lasted two and a half hours, saying it showed "a form of intolerance."

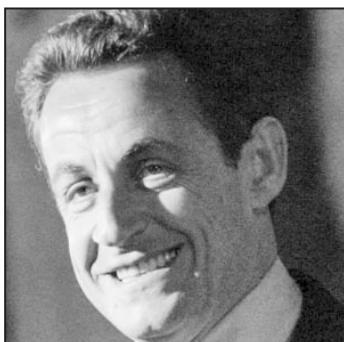
"It is revealing of the reactions that can come from some quarters of the left who consider anyone who does not share their ideas as illegitimate," he said in a radio interview.

Both candidates sought to address their weaknesses during the debate: Royal had to dispel doubts about her presidential stature while Sarkozy faces concerns over his hyper-active personality.

Royal, who wants to become France's first woman president, said Sarkozy "did not dare" repeat



Segolene Royal



Nicolas Sarkozy

during the debate some of the accusations he had directed at her during the campaign.

He "reminds me of those children who kick and then cry out to make believe that it was their playmate who hit first," Royal told French radio.

The most fiery outburst came in an exchange about places for handicapped children in ordinary schools.

Royal accused Sarkozy of "becoming teary-eyed" over the plight of handicapped children when it was his government that had dismantled Socialist measures guaranteeing a place for the disabled in ordinary schools.

LANDMARK CASE

Malaysian Hindu gets custody of children from Muslim wife

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A Malaysian Hindu man forcibly separated from his Muslim wife by Islamic authorities because they are of different religions was yesterday granted custody of their children in a milestone case.

The children will be raised as Hindus in central Selangor state despite having one Muslim parent -- which lawyers said was unprecedented in mainly Muslim Malaysia.

Selangor Islamic authorities last month forcibly separated ethnic Indian P. Marimuthu from his ethnic Indian Muslim wife of 21 years, Raimah Bibi Noordin and six of their seven children.

During a high court hearing west of Kuala Lumpur, Raimah, 39, clad in traditional Malay floor-length attire with a Muslim headdress, told the judge she was voluntarily giving up custody of her children.

"I agree to hand over the custody of my children to my husband to be raised as Hindus," Raimah said, before she broke down in tears.

Under Malaysian law, a non-Muslim must convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim, and children born to Muslims must be raised as followers of that religion.

Government legal advisor Zauyah Be Loth Khan said Selangor's Islamic Affairs Department did not object to the children being raised as Hindus.

"She is still entitled to visiting rights at any time," Zauyah told reporters.

"It sets a new precedent," said Marimuthu's lawyer Karpal Singh, also a lawmaker with the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Marimuthu, 43, applied for custody of the children after they were placed with Raimah in an ethnic Malay Muslim village.

Islamic authorities said they separated the couple after they recently found out she was a Muslim.

"I have had discussions with my husband ... with regard to the predicament facing the both of us, and I hereby state that I was born a Muslim and I wish to continue professing the Islamic faith," Raimah said in an affidavit to the court.

Marimuthu has said that Raimah, an ethnic Indian, was adopted by an Indian Muslim family but was a practising Hindu.

They were married 21 years ago according to Hindu rites and raised their seven children, aged 14 to 4, as Hindus, he said.



A soldier signals motorcycle riders to stop at a security zone in Thailand's restive southern Yala province yesterday. Two security officers were shot dead by suspected Islamic rebels in the Muslim-majority south.

Gunfire near Indian PM's residence

AFP, New Delhi

Gunshots were fired close to the official residence of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday but the incident was a personal dispute and completely unrelated to the premier, police said.

"This has got nothing to do with the security of the prime minister's house, as it was a private dispute," police spokesman Deependra Pathak told AFP.

Pathak said one "civilian" was injured in the shooting at a petrol station several hundred metres (yards) from Singh's official residence in New Delhi. He said the man was hospitalised for treatment.

At the time of the shooting, some 400 commandos and para-military forces were tasked with guarding Singh's residence, which has a three-tier security cordon.

The premier was not at home and staff at his residence said they had not heard the shooting.

"There was no breach in the PM's security. The incident happened quite a distance from here," a staff member, who asked not to be named, told AFP by telephone.

2 hurt in Assam bomb blast

AFP, Guwahati

Two people were critically wounded by a bomb blast yesterday at a food depot in India's northeast state of Assam that police said could be linked to a ransom demand by separatists rebels.

A police spokesman said the explosion occurred at a depot run by state-owned Food Corporation of India in Assam's main city of Guwahati.

"Two of the workers were seriously injured in the blast. We suspect it to be an improvised explosive device," a senior police official who asked not to be named told AFP.

The blast was linked by police to the United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) which has been fighting for an independent homeland since 1979. The rebels kidnapped Food Corporation director Phulchand Ram in April and demanded a two million rupee ransom (50,000 dollars) for his release.

"Maybe the blast at the depot was a warning by the Ulfa to pressurise the department to cough up the ransom money," the police official said.

The rebel group was unavailable for comment.



Agitating Pakistani lawyers yesterday scuffle with police at the main entrance to the Supreme Court building in Islamabad where suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry appeared for a hearing into misconduct charges against him. Scuffles broke out as police tried to stop them from entering the Court building.

PHOTO: AFP

Olmert faces street protests after dousing party mutiny

AFP, Tel Aviv

After dousing a mutiny from his own party over a scathing Lebanon war report, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert faced a new battle yesterday with street protests and angry lawmakers.

Addressing a special session of parliament, opposition chief Benjamin Netanyahu called on Olmert to step down and called for new polls after an interim government inquiry blasted his handling of the 34-day war.

"Our country needs new leadership," said the leader of the right-wing Likud party that surveys show would win new elections.

"Those who failed at war cannot be those who correct the failures... We have to go back to the people and allow them to express themselves," he said.

Turning to Olmert, who attended the session, Zahava Gal-On of the leftist Meretz party said: "The Winograd report does not leave any choice to you and the defence minister -- you must resign."

"All of this government failed and the entire Olmert government must go," she told the half-empty chamber.

Olmert, who has resisted enormous public pressure to step down after the release of the report on Monday, was not expected to



Ehud Olmert

address the session, with Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres due to defend his beleaguered government.

Late Thursday, thousands were expected to echo the resignation calls at a rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square at the first mass public protest after the publication of the damning report.

Livni failed to rally support within Kadima by not backing her call for Olmert to step down with her own resignation, observers said.

And a senior aide to the premier warned that Thursday's Tel Aviv rally was unlikely to persuade him to leave his post even if it attracts tens of thousands of people, as hoped by the organisers.

"The prime minister cannot react to polls and demonstrations," Tal Silberstein, a senior advisor, told army radio.

SCOTTISH ELECTION

Nationalists hope for independence boost

AFP, Edinburgh

Voting got under way in Scotland yesterday, with nationalists hoping to become the largest party in the Scottish parliament and bring their dreams of independence move closer to reality.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) is widely tipped to wrest control from the governing Labour Party, ending its dominance of Scottish politics and dealing a blow to Tony Blair a week before he is expected in Scotland.

Having the SNP in power in Edinburgh would also be a headache for Britain's Scottish chancellor of the exchequer Gordon Brown, just as he takes over as prime minister.

The eve-of-election survey of 1,137 Scottish voters gave the nationalists a six-point lead over Labour in the first-past-the-post constituency vote and a five-point lead in the proportional regional vote.

Scotland has two voting methods to return its 129 MSPs (members of the Scottish Parliament): majority voting for 73 single member constituencies and a party list system to elect seven MSPs for each of Scotland's eight regions.

"I can't tell you who I voted for. Secrecy of the ballot," said a smiling Salmond as he emerged from the polling station in his home village of Strichen, 35 miles north of Aberdeen.

"But let's put it this way: I voted for a new government for Scotland

Curfew in Nepal town as cops, Maoists clash

AFP, Kathmandu

An indefinite curfew has been imposed in a western Nepal border town following clashes between police and unarmed Maoist cadres that injured at least 17 people, officials said yesterday.

The clash erupted Wednesday after "Maoist cadres attacked policemen who were evicting Maoists from government-owned land they had occupied for the past five years," said Keshav Raj Sharma, an official at Bardia around 500 kilometres (300 miles) west of Kathmandu.

He said that at least 17 people including seven policemen and several Maoist cadres were injured in the incident.

The indefinite curfew was imposed to prevent any violence, said Sharma.

The Maoists have opposed the local authority's decision to station Armed Police Force personnel at a government-owned building in the area for security duty along the Nepal-India border, the official said.

The Maoists have had their army and weapons confined to UN-monitored camps, but continue to face accusations that they have not stopped using violence and intimidation.

11 foreigners kidnapped in Nigeria

AFP, Lagos

Nigerian militants yesterday kidnapped three South Korean and eight Filipino workers after a gunfight at their construction site, the South Korean foreign ministry and Nigerian police sources said.

"Three Koreans from Daewoo Engineering and Construction, eight Philippine workers and a local driver have been kidnapped by a group of armed insurgents," a foreign ministry spokesman said.

In a separate incident, unidentified assailants kidnapped several employees of Italian energy group ENI who were working on a ship in volatile southern Nigeria, the company said in a statement.

It said there were 85 people on the ship anchored 90 kilometers from Port Harcourt, including 22 foreigners from several countries, when the attack occurred.

The Italian foreign ministry told the Ansa news agency there were no Italians among those held.

Industry sources in Nigeria said five people were taken from the vessel, the Mystras, during the attack, but neither company would confirm this.

The construction site shootout, which happened at the Afam 6 power plant site, lasted for 40 minutes, construction company officials in Seoul said, but refused to confirm a report by Seoul's Yonhap news agency that several people were dead or injured.

"A gunfight erupted between the insurgents and security guards

but there have been no reports of injuries involving South Korean workers as yet," the spokesman said.

Local industry sources said the attack happened around 1 am local time. Afam 6 is close to Port Harcourt in the Niger delta.

One source said the attack

perimeter fence," one industry source told AFP.

A total of 1,755 workers including 148 Koreans were at the site, which has been guarded by Nigerian soldiers and security officials, Daewoo spokesman Huh Hyon said.



Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty arrives at a press conference to promote her new film "Life in A... Metro" in Sydney yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

GERE KISS FUSS

Shetty raps Indian 'lunatic fringe'

AFP, Sydney

Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty yesterday blamed India's "lunatic fringe" for an uproar over enthusiastic kisses bestowed on her by Hollywood heart-throb Richard Gere at an AIDS charity event.

An Indian court last week issued a warrant of arrest for Gere on charges of "obscene" behaviour after the televised embrace in which the star bent Shetty backwards on stage and kissed her repeatedly.

The incident triggered a public storm in India, known for its chaste public behaviour despite Bollywood's sexually suggestive song-and-dance routines.

Radical Hindus burned effigies

of the 57-year-old Gere in India's entertainment hub of Mumbai and organised street rallies in New Delhi.

But Shetty, 31, who is in Australia to promote her latest film, said the kisses had been "blown out of all proportion" and Gere "was just being very sweet."

"The media tends to get slightly irresponsible at times but that's the price one has to pay for celebrity," she said.

"The majority of Indians don't feel that way. It was the lunatic fringe that took over."

"This whole moral brigade got some momentum and some people who had political affiliations got some mileage out of it as well from

my profile, and Richard's."

Gere issued a "sincere apology" for any offence he caused a day after the furor erupted, saying the way he kissed Shetty was a move from his movie "Shall We Dance."

"My clumsy attempt at a 'Shall We Dance' move was a naive misread of Indian customs and I assure you nothing more," he said in a statement.

The warrant for Gere and a summons for Shetty were issued in the Rajasthan state capital of Jaipur following a complaint by a lawyer who accused the actor of "an obscene act" which carries a penalty of three months imprisonment, a fine or both.