

L'Oreal heiress scandal reaches climax in France

By AURELIEN GIRARD
Epoch Times Staff

PARIS—After nearly a month of being embroiled in accusations of scandal, France's Labour Minister Eric Woerth resigned from a key post—two days after his name was cleared.

Woerth, who was accused of a conflict of interest in the scandal surrounding L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt, resigned from his position as treasurer of President Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP party on July 13 after an investigation cleared him of any fault in the scandal.

"There has been a polemic, and I took good note of it," he told L'Express newspaper. He had previously refused to resign, assuming it would equate to admitting he was guilty.

But two days after the General Inspectorate of Finance (IGF) published its report finding that Woerth "had no information" on Bettencourt's tax evasion scheme, he resigned.

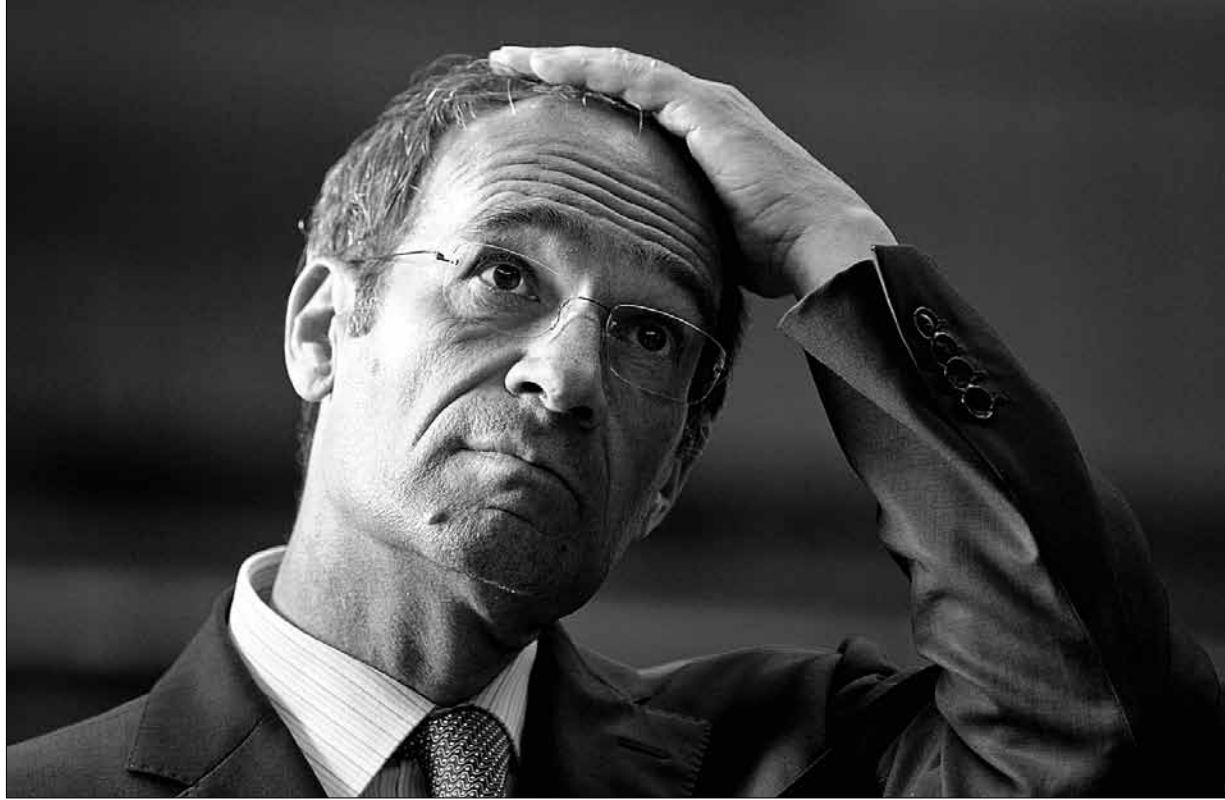
On July 12, in a show of support for his minister, Sarkozy addressed the issue in a rare one-hour interview on France 2 public television. Sarkozy is currently counting on Woerth in bringing to fruition difficult plans to reform France's pension system.

Sarkozy called Woerth a "competent and honest person" and rejected the idea that he should resign as labour minister. However, the president expressed his support for Woerth's resignation as UMP treasurer, hinting that he should probably "give up his position" to focus on pension reform.

LINKS TO BETTENCOURT

Accusations against Woerth came to the fore after Bettencourt's butler taped and leaked to the press discussions she had with her financial counsellor.

The recordings suggest that Bettencourt, France's richest woman, could hold as much as C\$85.5 million in a Swiss bank, thus escaping French



SCANDAL WEARY: French government financial inspectors on July 11 cleared scandal-hit Labor Minister Eric Woerth of accusations that he helped L'Oreal billionaire Liliane Bettencourt evade taxes. On July 13, Woerth resigned as ruling party treasurer. Woerth has also been accused of a conflict of interest because his wife worked for a company managing Bettencourt's estate while he was Budget minister. FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

taxes.

Members of the opposition claimed that Woerth, who was budget minister at the time and had pledged to fight tax evasion, could hardly pretend he was not aware of Bettencourt's situation since his own wife, Florence Woerth, was working as a financial adviser to her.

Mrs. Woerth announced on June 21 she would resign from her position, but this did not satisfy critics.

Then came the accusation from a former Bettencourt employee who said that in 2007, the heiress had offered C\$164,000 in cash to support Sarkozy's presidential campaign—a sum that sits well above the legally allowed maximum contribution of

C\$9,870. If the allegation had turned out to be true, Woerth would have been blamed for the illegal donation since he managed the UMP's campaign funds in his function as party treasurer.

Woerth commented to Le Nouvel Observateur newspaper that the attacks against him were "ignominious and utterly dirty." To Parliament, he said "The wife of a minister can have a job. There is no conflict of interest. The truth is that I have done nothing wrong. My integrity and that of Florence are absolute."

He added that he was "the right target at the right time," since he is currently reorganizing the French pension system and facing street protests

as well as a strong left-wing opposition in Parliament.

Prime Minister Francois Fillon supported Woerth publicly, saying he would not "let his honour be trampled upon for some miserable small political plans. I will not let our democracy deviate on roads of revenge."

Woerth might be able to expect brighter days ahead now, unless new elements in the management of Bettencourt's fortune come to light, which the Socialist Party will use to turn up the heat again.

"We will maintain pressure on the government," Socialist lawmaker Jean-Marc Avraut said on television shortly after Woerth's resignation. "We won't let this case go away."

Hamas bans three newspapers in the Gaza Strip

Move came after Israel lifted a ban on the same media

By GENEVIEVE LONG
Epoch Times Staff

JERUSALEM—Three pro-Fatah newspapers produced in the West Bank have been banned from Gaza by Hamas.

On July 7, Gaza-based distributors of the three daily papers, Al-Hayat al-Jadida, Al-Ayyam, and Al-Quds, were met by Hamas security forces who did not let them pick up the publications after passing through the Erez crossing, a barrier at the northern end of Gaza.

Recently, Israel lifted its own three-year ban on the three newspapers in Gaza.

According to New York-based press freedom organization the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Abdel Nasser Al-Najjar, chair of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate and the editorial director of Al-Ayyam, said the newspapers were told to sign an agreement agreeing not to criticize Hamas if they want to distribute in Gaza.

"Hamas unofficially asked the officials of the newspapers to sign, and when we try to contact Hamas officials they refuse to talk or comment on that," Al-Najjar told CPJ.

The Hamas Information Office denied the claim, saying that at least one pro-Hamas paper has been banned from the West Bank for the past three years.

The conflict between the two largest Palestinian political factions, Fatah and Hamas, dates back largely to 2005 when Yasser Arafat died. In the power

void, the two parties could not come together and the tension steadily intensified, culminating in the summer of 2007 when the Palestinian Territories split into two, with Fatah controlling the West Bank and Hamas the Gaza Strip.

Conflicts between pro-Hamas and pro-Fatah newspapers are not new. The international press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reports that in 2009, over 20 journalists were arrested by Hamas interior ministry security services. RSF says the journalists were questioned about their links with Fatah and the "Ramallah government" while in custody.

According to RSF, Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank have arrested several journalists they consider close to Hamas, including in 2009 when about 40 journalists, mostly with al-Aqsa TV, were arrested and questioned about their work, their media's source of income, and their relations with Hamas officials.

The ongoing coercion and intimidation has created an atmosphere of self-censorship for Palestinian journalists, says RSF.

Mousa Rimawi, from the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedom (MADA), agrees that the situation is "nothing new." She told the CPJ that the turning point came in 2007, when Hamas won elections in Gaza and took power. The elections only intensified the rift between Hamas and Fatah.

Rimawi thinks Hamas's new ban on the three newspapers is a move to censor the editorial positions of the newspapers, preventing criticism of Hamas. She also thinks Hamas is using the ban of the newspapers to pressure Palestinian authorities in the West Bank to let media outlets there affiliated with Hamas operate freely.

Manhunt on for renegade Afghan soldier

By STEPHEN JONES
Epoch Times Staff

A manhunt for a rogue Afghan soldier who killed three British troops was underway on Wednesday, as reports suggested that the attack was part of a new Taliban strategy.

The soldier shot dead a British officer in his sleeping quarters at a base in the Nahr-e Saraj district, Helmand Province, in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

In addition, he fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the command centre of the base, killing one British lieutenant and one Nepalese Gurkha. Four others were injured in the attack.

The Taliban has claimed that the renegade soldier has joined their movement. The Afghan Ministry of Defense said the attack was premeditated.

Last week, the Taliban announced a new operation called al-Fatah, meaning "victory" in Arabic.

The attack on Tuesday morning was a part of that operation, Sky News

reported, citing an interview with a Taliban official.

It is not the first time that a member of the Afghan security forces has turned on NATO troops.

In November last year, an Afghan policeman opened fire on a British convoy at a secure checkpoint in Nad e-Ali, Helmand Province. Five British soldiers were killed and six injured.

Officials in Afghanistan have announced a large-scale manhunt in the region for the rogue soldier. Lt. Col. Todd Bresseale told Britain's Channel 4 News that the Afghan soldiers at the base were "devastated."

"They are not part of the Royal Gurkha Rifles (British Army regiment), but in a way they feel like they were as they lived together, [and] got shot at together. They're not in a very good state.

"Without a doubt this was a heavy blow to all of us and in a way it strengthens the partnership. The Afghans have been moving forward for an all-out manhunt—it's what partners do for each other."

Speaking in Parliament, Prime

Minister David Cameron said that the attack was designed to engender a loss of faith in the Afghan forces.

"The insurgents want us to change our approach, they want us to abandon our strategy, they want us to lose faith in the Afghan national army. That would not be the right approach," he said.

Cameron said that a joint investigation would be carried out by NATO and Afghan forces, which would highlight the "lessons to be learned" from the incident.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has sent a letter of condolence to Britain, apologizing for the killings.

One of the soldiers was named on Wednesday as Lt. Neil Turkington, 26, from Portadown, County Armagh in Ireland. The local member of Parliament, David Simpson, visited Turkington's family on Tuesday night.

"They are going through a lot of emotions—a mixture of shock, numbness, sadness, everything rolled into one," he told Radio Ulster.

"At this stage there are still a lot more answers to get."



FALLEN SOLDIERS: Mourners hold flowers at the funeral of seven British soldiers killed in Afghanistan on June 29. On July 13, a rogue Afghan soldier killed three British troops at a base in the Nahr-e Saraj district, Helmand Province. BEN STANSALL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

France votes for burqa ban

By MARCO 'T HOEN
Epoch Times Staff

French parliament on Tuesday voted in favor of a bill to totally ban the wearing of full face-covering veils in public spaces.

The lower house of the National Assembly voted an overwhelming 335 for the bill and only one against.

Socialist and Communist deputies abstained from voting.

The bill gives six months to Muslim women to adapt, after which it will be illegal to cover faces in public places like streets, parks, shops, or on public transport.

Wearing a niqab or burqa will carry a fine of C\$195. Men forcing women to cover themselves are most heavily punished, with a penalty of up to C\$39,190 and one year in jail.

France has about 5 million to 6 million Muslims, out of which analysts say only 1,900 wear the full veil. According to Amnesty International's expert on discrimination




VEIL BAN: The French Parliament voted on July 13 in favour of a bill banning face-covering veils in public spaces. EVERT-JAN DANIELS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

in Europe, "A complete ban on the covering of the face would violate the rights to freedom of expression and religion."

The bill is not yet law, as it still has to pass the senate in September and the text must still be examined by the Constitutional Council of France.

The European Court of Human Rights, which protects religious freedoms, might also have a say in this, as similar laws are pending in Belgium, Spain, and some Italian municipalities.



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