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# Mali hails president's freedom



Like a Roman conqueror, Francois Hollande raised his palms in triumph and plunged into an ecstatic crowd in Timbuktu, grasping one hand after another as thousands of Malians hailed him as their saviour. Only five days after French forces drove radical Islamists out of this city of winding alleys and mud mosques on the southern fringe of the Sahara, the French President arrived on Saturday and became the unlikely focus of a tumultuous welcome.

This diminutive and bespectacled socialist does not look like a liberation leader. But in the eyes of Timbuktu's people, Mr Hollande became the man who brought freedom.

As recently as last Sunday, Timbuktu was the unofficial headquarters of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the centre of a vast domain carved out by the extremists in northern Mali.

Now it was safe enough to host a French leader, thanks to Mr Hollande's decision to sanction a lightning operation that succeeded in breaking the militants' grip on the main towns of northern Mali.

"Alongside the Malians and the Africans, we have liberated this town," Mr Hollande told French troops after disembarking at the airport. "Today Timbuktu. Tomorrow Kidal. And others are still to come. You have accomplished an exceptional mission."

Earnest and grave, Mr Hollande wore a sombre dark suit and a black tie, as if making a routine tour of provincial France. But his journey into the centre of Timbuktu showed that the visit was, in



Whirlpool of adulation... French President Francois Hollande plunges into the ecstatic crowd in Timbuktu. Picture: Reuters

the words of one of his entourage, a "once-in-a-lifetime" occasion.

Mr Hollande was first driven to the Djingarey Ber Mosque, the oldest in Timbuktu, with mud walls and slender minarets dating from 1330. A line of dignitaries, clad in flowing robes, greeted him.

One, Khalifa Cissi, gave a taste of what was to come. Wearing a tricolour around his forehead, he called out: "Vive la France! Vive Francois Hollande!"

"We have lived through a period of fear," said Mr Cissi, recalling the 10-month occupation by radical Islamists.

"You could not listen to a radio -

that was haram [forbidden]. Women had to stay in their homes, or they faced the whip. How can it be haram for women to leave the home? This is not our Islam."

After leaving the mosque, Mr Hollande was taken to the central square where thousands had gathered, many waving tricolours. In the front row stood brightly dressed and unveiled women, with braided hair falling around their shoulders. Had they appeared like that in public only six days earlier, they would have risked 100 lashes.

But now young women wore T-shirts declaring their thanks to France. "Papa Francois Hollande,"

read one. "The city of mysteries you have saved welcomes you! Thank you!"

Another said: "Hello to the first citizen of France. You will live with us forever for stopping a calamity! Our Saviour!"

When Mr Hollande appeared, the throng erupted in cheers, waving tricolours. The French and Malian soldiers on duty assumed the President would make an orderly way through. Instead, he was caught in a whirlpool of adulation.

Having grasped the proffered hands along the front row, he was visibly overcome by the enthusiasm of his reception. Ignoring the

strangled cries of his security detail, Mr Hollande plunged into the crowd. Around him gathered a maelstrom of ecstatic Malians, frantic bodyguards and bemused aides.

He stood at the centre, soaking up the adulation, shaking every hand thrust his way. Caught in his slipstream was Dioncounda Traore, who nominally rules Mali as the Acting President since the coup that ousted his predecessor. He attracted only a fraction of the adoration heaped on the leader of the former colonial power.

Telegraph, London, Bloomberg

# France moving on gay marriage, adoption rights

Paris

France's National Assembly has overwhelmingly approved the first and most important article of a controversial law that will allow gay couples to get married and adopt children.

Deputies voted 249-97 in favour of article one of the draft legislation, which redefines marriage as being an agreement between two people rather than necessarily between a man and a woman.

Although the proposed law still faces at least another week of parliamentary scrutiny before a final

vote scheduled for February 12, the ease with which it cleared the first hurdle indicated it was almost certain to emerge unscathed from the debate.

The article - approved on Saturday - was supported by deputies of the ruling Socialist Party, who enjoy an overall majority in the Assembly, other leftists and Greens as well as at least one member of the UMP, the main centre-right opposition force.

"We are happy and proud to have taken this first step," Justice Minister Christiane Taubira said.

"We are going to establish the

**'We are going to establish the freedom for everyone to choose his or her partner.'**  
Christiane Taubira, Justice Minister

freedom for everyone to choose his or her partner for a future together."

But a UMP deputy, Philippe Gosselin, said the government was focusing through legislation France did not want.

"Today it is marriage and adoption. Tomorrow it will be medically assisted conception and surrogate mothers," he said in comments that reflected the strength of feeling among opponents of the government's plans.

Opinion polls suggest that there is a clear majority of French voters who support the right of gay cou-

ples to marry and a narrower majority favour them being granted the right to adopt as couples (gay men and women can already adopt as individuals if approved by social services).

Huge demonstrations opposing gay marriage, mobilised in part by the Catholic Church and the Muslim community, have been held across the country and President Francois Hollande has been accused of pushing the legislation through without proper consultation. Hundreds of thousands of people.

AFP

## Gun control Skeet-shooting President has his doubters



President Barack Obama blasting away at clay pigeons at Camp David.

## Minister offers to quit over bashing

Cairo

Video footage of a man beaten and dragged naked by policemen in Cairo has triggered outrage in Egypt and prompted calls for the Interior Minister, Mohammed Ibrahim, to resign.

But hours after the presidency expressed disappointment over the incident and Mr Ibrahim offered to resign, the man told state television the policemen were actually trying to save him from protesters - a claim quickly dismissed by his relatives.

Footage of the incident was broadcast live on television during protests on Friday night against the Islamist President, Mohamed Mursi.

In the video, riot police can be seen beating Hamada Saber, a 50-year-old painter, before he is dragged into an armoured vehicle in front of the presidential palace.

"The horrible and degrading images showing the central security officers and police beating and dragging a naked man near the presidential palace should lead to the Interior Minister's immediate resignation," said Khaled Mawoud, spokesman for the main opposition National Salvation Front.

The presidency said it was "pained by the shocking footage of some policemen treating a protester in a manner that does not accord with human dignity and human rights".

Mr Ibrahim's office said he had ordered an investigation to "hold accountable" those who beat the man, and that he would resign if "that's what the people want".

Prosecutors said Mr Saber had been found carrying petrol bombs.

Late on Saturday, Mr Saber, in an interview with state television, said the police were actually saving him from protesters.

The New York Times

# Obama wins no admirers

UNITED STATES  
Peter Baker  
Mark Landler  
WASHINGTON

When Barack Obama mentioned last week he had picked up a new hobby - skeet shooting at Camp David - it was a surprising disclosure by a president whose main identification with guns these days is his effort to ban assault rifles and high-capacity magazines.

To some, the US President's newfound enthusiasm for shooting clay pigeons also seemed a bit suspicious.

So, on Saturday, the White House tried to silence the sceptics by releasing a photo of Mr Obama

shooting on the range at Camp David on August 4. But it offered no further details on whether his target practice was a regular hobby.

The notion of the President taking aim at targets flung into the air captivated some in the political and social media worlds at a time when he is pushing Congress to enact sweeping restrictions on high-capacity rifles and magazines. Conservatives scoffed, comics mocked, a congresswoman challenged him to a skeet-shooting contest, a fake picture of an armed Obama circulated on the internet, and the White House tried to make the whole matter go away.

"It was a surprise to a lot of people in the industry when we saw

that and heard that," said Michael Hampton, the executive director of the National Skeet Shooting Association, whose 35,000-member rolls do not include the President.

The commotion has its origins in an interview Mr Obama gave to *The New Republic*. The magazine's editor, Franklin Foer, referred to the fight over gun control and asked the President if he had ever fired a gun.

"Yes, in fact, up at Camp David, we do skeet shooting all the time," Mr Obama said.

"The whole family?" Foer asked.

"Not the girls," he said, "but oftentimes guests of mine go up there. And I have a profound respect for the traditions of hunting

that trace back in this country for generations. And I think those who dismiss that out of hand make a big mistake."

Mr Obama went on to say the reality of guns in urban areas differed from that in rural areas. "So trying to bridge those gaps is going to be part of the biggest task over the next several months," he said.

While other presidents have used the skeet shooting range at Camp David, database searches of Mr Obama's speeches and interviews turned up no previous mention of participating.

# Fiery finale for charismatic, enigmatic Sihanouk

CAMBODIA  
Lindsay Murdoch  
ASIA CORRESPONDENT

Norodom Sihanouk, the cherubic, mercurial two-time king of Cambodia will depart as he lived - in a blaze of pomp and ceremony at dusk on Monday.

The pageantry will end the story of one of Asia's towering figures of the 20th century.

Royal astrologers will blow conch-shell trumpets, 101 guns will boom a salute, fireworks will explode and skatue music will resound as Sihanouk's body burns in

a pyramidal pyre within an ornate crematorium on Phnom Penh's riverfront.

Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians will watch a ceremony based on the funerals of more than 100 Khmer monarchs dating back 2000 years.

A larger-than-life character who steered Cambodia through six decades marked by independence from France, civil war, the rule of the murderous Khmer Rouge and his own exile, the king died from a heart attack on October 15 in Beijing, aged 89.

His embalmed body lay in state

at the royal palace until Friday when a giant golden float shaped like a mythical bird took it from the palace to the pyre in a city park.

After the flames are quenched, Sihanouk's wife, Queen Monineath, and his son, King Sihamoni, will scatter some ashes in the Mekong and keep others in a diamond urn at the palace, with the remains of previous kings.

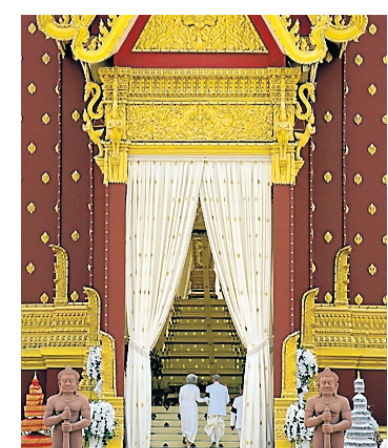
The departure of the self-confessed "naughty boy" who fathered 14 children over six marriages will cement the dominance of Prime Minister Hun Sen, who took power in 1985.

"This is our last homage to say goodbye to the great hero king," Mr Hun Sen, 60, said on radio.

King Sihamoni, a former ballet dancer, has played a shrinking role compared with his father, who was just 18 when placed on the throne by French colonial authorities in 1941. He quickly defied expectations he would be a compliant king.

As his health declined, Mr Hun Sen, a one-time Khmer Rouge commander, monopolised power, accused of using violence and intimidation to quash dissent.

Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith.



A family visit to the crematorium.