

French PM announces new cabinet

New French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin has named a cabinet designed to boost confidence in a government shaken by the "No" to the constitution.

Mr de Villepin confirmed that his rival Nicolas Sarkozy will serve as his deputy in the new centre-right line-up, and succeed him as interior minister.

The new foreign minister is Philippe Douste-Blazy, formerly health minister.

The French "No" to the EU treaty and its rejection by the Dutch this week has sent shockwaves across the bloc.

France's flagging economy is believed to have fuelled the "No" vote in Sunday's referendum.

Both President Jacques Chirac and Mr de Villepin have promised to make tackling the country's 10% unemployment level a priority.

KEY MINISTRIES

Interior minister and deputy PM : Nicolas Sarkozy

Foreign Minister : Philippe Douste-Blazy

Defence Minister : Michele Alliot-Marie

Finance Minister : Thierry Breton

Junior European affairs minister : Catherine Colonna

"It is an absolute requirement of our social pact that the French people regain confidence in the future," Mr de Villepin said on a visit to an unemployment office.

The BBC's Caroline Wyatt in Paris says President Chirac and Mr de Villepin were determined to look decisive, and came up with the new cabinet sooner than anticipated.

Mr Sarkozy has been given a prominent role - which our correspondent says

appears aimed at keeping this ambitious and popular politician on side.

Mr Sarkozy, who left the government last year to become head of the governing UMP party, makes no secret of his presidential designs.

He said on Thursday he saw it as his "duty" to rejoin the government "because in a difficult situation we cannot allow ourselves to be divided".

Reshuffle

Many senior members of the previous government remain in the cabinet.

Former Foreign Minister Michel Barnier is among the few senior figures to have been left out.

**It was my duty to participate in this team,
precisely because things are difficult**
Nicolas Sarkozy
Interior Minister

Michele Alliot-Marie has kept the defence portfolio. Thierry Breton has held on to finance and Jean-Louis Borloo to labour.

The new foreign minister, Mr Douste-Blazy, is a cardiologist and medical professor. He is close to the president but has little experience of international affairs.

His main challenge will be to restore France's standing within the European Union, following the referendum defeat.

The new junior minister for European affairs is Mr Chirac's long-time spokeswoman Catherine Colonna.

Mr de Villepin replaced former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. He is widely viewed as Mr Chirac's chosen successor and Mr Sarkozy's leading rival.

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