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By Craig S Smith

France wrestles with radical Islam

FRANCE'S Vénissieux town's largest mosque is temporarily leaderless, after its chief cleric was expelled from France last week for advocating wife beating, stoning and other medieval Islamic views at odds with the principles of the modern French state.

The cleric, Abdelkader Bouziane, was the fifth cleric expelled from France this year on charges that they were spreading a dangerously divisive brand of radical Islam. The country has kicked out dozens since 2001.

"The government cannot tolerate the public statement of views that are contrary to human rights, attack the dignity of women and call for hate or violence," the country's new interior minister, Dominique de Villepin, said last weekend. France has long maintained one of the strictest antiterrorism programmes in Europe, in part because it was hit early by Islamist terror and because it has the largest Muslim population on the Continent. Many other countries in Europe have been far more tolerant in allowing radical dis-

But making such a hard-line stance

stick is difficult, even here in a country that has been more willing than most of its European neighbors to limit free speech in the interest of a calm and cohesive society. Bouziane, 52, won an appeal that would allow him to return from his native Algeria to France, despite the Interior Ministry's presentation to the court of evidence that Bouziane has links to groups that support terrorism.

The embarrassed ministry announced late Monday that it would take the case to France's highest court, and a frustrated Villepin said Tuesday that if the justice system tied his hands in such cases he would seek tougher laws.

At a wide-ranging news conference on Thursday, President Jacques Chirac said that France might modify its deportation laws and that if Bouziane returned to France he would "immediately and naturally be the object of judicial proceedings." The expulsion and possible return of Bouziane highlight a thorny issue that most countries across Europe are facing as they struggle to fulfill the needs of their growing Muslim populations and protect traditional civil liberties while trying to curb the spread of extremist Islamic thought.

Part of the problem is a dearth of domestically trained clerics to lead congregations of European-born Muslims. As a result, mosques like that in Vénissieux often have to rely on imported imams or self-proclaimed clerics who espouse fundamentalist beliefs that grate against Europe's more tolerant societies. "The problem is that we have 1,500 imams, but the great majority of them don't have any knowledge of the land," said Azzedine Gaci, who represents the Muslims of the Rhône-Alps region at the national Muslim Council. Only about 10 percent of the imams preaching in France's mosques and prayer rooms are citizens, and half do not speak French, according to the Interior Ministry.

The issue has become more pressing in the 10 years since a wave of terrorism swept France and has continued to spread around the world. The fundamentalist clerics provided inspiration and support for Islamists returning from Afghanistan and the jihads of Eastern Europe - among them the hijackers who attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. They have also helped prepare fresh recruits from among Europe's frustrated, disenfranchised second-generation immigrant

youths now rediscovering their religious roots. Villepin said this month that France would have to help Muslims to train moderate prayer leaders here to encourage the emergence of a tolerant "French Islam." The country's government-sponsored Muslim Council is working on a training programme but says it needs state aid. But any government move to support such a programme faces huge obstacles because of France's laws barring the state from meddling in religion.

The bearded, robed men streaming into the mosque for Friday prayers last week refused to answer questions from outsiders, arguing that they have been misrepresented by the news media.

But extreme fundamentalist congregations in Vénissieux and other working-class suburbs east of Lyon, France's second-largest urban centre, have produced violent militants in the past.

In September 1995, the police killed an Algerian Islamist in a shootout near Lyon after recovering his fingerprints from an unexploded bomb found on the tracks of the high-speed rail line between Lyon and Paris. The man was believed to have been behind a spate of bombings that had terrorized Paris earlier that year.

In January this year, the police arrested six men from Vénissieux who were suspected of being part of a terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda that had planned a chemical weapons attack in Paris in 2002.

Two Vénissieux men, meanwhile, are among those people taken prisoner two years ago in Afghanistan and who are now detained at the United States naval station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

France has tried to regulate its five million Muslims by creating a national advisory body to address issues like the training of clerics and to act as the Muslim representative in dealing with the government. But the country's most extreme fundamentalists have refused to take part.

"People like Mr Bouziane live in another world," said Gaci, who is part of a broader trend of young, politically active second-generation Muslims here who are struggling to establish a united front to give Europe's Muslims a stronger voice. He worries that the scattered but spreading fundamentalist movement is hurting that effort.

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Bouziane has preached at several mosques in and around Lyon since

arriving in France from Algeria in 1979. After a six-month stint in Saudi Arabia, he began preaching at the Vénissieux mosque.

The imam's extreme views were well known among Muslims in the region and drew the attention of the local authorities last year after he reportedly issued a fatwa, or religious edict, calling for jihad against American interests in France.

The Interior Ministry issued an expulsion order in February, but did not immediately execute it. Then, in early April, a local publication, Lyon Mag, published an interview with Bouziane in which he spoke about his support for the Quran's teaching that adulterous women should be stoned and that it was a man's right to strike his wife if she was unfaithful.

France's national press picked up the article, and within days the Interior Ministry executed the expulsion order.

But the expulsion drew sharp criticism from many Muslims across France, who saw it as part of a broader attack on Muslims by the French state. The country has recently issued a law banning girls from wearing Muslim veils at school, for example. —Courtsey IHT