

French diplomats to go on strike for first time in 20 years

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French foreign ministry civil servants demonstrate in Paris in 2003 [File: Philippe Wojazer/Reuters]

Paris, June 1 (RHC)-- French diplomats will go on strike for the first time in 20 years on Thursday in protest against a perceived lack of recognition and reforms pushed by the president that they say could damage France's global standing.

The action won support from 500 foreign ministry civil servants in a newspaper opinion piece and has seen widespread backing from senior diplomats and ambassadors on social media.

The strike comes at a bad time for President Emmanuel Macron, with France holding the European Union presidency until the end of June, as he seeks to play a leading role in the bloc's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and looks for fresh impetus to his new presidential mandate.

Public sector reforms will see the diplomatic career structure change, including scrapping a special status for senior foreign ministry officials, meaning they would fall into a broader civil service pool. "The reform of the senior civil service is the latest attack on our professions, our expertise, our future," said a strike notice for June 2 sent by unions.

"This reform reflects an incomprehensible desire to undermine our ministry and risks permanently weakening our country's ability to project and defend itself in the world."

Ministry officials have played down the effect, and in a statement on May 19, Ministry Spokeswoman Anne Claire Legendre said solid guarantees had been obtained to preserve the diplomatic profession and careers. France has the world's third-largest diplomatic network with about 1,800 diplomats and, in total, about 13,500 officials working at the foreign ministry.

Half a dozen diplomats the Reuters news agency spoke to said the reform was merely the culmination of years of malaise that have seen staffing fall by about 20 percent since 2007 and repeated budget cuts just as the demands on the service have increased.

Macron's past accusations of diplomats at times working against the executive and a sense that the work of the foreign ministry is not always recognised have also not gone down well. "There is a real feeling of incomprehension and disconnect from reality," said a diplomat based overseas, who said they at least wanted the strike to lead to a proper debate.

Some say Macron's appointment of career diplomat Catherine Colonna as foreign minister was an effort to appease the diplomatic corps. One European diplomat said the changes were sending a poor message overseas because they appeared to be downgrading the foreign ministry's role, potentially harming long-term relations and expertise. "It's like having a sports journalist analysing weather patterns," the diplomat said.

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