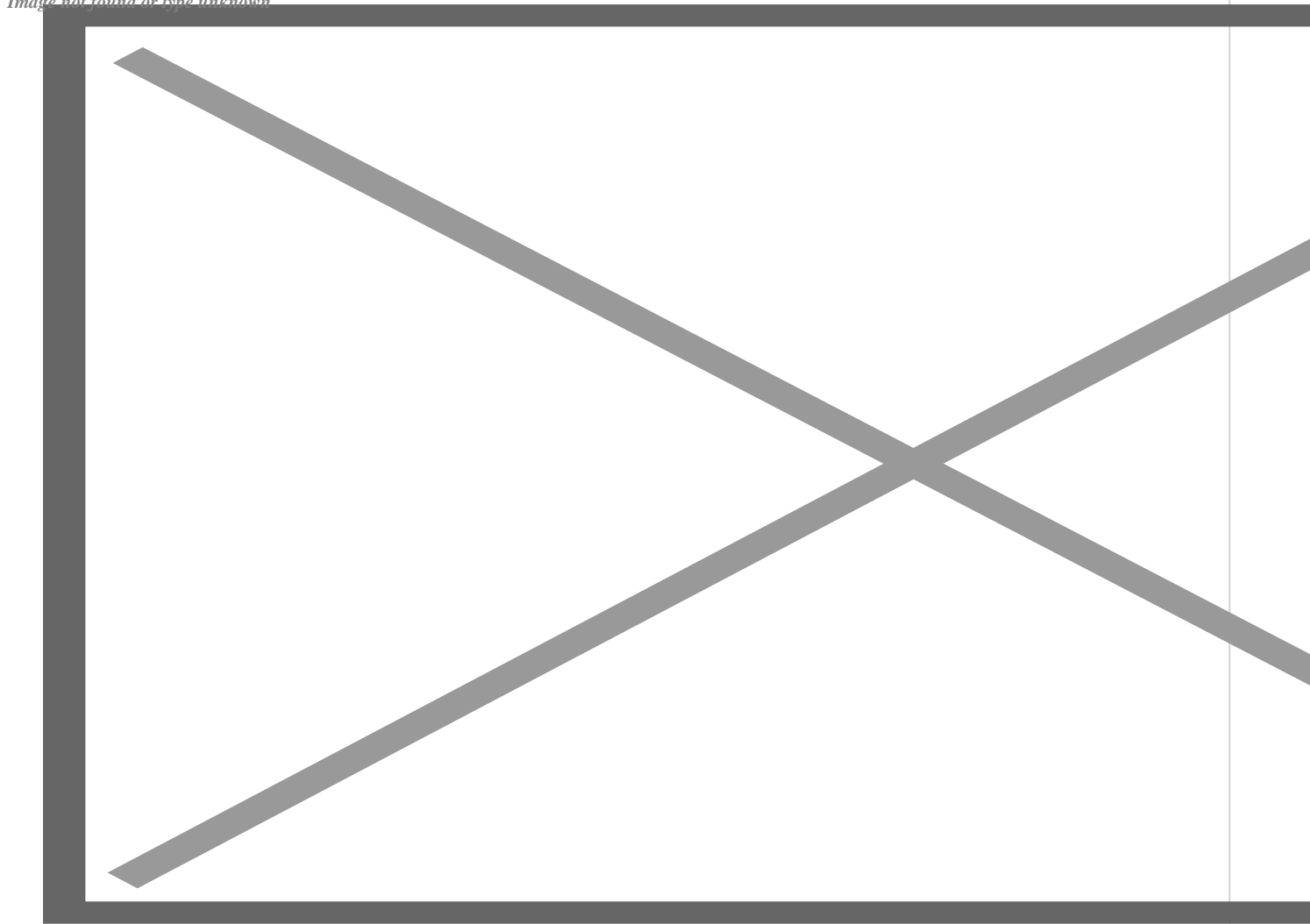


Anti-France protesters block highway in Pakistani capital

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Protesters block a main highway during an anti-France rally in Islamabad. (Photo: Anjum Naveed / AP)

Islamabad, November 16 (RHC)-- More than 1,000 protesters have blocked a major highway in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador and end of diplomatic ties with the European country over perceived Islamophobia.

Protesters from the far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a hardline religious political party that has campaigned on the issue of curbing blasphemy against Islam, blocked the city's main Faizabad interchange on Monday, a day after violent clashes with the police.

Riot police were deployed to guard government buildings across the capital, with authorities using shipping containers to block important roads around the sit-in site. Mobile phone services remained blocked for a second straight day across most of the city, as authorities attempted to disrupt the protesters' ability to organise. Most Pakistani news media did not cover the protest.

The TLP, led by religious leader Khadim Husain Rizvi, has often agitated against the Pakistani government on issues around blasphemy, a sensitive topic in the South Asian country, where the crime carries a potential death sentence.

Monday's protest, which began a day earlier, was aimed against the government of French President Emmanuel Macron, who made remarks about Islam and "blasphemy" in recent months that have sparked outrage in several Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, Turkey and countries across the Gulf.

In October, following the beheading of French teacher Samuel Paty by an 18-year-old man for showing cartoons of Islam's Prophet Muhammad in his class, Macron hailed the teacher as a "quiet hero." "Samuel Paty was killed because Islamists want our future and because they know that with quiet heroes like him, they will never have it," said Macron. Most Muslims believe any depiction of the Prophet is blasphemous.

Earlier, in September, Macron had defended the "right to blaspheme" under free speech rights, and pledged to fight what he termed "Islamic separatism" in France through administrative measures.

Macron's remarks drew ire from several world leaders, including Pakistan's Imran Khan and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and calls for a boycott of French goods.

Pakistan and France do not hold deep economic ties, and bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to just more than \$778,000 last year, according to Pakistani central bank data.

In October, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said Macron's comments "encourage Islamophobia", and the French ambassador to Pakistan was summoned to the country's foreign ministry to register a protest.

Protesters in Islamabad said the government had not done enough on the issue, and demanded that the country cut diplomatic ties with France and expel French Ambassador Marc Baretty over the issue.

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