
HOLLANDE EMBARKS ON TOUR TO PUSH FOR EUROPEAN ARMY

20.07.2016

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EurActiv

French President François Hollande will visit Portugal and Ireland this week in an attempt to reinforce the foundations of the EU, including fostering increased defence cooperation, following the terrorist attack in Nice last week. EurActiv France reports.

François Hollande has had to cut short his planned European tour after the terrorist attack carried out in Nice during Bastille day celebrations last Thursday (14 July).

The French head of state had initially planned to visit Vienna, Prague and Bratislava as well as the Irish and Portuguese capitals. But these official visits have been postponed after the lorry attack that killed 84 people on the French riviera city. The visits to Lisbon on Tuesday and Dublin on Thursday (21 July) are now working visits to prepare the Bratislava summit on the future of Europe in September, not the official visits that were originally planned, a representative of the president said.

EU defence solidarity

President Hollande's two visits will focus on European solidarity in defence, a subject long blocked by Britain.

Officials in Paris believe attitudes towards tighter EU defence cooperation could change now that British voters have decided to leave the European Union in a referendum last month.

The French president will use these visits to insist on security and defence aspects in view of September's Bratislava summit, where EU leaders will attempt to find new ways to relaunch the EU after the shock of Brexit, French officials said.

In Portugal on Tuesday (19 July), Hollande met both President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Prime Minister Antonio Costa.

But these discussions will carry on all summer, the president's entourage said. Paris objective is to breathe new life into the European debate ahead of Bratislava.

Repeated terrorist attacks in France and the many criticisms raised about the French government's handling of the terror threat have pushed the thorny subject of European defence to the top of the agenda.

The summit in September will not mark the end of the subject, the official said, however.

The UKs vote to decision the EU has also given more scope for possible actions to relaunch the project. For years London had blocked any movement towards closer union.

After long taking a neutral stance on the issue of a European army, Germany has finally published a white paper on the issue.

The day after the Nice attack, Hollande announced a French initiative to strengthen European defence, in collaboration with Germany.

Frances objectives are quite clear. Paris hopes for more cooperation between European partners on research, but also to form European partnerships in industry and defence.

Strengthening partner countries, particularly in Africa is another priority area for European collaboration, according to one source.

In this context, a meeting with Portugal could be beneficial, due to the countrys colonial past and its strong links with Africa. Lisbon was one of the partners to provide military assistance to Paris after the terrorist attacks in November 2015.

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