
BC-FRANCOPHONIE (SCHEDULED FEATURE)

LA FRANCOPHONIE GROWS TO CHALLENGE ENGLISH ADVANCES

By Francois Raitberger

PARIS (Reuter) - The number of French-speaking states is not elastic, yet La Francophonie, the club of countries formed to promote French culture, keeps growing.

From 42 seven years ago, the number of participants in the fifth Francophonie summit opening Saturday on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius has grown to 47 -- with such odd additions as Romania and Bulgaria.

Dominated by France, the group was founded in 1986 following former Senegalese president Leopold Sedar Senghor's call for a French-language equivalent to the Commonwealth.

But unlike its 50-member English-language rival, grouping former members of the British empire, La Francophonie kept its rules loose enough to be able to extend in all directions.

The weapon of France's jealous defense of its language and culture against Anglo-Saxon encroachment, it gathers "countries sharing the use of the French language."

While some 110 million people use French as their main language and another 50 million are fluent, La Francophonie covers some 400 million people.

With biennial summits and a few cooperation agencies as its only institutions, it stands half-way between the structured Commonwealth and the informal Hispanidad which links Spanish-speaking countries.

French officials say La Francophonie extends to countries where part of the population speaks French, and countries willing to develop the French language.

"Defending the French language means defending it anywhere," says President Francois Mitterrand's spokesman Jean Musitelli.

Thus Commonwealth member Mauritius, whose administrative language is English but whose residents speak French as a legacy of 18th century French rule, can belong to the club and host its members.

Countries like Armenia, Moldavia and Portuguese-speaking Sao Tome and Principe are applying to join.

France canceled the debt of La Francophonie's African members at the 1989 Dakar summit, but Paris dismisses charges that it is trying to lure new members with the promise of aid.

"We are not enlisting anyone, and La Francophonie is not lavishing aid anyway," Musitelli said.

Although credits are being boosted by more than 40 percent next year, Paris's Francophonie budget will remain small at \$12 million. Criteria for membership of La Francophonie's aid body, the Cultural and Technical Cooperation Agency, are stricter and only 34 countries have been admitted.

Besides cultural exchanges, scholarships and the satellite French-language television channel TV5, French officials say the main attraction of La Francophonie is to provide a useful megaphone for poor countries deprived of influence.

They can air economic worries at the summits and adopt joint stands to gain weight in international organizations.

In return, they undertake to join France's fight to promote French language and culture.

French Culture Minister Jacques Toubon said Paris will try to get participants at the Mauritius summit to back the so-called "cultural exemption" -- a bid to keep cultural goods out of GATT world trade negotiations.

France fears a free market would flood the world with cheap U.S. film and television series and sink subsidized European productions -- in turn hitting Francophone African culture largely subsidized by France.

"Who can be blind today to the threat of a world gradually invaded by an identical culture, Anglo-Saxon culture, under the cover of economic liberalism?" he asked.

Francophone hardliner Maurice Druon, secretary of the prestigious Academie Francaise, has more demands to stem the advances of English.

He wants member states to pledge to use only their national language or French in international meetings. He also wants the Olympic Games to restore French as their first language in tribute to their French founder Pierre de Coubertin.

Druon also suggests creating a worldwide French-language press network for expatriates to rival newspapers published for English-language communities in many countries.

Perhaps dreaming of the common citizenship that once linked Commonwealth countries, Druon suggested that Francophonie states temporarily grant their nationality to experts on assignment from another member of the group.

"This may be the most far-fetched of my wishes," he said.

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