

Riot police protect offices of French satirical magazine after it publishes cartoons of the prophet Muhammad

- **France steps up embassy security after Parisian weekly prints crude caricatures of prophet**
- **Images make reference to riots sparked by U.S.-made film mocking Islam**
- **French government defends magazine's decision and says it will block further protests over movie**
- **Cartoons threaten repeat of violence four years ago when Danish newspapers printed image of Mohammad with bomb in his turban**

By Daily Mail Reporter

France is braced for a Muslim backlash after its government backed the publication of cartoons depicting a wheelchair-bound Prophet Muhammad being pushed by a rabbi. It will close 20 embassies and schools across Islamic countries tomorrow, and has warned its citizens abroad to take care.

Foreign minister Laurent Fabius admitted that satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo's provocative cartoons, one of which appeared on its front cover, would 'throw oil on the fire' of recent anger over an anti-Islam film produced in the U.S.



Waiting for the storm: Riot police stand guard outside the offices of Parisian weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo after it published crude caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad



Tensions running high: The cartoons in the satirical publication made reference to the U.S.-made anti-Islam film which has sparked violence around the world

However, he defended freedom of expression, adding that the fundamental right could only be limited 'by court decisions'.

Mr Fabius said embassy security was being stepped up in Muslim countries, and that riot police in major cities would receive reinforcements.

As France plunged into a fierce debate about free speech, the government defended Charlie Hebdo's right to publish the drawings and said it would also block a protest planned by people angry over the anti-Islam movie *The Innocence Of Muslims*.

The amateurish film, which portrays the prophet as a fraud, a womaniser and a child molester, has set off violence in seven countries that has killed at least 28 people, including the U.S. ambassador to Libya.

On the defence: Charlie Hebdo's publisher (left), known only as Charb, said the images would 'shock those who will want to be shocked'. Pictured right is a previous edition of the satirical publication



Courting controversy: The small-circulation weekly often draws attention for ridiculing sensitivity around the Prophet Muhammad



Targeted: The offices of Charlie Hebdo were firebombed last year after it released an edition that mocked radical Islam

CFCM, an umbrella group for French Muslims, issued a statement expressing 'deep concern' over the caricatures and warning that 'in a very tense context, it risks exacerbating tensions and provoking reactions.'

It urged French Muslims to 'not cede to provocation and ... express their indignation in peace via legal means.'

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said organisers of a demonstration planned for Saturday against *The Innocence Of Muslims* film won't receive police authorisation.

'There's no reason for us to let a conflict that doesn't concern France come into our country,' Mr

Ayrault told French radio RTL.

Paris prosecutors have opened an investigation into an unauthorised protest last Saturday around the U.S. Embassy that drew about 150 people and led to scores of arrests.

The tensions surrounding the film are provoking debate in France about the limits of free speech.



Unhappy: Paris Mosque rector Dalil Boubakeur (right) and Ahmed Jaballah, president of the Union of French Islamic Organisations, attend a news conference about Charlie Hebdo's cartoons





Robust stance: French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault (left) said he plans to block a protest planned for Saturday over the U.S.-made anti-Islam film, while Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius (right) said the right to free speech 'must not be infringed'

The magazine's editor, originally a cartoonist who uses the name Charb, said the images would 'shock those who will want to be shocked'.

'The freedom of the press, is that a provocation?' he said. 'I'm not asking strict Muslims to read Charlie Hebdo, just like I wouldn't go to a mosque to listen to speeches that go against everything I believe.'

A small-circulation weekly, Charlie Hebdo often draws attention for ridiculing sensitivity around the Prophet Muhammad. An investigation is underway into the firebombing of its offices after it released an edition that mocked radical Islam last year.

The magazine's website was down yesterday for reasons that were unclear.

One of the cartoonists, who goes by the name of Tignous, defended the drawings in an interview yesterday at the weekly's offices on the northeast edge of Paris amid a cluster of housing estates.

'It's just a drawing,' he said. 'It's not a provocation'.



Anger: Protesters in Pakistan torch a US flag during a demonstration against the anti-Islam film The Innocence of Islam in the city of Lahore

The prime minister said freedom of expression is guaranteed in France, but cautioned that it 'should be exercised with responsibility and respect.'

On the streets of Paris, public reaction was mixed.

'I'm not shocked at all. If this shocks people, well too bad for them,' said Sylvain Marseguerra, a 21-year-old student at the Sorbonne.

'We are free to say what we want. We are a country in which freedom prevails and ... if this doesn't enchant some people, well too bad for them.'

Khairreddene Chabbara disagreed. 'We are for freedom of expression, but when it comes to religion it shouldn't hurt the feelings of believers.'



Fury of the mob: Hundreds of protesters - some of them very young - targeted American base Camp Phoenix in Kabul shouting 'Death to America' as the Muslim riots spread earlier this week

Yesterday a small bomb exploded at a kosher grocer's in a Paris suburb, wounding at least one. Police said it was too early to link the attack to the cartoons.

The Arab League has issued a statement calling for 'those who were hurt by those offensive drawings to control themselves and use peaceful means to firmly express their rejection of such shameful actions'.

In 2005, a Danish newspaper sparked global controversy by publishing several cartoons depicting Muhammad.

Charlie Hebdo's latest issue has already sold out at Paris newsagents.