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French schools refuse dozens of girls wearing Muslim dress

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Children walk pass a door with signing that reads, 'Welcome back to school' for the first day of school at the Pergaud elementary school in Mulhouse, eastern France. - AFP PIC

PARIS: French schools sent dozens of girls home for refusing to remove their abayas -- an over-garment from the shoulders to the feet worn by Muslim women -- on the first day of the school year, a government minister said Tuesday.

Defying a ban on the Muslim dress, nearly 300 girls showed up Monday morning wearing an abaya, Gabriel Attal told the BFM broadcaster.

Most agreed to change out of the dress, but 67 refused and were sent home, he said.

The government announced last month it was banning the abaya in schools, saying it broke the rules on secularism in education that have already seen Muslim headscarves banned on the grounds they constitute a display of religious affiliation.

The move gladdened the political right but the hard-left argued it represented an affront to civil liberties.

Attal said the girls refused entry were given a letter addressed to their families saying that "secularism is not a constraint, it is a liberty".

If they showed up at school again wearing the dress there would be a "new dialogue", the minister said.

Late Monday, President Emmanuel Macron defended the controversial measure, saying there was a "minority" in France who "hijack a religion and challenge the republic and secularism", leading to the "worst consequences" such as the murder three years ago of teacher Samuel Paty for showing Prophet Muhammad caricatures during a civics education class.

"We cannot act as if the terrorist attack, the murder of Samuel Paty, had not happened," he said in an interview with You Tube channel HugoDecrypte.

An association representing Muslims has filed a motion with the State Council, France's highest court for complaints against state authorities, for an injunction against the ban on the abaya and the qamis, its equivalent dress for men.

The Action for the Rights of Muslims (ADM) motion is to be examined later Tuesday.

A law introduced in March 2004 banned "the wearing of signs or outfits by which students ostensibly show a religious affiliation" in schools.

This includes large Christian crosses, Jewish kippas and Islamic headscarves.

Unlike headscarves, abayas occupied a grey area and had faced no outright ban until now. -- AFP