

RELEASE IN FULL

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Subject: French foreign minister to quit at weekend-sources (Reuters)

PARIS (Reuters) - French Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie is expected to resign over the weekend after a series of gaffes over Tunisia that have tarnished President Nicolas Sarkozy's government, official sources said on Friday.

Defence Minister Alain Juppe, a veteran conservative who was both prime minister and foreign minister in the 1990s, will replace her, the sources said.

The switch comes as France is struggling to come to terms with a fast-spreading pro-democracy revolt across North African states, several of which are former French colonies. The French political elite has had close ties with their authoritarian rulers.

"This can't go on," one government source said of a furore over disclosures that Alliot-Marie holidayed in Tunisia as protests raged there and accepted private plane rides from a Tunisian businessman close to ousted president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

"She has to go, and for it to be dignified, she has to stand down herself," the source said.

Alliot-Marie has been unable to visit the region since the fall of Ben Ali, and Tunisia's first post-revolution foreign minister was forced to resign after saying he had been honoured to meet her in Paris.

The government at first supported Alliot-Marie against a media outcry and opposition calls for her head, but polls showed the debacle was hurting Sarkozy's already rock-bottom ratings.

"Alliot-Marie's departure is a done deal," a second source told Reuters. "Juppe is down to take over from her straight away, with a lot of pressure coming from the president."

Sarkozy's office declined comment. Alliot-Marie told French radio she "was not interested in rumours". The daily Le Monde quoted sources as saying she would be gone by next week.

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