

A plot to sully Sarkozy?

Report says Villepin hoped to besmirch rival

The Associated Press

PARIS: A scandal that has shaken France's political elite gained momentum Friday with a report that quoted a former secret-service agent as alleging that Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin had asked for an investigation of his chief political rival.

The newspaper *Le Monde* reported that Villepin, on the orders of President Jacques Chirac, asked the agent to dig up information on Nicolas Sarkozy, now the interior minister, as part of a bribetaking inquiry centered on the Defense Ministry.

The implication was that Villepin and Chirac were trying to sully Sarkozy's reputation before next year's presidential elections. Sarkozy is considered a leading candidate.

Villepin and Chirac denied the report.

The government "never had another goal but to defend national security and the interests of our country," Villepin said. Chirac's office said that the president "categorically denied having asked for the slightest inquiry targeting political personalities whose names have been mentioned."

The scandal started simmering in 2004, when Judge Renaud Van Ruymbeke received a CD-ROM accusing Sarkozy and other top ministers of holding secret accounts with the Luxembourg bank Clearstream. The accounts were said to hold kickbacks from the \$2.8 billion sale of French frigates to Taiwan in 1991, which Van Ruymbeke was

investigating when he received the CD.

After a year of investigation, the judge decided the list was a fake. The question now is: Who created it and why?

Sarkozy has demanded a new inquiry to punish the mysterious informer. He is said to be convinced that the affair was devised to ruin his reputation and presidential chances. He has also accused Villepin of knowing earlier — and perhaps all along — that the list was fake.

Villepin acknowledged to *Le Monde*

Both Villepin and Chirac deny having targeted political figures.

and *Le Figaro* that he had ordered an investigation in early 2004 into the Defense Ministry's role in alleged bribetaking in the frigates deal. But he insisted that Sarkozy's name was not mentioned until later, after the CD appeared.

But the intelligence agent who carried out Villepin's inquiry and who was quoted in *Le Monde*'s report, General Philippe Rondot, now retired, said Sarkozy's name came up in a meeting with Villepin on Jan. 9, 2004.

The paper said investigators had confiscated Rondot's notes on the conversation, including one that read: "Political stake: N. Sarkozy. Fixation on Sarkozy (re: conflict J. Chirac/N. Sarkozy)."