Notre Dame to reopen in Paris with Trump in attendance

AFP- Notre Dame cathedral will reopen in Paris on Saturday with incoming US president Donald Trump set to attend the ceremony marking the resurrection of the Gothic masterpiece five years after a devastating fire.

The Republican confirmed Monday he had accepted an invitation from French President Emmanuel Macron to attend the grand re-opening of the 850-year-old edifice which was nearly lost to flames in April 2019.

It will be Trump's first foreign trip since his re-election last month in a political comeback that has set off alarm bells in much of Europe, including in France where Macron regularly tussled with the New York real estate tycoon during his first term.

Trump posted on his Truth Social website that Macron had "done a wonderful job ensuring that Notre Dame has been restored to its full level of glory, and even more so. It will be a very special day for all!"

The presence of Trump is likely to encourage other world political leaders to attend as they seek to build relations and head off possible disputes over trade and defence before his January 20 inauguration.

After Trump first took office in 2017, his relations with Macron – then also a fresh new face on the world stage – had the initial makings of a "bromance".

Their long and muscular handshakes – which saw each man seek to assert his superiority – became a light-hearted focus of attention before ties cooled, then soured, following disputes about climate change, trade and defence.

Trump publicly mocked Macron's "very low approval rating" and even aimed a jibe at France's war history after a rancorous 2018 trip to the country.

Macron's current political problems, with his latest government likely to fall this week and the parliament deadlocked, risk overshadowing Saturday's ceremony which the French leader hoped to present as a moment of national and personal triumph.

– 'Sublime' –

Parisians watched in horror in 2019 as flames ravaged the world heritage landmark, famed as the setting for Victor Hugo's novel "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", and toppled its spire.

The apocalyptic images were even seen by some as a sign of the demise of Western civilisation, with the edifice saved from complete collapse only by the heroic intervention of Parisian firefighters.

Tweeting as the blaze took place, Trump suggested that "perhaps flying water tankers could be used to put it out", leading irritated French fire chiefs to dismiss the suggestion as "risible" and almost certain to devastate what remained of the building.

Some 250 companies and hundreds of experts were brought in to restore the destroyed artwork, blackened walls and damaged facilities at a cost of 700 million euros ($750 million).

During a visit to inspect their work last Friday, Macron praised them for achieving the "impossible" by healing a "national wound".

Accompanied by Paris' archbishop Laurent Ulrich and top city politicians, he gazed at the restored pale-coloured stonework in the nave and praised the edifice as "much more welcoming"

and “sublime”.

– Politics and diplomacy –

Saturday’s ceremony is set to mix public celebration, politics, diplomacy and religion.

Macron is due to deliver a speech in front of the cathedral with around 50 heads of state and government set to attend, according to his office.

Pope Francis will not attend to the surprise of some observers, with the head of the Catholic church opting not to break off from his weekend trip to the French island of Corsica.

After Macron’s speech in front of a crowd of a maximum 3,000 people, VIPs will be invited to inspect the monument and witness the rebirth of its restored Grand Organ, the largest in France with nearly 8,000 pipes.

A public area with capacity for 40,000 people will be created on the bank of the river Seine opposite Notre Dame, while a concert featuring the Notre Dame choir, the Radio France philharmonic orchestra and French singers will be broadcast on national radio and television.

There are unconfirmed rumours that Pharrell Williams will perform and offer some international stardust.

Around 6,000 police officers are expected to be on duty to ensure security.

AFP