

Beat: Politics

FROM LYHANNA TO SYSTEM FAILURE: GOVERNMENT ORDERS INQUIRY INTO JUDICIARY'S LAXITY

PM LECORNU SEEKS TO END POLITICAL CRISIS

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USPA NEWS - French Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu has called an emergency crisis meeting for early Friday morning with his justice and interior ministers, cancelling all other engagements in the wake of the Lyhanna affair, which has provoked a wave of national shock and anger. The body of 11-year-old Lyhanna, missing for six days from Fleurance in the Gers, was discovered in an agricultural site near Puycasquier, wearing clothes similar to those she had on when she vanished, before an autopsy formally confirmed that the remains were hers, according to the prosecutor. The case has rapidly shifted from a local tragedy to a full-blown political crisis as it emerges that the main suspect, Jerome Barella, now indicted and remanded for kidnapping and the killing of a minor, had already been targeted by several complaints and reports for sexual violence against minors in recent years, including at least one complaint for rape filed in August 2025 in which he was never even questioned by investigators. This accumulation of ignored warnings has fuelled public outrage and given ammunition to opposition parties;

"CRUSHING FAILURES" AND A 15 DAY DEADLINE

Justice Minister Gerald Darmanin and Interior Minister Laurent Nunez emerged from the Matignon meeting speaking of "crushing" or "overwhelming" failures "at all levels" of the procedure targeting Barella, from the handling of previous complaints to the lack of follow-up on the August rape case. Darmanin, who has already described an "immense failure" of the justice system and presented his "excuses" to the family, has promised an administrative inquiry into how the various complaints were processed, while Nunez acknowledged that the State must also scrutinise its own internal alert channels and policing priorities.

At Matignon (Premiership Office) Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu asked the joint inspection mission, involving the Inspectorate General of Justice and the Inspectorate General of the National Gendarmerie, to deliver its first conclusions within fifteen days, insisting that the government must determine whether all warning signals were taken into account in time and whether priorities were properly set. For many citizens, however, the crisis now goes beyond individual responsibilities to question the capacity of France's justice and police systems to protect children, and the political will to reform institutions that too often fail to act in time.

AN OVERLOADED, OBSOLETE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The Lyhanna case already looked like the failure of a chain of individuals. It is now exposing something deeper: a justice system that is structurally overloaded, technologically behind and almost physically incapable of absorbing the volume of cases it produces.

In 2024, French prisons offered roughly 62,500 operational places for more than 81,000 inmates, an average occupancy rate approaching 136%, with some remand prisons like Bois-d'Arcy around 200%. Conditions there are so tight that cells are "tripled", with a third bed or even a mattress on the floor, overcrowded yards and workshops, and penitentiary staff constantly operating in crisis mode. Judges in charge of sentence enforcement, already overwhelmed by files, must manage sentence adjustments, early releases and incident reports in an environment where each new incarceration pushes the system closer to rupture.

TOUGHER SENTENCES, BUT NO EXTRA CAPACITY

In this context, the political reflex to "be tougher" on crime has a paradoxical effect. Sentences have lengthened in recent years, particularly in the most serious cases that still reach open court, while new categories of offences, such as domestic violence, rightly attract more custodial sentences. But each additional month of prison time translates mechanically into more pressure on remand prisons, where pre-trial detainees and short sentences accumulate, and where the overcrowding seen in cases like Lyhanna's suspect underscores how slowly high-risk profiles can move through the system. At the same time, a tiny fraction of magistrates are ever disciplined when misjudgements or case dismissals contribute to tragedies, which fuels the perception of a system that neither protects enough nor questions itself.

A DIGITAL GAP AT THE HEART OF CRIMINAL POLICY

What makes this obsolescence even more glaring is the technological gap. On the one hand, some lawyers have begun to use digital tools and even artificial intelligence to sort documents, cross-check jurisprudence and accelerate the processing of complex case files. On the other, much of the magistrature still works in an old-fashioned way: fragmented information systems, alerts that still travel by post or through slow electronic workflows...

, little interoperability between prosecutors' offices, education services and child-protection agencies. When complaints about the same suspect are filed over several years and none of them trigger an automated red flag or a consolidated risk profile, the problem is no longer only human error; it is a system that has not been designed for speed, volume and prevention.

THREE CONTRADICTIONS THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT EVADE

Behind the emotion of the Lyhanna affair lies therefore a triple contradiction. There is a political discourse that demands ever more severity while the prisons are overflowing; a judicial institution asked to do more, faster, with almost the same number of judges; and a digital revolution that advances in the legal profession but barely touches the heart of criminal policy. As long as these three lines are not addressed together investment in magistrates and court clerks, a genuine prison and sentencing policy, and the controlled introduction of modern digital tools, including AI, to prioritise and follow up on the most sensitive complaints the promise to "draw all the consequences" of such tragedies will remain largely rhetorical.

FROM THE LYHANNA CASE TO THE URGENCY OF REFORM AND DIGITAL TOOLS AND A.I

Beyond individual responsibilities, the meeting at Matignon must now confront a structural reality: French justice is working at the limits of what it can bear. With more than 81,000 inmates for around 62,500 operational prison places, remand prisons are chronically overcrowded, judges are submerged by files, and only a tiny minority of magistrates are ever sanctioned when serious errors of assessment occur. While some lawyers have started using digital tools and even artificial intelligence to analyse documents and speed up procedures, the core of the judiciary still functions with fragmented IT systems, slow transmissions and little automated cross-checking of repeat complaints involving minors.

In this sense, the Lyhanna affair turns the Prime Minister's crisis meeting into a test of political courage. If the government limits itself to expressions of compassion and a narrow administrative inquiry, it will confirm the image of a system that deplores "dysfunctions" without changing its operating model. If, on the contrary, Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu uses this moment to open the door to a real justice reform more magistrates and court-clerks, a coherent prison and sentencing policy, and the controlled deployment of modern digital tools, including AI, to priorities and track the most sensitive cases then this tragedy could at least serve as a starting point for bringing a breathless system into the 21st century.../ To be continued

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